

COMMON COUNTRY ANALYSIS



UNITED NATIONS
MALDIVES



OCTOBER 2024





This document was prepared by the Office of the UN Resident Coordinator for the Maldives based on the published data and statistics by government authorities, non-government actors and the UN entities.

Any comments or suggestions concerning the contents of this document should be addressed to rcs-info-unmaldives@un.org

The boundaries and names shown on the maps included in this publication do not imply official acceptance or endorsement by the United Nations.

CONTENTS

I.	EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	9
II.	INTRODUCTION	12
III.	PROGRESS TOWARDS THE 2030 AGENDA AND SDGs	15
	A Country progress towards the 2030 agenda.....	16
	B Human rights.....	23
	C Leaving no one behind	26
	D Gender equality and women empowerment.....	37
	E Challenges and gaps towards achieving the 2030 agenda.....	39
	F Social development and exclusion analysis	44
	G Economic transformation analysis	50
	H Environment and climate change analysis and progress on global commitments	52
	I Governance and political analysis	55
	J National vision and development plan vis-à-vis the 2030 Agenda	57
	K Financial landscape analysis.....	57
	L Stakeholders / Partnership.....	59
IV.	CONCLUSIONS	61
	Challenge #1: Ensuring equitable and stable economic growth and shared prosperity	62
	Challenge #2: Ensuring lifelong good health, wellbeing and fulfilment of the population ...	63
	Challenge #3: Protecting the environment	64
	Challenge #4: Ensuring more efficient and accountable governance and justice	65
	Challenge #5: Eliminating gender-based discrimination and ensuring gender equality	66
	Challenge #6: Bridging the digital divide.....	67
	ANNEX Analysis of Risks.....	69



ACRONYMS

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
AMR	Ani-Microbial Resistance
CAT	Convention Against Torture
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
CCS	Climate Change Strategy CCPR
CCPR	Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CERD	Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination
CESCR	Covenant or Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
CHOGM	Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting
CITES	Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora
CO2	Carbon Dioxide
COP	Convention of Parties
COT	Crown of Thorns
CPED	Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CRMW	Convention on Protection of Rights of All Migrant Workers
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CWD	Children with Disabilities
DC	Defined Contributions
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
EmOC	Emergency Obstetric Care
EPPA	Environmental Protection and Preservation Act
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FCSC	Family and Children's Service Centres
GBV	Gender Based Violence
GCM	Global Compact on Safe Orderly and Regular Migration
GDI	Gender Development Index
CH4	Methane
GHG	Green House Gas
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GOI	Government of India
GOM	Government of Maldives
GST	General Sales Tax
H1	First half of fiscal year
HDI	Human Development Index
HEI	Higher Education Institution



HIES	Household Income Expenditure Survey
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
HLPF	High Level Political Forum
HR	Human Right
HRCM	Human Rights Commission of the Maldives
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IDB	Islamic Development Bank
IFAD	International Fund for Agriculture development
IFI	International Financial Institution
IHR	International Health Regulation
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IOTC	Indian Ocean Tuna Commission
JSC	Judicial Service Commission
Kg	Kilo Gram
KWp	Kilowatt peak
LFPR	Labour Force Participation Rate
LGBTQI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex
MAP	Maldives Agribusiness Programme
MCCPF	Maldives Climate Change Policy Framework
MCH	Maternal and Child Health
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MGFSS	Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services
MNPI	Ministry of National Planning and Infrastructure
MNU	Maldives National University
MPI	Multi-dimensional Poverty Index
MRPS	Maldives Retirement Pension Scheme
MTBF	Medium Term Budgetary Framework
MTEF	Medium Term Expenditure Framework
MQA	Maldives Qualification Authority
N ₂ O	Dinitrogen Monoxide
NALO	National Assessment of Learning Outcomes
M BS	Maldives Bureau of Statistics
NBSAP	National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan
NDA	National Drugs Agency
NDC	Nationally Determined Conditions
NCD	Non-communicable Disease
NCF	National Curriculum Framework
NEET	Not in Employment, Education or Training
NER	Net Enrolment Ratio
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NMCC	National Ministerial Coordination Committee
NPI	New Policy Initiative
NPSD	National Programme for Sustainable Development
NSDF	National Strategic Development Framework



NSP	National Spatial Plan
NSPA	National Social Protection Agency
OABP	Old-Age Basic Pension
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OIC	Organisation of Islamic Cooperation
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
OOP	Out of Pocket
OP	Optional Protocol
p.a.	per annum
PFM	Public Finance Management
POE	Points of Entry
PPG	Public and Publicly Guaranteed
PSIP	Public Sector Investment Programme
PWD	Persons with Disabilities
RBB	Results Based Budgeting
RIA	Rapid Integration Assessment
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SAMOA	SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action
SAP	Strategic Action Plan
SBI	State Bank of India
SCA	Senior Citizen Allowance
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SDSN	Sustainable Development Solutions Network
SEN	Special Education Needs
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
SME	Small-Medium Enterprise
SOE	State-Owned Enterprise
SPECA	Special Programme for Economies of Central Asia
SR	Special Rapporteur
SST	Sea Surface Temperature
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
STO	State Trading Organisation
TB	Tuberculosis
TFR	Total Fertility Rate
THE	Total Health Expenditure
TIP	Trafficking in Persons
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UN	United Nations
UNCT	United Nations Country Team
UNDESA	United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNDS	United Nations Development System
UNECOSOC	United Nations Economic and Social Council
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization



UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNOPS	United Nations Office for Project Services
UNRCCA	United Nations Regional Centre for Central Asia
UNV	United Nations Volunteers
UPR	Universal Periodic Review
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USD	United States Dollar
UNW	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
VNR	Voluntary National Review
WAMCO	Waste Management Corporation
WB	World Bank
WEF	Women Enterprise Fund
WHO	World Health Organization
WTO	World Trade Organisation



UNITED NATIONS
MALDIVES



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Maldives has achieved remarkable socio-economic progress, transitioning to an upper-middle-income country driven by tourism and construction. Economic growth averaged 5.1% annually from 2000 to 2019, with a significant rebound following the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2022, the economy grew by 13.9%, but this slowed to 4.1% in 2023, with a projected growth of 5% in 2024. Despite this progress, public debt surpassed 100% of GDP during the pandemic and remains a critical challenge, projected to rise to 122.1% of GDP in 2024. Economic diversification is limited, with the Maldives remaining heavily reliant on high-end tourism and state-owned enterprises. Infrastructure projects with low returns, heavy borrowing, and pandemic-induced shocks have exacerbated fiscal vulnerabilities.

Youth unemployment stands at 13.9%, nearly 9% higher than the national average, while over 26% of youth aged 15–24 is not engaged in education, employment, or training (NEET). Substance use disorder among youth is a growing issue, which undermines their ability to participate in education and employment, contributing to broader social and economic challenges. Of the employed population, 40% are engaged in the informal employment, of which women constitute 21.4% while men account for 78.6%. The informal employment consists of 33.7% of employed women and 42.1% of employed men. Men dominate both informal and formal employment with female participation in the labor force especially low at higher levels with women accounting for only 23% of managerial positions.

Social development indicators show progress in health and education. Infant mortality decreased to 5.26 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2023, a 5.39% decline from the previous year. Literacy rates have reached 98%, and universal access to 14 years of free education

is guaranteed. However, inequalities persist, with multidimensional poverty affecting 28% of the population, predominantly in the atolls. Children bear a disproportionate burden, with one-third of those aged 0–17 living in multidimensionally poor households. Gender-based violence remains pervasive, affecting one in four women. Regional disparities are stark, with Malé consistently showing higher education and employment rates than the atolls. The poorest groups, migrants, and persons with disabilities (PWDs) often face multiple barriers in accessing the social protection systems. Addressing these disparities are critical for equitable social development. Reflecting on the principle of "Leaving No One Behind," the report identifies key groups facing systemic vulnerabilities: women and girls, children and adolescents, people living in outer atolls, persons with disabilities, and migrants. These groups require targeted interventions to reduce inequalities and promote inclusion.

The Maldives faces existential environmental threats due to its geographic vulnerability to climate change. With over 80% of its land less than one meter above sea level, the Maldives is among the most at-risk nations globally. Climate-related events have intensified, with 45 islands facing water shortages in 2016 and 60% of coral reefs bleached due to rising sea temperatures. Efforts to combat climate change include a commitment to achieving carbon neutrality and a 26% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030. Renewable energy accounts for only 15% of the energy mix, while waste management systems needs to be rolled out, affecting both land and marine ecosystems. The rapid expansion of tourism and the needs for rapid development has led to unsustainable practices, such as the destruction of mangroves and reefs, which further strain environmental resources. Data

gaps hinder effective monitoring of environmental indicators, and stronger disaster risk management and sustainable spatial planning are urgently needed.

Governance in the Maldives has seen progress but remains challenged by political polarization and systemic inefficiencies. The 2023 presidential election resulted in a victory for the People's National Congress (PNC), and the 2024 parliamentary elections delivered a majority for the same party, marking a significant shift in political power. Corruption continues to be one of the major risks for democracy and governance in the Maldives which requires strengthening of the institutional frameworks. Migrant workers, who make up approximately 26% of the population, face unsafe living conditions, forced labor risks, and exclusion from minimum wage protections. The absence of an asylum system and anti-discrimination legislation highlights gaps in human rights protections. Despite these challenges, the Maldives has ratified eight of nine core international human rights treaties, reflecting a commitment to improving governance and rights-based development.

Digital transformation offers opportunities to modernize public services and enhance economic resilience. Efforts are underway to expand digital infrastructure, promote e-governance, and improve digital literacy. However, the digital divide, particularly in the outer atolls, limits equitable access to technology. Digitalization can improve service delivery, create jobs, and enhance education and healthcare, but its benefits must reach all regions and communities.

In light of these analyses, the CCA adopts a systems-thinking approach to highlight key

issues and the web of interconnected challenges and opportunities. It identifies major challenges with ramifications across all dimensions of sustainable development: quality of public service delivery, sluggish economic growth, and climate change and natural hazards. These issues contribute to persistent inequity, inequality, and overall vulnerability. However, opportunities such as digitalization, data innovation, and the development of green energy and circular economies offer multiple pathways to address these challenges while fostering resilience and sustainability.

To achieve the SDGs, the Maldives must diversify its economy by promoting green, blue, and orange sectors and expanding private-sector opportunities. Addressing social disparities requires strengthening social protection, reducing regional inequalities, and improving access to quality education and healthcare. Environmental sustainability must be prioritized by adopting renewable energy, enhancing waste management, and conserving ecosystems. Governance reforms should focus on institutional capacity building, combating corruption, and upholding human rights. Investments in digital transformation and data systems will be essential to improving evidence-based policymaking and ensuring inclusive development.

The Maldives stands at a critical juncture, with significant achievements but persistent challenges in economic stability, environmental resilience, social equity, and governance. By fostering partnerships, leveraging innovative financing, and embracing a unified national vision, the Maldives can overcome these challenges and secure a sustainable and inclusive future for all.



UNITED NATIONS
MALDIVES



INTRODUCTION

The UN Country Analysis Report (commonly referred to also as Common Country Analysis or CCA) is designed to reflect the United Nations integrated, forward-looking and evidence-based joint analysis of the context for sustainable development in the Maldives, in view of achieving the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and as a basis for the UN programmatic support through the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF). The analysis is premised on the overall commitment to Leaving No One Behind (LNOB), the UN Charter and international norms and standards.

This report represents the first building block of the analysis for UNSDCF, which is updated on an annual basis as the context evolves and new evidence is made available. Three main data collection methodologies were utilized in the preparation of this document:

1. Analytical inputs from UN entities, resident and non- resident, with reference to their specific areas of expertise and mandate. These were collected through two main tools: mandate-specific data collection on topics of relevance to the agencies and a questionnaire on cross-cutting issues to capture entities' perspectives on areas considered to be outside their core mandate, identifying synergies and trade-offs.
2. A risk matrix through which UNCT member entities were surveyed to provide a quantitative assessment of the major risks and their potential impact on the future sustainable development of the country.
3. Desk review of existing country and sectoral studies and retrieval of statistical data from national and international sources, including government plans and reports.
4. Data and information have been disaggregated to the extent possible. The CCA highlights the data gaps, noting the need to strengthen

capacity to collect data and continuously fill the gaps through future assessment. Targeted analysis has been undertaken by each of the UN agencies in line with their mandate. The greatest limitation to the CCA has been gaps in data to support comprehensive thematic analyses, or to map national realities against SDG targets. Secondly, there is a severe limitation in the availability of data disaggregated geographically, by gender, age, and other relevant characteristics in the Maldives.

Some of the guiding principles used in this document include the concept of Leaving No One Behind (LNOB) and the Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA). Other principles that are reflected throughout the document are a focus on gender analysis and women's empowerment, as well as the pursuit of (environmental) sustainability, associated with building up resilience.

The report is meant to be a concise, yet comprehensive, overview of the country's challenges and opportunities to achieve the 2030 Agenda. Particular focus was placed on identifying intersectoral and transformative opportunities that could be seized for future joint planning and to unlock the country's potential to achieve the SDGs. With less than a decade remaining until 2030, the time for action is now and all sectors in society need to be engaged.

The preliminary findings of the CCA published in March 2020 were validated by UN and national stakeholders at a workshop. Extensive comments on the draft CCA were also made by the regional Peer Support Group. With the COVID-19 pandemic and given how it has significantly impacted the Maldives, UNCT decided that the CCA would need to be significantly rewritten before UNSDCF process starts. This work was done internally, under RCO's facilitation, with inputs from all resident and non-resident UN agencies in the Maldives.

The process took place in the last quarter of 2020 and the final version was endorsed by UNCT in January 2021. It is this version of the CCA that formed the basis of our analysis for the development of the UNSDCF. UN agencies, funds and programmes based in the Maldives and beyond contributed to this review.

The CCA is a living document, updated regularly as required¹, to assure that the UNSDCF the UN's analysis of key issues remains current. The present report is being updated with new data/analysis we have gathered during the year and ensure that our analysis is still up to date.

¹ Annual updates of the CCA were carried out in 2022 and 2023. The current report serves as the 2024 update of the CCA.



UNITED NATIONS
MALDIVES



PROGRESS TOWARDS THE 2030 AGENDA AND SDGS



A | COUNTRY PROGRESS TOWARDS THE 2030 AGENDA

Progress towards Agenda 2030 and achievement of the SDGs must ultimately be tracked comprehensively using nationally prioritised goals and targets. As this work remains to be done in the Maldives, the progress captured below takes into account the reporting by the Government of Maldives through the Voluntary National Review 2023 report consolidated under the five Ps for the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development.

Under ‘Prosperity’ targets, while Maldives promotes an open economy, a decade of heavy borrowing, infrastructure spending with low returns, and slowing growth has now left the country vulnerable to external shocks. The country now faces increasingly difficult choices in how it maintains the stability of the broader economy and public services while avoiding a debt crisis. The Maldives has among the highest budget deficits globally in recent years (approx. 12% of GDP per annum), worsened significantly by a brief collapse in tourism arrivals during the COVID-19 pandemic. The issue has been exacerbated by sustained high levels of government expenditure post-pandemic recovery, leading to increased borrowing. The debt-to-GDP ratio, which stood at 77.2% in 2019, rose above 100% during the pandemic and has remained elevated through 2023. This has left the new administration elected in November 2023, with a short window to enact sweeping fiscal reforms or face the likelihood of a broader crisis. Persistent fiscal deficits see public debt projected to increase from 118.7% to 122.1% of GDP in 2024 - a level assessed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as "unsustainable" under current policy settings that urgently requires *"...a strong and credible form of fiscal consolidation"*. This year's

projected financing gap of approx. 550 million USD remains largely unfinanced with new external lending proving hard to secure.

Adding to this precarious situation is the issue of unpaid private sector debt. Beyond the government's obligations, the private sector carries over MVR 17 billion (more than USD 1 billion) in unpaid debt. This compounds vulnerabilities in the economy, especially given the heavy reliance on public-private partnerships for infrastructure projects and the significant overlap between private sector liabilities and public guarantees. The risk of default on these obligations could lead to cascading impacts on the banking sector, further weakening investor confidence and exacerbating the financing challenges faced by the country. Addressing these issues will require not just fiscal reforms at the government level but also regulatory measures to ensure private sector debt sustainability and transparency.

Maldives is expanding and attempting to diversify its sources of tourists, further increasing high-end resorts on tourist islands while expanding numbers of guest houses on inhabited islands. Guesthouses, being on inhabited islands, can provide more jobs for island inhabitants than resorts, which employ largely international migrant workers. And dependence on high-end resort tourism remains. Construction, the other major growth area of the economy, is also a sector which largely employs international migrant workers. Thus, progress on decent work has been slower than expected, with reductions in unemployment not tracking economic growth.

A low birth rate has created a 'youth bulge' in which people in their productive years outnumber young and old dependents combined. This creates the potential for a 'demographic dividend' of faster growth and high national savings, but it cannot be realized unless a dynamic private sector is created to provide jobs, and measures are agreed to prepare for the demographic shift and the education system prepares youth to provide the skills the market requires. Notably, 53% of the youth population comprises migrant workers. Females tend to further study at higher levels with interventions needed to increase their participation in the employment sectors and enhance the social protection measures for those engaged in the informal sectors.

In the Maldives, there has been a significant trend of declining fertility rates over the past few decades. This decline is characterised by a decreasing number of children born per woman of childbearing age. Factors such as changing societal norms, increasing emphasis on education and careers, economic pressures, housing, and limited access to reproductive health services have contributed to this trend. While fertility rates are decreasing, the country is simultaneously grappling with various challenges related to its demographic composition. These include skill shortages, an abundance of migrant workers compared to the local population in the Maldives, and housing conditions. As a result, the Maldives is currently undergoing a demographic shift towards an ageing population and will likely face numerous challenges associated with this trend in the future. This is primarily due to the rapid decline in fertility rates and the increased life expectancy of the Maldivian population. Consequently, there will be potential labour force shortages and significant changes in the demographic structure. Addressing this evolving trend now itself is crucial to ensure sustainable population growth and maintain a balanced age distribution in the years to come. In addition, the uncertainty

around how climate change could impact the factors above could have devastating impacts on the country.

Approximately one in every five (19%) young Maldivians aged 15-24, totalling 10,416 youths, are categorized as not in education, employment, or training (NEET). The NEET rate among young women is higher (22%) compared to young men (17%). Interestingly, among youth who are not part of the labour force, 34% are currently engaged in education or training. Similarly, a corresponding 34% of youth who are not in education or training are actively employed.

Approximately one in every four (23%) young Maldivians aged 18-35, totalling 117,076 youths, fall into the category of not being in education, employment, or training (NEET). The NEET rate among young women is nearly three times as high as that among young men, with 12% for men and 34% for women. The proportion of women outside the labor force is significantly higher compared to men. Conversely, the percentage of young men who are not in education and are employed is higher when compared to women.

Within the potential labor force (PLF), a total of 18,203 individuals indicated their availability for work but did not actively seek employment for various reasons, constituting 97% of the PLF. The primary reason for not seeking employment among this group is the fulfilment of family and household responsibilities. For young individuals aged 15-19 years, the primary reason is their involvement in studies and training, given that many are still pursuing secondary and higher secondary education during this age. Among the elderly population aged 65 years and above, the primary reason is often retirement, receipt of pensions, or having another source of income. Notably, the government's social protection schemes, which provide a basic pension of MVR

5,000 per month to every citizen, contribute to this circumstance.

Among the top five reasons for not seeking employment, "weariness from job hunting" and the unavailability of job opportunities in the area are prevalent. People often become disheartened and cease their job search, particularly when suitable job opportunities are scarce in their locality.

The challenge is to provide young people with necessary skills for the job market through revised curricula in the public education system and to redirect current expectations for white collar and government jobs, toward skilled trades and private sector work. Although unemployment is higher in Malé than the Atolls, poverty levels in the Atolls are higher. To address poverty and break the cycle of the migration of unskilled youth to Malé there is a need for development of transport, services, self-government and increasing opportunities for economic activity in the Atolls. However, the country is under significant debt and the growth trajectory of the economy is largely dependent on continued external financing and tourism numbers that are subject to shocks.

The Census 2022 divides the total employment into three categories of informal sector, formal sector and households with the conclusion that approximately 40% of employed population is in informal employment, totalling 120,062 workers, of which women constitute 21.4% while men account for 78.6%². The informal employment consists of 33.7% of employed women and 42.1% of employed men. Men dominate both informal and formal employment.

In the household sector, women's share outweighs that of men, at 71.5%, while in informal sector and formal sector, men lead at 85.8% and 76.4% respectively. A similar trend with slight variation occurs in both Male' and atolls. This calls for various social protection and pension policies that accounts for different employment sectors and target groups.

An analysis across the indicators suggests that much progress has been achieved in the 'People' targets. These include targets on poverty, and major health and education targets. Poverty levels were 6.6 per cent in 2016 using the internal poverty line of \$1.25 (MVR70).³ Using a more nuanced approach to measuring poverty, the 2019 Multidimensional Poverty Index indicates the incidence of poverty (H) in Maldives was 28 per cent, and the average intensity (A) was 51 per cent. The Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) was 0.145. In Maldives, more people were living in multidimensional poverty (28%) than monetary poverty (8 per cent were living below the poverty line of MVR 74 per day). 87 per cent of people who are multidimensionally poor were living in the Atolls, and only 13% on the populous capital island of Male⁴. At the national level, years of schooling contributed the most to overall poverty in Maldives at 19 per cent, and access to health contributed 16 per cent. Children bear the greatest burden of poverty and have a higher likelihood of being multidimensionally poorer than any other age group, with one third of 0–17-year-olds living in MPI poor households.⁵ Due to increased government spending on health, education and social protection, the financial burden of poverty is declining, and the focus now needs to shift towards minimizing the urban-rural gap in the

² National Bureau of Statistics (2024). Census Analysis

³ National Bureau of Statistics (2016). Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) Analytical Report IV: Poverty & Inequality

⁴ 10% of population in Male are multidimensionally poor whereas 40% of people in the Atolls are poor.

⁵ OPHI (2020). National Multidimensional Poverty in Maldives in 2020.

quality of service provision and tracking poverty⁶.

Maternal, child and neonatal mortality rates continued to decrease while childhood nutrition indicators improved⁷ and out-of-pocket healthcare expenditure decreased from 49 per cent in 2011 to 29 per cent in 2016.⁸ Further reductions in neonatal mortality and maternal mortality can be achieved only with further investments and capacity for caring for premature births and addressing birth defect prevention through interventions such as folic acid supplementation for women of reproductive age, early detection and management through a comprehensive life cycle approach. Policies and practices related to nutrition and dietary habits, tobacco and drug use, and sedentary lifestyles pose major challenges towards achieving health targets related to NCDs.

The Maldivian population is seen as a well-literate population where Census data shows a high percentage of literate population since 1985 which stood at 92.2 percent. At present the Census 2022 shows that 98 percent of the population is literate.⁹

Education targets show similar improvements; all children are now guaranteed 14 years of free education from pre-primary through first degree. This includes a 10-year compulsory cycle from grades 1 to 10. According to census 2022, the current education attendance rate remains consistently high, exceeding 99 percent for individuals aged 5 to 15 years. Beyond this age, there is a noticeable decline in attendance, particularly after age 19. In the age group of 16 to 19 years, which corresponds to higher secondary education, the attendance rate averages at 54.8 percent. Beyond this age group, from 20 to 29 years, the attendance rate

averages at 19.8 percent, with a majority of students pursuing various higher education levels.

However, access to education and upskilling opportunities remains limited for migrant populations in the Maldives, who make up a significant portion of the labor force. Language barriers, legal restrictions, and the high costs of private training programs often prevent migrants from accessing even basic educational resources or vocational training. Addressing this disparity will require targeted policy measures and inclusive program designs that extend educational benefits to all residents, regardless of nationality or legal status.

A noteworthy observation is that there is a higher enrolment of males in pre-school, primary, and lower secondary education levels, whereas at other educational stages, females exhibit higher attendance rates. The current attendance rates for Male' and the Atolls are quite similar in the age group of 5-15 years, both exceeding 99 percent. However, starting from the age of 17 and above, a noticeable disparity emerges between Male' and the Atolls, with Male' consistently exhibiting higher attendance rates across all age groups. On average, approximately 22 percent of the population aged 18-29 years in Male' were actively pursuing education, while in the Atolls, only around 12 percent of the population in the same age group were currently studying.

The challenges with regard to education relate to quality, low levels of functional literacy and learning outcomes, improving life skills, particularly those related to sexual and reproductive behaviour, inculcating civic responsibility and volunteerism through education, and increasing enrolment in higher secondary education.¹⁰

⁶ Ministry of Environment and Energy (2017). Voluntary National Review for the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development 2017

⁷ Ministry of Health (2017). Health SDG profile.

⁸ Ministry of Health (2019). National Health Accounts 2015-2017

⁹ National Bureau of Statistics (2016). Census 2022. Education sector

¹⁰ Ministry of Education (2019). Education Sector Analysis

Gender equality is low across all targets. Women experiencing gender-based violence is high, with one in four women experiencing some form of violence by their current or most recent husband / partner¹¹. The labour force participation rate is low among women, which is the result of cultural norms and the higher burden of unpaid care work for family members, which restrict their time to engage in formal and higher paying economic activities, enhance their education and training and participate in the public sphere.

According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2023, the Maldives ranked 124th out of 146 countries, with the lowest score of 0.139 recorded for Political Empowerment, significantly affecting the country's overall gender parity ranking. While the political empowerment score saw a modest improvement, moving from 114th in 2022 to 103rd in 2023, women's representation in politics is still inadequate.

According to the census 2022, while male resident Maldivians account for 77% of the managerial positions, female managerial positions are at 23%. Across the country, women have significantly less assets and financial capacity than men, to be used as collateral to obtain bank loans for small and medium enterprises¹²

Despite positive developments such as the appointment of the first female justices of the Maldives Supreme Court¹³ and the landmark amendment to the Decentralisation Act in 2019, allocating of one third of seats to women in the local councils, women are still largely underrepresented in the Maldives' judiciary, parliament, local governing bodies, decision-making roles in public and private sector institutions, as well as in the formal economy.¹⁴ It's important to note that systemic barriers still deprive most women of access to justice or

meaningful participation in decision-making processes. The presence of a few women in high-profile positions does not address the broader structural inequalities or the lack of inclusive mechanisms that would enable women to play a more active and equitable role in shaping policies, institutions, and outcomes.

The existence of nutrition challenges, low secondary and higher school enrolment rates and high unemployment and NEET rates in a country with upper-middle income status is alarming and signals an urgent need for a major, comprehensive new focus on human resources capacity development, and effectiveness of the governance system and institutions. While several targets call for disaggregated data there is a huge gap in the national data system to track vulnerable groups.

As an archipelago, Maldives depends on the sea for its livelihood, from tourism and fisheries. Rapid urbanization and growth, as well as unsustainable and unchecked development practices across the islands, have led to serious overcrowding, fresh water, and waste treatment issues, as well as threatening the environment and future of the Maldives. Rapid expansion of tourism especially reclaiming of islands for tourism development is a big threat to increase of waste, loss of biodiversity, and threat to environment including the removal of trees from inhabited and uninhabited islands to new resort development. While some of the '**planet**' targets appear to be partially on track, data gaps limit the possibility of conducting a sound assessment of the progress that has been made. Access to improved water and sanitation has improved, with 98 % of the population with access to safely managed drinking water and sanitation

¹¹ Ministry of Health & ICF. Maldives Demographic Health Survey 2016/17

¹² ADB (2014). Maldives Gender Equality Diagnostic of Selected Sectors

¹³ Gender Equality Act 2016

¹⁴ UNDP (2024). Maldives Country Profile.

facilities.¹⁵ However, waste management, energy and emission targets remain problematic, especially with the expansion of tourism and urbanisation.

With emissions of GHGs projected to grow substantially in the future due to an increase in population and in energy demand, in its National Determined Contribution (NDC), Maldives pledged to cut emissions by 26% by 2030 and aims for carbon neutrality by 2023, given sufficient international support.¹⁶ Maldives aims to increase renewable energy electricity production and raise the installed renewable energy share to 15% of the energy mix as part of its NDC targets under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Under the Maldives Energy Policy and Strategy (2016) various policy measures and programmes are being implemented which are predominantly focused on increasing the share of renewable energy in the energy mix and mainstreaming energy efficiency into development activities. Since 2010, import duty has been exempted from all renewable energy equipment. Electricity, vehicles and waste management have been identified as the main sources of GHG emissions and while there are initiatives on energy production and waste management, there are no policy initiatives on reducing emissions from vehicles.¹⁷

With 80 % of land being less than 1 meter above sea level, and with 42 per cent of the population and more than 70 per cent of critical infrastructure within 100 meters of the shorelines, climate change and extreme weather events are a pressing and potentially existential threat. In 2016 alone, over 45 islands faced water shortages due to significant changes to weather patterns, including the hottest dry

season recorded in 18 years. The warm temperature due to El Nino resulted in more than 60 per cent of coral reefs bleaching,¹⁸ which adversely impacts underwater life and natural resources vital for the economy and livelihoods. Information is limited and data is not available on the indicators of Goals 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15, making it difficult to assess progress made. The overall lack of data for the environmental dimension of the SDGs is particularly evident in relation to monitoring emissions and air quality, spatial data, waste, energy and the water sector, with a strong need to strengthen mechanisms to collect, process, analyse and manage data and statistics related to these sectors.

Progress on promoting peaceful and just societies related to the 'Peace' targets is mixed, due to the country's ongoing political uncertainty and widening opinions over social economic, political and religious issues. There is limited national data but progress on governance can be assessed with the international governance indicators. The VNR points to the legislative changes made to improve access to information and the criminal code,¹⁹ which has since been enacted along with several judicial reforms that are currently underway.

Inadequate implementation of policies and standards is also seen in prison conditions, juvenile justice approaches and detention standards, drug rehabilitation options, and availability of mental health services and protective services for victims and survivors. The chief constraint is adequate budgeting and investment in skills and mindsets and making available the human resources to implement new laws and policies.

¹⁵ Ministry of Health & ICF (2019) Maldives Demographic Health Survey 2016/2017

¹⁶ UNDP (2024). Maldives Country Profile.

¹⁷ Ministry of Environment and Energy (2017). State of the Environment 2016

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ Ministry of Environment and Energy (2017). Voluntary National Review for the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development 2017

There was progress in relation to prevention of domestic violence including violence against children and gender-based violence, with enactment of appropriate laws. However, a number of serious challenges exist with regard to awareness and implementation of these laws and providing protective services for victims. Widely accepted social norms that promote violent behaviours still exist.

Notably, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women was concerned that domestic violence is not criminalized in the current legislation. The Committee on the Rights of the Child was concerned that the level of reporting of cases of domestic violence is low, and law enforcement officers are often reluctant to take action and arrest perpetrators of domestic violence, believing such violence is justified in Islam. The Committee Against Torture was concerned at the persistence of violence against women, in particular domestic violence, especially against women and girls, and the small number of prosecutions of perpetrators of such acts. It was also concerned about the absence of due diligence, effective protection mechanisms and rehabilitation for victims of domestic violence.²⁰

The Working Group on Discrimination Against Women was concerned about reports of overcrowded housing arrangements that contribute to the prevalence of domestic violence and the impact of the exposure of young children to such acts. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women recommended that the Maldives review its current legislation, including the Penal Code and the Domestic Violence Prevention Act, to ensure that domestic violence is specifically criminalized, can be prosecuted ex officio and is

sanctioned with appropriate penalties commensurate with the gravity of the abuse.²¹

The key challenge to achieving sustained progress in peace and justice targets is also related to the recent history of polarized politics - which has worsened already limited trust in institutions and created a high turnover of staff in government institutions and in the civil service generally. The loss of experienced senior staff is especially devastating in a small island nation, further limiting the national capacity to contribute to agenda 2030 across the SDGs. Finally, porous maritime borders hinder state efforts to combat illegal activities taking place at sea, including drug smuggling, possible human trafficking and crimes in the fishery sector.

Under ‘**partnerships**’ targets, progress is slow without a national vision that aligns with the SDGs. Sectors work in silos and partners are not coordinated in a comprehensive manner. Further improvement is needed for adopting a ‘whole of government’ approach, building capacity within sectors on planning and strategizing, data management and statistical capacity.^{22,23} The localization of the SDGs has not progressed, and a number of data gaps exist, even though 80 percent of the data is expected to be available to be drawn from administrative systems. The limitations on the utility of the existing data systems and data management capacities are areas that need prioritisation. Furthermore, coordination mechanisms do not have the participation of the Parliament and the judiciary that is critical for SDG 16 and a number of other SDGs.²⁴

The VNR notes that continued political commitment, long term strategy, social dialogue and partnerships are critical to drive the

²⁰ UNDP (2024). Maldives Country Profile.

²¹ UNDP (2024). Maldives Country Profile.

²² Auditor General’s Office (2019). Performance audit of preparedness for implementation of sustainable development goals

²³ Sobir R (2017). Rapid Integrated Assessment (RIA) to assess the Maldives readiness to implement the SDGs. Ministry of Environment Energy & UNDP

²⁴ Auditor General’s Office (2019). Performance audit of preparedness for implementation of sustainable development goals

Sustainable Development Agenda forward. Meaningful decentralization, building economic and climate resilience, regional development, improving human wellbeing, ensuring social inclusion, gender equality, and expansion of physical and digital connectivity for improved access to services can enable SDG acceleration in the Maldives.²⁵ The key messages from the latest VNR on the policy and implementation is captured below.

Since the first VNR, the Maldives has mapped out the Strategic Action Plan (SAP) 2019-2023 of the government against the SDGs, which shows strong alignments with the SDGs. The mapping of this SAP and the SDGs showed the greatest concentration of interlinkages across four of the SDGs: SDG 8 (Decent work and Economic Growth), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure) SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). This suggests the substantial focus of the SAP on creating employment, investing in necessary social and economic infrastructure, addressing inequalities, and developing cities and communities that are equitable, safe, sustainable, and thriving at social and economic fronts.

Looking ahead, the government is in the process of developing a new Strategic Action Plan for the current administration. enhanced resilience, sustainability, and inclusivity.

The Ministry of Housing, Land and Urban Development currently is serving as the national SDG Coordinator. The stakeholder discussions for VNR formulation highlighted that the mandate for SDG prioritization needs to be strengthened and the function of the SDG Coordination Division needs strengthening with clear direction and resources for SDG prioritization, monitoring, and oversight. The Office has been actively engaging in trainings and workshops to enhance knowledge, build

capacity, and exchange information on SDG progress. Human resources are a critical challenge for the SDG Coordination Division to function fully and the limited human resource capacity hinders to facilitate regular engagements with the agencies to track progress, and continue engagement with the CSOs, and the private sector to facilitate partnerships for SDG implementation. The Technical Committees grouped into social, economic, environmental, institutional, and partnerships, continue to form the implementing partners, which comprise of line ministries, independent institutions, and the judiciary. A National Ministerial Coordination Committee was formulated during the first VNR as the over-arching body responsible to provide policy guidance on key decisions that are to be made during the process of the development of the SDGs. However, this Committee has not been active since 2018.

A National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS) and an Integrated National Financing Framework (INFF) which articulates an SDG financing strategy on climate change and the social sector has been formulated. Efforts are also ongoing to tag the national budget against the SDGs, which would enable measurement of the impact of finance on SDG progress.

The current administration has key focus on strategic and long-term development planning. The draft National Planning Bill is one of the priority legislations to be passed during the current administration. Strategic Action Plan 2024-2028 and 20-year National Development Plan will be drafted and adopted by the administration between 2024 and 2025. In the meantime, the new policies and legislation continue to demonstrate the commitment to drive the 2030 Agenda forward.

²⁵ Ministry of National Planning, Housing and Infrastructure (2023), Voluntary National Review

Access to international finance mechanisms and concessional financing terms are major development needs for the Maldives. International support and partnerships will benefit the country in overcoming its development challenges and barriers. The climate vulnerability of the country is increasing, threatening its existence. Investments for

addressing global warming are even more urgent and critical for the existence of small island countries like the Maldives. The Integrated National Financing Framework (INFF) that supports to consolidate and coordinate the funding support for SDGs is a critical document that sets the right direction in this area.

B | HUMAN RIGHTS

Maldives is party to eight out of nine core human rights treaties (exception being the Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families) including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). In July 2024, Maldives underwent a second review of the extent it has implemented the ICCPR provisions and addressed the issues raised in the previous review. The Human Rights Committee, the UN treaty body responsible for monitoring State Parties' compliance to the ICCPR, engaged in a dialogue with the Maldives government delegation over two days in Geneva, covering a time period spanning three administrations as the first and last ICCPR review was in 2012.

The Committee welcomed the adoption of several related legislative, policy and institutional measures since 2012, with the most recent ones listed to be: the Associations Act, in May 2022; the Evidence Act, in July 2022; and the Industrial Relations Act, in January 2024. The Committee also welcomed the ratification of the following international instruments by Maldives: Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a communications procedure, in September 2019; Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, in December 2020; and International Convention

for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, in July 2023.

The Committee highlighted the restrictive effect of the Religious Unity Act especially on the rights of migrant workers, recommending its amendment to ensure that non-Muslims can practice and manifest their religion, including in places of public worship. The Committee was also concerned about the use of the Religious Unity Act to target human rights defenders for their promotion of the right to freedom of religion.

On freedom of expression, the Committee expressed concern at the incidents of intimidation, harassment and violence against journalists and human rights defenders, and the impunity given to perpetrators of such attacks as well as interference and obstruction of the media, particularly by State-owned enterprises funding the media, urging the State to guarantee the right to freedom of expression in all its forms, by protecting journalists and human rights defenders against any form of violence and censorship, investigating and prosecuting such attacks and providing compensation to victims. On the provisions of the Evidence Act which allow for compelling journalists to disclose confidential sources in cases where the information concerns a suspected terrorism

offense or a threat to national security, the Committee recommended to amend the Evidence Act to recognize journalistic privilege not to disclose a source and to ensure that any restriction to that privilege is compatible with the Covenant.

Regarding the right to peaceful assembly, the Committee noted the restrictions on protests, arbitrary arrests of demonstrators and excessive use of force by police, and the zero-tolerance approach to anti-government protests. The Committee was concerned by the restrictions to public assemblies in Malé to one designated area since 2016 under the Freedom of Peaceful Assembly Act. It recommended that the State fully guarantee the right of peaceful assembly in compliance with ICCPR and its General Comment no. 376 and to amend the Freedom of Peaceful Assembly Act to align with the Covenant. Further, the Committee called for thorough and impartial investigation and prosecution of complaints against law enforcement and providing compensation to victims.

Additionally, freedom of assembly for migrant workers remains heavily restricted, with legal and systemic barriers preventing them from organizing protests or advocating for their rights. This lack of access to peaceful assembly disproportionately impacts the ability of migrants to voice grievances about labor conditions, discrimination, and other forms of exploitation.

Regarding freedom of association, the Committee expressed concern at reports of threats, intimidation and reprisals against civil society organizations, highlighting the de-registration of Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN) in 2019 without due process and attacks and threats of blasphemy against three other civil society organizations. It was recommended to reinstate MDN and return their seized funds. It was also recommended to promptly, thoroughly and impartially investigation of all

complaints against human rights defenders and organisations, hold perpetrators accountable and to provide compensation to victims.

Noting that Presidential Commission on Deaths and Disappearances (initially entitled the Presidential Commission on Investigation of Murders and Enforced Disappearances) submitted its findings to the Government, the Committee urged to ensure that the findings are shared with the families of the victims and made public. The Committee further expressed concern towards the State's announcements to reinstate the death penalty. The Committee has recommended to maintain the moratorium on the death penalty, consider ratifying the Second Optional Protocol and abolishing the death penalty, and to implement awareness raising measures to increase support for abolition of the death penalty.

However, on June 2, 2024, a Presidential Decree dissolved the Commission on Deaths and Disappearances. This has raised significant concerns among families of victims and civil society about the continuity and transparency of efforts to address unresolved cases of murders and enforced disappearances. The dissolution underscores the urgent need for alternative mechanisms or reforms to ensure accountability and justice for affected families.

Regarding non-discrimination, the Committee was concerned that being a Muslim was a prerequisite to becoming a Maldivian citizen and that sexual relations between consenting adults of the same sex were criminalized as well as violence and discrimination perpetrated based on sexual orientation, recommending for the adoption of an anti-discrimination legislation prohibiting all forms of discrimination, decriminalize sexual relations between consenting adults of the same sex, criminalizing violence perpetrated based on gender and sexual orientation, and investigate and prosecute all crimes committed against people

on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

The Committee noted that the definition of terrorism in the 2015 Prevention of Terrorism Act is overbroad and could be and was used to target civil society organizations and political opposition, calling for its amendment to align with recommendations from the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism following the visit to Maldives in 2022 to ensure it complies with the Covenant. Further, the Committee pressed on the need to protect complainants from reprisals and conduct prompt, thorough, and impartial investigations into allegations of torture, ill-treatment, and reprisals, ensuring that perpetrators are prosecuted and punished appropriately, and that victims receive effective remedies.

On forced labour and human trafficking, the Committee was concerned about the prevalence of human trafficking, difficulties in identifying victims, and low rates of investigations, prosecutions, and trials as well as by the investigation of sexual trafficking victims for sex-related offenses and the poor living and working conditions of migrant workers, including their exclusion from the minimum wage scheme, the practice of “quota trading,” and the lack of effective remedies for rights violations. The Committee recommended amending the legislation to include migrant workers in the minimum wage scheme, ensure thorough investigation and prosecution of all cases of trafficking and forced labour, and provide victims with full reparation and protection, ensuring they are not prosecuted. It was further recommended to improve the State’s data collection system to evaluate the scope of trafficking and forced labour and to assess the effectiveness of adopted measures. The

Committee’s past recommendation was reiterated for the State to consider acceding to the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. Similarly, the U.S. State Department’s Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report for 2024 noted many concerns including that “the government did not initiate any prosecutions or convict any traffickers, including government officials complicit in human trafficking crimes.”²⁶ The Maldives was also downgraded to its Tier 2 Watchlist.

The Committee was concerned about the absence of an asylum system as well as the lack of protection mechanisms for refugees. The Committee was also concerned about the lack of an effective procedure to ensure the respect of the principle of non-refoulement. The committee recommended to Adopt a national refugee protection framework through the development of administrative orders/instructions and domestic asylum adjudication or registration structures so as to allow asylum issues to be dealt with in line with international human rights and refugee law; and to Ensure respect for the right to seek asylum by enabling effective access to its territory and full compliance with the principle of non-refoulement which is also guaranteed by Section 42 of the Anti-Torture Act;

On the right to a fair trial and the independence of the judiciary, the Committee noted the lack of impartial avenues for forensic investigation and that free legal aid was limited only for criminal matters and most serious crimes and that it is not available for victims of sexual assault and harassment, thus recommended that the State ensure impartial forensic investigations and ensure access to justice for all persons without sufficient means. On anti-corruption, the Committee highlighted the persistence of widespread grand corruption, particularly in the

²⁶ United States Department of State (2024). Trafficking in Persons Report: Maldives

tourism industry, high level of impunity for corruption and the low prosecution rates. The Committee urged the State increase its efforts to prevent and eradicate corruption and impunity at all levels, particularly by strengthening investigation and prosecution, promoting accountability and good governance and training and awareness raising with an emphasis on the economic and social cost of corruption.

On juvenile justice, the Committee noted concern over the State's intent to lower the minimum age of criminal responsibility (MACR) to 12 years and the plans to create "Hope Island" which will remove juvenile offenders from the community and place them under the supervision of law enforcement. The Committee urged the State to refrain from lowering the MACR and noted that the focus should instead be on prosecuting perpetrators who exploit children into crimes.

Noting that Judicial Service Commission (JSC) has established a competency-based criteria for the appointment of judges, the Committee was

concerned that there is a prevailing lack of public trust in the judiciary and further stated that the composition and functioning of the JSC undermine efforts to ensure the independence, impartiality, and integrity of the judiciary. Furthermore, it was concerned that lawyers are targeted depending on their clients' charges (for example, undermining religious unity and / or tenets of Islam, domestic violence, and sexual violence and harassment). It was recommended that the State guarantee judicial independence and integrity by reforming recruitment, promotion and removal processes to align with the UN Basic Principles on the Independence of the Judiciary, implement capacity building and introduce measures to prevent undue influence. It was further recommended to reform the composition of JSC to ensure majority of members are judges. Recommendations were also made to take measures to protect legal professionals and to create a safe environment where lawyers can perform their duties without fear of retribution.

C | LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND

The Government is committed to the realization of human rights but lacks capacities to fully meet its obligations as a duty-bearer. Social norms, increasing conservatism, especially gender equality and women rights, also act as barriers. Specific groups are not benefitting equally from current patterns of development, and experience inequality, discrimination, and inequity and limited participation. Women, children, youth, the elderly and migrants are the most impacted. Their vulnerabilities are further increased by reduced access to educational or training opportunities, limited access to income generating opportunities and/or productive

assets, having a disability, being poor, living in the atolls, coming from a broken home, or having a different gender identity or sexual orientation, or religious identity or minority.

Women

While welcoming the enactment of the 2016 Gender Equality Act as well as the efforts on gender parity, the Human Rights Committee in its second review of Maldives' international obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights expressed concern about the underrepresentation of women in political and public life. To address this, the

Committee asked the State to introduce temporary special measures in the Government, Parliament and the Judiciary and recommended awareness raising to increase women's participation, particularly among the media, to eliminate gender-based stereotypes.

The Committee expressed concern at the persistence of violence against women, the low rate of investigation, prosecution and trials, the lack of effective protection and rehabilitation mechanism and the lack of effectively trained professionals in the area. It was particularly concerned at the evidentiary requirements under 2014 Sexual Offences Act, lack of specific criminal offence for domestic violence and that female genital mutilation is not criminalized. In addition to criminalizing female genital mutilation and making domestic violence a specific crime, the Committee recommended that the State effectively investigate and prosecute violence against women, train judges, prosecutors, lawyers and law enforcement officers on violence against women, particularly on the evidentiary requirement under section 52 of the Sexual Offences Act.

On termination of pregnancy, maternal mortality and reproductive rights, the Committee expressed serious concerns over reports regarding difficulties in accessing safe abortion due to medical practitioners refusing to perform abortions as a result of conscientious objection even under the circumstances permitted by law, but also since abortion is not provided for in health facilities across the whole country. It was recommended that the State take all necessary measures to ensure that abortion is not regulated in a manner that runs contrary to its duty to ensure that women and girls do not have to undertake unsafe abortions. In particular, the Committee recommended to take measures to counter stigma around abortion, ensure access to safe and legal abortion services, and take all necessary measures to ensure that the exercise of conscientious objection does not impede women and girls' effective and equal access to

confidential, legal and safe abortion services and post-abortion care.

Children

Maldives achieved 5 out of the 8 Millennial Development Goals including significant progress towards poverty reduction, universal primary education, reduction in child and maternal mortality, and reduction in gender inequalities in health, education, and income. However, to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, Maldives would have to prioritize the significant inequalities among the islands and unfinished business in child rights. This includes the triple burden of malnutrition – micronutrient deficiency, stunting and obesity, rising noncommunicable diseases including mental health, low transition between lower and upper secondary school, high number of young people that are not in education, employment and/or training, high youth unemployment including voluntary unemployment, and rising numbers of gangs, drug use and violence.

Major child protection concerns still exist and encompass a range of issues such as violence against children (VAC), children in contact and conflict with the law and children deprived of family care. In 2023, the Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services (MoGFSS) received 889 (1.73 per 1,000 population) reported cases of VAC (400 boys and 489 girls), of which negligence was the highest type of case reported. Notably, girls are victims in 80% of the reported cases of sexual abuse. The reported cases of child sexual abuse have increased from 98 cases in 2015 (0.19 per 1,000 population) to 461 cases in 2022 (0.89 per 1,000 population). Further, due to the rapidly evolving digital landscape in Maldives, ensuring a safe and secure online environment for children remains a challenge.

Deeply rooted in the principles established by the Child Rights Protection Act enacted in 2019, 'National Action Plan on Prevention and Response to Violence Against Children 2024-

2028' was jointly developed and launched in September 2024 by the Maldives government supported by UNICEF-Maldives. Previous efforts to combat VAC through the formulation of a National Action Plan on Prevention and Response to Violence Against Children (NAP-PRVAC) in 2017 highlighted the lack of a systematic and holistic approach to preventing and responding to VAC, the absence of a formal coordination mechanism, and the need to strengthen the implementation of the existing legal framework. Limited baseline data on VAC, limited understanding, capacity, and roles of duty bearers in prevention and response to VAC, and inadequate service delivery compared to demand have led to fragmented interventions, which could fuel growing public mistrust towards key institutions working in the sector.

The 2024-2028 National Action Plan seeks to do more, and do better in prevention, protection, and response, to break the cycle of violence and ensure that every child grows up in a safe environment over the next four years. The consultative and inclusive process undertaken to formulate this plan translated it into a comprehensive framework which will enable all partners to work together to address violence holistically, focusing on creating safe homes, schools, communities, online spaces, and industries for children.

Regarding juvenile justice, in its second review of Maldives' international obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in July 2024, the Human Rights Committee noted the adoption of the 2019 Juvenile Justice Act, and the 2019 Child Rights Protection Act as welcome developments but expressed concern by the State's intention to lower the age of criminal responsibility to 12 years. The Committee also raised concerns about State's approach to rehabilitation; the Committee stated that the creation of a facility such as the suggested "Hope Island" will remove juvenile offenders from society and place them under the supervision of law enforcement officers. Noting

that the State should be focused on investigating and prosecuting those who exploit children in their criminal activities, the Committee recommended reviewing the Hope Island programme to ensure compatibility with the Covenant and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Committee urged the State to refrain from lowering the age of criminal responsibility to under 15 years.

While acknowledging the positive steps taken by the State party with the 2019 Child Rights Protection Act, which prohibits corporal punishment in all institutional settings, the Committee was nevertheless concerned about the continued use of corporal punishment, including flogging, which can still be imposed at the discretion of judges. The Committee reiterated its previous recommendations on this point and urged the State to take further actions to abolish corporal punishment in all settings.

The Birth and Death Registration Act obliges all parents to register the birth of their child in the Maldives within seven days of birth. Late birth registration is subject to a fine not exceeding MVR10,000 (USD 650). The threat of fines may act as a deterrent for those with limited financial means from registering their children in such circumstances and leave children at risk of statelessness.

Upon registration a child born to a Maldivian citizen parent is assigned a unique identity number and a National Identity Card. Additionally, the Children's Act Article 14(a) provides the right to universal birth registration. Despite the right to universal birth registration prescribed under the law, stakeholders have reported that children born to a foreign parent or parents, and parents married outside of the country face administrative barriers to having their birth registered, and that only children who are considered Maldivian nationals will be granted a National Identity Card, which in turn provides access to a range of services from healthcare to education. The right to universal

birth registration provided under the Birth and Death Registration Act and the Children's Act requires to be upheld so that all children are able to have their birth registered regardless of the citizenship or marriage status of the parents to mitigate risk of Statelessness.

Adolescents and Youth

Many young people are unwilling to take non-white collar jobs or work for the private sector, due to parental aspirations for 'office jobs' for their children once they complete high school. Others are poorly prepared for work. The youth unemployment at 13.9 percent is 9.3 percentage points higher than the national average. Approximately 26.3 percent of those aged 15-24 are not in employment, education or training (NEET). The structure of the dynamic tourism and construction industries is driven by international migrant workers. The paradox of national labour shortages and youth unemployment is a central issue. To attract more young Maldivians into the local workforce, there must be sustained efforts on both the demand and supply sides. Developing a dynamic private sector beyond tourism is essential. Equally essential are sustained efforts for improving working conditions that are family friendly, enhancing skills-matching and reintroducing a local labour market assessment to determine genuine labour shortages, together with more relevant education and vocational training that respond to market needs.

Many youths do not continue beyond lower secondary school. Many are exposed to drugs, drug dealing and crime, and find it difficult to find jobs, rehabilitation, or other support. A study on gangs in Malé reported that there are between 20-30 different gangs operating in Malé with 50-400 members in each group²⁷. The juvenile justice system and the drug court are

meant to be rehabilitative, but they stigmatize, rather than provide second chances. Reform of drug laws and expansion of rehabilitative capacities are essential. Young Maldivians who end up in the penal system are at a higher risk of radicalisation, or recruitment by violent extremists, given their already marginalised status. Guilt and shame over drug abuse, punitive versus rehabilitative state practices, and a lack of Islamic education countering militant jihadist ideologies, can lead Maldivian inmates to join inmates detained on terrorism and violent extremism-related ground in prison for the sake of belonging, positive identity, drug rehabilitation, and religious redemption.²⁸

As the Maldives transitions from traditional to more urban and modern ways of life, many young people's value orientations are changing and becoming different from those of their parents and prior generations. This is resulting in a growing distance between older and younger generations, challenges for young people in finding their identity in society (which can lead to mental health problems) and seeking out risky behaviours. There are limited mental health professionals and services in the Maldives, something that should also be addressed within a human capital development strategy.

Drastic shifts in behaviour and perception are sometimes a reaction to such conditions. Violent Extremism is one such reaction, affecting an apparently small but significant number of youths. Several factors likely contribute to this, including the human rights abuses that had occurred in the Maldives,²⁹ a perceived self-serving, corrupt and out-of-touch political class and increased levels of violence in society.

The Independent Expert on the promotion of a democratic and equitable international order during his visit to the Maldives in March 2024

²⁷ UNICEF Maldives (2012). Rapid Situation Assessment of Gangs in Malé

²⁸ International Centre for the Study of violent extremism (2022). Prison-Based Radicalization to Militant Jihadism in the Maldives

²⁹ National Counter Terrorism Centre and UNDP (2019). Youth Vulnerability in the Maldives

was informed that people aged between 18 and 34 years represented 49.95% of the population of Maldives in 2023, which makes youth participation in decision-making processes pivotal for fostering inclusive governance and ensuring the representation of diverse perspectives in policy formulation and implementation. The expert welcomed the presidential initiative on youth councils or advisers and encouraged the further expansion of such initiatives for better implementation and monitoring across the country. Nevertheless, he noted several challenges remain in ensuring effective youth participation in decision-making in Maldives such as structural barriers, including limited access to education in the remote atolls and rural areas, limited economic opportunities and limited access to financial resources, hinder the meaningful engagement of young people in governance processes. The education system faces challenges, such as inadequate infrastructure, limited vocational training opportunities and disparities in access between urban and rural areas. The expert also found that economic opportunities for young people are also constrained by high unemployment rates, in particular among women and those living on remote islands.

The expert found it to be imperative to assess the prevalent issue of substance use disorders among young people in Maldives as this not only undermines the physical and mental well-being of young citizens but also poses a significant barrier to their participation in societal development and inclusive decision-making processes. Statistics indicate a disturbing trend in substance use disorders among Maldivian young people. According to data from the Ministry of Health, a large portion of people aged between 15 and 24 have experimented with illicit drugs, most commonly cannabis and heroin. Furthermore, the accessibility and affordability of these drugs exacerbate the problem, leading to a cycle of addiction and dependency. The expert expressed concern that the negative impact of substance use disorders

extends far beyond individual health concerns. It directly hampers youth empowerment initiatives by impeding educational attainment, hindering employment prospects and eroding social cohesion. Moreover, substance use disorders perpetuate cycles of poverty and marginalization, disproportionately affecting vulnerable segments of the youth population. Inclusive governance entails the active participation of all citizens, yet substance abuse undermines the capacity of young people to engage meaningfully in democratic processes and advocate for their rights.

Migrants & Asylum-seekers/Refugees

Maldives has the largest proportion of migrant workers in South Asia. According to the 2022 Maldives Population and Housing Census there are 132,371 foreigners in the country, which accounts to approximately 26% of the population. It is estimated that there are additional 63,000 undocumented migrants present in the country. The majority of migrants in the Maldives are men from Bangladesh and India who work in the construction and tourism sectors. Other major countries of origin include Sri Lanka, Nepal, Indonesia and the Philippines.

Inadequate labour migration policy and governance frameworks can bring risks and challenges including with regard to informality, violence and exploitation, child labour, debt bondage, forced labour, birth registration and legal identity, occupational safety and health hazards and other decent work deficits. Human rights risks outside the workplace can also include lack of access to economic and social rights including access to health, education and housing, lack of attention to the right to family life including for migrants who wish to found families in the Maldives, freedom of association and expression restrictions, and heightened vulnerability to trafficking, exploitation and smuggling.

Racism, xenophobia and discrimination, misperceptions and misinformation can add to

the overall challenges of precarious migration. Irregular labour migration increases the vulnerability of migrant workers to human rights violations. Specific groups such as women migrant workers and domestic workers might be particularly vulnerable to forced labour, exploitation, human trafficking, sex trafficking and abuse due to their isolation. So could refugees - who may resort to irregular labour migration channels or smuggling and trafficking networks in the absence of legal pathways and asylum pathways.

Migrants are therefore subjected to the following risks or already suffering from them: unsafe and substandard living and working conditions and occupational health hazards; non-payment, short payment and delayed payment of wages for migrant workers; vulnerability to forced labour and exploitation; vulnerability of specific groups such as women migrant and domestic care workers; high levels of indebtedness, which can also lead to situations akin to bonded or forced labour; arbitrary and/or prolonged detention of migrants and refugees; risk of forced return without due process and refoulement for refugees; limited access of migrant workers and their families to social protection, adequate health care, education, housing, water and sanitation; limited access of migrant workers to justice (through both non-judicial and judicial labour dispute resolution system), redressal, remediation and protection of the law; and risk of trafficking, aggravated smuggling, and situations of forced labour.

In addition, migrant workers are likely to be disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change, such as sea-level rise, coastal erosion, storm surges, extreme flooding, and other severe weather events. Their often-precarious living conditions, coupled with limited access to resources and legal protections, make them particularly vulnerable to displacement, loss of livelihoods, and increased

exposure to environmental and economic risks in the face of these climate-induced challenges. The Independent Expert on the promotion of a democratic and equitable international order who visited Maldives in March 2024 also noted migrant workers in Maldives face myriad challenges and risks that jeopardize their enjoyment of fundamental human rights. Foremost among these are the risks of smuggling and trafficking, despite the entry into force of the Prevention of Human Trafficking Act in 2013, and which often result from deceptive recruitment practices, exploitative working conditions and lack of legal protection. The expert further observed that many migrant workers find themselves trapped in debt bondage, subjected to forced labour and deprived of their basic freedoms and dignity, with the gender dimension exacerbating vulnerabilities, as female migrant workers face heightened risks of sexual exploitation and abuse.

The expert stated that human rights of migrant workers are intrinsically linked with the principles of good governance and inclusive development and that upholding the rights and dignity of migrant workers requires robust legal frameworks, effective oversight mechanisms and proactive measures to combat trafficking and exploitation. Among his recommendations on this include ratification of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families; and the enactment of a comprehensive legislation specifically addressing the rights and protections of migrant workers, aligned with international human rights standards and conventions and including provisions on equal treatment, non-discrimination and access to justice for migrant workers.

(See also under Human Rights section above on the Human Rights Committee's observations and recommendations regarding forced labour and human trafficking.)

In response to the pressing need to enhance the protection of migrant workers in the Maldives, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has been instrumental in the establishment of the Migrant Workers Resource Centre (MWRC) in the Maldives. This one-stop-shop will be launched in early 2025. The MWRC will serve as a central hub for migrants, offering them access to vital information, advice, and grievance redressal mechanisms.

The MWRC's core objective is to operationalize a comprehensive approach to migrant well-being, focusing on Prevention, Protection, and Provision. The centre's activities include raising awareness among migrants about the risks of human trafficking, transnational crimes, forced labor, and unethical recruitment practices. It also provides legal assistance to migrants facing exploitation and facilitates access to grievance mechanisms. Moreover, the MWRC will play a crucial role in disseminating information about safe migration practices, empowering migrants to make informed decisions and protect their rights.

The MWRC and Migrant Data Health project will play a crucial role in collecting and disseminating disaggregated data on migration, aligning with Objective 17 of the Global Compact for Migration (GCM), which emphasizes the importance of evidence-based policymaking for effective migration governance.

Regarding rights of refugees and asylum seekers, the Human Rights Committee in its second review of Maldives international obligations under ICCPR was concerned at the lack of an asylum system and protection mechanism for refugees as well as the lack of effective procedures for non-refoulement. It was

recommended that the State consider acceding to the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees of 1951 and its Protocol of 1967. It was further recommended that the State ensure the right to seek asylum in full compliance with the principle of non-refoulement as guaranteed by the Anti-Torture Act, adopt a national refugee protection framework, and provide migrants and asylum seekers with support services such as free legal aid and access to interpreters from the very beginning of proceedings.

Persons with disabilities³⁰

The Maldives has a national disability registry that provides data on the number of registered Persons with Disabilities (PWDs).

However, various types of congenital disabilities are increasing, and there is limited data collected in the country. Disability information is collected in the last census using core six questions recommended by the Washington group. And the data is published which is available at the island level. However, census data is not provided at individual level. Therefore, there are many obstacles to providing state care to such people. There have also been difficulties in formulating policies and providing services for people with disabilities. The disability prevalence in the Maldives is estimated at 6.7 percent.³¹

The prevalence of any disability increases with age,³² from 1 % of females below age to 5 to 10 % of those age 60 and over. Among males, prevalence rises from 2 per cent of those under age 5 to 11 % of those age 60 and over. It is estimated that 6.3 percent of live births are born with a birth defect, resulting in subsequent disability.³³ This figure is well below the global and regional average, presumably because disability is identified based on a medical model rather than a social model (in line with the

³⁰ Drawn from Maldives' response to an OHCHR questionnaire pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 31/6, 2016

³¹ London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and Eskey (2020). Maldives social protection and disability study 2017-2019. Preliminary results.

³² Ministry of Health and ICF (2019). Maldives Demographic Health Survey 2016/2017. Ministry of Health, Maldives. p.17

³³ Faisal A, Ibrahim N, Rasheed H, Mustafa M (2019). Birth defects in government referral hospital 2016-2018

Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which defines “Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”). Such approach would impact persons with disabilities in the Maldives, including on their enjoyment of human rights. It is crucial to ensure a rights-based approach rather than a charity approach.

Access to treatment and rehabilitation therapy is limited mainly to Male and physical therapy at regional hospitals with resulting gaps in service for a range of disabilities. Lack of access to a health care consultation is a major barrier confronting PWDs in attempting to gain access to services provided by the Government and in participating in activities targeted for them. Consultation is recognised as one of the primary strategies in human rights-based development, particularly in policy formulation. Consultation must also be a core element in service delivery for PWDs. Although the Health Master Plan identifies the need for establishing services for the treatment and rehabilitation of PWDs, these services have not been prioritized.

The Child Rights Protection Act (Law No. 19/2019) requires the government to arrange treatment for children with mental and physical disabilities. In addition, it requires all efforts to be made to enable participation of children with disabilities in society, with special assistance being made available. There have been attempts for including children with disabilities in the education system, however, there are number of capacity gaps to the provision of inclusive education in the schools. Training of special education teachers and getting teachers to respect and protect the rights of children with disabilities are major challenges. There is virtually no access to or transition to secondary

level education for children with disabilities. Another challenge facing young people with disabilities and their parents is the lack of planned transitions from school to work, vocational training, tertiary education, or other meaningful day-time activities.³⁴

A Law on Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and providing Financial Assistance (8/2010) guarantees a monthly disability allowance ranging from MVR 3000 to MVR 6000 (USD 194 – USD 388). Eligibility for the scheme is solely determined by the assessment conducted by a medical professional, without a means test. Census 2022 identifies around 23,000 PWD and disability registry has beneficiaries around 13,000 which means more than 50% are covered.

The most obvious gap in services provided to PWDs in the Maldives is lack of employment services. There is no government-organised support or services to PWDs for obtaining jobs. The challenges around employment include discrimination in the labour market and workplace and low expectations and assumptions about what PWDs can and cannot do.³⁵ PWDs need reasonable accommodation in the workplace for them to be effective and to work to their full capacity, or to retain a job following an accident which are not forthcoming. Accessible transport to and from work and accessible workplaces are also critical factors in ensuring people can work. In January 2023, the President of Maldives launched the National Disability Registry with the aim to ensure that the Administration would be better equipped to meet the specific needs and requirements of disabled people.

The Independent Expert on the promotion of a democratic and equitable international order who visited Maldives in March 2024 noted that while the establishment of the National Disability Council demonstrates a commitment

³⁴ Human Rights Commission of the Maldives (2010). Baseline assessment on activities addressing rights of persons with disabilities.

³⁵ Human Rights Commission of the Maldives (2010). Baseline assessment on activities addressing rights of persons with disabilities.

to institutionalizing mechanisms for addressing disability-related issues and promoting inclusive policies, marginalized groups, including persons with disabilities, continue to encounter barriers to meaningful participation in public decision-making processes. One of the primary challenges is the lack of accessibility of physical infrastructure, transportation and communication channels, which restricts the mobility and participation of persons with disabilities, as was particularly apparent to the Independent Expert during his visit. In addition, societal attitudes and stigma towards disability often perpetuate discrimination and exclusion, limiting opportunities for engagement in political and civic activities. There remains a gap between policy formulation and implementation, with limited resources allocated to ensure the effective implementation of inclusive policies and programmes, such as the disability allowance programme, which, regrettably, does not always benefit all communities far from major cities, due to the lack of accessibility, infrastructure and connectivity in the islands. As a result, marginalized groups, including persons with disabilities and older persons, may not receive the support and accommodations necessary to fully exercise their rights and participate in decision-making processes.

As such, the expert made the following recommendations: Invest in enhancing accessibility infrastructure, including ramps, Braille signage and assistive technologies, to ensure that persons with disabilities can access public spaces and participate in decision-making processes without barriers; Conduct targeted awareness campaigns and training programmes to challenge stereotypes and misconceptions about disability, fostering a culture of inclusivity and respect for diversity within society; Provide training and capacity-building opportunities for persons with disabilities to develop leadership

skills, advocacy abilities and political awareness, empowering them to actively engage in public decision-making processes; Strengthen mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of disability-inclusive policies, ensuring that adequate resources are allocated and that accountability mechanisms are in place to address gaps and barriers; and Foster meaningful consultation with and participation of marginalized groups, including persons with disabilities, in the design, implementation and evaluation of policies and programmes that affect their lives, ensuring that their voices are heard and their needs are addressed.

Persons with mental health conditions

There is little research on mental health in the Maldives. A 2003 survey³⁶ reported that more than 29.1% of the respondents stated that they had a mental health condition. The study also reported that nearly 5 per cent suffer from anxiety and depression and nearly 4 per cent reported somatic symptoms. More than twice as many women as men suffer from anxiety, depression, and somatic disorders. There has also been a trend of increasing suicides, particularly among youth. However, no formal research figures are available.

Most recently, mental health deterioration is increasing due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which will have a major impact on vulnerable groups. Mental disorders include an important human rights dimension and people with mental disorders are a vulnerable population group. There is significant stigma and discrimination associated with mental disorders, which can lead to denial of basic human rights such as health, education, employment, housing, welfare services and other civil rights.³⁷ Mental health and wellbeing are linked to broader social issues such as domestic violence, child abuse, family disruption, educational failure, substance use, unemployment and poverty. These issues

³⁶ Niyaz H, Naz A. (2003). Mental health situation in the Maldives. Malé: Ministry of Health

³⁷ Health Protection Agency (2017). Mental health policy. Ministry of Health, Maldives

have important implications for the prevention of mental disorders and conversely, addressing mental health is important to tackling these broad social issues.

The results of a survey done in 2006 on Women's Health and Life Experiences showed that more than 1 in 3 women (34.6 %) aged 15-49 reported experiencing physical or sexual violence during their lifetime.³⁸ This research also showed that psychological distress for women who have experienced physical or sexual partner violence is significantly higher than for those not experiencing violence.

The National Drug Use Survey 2011-2012 revealed that mental health problems were common in this population. Data on mental health problems among drug users implied that about 15 % of drug users in Male and 9 per cent in the atolls had been diagnosed with a psychological disorder.³⁹ More than a third of current drug users in Male stated that they were affected by a mental health problem.

The mental health system in the Maldives is currently limited. Most mental health services are in Malé, with minimal services in the outer islands. There are psychiatric and psychological services in the private sector. The Mental Health Centre at the Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital (IGMH) provides mental health services to the public, mainly in the form of outpatient psychiatric clinics. Inpatient service for psychiatric patients at IGMH is very limited with no psychiatric ward. Over the past year, psychiatrists have been newly posted at the Regional Hospitals. Medications are available and free. However, there is a dearth of trained mental health workers in the country. While there is some mental health training at local institutions for counsellors, nurses, and primary

healthcare workers, this is limited with little practical emphasis.

Older persons

Five per cent of the population is aged 65 and above.⁴⁰ This group is expected to more than double by 2030. While life expectancy of Maldivians has increased from 70 to 79 years in the past 15 years, the healthy life span is 70 years.

The Universal Health Insurance Scheme – Aasandha, introduced in 2012, has mitigated health care related financial burdens and ended health care related impoverishment of older adults. A state funded old age basic pension scheme, in operation since 2010, covers all citizens 65 and above. Currently, the state pension is MVR 5,000 (approximately USD 300) per month.

Traditionally, elderly family members are cared for in an extended family setting, but this has become less common due to inadequate living space and internal migration. In some cases, parents are left alone on remote islands. Presently, Maldives is moving away from the pattern of an extended family to a nuclear family. The tradition was that the elderly were cared for by family members, particularly the women.⁴¹

There is limited information and data on older persons' participation in society, with emerging concern of exclusion of the elderly, increasing loneliness among older populations and limited options for productive engagement of the elderly in society. Respondents in one study conducted in Malé⁴² preferred to live with their children and appreciated the level of care given by their children. The absence of modified homes and adapted built environments and

³⁸ Fulu E. (2006). The Maldives Study on Women's Health and Life Experiences. Malé: Ministry of Health and Gender

³⁹ Malé: United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (; 2012). National Drug Use Survey Maldives

⁴⁰ National Bureau of Statistics (2016). Maldives Population and Housing Census, 2014. Statistical release 1: Population and households. P.13

⁴¹ Didi R., (2012). Implications of ageing in Maldives. Regional Health Forum

⁴² Nazra A (2018). 'Perceptions of Ageing Among Older Adults Living in Male', Maldives and Implications for Provision of Support

suitable housing for families living with elderly parents means that healthy older adults' levels of physical activities, social interaction and independence are limited.

Maldives has no specific facilities for geriatric care. Age related minor illnesses are treated at tertiary-multipurpose hospitals. There are very few organizations for older adults. More needs to be done to support the ability of the elderly to live an independent life for as long as possible, through schemes such as adapted housing and home nursing support.

Regional and urban/atoll differences

The geographic distribution of services across many small islands limits opportunities and often results in migration to Male. The Household Income and Expenditure (HIES) 2019⁴³ highlights significant income disparity between Male and in the Atolls, with almost 60% of the atoll population getting less than USD 250, while only 18% of the Male gets this amount. Those living in Atoll have unfavourable labour market outcomes. For example, employment-to-population ratio and labour force participation rate is 8.3 and 6.8 % lower in Atoll respectively

compared to that in Male'. Inequality between Male' and the atolls has a negative impact on social cohesion. This can act as a trigger point for future social tensions if policy measures are not taken to address the underlying issues. Geography causes a relative disconnect between Male and the atolls, and between atolls and small islands, encouraging reliance on local community-based structures and support networks, often consisting of just a few families. As adults and youth migrate to Malé, those networks are increasingly strained, with growing, negative social consequences.

An estimated 45.5% of the population lives in urban areas.⁴⁴ Due to constant internal migration⁴⁵ from the atolls to Male and a low fertility rate, it is anticipated that this will continue to increase. It is estimated that by 2030 that over half of the population will be living in Male with this increasing to 64% of resident Maldivians living in Male by 2054.⁴⁶ This will have a significant impact on infrastructure and demand for services, including education, health and social services, to the continued disadvantage of the atolls.

⁴³ Maldives Bureau of Statistics (2020). HIES 2019 – Income

⁴⁴ Macrotrends.net (2024). Maldives Urban Population 1960-2019.

⁴⁵ National Bureau of Statistics, and UNFPA, Maldives Population Projections 2014-2054,

⁴⁶ National Bureau of Statistics and UNFPA, Maldives Population Projection 2014-2054, Assumptions and Results Analysis, p.13.

D | GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Over the past decade, significant progress has been made towards advancing gender equality and women's empowerment. However, challenges remain as women are still underrepresented at all levels of decision-making, including in the parliament and cabinet.

In the previous administration, Maldives broke the glass ceiling by appointing women to Supreme Court bench and to non-traditional cabinet portfolios such as the defence, transport and technology portfolios and had a cabinet comprising of 33% women. However, in the current cabinet women are assigned more stereotypical roles such as education, social and family development and agriculture and animal welfare. Women's representation in the parliament also dropped to 13.6%. The approach to women in cabinet, where fewer women hold non-stereotypical portfolios, added to the removal of 'gender' from the Ministry's title, raises concerns about a potential shift in focus towards traditional roles.

Women's representation in parliament has stagnated, showing a slight decline over the past 20 years. Women's representation in the national parliament, the People's Majlis, has fallen to 3.2%, with only three women securing seats in the 2023 elections.

This underrepresentation, followed by the decline in women's cabinet positions, underscores the need for better legislative measures, beyond temporary initiatives, to ensure sustainable progress. The 2016 Gender Equality Act leaves achieving gender parity in politics to the discretion of political parties, but without specific provisions in the Political Parties

Act greater representation in the political arena has remained elusive to women. A bill was proposed to amend the Constitution to introduce measures to increase women's representation in parliament close to the 2024 Parliamentary Election. With the change in parliament majority in favour of the ruling party, it is unclear if there will be support to the proposed amendments as it was proposed by the opposition.

The issue of underrepresentation in parliament and broader decision-making roles was highlighted during the Maldives' reviews under Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the UPR and is in alignment with SDG Goal 5. Both the CEDAW Committee and the Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls recommended measures to increase women's participation in political and public life, including introducing a parliamentary quota for women.⁴⁷

However, quotas alone may not be sufficient to enhance meaningful participation. Stereotypes persist, with claims that women are less interested in politics, which must be countered by addressing the systemic and socio-economic barriers that hinder women from running for office or participating effectively once elected. The historic legislative quota introduced following the 2019 amendment to the Decentralization Act increased women's representation in local councils to 33%. However, some political parties restricted women to quota seats, and even labelled women as "quota councillors", and limited

⁴⁷ A/HRC/53/39/ADD.2 CEDAW/C/MDV/CO/6

their responsibilities.⁴⁸ Women's Development Committees (WDCs), despite their legal status, still face funding constraints and has minimal decision-making authority, often confined to traditional gender roles.⁴⁹

Female council members revealed similar barriers and difficulties in reaching leadership positions within political parties and running as party candidates. Many women continue to bear the dual burden of managing domestic responsibilities while pursuing political careers, making family support critical. Without this support, women often struggle to fully engage in politics. Women councilors also noted that they are frequently relegated to managing "feminized" sectors such as education, health, and community empowerment, which limits their influence on broader governance issues.

The challenges extend to political party structures, which remain overwhelmingly male-dominated. Although most parties have women's wings, these often isolate rather than empower women within decision-making processes. The reluctance to support female candidates, coupled with persistent harassment from male colleagues, stunts women's political mobility from local to national leadership. Addressing these entrenched barriers require systemic changes to political party dynamics, broader societal support, and measures to ensure women's meaningful inclusion across all governance levels.

Addressing these barriers requires implementing the recommendations from human rights bodies like CEDAW, particularly on legislative quotas, campaign financing, leadership training, and

media access, alongside achieving the 33% women's representation target outlined in the National Gender Equality Action Plan for 2022–2026.

The gender gaps in the Maldivian labour market, as highlighted by the 2022 Census and the 2019 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES), reveal disparities. Labour force participation is higher among men, women's labour force participation is around 42%, compared to men's participation of around 73%.⁵⁰ According to the 2022 Census, the employment rate among women is at 94.7%, compared to 97.8% for men, highlighting a persistent gender gap in the Maldives' labour market.⁵¹

Income inequality persists, as men earn an average monthly salary of MVR 11,977 compared to women's MVR 7,510. A major barrier to women's economic participation is the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work. Women are more likely to spend more hours on informal employment at 44% when compared to the 36% of men.⁵²

In the tourism sector, women's representation remains low, standing at only 11% in 2022,⁵³ despite the sector's expansion over the years. Men also dominate other key sectors such as public administration, agriculture, and fisheries.

⁴⁸ Report on the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls. Page 5, Para 14

⁴⁹ *ibid*

⁵⁰ Maldives Bureau of Statistics (2023). Poverty and Inequality in Maldives 2022.

⁵¹ Maldives Bureau of Statistics (2023). Mapping the Employment Landscape: A Comprehensive Analysis of the situation in the page 79

⁵² UNDP – Gender Equality

⁵³ Maldives Bureau of Statistics (2023). Employment in Tourist Resorts – 2022.

E | CHALLENGES AND GAPS TOWARDS ACHIEVING THE 2030 AGENDA

Social Wellbeing

1. Good Health and Wellbeing

The Maldives has made strides in maternal and infant health, yet it faces significant challenges in achieving SDG 3, Good Health and Well-Being. Geographic dispersion across the islands limits availability of specialized healthcare access, particularly for remote atoll residents who often must travel to secondary hospitals in Malé or regional centres for essential services, including emergency obstetrics. This situation disproportionately impacts unmarried women and girls, highlighting a critical gap in timely access to sexual and reproductive health services.

Additionally, the healthcare system's heavy reliance on foreign healthcare workers—59% of doctors and 38% of nurses in 2021—contributes to instability due to high turnover rates and a lack of locally trained

professionals. Although maternal mortality rates have improved, specialized care remains uneven, with rising caesarean section rates reflecting access and quality concerns, particularly in remote areas. Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) account for a significant portion of deaths, yet preventive measures are lacking, especially in rural regions. Mental health services are under-resourced and insufficient to address escalating issues exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, while substance abuse remains a critical challenge linked to increased crime and domestic violence. Lastly, as the population ages, with projections indicating that 14% will be over 65 by 2050, a comprehensive policy framework is urgently needed to support healthy ageing and alleviate the healthcare burden.

2. Quality Education

The Maldives has made notable progress in education, achieving gender parity at the primary and secondary levels. However, significant challenges persist that impede progress towards SDG 4, which aims for inclusive and equitable quality education for all. Geographic disparities in access to higher secondary education are stark, with only 46 schools nationwide and entire atolls lacking such institutions. This limitation results in lower enrolment rates in higher secondary education, particularly in remote areas. Furthermore, while girls represent a larger share of higher secondary enrolments (40.3% versus boys at 27.6%), economic and social factors contribute to a growing gender imbalance.

Challenges also include low enrolment and high dropout rates in higher education, where only 20% of lower secondary graduates continue their studies. Despite government initiatives, economic pressures often force students, especially in remote areas, to prioritize work over education. The Maldives faces a shortage of qualified teachers, particularly in rural areas, with a heavy reliance on foreign staff and inadequate training for Special Education Needs (SEN). Additionally, stark disparities exist in education completion rates between students in urban centres like Male' and those from poorer households in remote atolls, exacerbating socioeconomic inequalities.

comprehensive implementation and curriculum development are necessary to enhance

3. Gender Equality, Empowerment of Women and Child Protection

The Maldives has made progresses toward gender equality and child protection, yet significant challenges hinder progress towards SDG 5. Despite women holding 39.5% of local council seats, their representation in higher political positions remains low, with only 4.6% of parliamentary seats and 11% of judicial roles filled by women. This underrepresentation limits their influence in shaping political agendas. Additionally, women's labor force participation is significantly lower than men's, with only 45.6% of women engaged compared to 77% of men. Many women work in the informal sector, which lacks social protections, further complicating their economic empowerment.

Moreover, violence against women is rising, with over 80% of victims being female, and

Economic Inclusion and Resilience

The Maldives has made significant advances in economic development, primarily through tourism, but challenges remain that hinder progress towards SDG 8 for inclusive and sustained economic growth. The economy's overdependence on tourism—contributing to a quarter of the GDP—renders it vulnerable to external shocks, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused a 33% GDP decline. Economic diversification is essential, but limited growth in critical sectors like fisheries and agriculture, which contribute minimally to GDP, further exacerbates this vulnerability. Climate change poses additional threats to these sectors, and younger generations are increasingly moving away from traditional jobs, underscoring the need for modernization and policy implementation.

Rising fiscal vulnerability is another pressing issue, with public and publicly guaranteed debt

opportunities for all learners, aligning with SDG 4.

only 5% of reported cases of gender-based violence leading to prosecution due to weak implementation of existing laws and sociocultural barriers. Women disproportionately bear the burden of unpaid domestic work, making them more vulnerable economically, particularly as they age without formal social protections like pensions. Challenges also extend to digital and financial inclusion, where women's access to financial services lags behind men's. Children, particularly those from poorer households or violent environments, face increased risks of exploitation and abuse. There is an urgent need for better protection strategies and reforms in the justice system to address gender biases and enhance access to justice for women and children.

1. Inclusive and Sustained Economic Growth and Fiscal Sustainability

exceeding 100% of GDP, limiting fiscal space for development initiatives. Although national poverty rates are low, poverty concentration remains high in the atolls, with income inequality and lack of infrastructure perpetuating multidimensional poverty, which is 28%. Informal employment is prevalent, particularly among women, who are often excluded from social protections and formal economic participation. Addressing these inequalities requires targeted investments in infrastructure, social protections for informal workers, and support for women and youth entrepreneurs. Additionally, the Maldives faces the dual challenges of climate change risks and limited financial inclusion, necessitating significant investments in climate resilience and entrepreneurial support to foster economic diversification and sustainability.

1. Human Capital and Reduced Inequalities

Although Maldives has progressed in developing human capital, several challenges hinder progress toward SDGs 8 and 10, particularly regarding gender inequality, youth unemployment, and reliance on foreign labor. Women's labor force participation is notably lower than men's (46% compared to 77%), largely due to domestic responsibilities. Additionally, many women work in the informal sector, which lacks essential social protections, creating economic vulnerabilities. Addressing gender disparities in labor participation and providing better support for women in both formal and informal employment are crucial to fostering economic inclusion.

Youth unemployment is another pressing issue, particularly in the atolls, where many young people are neither employed nor in education or training. Statistics released by

the Maldives Bureau of Statistics (MBS) revealed that 1 in 5 youths who are between the ages of 15 and 24 are Not in Education, Employment, or

2. Sustainable Cities and Communities and Resilient Infrastructure

The Maldives faces challenges in achieving SDGs 9 and 11, particularly concerning housing, urbanization, infrastructure, and environmental sustainability. Despite public investments in housing, there remains a critical shortage of affordable options, especially in the Greater Male' region, where uniform rent rates in social housing projects limit access for low-income and vulnerable populations. Overcrowding in Male' exacerbates issues like traffic congestion, poor waste management, and limited green spaces, negatively impacting the well-being of residents. A lack of comprehensive urban planning further contributes to these challenges, necessitating investments in sustainable transport and green spaces.

Additionally, the Maldives grapples with environmental degradation and inadequate

Training (NEETs). This number currently stands at 10,414. Bridging the skills gap between education and labor market demands, especially in tourism and STEM fields, is essential. The Maldives also relies heavily on foreign migrant workers, which raises concerns about exploitation and inadequate protections. Additionally, persons with disabilities face barriers in accessing education and employment. Targeted policies for inclusion, along with initiatives to encourage women's participation in STEM, are vital for reducing inequalities and enhancing economic growth. Expanding programs like the Maldives: Enhancing Employability and Resilience of Youth (MEERY) can provide essential opportunities for skill development and entrepreneurship, addressing the rising disengagement among young people.

waste management, as increasing solid waste, especially plastic, threatens marine ecosystems. Climate resilience is crucial, as the country's infrastructure is vulnerable to climate change, yet current developments often lack the necessary sustainability measures. Digital infrastructure is also unevenly distributed, with many remote islands lacking access to high-speed internet, leading to digital exclusion for vulnerable groups. Furthermore, the reliance on traditional transportation methods exacerbates congestion and pollution. Addressing these interconnected challenges through strategic investments in infrastructure, sustainable practices, and equitable access to services is vital for fostering resilient cities and communities across the Maldives.

Environment and Climate Action

1. Clean Water and Sanitation

To achieve SDG 6, Clean Water and Sanitation in the Maldives, several significant challenges must be addressed. While 78% of the population has access to piped water, bottled water has emerged as the most common type of water for drinking, constituting 49% of the population followed by 25% utilising piped desalinated water and 24% relying on rainwater tanks in households. Additionally, 80% of households have toilets connected to the sewerage system with every household in Male' being equipped with toilets connected to the sewerage system. Environmental degradation, exacerbated by pollution and climate change, threatens water quality and resources, with rising sea levels and increased rainfall leading to freshwater shortages, especially during the dry season. Economic constraints from the COVID-19 pandemic have further impacted efforts to expand water infrastructure and reliance on energy-intensive desalination processes presents sustainability challenges.

There are gaps in access to clean water and sanitation between urban and rural areas, disproportionately affecting households in multidimensional poverty. The uneven implementation of infrastructure projects, regulatory framework challenges, and insufficient public awareness hinder progress in providing essential services. Effective enforcement of the Water and Sewerage Act is needed, along with enhanced integration of renewable energy sources for sustainability. Moreover, improved community involvement and monitoring systems are crucial for effective water management and ensuring that interventions meet the needs of all residents, particularly in remote areas.

2. Clean Energy

Achieving SDG 7, Affordable and Clean Energy in the Maldives involves overcoming significant challenges. The country relies heavily on

imported diesel for electricity, with fossil fuels accounting for 80% of fuel imports and leading to high electricity tariffs that burden households and institutions. As of 2019, only 6% of energy generation came from renewable sources, and infrastructure constraints further hinder efficient energy production and distribution. Despite achieving 100% electricity connectivity, many islands lack the capacity to meet rising energy demands, particularly with increased digital device usage. Additionally, the current voluntary energy efficiency program has limited effectiveness due to low consumer awareness and engagement.

There are notable gaps in energy access and costs between urban and remote islands, exacerbating social inequalities. While investment in renewable energy is increasing, progress remains slow, necessitating an update to the existing Road Map for the Energy Sector to address COVID-19-related challenges. A lack of public awareness and engagement around energy efficiency and renewable energy benefits further impedes progress. Robust financial mechanisms are essential to attract investment for renewable energy projects, while improved monitoring and evaluation systems are needed to track progress and inform policy decisions regarding energy consumption and emissions reduction.

3. Conservation and Sustainable Marine Resource Use

For the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Resources in the Maldives, various issues must be addressed. Climate change continues to threaten the health of coral reefs which according to IPCC will decline by 70–90% at 1.5 °C global warming, exceeding 99% at 2 °C (with high confidence). Overfishing driven by local and tourist demand, coupled with illegal fishing practices, places immense pressure on reef-based fish stocks. Additionally, the tourism sector contributes to ecosystem degradation through activities like beach replenishment and pollution from untreated wastewater, further

stressing fragile marine environments. Although some areas are designated as protected, enforcement of conservation measures remains inadequate, while insufficient data on fish stocks limits effective management.

Key gaps include socioeconomic vulnerabilities faced by communities reliant on marine resources, particularly marginalized groups such as women, children and youth. There is a pressing need for increased community engagement and education on marine conservation, alongside more cohesive and integrated conservation efforts among government agencies and local stakeholders. Robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are essential for tracking biodiversity changes and assessing conservation effectiveness. Investment in research and development is also crucial for enhancing understanding of marine ecosystems and fostering innovative solutions to combat the impacts of climate change and overfishing, with collaboration from international organizations to boost research capacity.

4. Climate Action

As a low-lying small island, the Maldives is under serious threat from climate change and related hazards, which affects its natural environment, economic development, and well-being of its people.⁵⁴ This island nation is highly vulnerable to diverse extreme weather events such as floods, sea-level rise, storm surges, and coastal erosion. Climate change has visibly increased the frequency of these events in recent decades, highlighting the urgent need to understand future climate patterns for developing effective adaptation plans.

Since 1950, the Maldives, already a hot tropical country, has been witnessing climate change

through further increases in temperature.⁵⁵ The increase in maximum and minimum temperature has been sharper in recent decades (1991-2020) mainly due to GHG emissions and socioeconomic development with frequent occurrences of high temperature-related extreme events.

According to the downscaled CMIP6 climate projection data, the annual precipitation is likely to increase across the country until 2100.⁵⁶ The increase is greater in the higher emission scenarios. The central region of the country, including the capital city, is likely to receive the highest rainfall, with an enhanced risk of floods and related events. For the northern atolls (Haa Alifu, Haa Dhaalu, Raa, Shaviyani, Noonu, and Raa atoll) the increase in total annual rainfall is the highest. For the southern atolls, including Gaafu Alifu, Gaafu Dhaalu, Gnaviyani, and Seenu atolls, rainfall is likely to decrease.

The impacts of climate change are unevenly distributed across sectors and populations, with pre-existing vulnerabilities making it challenging to prepare for and cope with the changes.⁵⁷ In addition to directly affecting the population, climate change threatens agriculture, critical infrastructures, and energy sectors. Highly populated areas in the Maldives, such as Malé, are expected to experience increased rainfall, temperature, and the impacts of sea level rise, with the population exposure to very high rainfall increasing under higher emission scenarios. 'The central atolls' major agricultural areas will likely face more rain and related impacts.

⁵⁴ Joint SDG Fund (2024). Strengthening National and Subnational Capacity for Sustainable Disaster Risk Reduction, Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation in Maldives

⁵⁵ Joint SDG Fund (2024). Strengthening National and Subnational Capacity for Sustainable Disaster Risk Reduction, Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation in Maldives

⁵⁶ Joint SDG Fund (2024). Strengthening National and Subnational Capacity for Sustainable Disaster Risk Reduction, Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation in Maldives

⁵⁷ Joint SDG Fund (2024). Strengthening National and Subnational Capacity for Sustainable Disaster Risk Reduction, Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation in Maldives

Climate-induced disaster risk can outpace the country's resilience.⁵⁸ Hence, risk-informed adaptation measures targeted at vulnerable sectors and communities can help avoid losses caused by disasters and enhance the resilience of the country. Identifying the priority areas and continued investment in those areas is needed to strengthen disaster resilience locally and nationally. Policy decisions based on science and evidence can enhance their social and economic outcomes.

Key gaps include lack of awareness and the need for capacity building to enhance the local capabilities in using data and tools to inform

policy and adaptation strategies, limited community engagement in climate initiatives, and inadequate integration of climate policies across sectors. Building resilience in vulnerable communities, particularly those reliant on natural resources, is crucial. Enhanced investment in capacity building and technology is needed to support sustainable practices and climate-resilient infrastructure. Additionally, inclusive participation of children, young people and women in climate action is essential for equitable solutions. Lastly, mobilizing resources through climate financing and partnerships is vital for supporting the Maldives' climate adaptation and mitigation efforts.

F | SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND EXCLUSION ANALYSIS

Education

In the Maldives, access to Education is a fundamental right to all under the constitution, bestowing knowledge and skills for clear choices by individuals in life and build resilience.

Over the years, access to education and the quality of teaching have improved across the country. Innovative developments in the education sector with complementing capacity building of individuals have contributed to the socio-economic advancement of society.

Maldives adopted the Global Agenda 2030, aligned with the National Strategic Goals with the ultimate target of the Maldives Education Sector to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.⁵⁹

Annual Statistics 2021 of the Maldives' Ministry of Education, reflects that Maldives has made progress in primary (Grade 1-6) and secondary education (Grade 7-10), having achieved gender parity in these levels of education. The net enrollment rate (NER) in primary grades in the Maldives during 2010 was at 95.5 where it has reached to 101.2 in 2020 and NER in secondary grades was at 83.6 in 2010 and it reached 93.6 in 2020. As per UNESCO Institute for Statistics (uis.unesco.org), the ratio of female to male pupils in primary school from 1992 to 2020, the average value was 0.99% with a minimum of 0.96 percent in 1997 and a maximum of 1.04 % in 2018. The latest value from 2022 is 1%.

The challenges in the sector include the need to enhance the skills of teachers for improvement of the quality of education. The education sector

⁵⁸ Joint SDG Fund (2024). Strengthening National and Subnational Capacity for Sustainable Disaster Risk Reduction, Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation in Maldives

⁵⁹ Maldives Bureau of Statistics (2023). Education Status of Population. An Analysis of Census 2022.

analysis noted that there is a need for the pre-service teacher training institutions to incorporate training in many aspects of the national curriculum in a more explicit manner, and to improve skills for subject specific teaching. Technical expertise of staff must be improved, including school principals and leading teachers at the school level. Skills of teacher trainers need to be enhanced to ensure effective implementation of the curriculum. In addition, student-teacher ratios, especially in schools at both extremes of enrolment size, need to be further improved.

The higher education sector is growing with two public universities, nine new private colleges and two polytechnics, but there is no proper mechanism or regulation to assist in their governance. There are more than 200 higher education institutions (HEIs) registered and 35 of them offer programmes at diploma and above qualifications.⁶⁰ The Ministry of Higher Education and the Maldives Qualification Authority, though mandated for regulation and quality assurance of higher education, do not have qualified staff to properly regulate the sector.

Health

The health of the people of Maldives has improved significantly in the past few decades. There are more than 200 higher education institutions (HEIs) registered and 35 of them offer programmes at diploma and above qualifications.⁶¹

Child survival has improved with the Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) falling from 7 to 3 per 1,000 live births in between 2018 and 2019. However, this has since increased to 10 per 1,000 live births in 2021⁶². The Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) came down to zero in 2019 but has

increased to from 68 per 100,000 births in 2021. The improvements in MMR are owed to better Emergency Obstetric Care (EmOC) at atoll level and antenatal care at the island level.⁶³ More policy intervention needed to address the recent spike in MMR.

The Total Fertility Rate (TFR) for the country, as shown by the Census 2022, is 1.7 births per woman, marking a significant decline from the 2.5 births recorded in Census 2014. This is the lowest TFR observed over the past five censuses, and it is also below the replacement level of 2.1. This highlights a notable shift in fertility patterns.

This decline could be attributed, at least in part, to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to delayed marriages and the postponement of reproduction during this challenging period.⁶⁴ Unless counteracted by factors such as immigration, this trend may result in a gradual decline in the population once the momentum of growth diminishes.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, anticipations arise that the TFR might experience an increase in the post-pandemic years due to the resumption of births and the potential rise in marriages that were delayed earlier.⁶⁶

Health services are currently delivered by a four-tier system comprising of island, atoll, regional and central level services. The Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital in Malé serves as the main tertiary referral hospital. Six regional and 13 atoll hospitals across the country serve as the first referral while each of the inhabited islands has a fully functional health centre with a medical doctor, nurse and a primary health care worker. Maldives continues to rely on international migrant health professionals, who

⁶⁰ Ministry of Higher Education (2019). Environmental & social management framework

⁶¹ Ministry of Higher Education (2019). Environmental & social management framework

⁶² Maldives Bureau of Statistics (2024). Statistical Yearbook of 2024

⁶³ *ibid*

⁶⁴ Maldives Bureau of Statistics (2024). Nuptiality Analysis – Census 2022.

⁶⁵ *ibid*

⁶⁶ *ibid*

account for 27% of health personnel.⁶⁷ Challenges in the sector include balancing turnover while assuring the quality of health workforce performance, familiarization to the national guidelines and protocols, as well as possible language and cultural barriers. Managing logistics and supplies across the islands' centres and hospitals is challenging, and there is sub-optimal use of information and communication technology.

Most communicable diseases have been controlled, and Maldives has been certified free of diseases such as malaria, lymphatic filariasis, measles and polio. The Maldives has halted mother-to-child transmission of HIV and is on track to eliminate leprosy.⁶⁸ However, there is an increased public health threat from HIV, other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), Hepatitis B and TB due to high-risk behaviours such as unprotected sex related to drug abuse. Children born out of wedlock to drug using mothers are often taken up for state care.

Maldives has made significant progress in sub-indicators within Early Childhood Development (ECD) such as early learning and vaccination, and overall achieving a high ECD composite index. However, the country does not have sufficient data on key SDG indicators (4.2) such as young children who are developmentally on track in health, learning, and psychosocial well-being, or young children at risk of poor development. Maldives does not have an ECD policy, nor a comprehensive programme or interventions delivered as a package. Interventions are delivered separately by respective sectors in silos. Parenting continues to emerge as a common thread in many of the social issues, with a parenting programme by the Ministry of Education aiming to address the challenges to reach parents of young children. The health

sector, through growth monitoring and vaccination programs can play an instrumental role to promote early childhood development, positive parenting, and nurturing care.

Non-communicable Diseases (NCDs) have emerged as the main cause of morbidity and mortality in the country. It is estimated that NCDs account for 84% of deaths in the country, men have less survival chance and a 7 year lower life expectancy than women⁶⁹, and 16 per cent of deaths are classified as premature death for the population aged 30-70 years.⁷⁰ In terms of the number of lives lost due to ill-health, disability, and early death (DALYs), NCDs (inclusive of injuries) account for 78 per cent of the total disease burden.⁷¹

Current health challenges include addressing NCDs, a potential risk of drop in immunization coverage, nutritional issues among children as well as adults, cancers and associated unhealthy risk behaviour, provision of comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and HIV/STIs information and services, particularly in school and for young people, prevention and control of thalassemia and other inherited conditions, addressing increasing mental health burdens and disabilities including developmental disorders and addressing environmental pollution.

Most NCDs can be prevented, detected early and optimally managed to prevent complications and premature death within a well performing PHC service delivery model. In response to the existing and anticipated health challenges in Maldives, with a concerted effort to reorganize the Primary Healthcare (PHC) WHO commenced in 2022, "Primary Health Care Demonstration Site" in Faafu Atoll. This initiative leverages the existing PHC system to integrate specific

⁶⁷ Maldives Bureau of Statistics (2024). Statistical Yearbook 2024.

⁶⁸ World Health Organisation (2017). Maldives: A journey of health

⁶⁹ National Bureau of Statistics, (2020) Statistical Yearbook of Maldives

⁷⁰ World Health Organisation (2020). Non-communicable diseases (NCD) Country Profiles 2018. Maldives.

⁷¹ Ministry of Health (2017). Maldives Health Statistics 2015-16

services, ensuring cost efficiency by utilizing existing resources for systematic screening of common NCDs and their associated risk factors, early identification and referral of selected mental health conditions and common cancers, prompt treatment initiation and continuous monitoring. The approach serves as a suitable model for Maldives and other Small Island Developing States (SIDS) with similar healthcare challenges.

Attraction and retention of competent local health professionals remains a major constraint due to limited opportunities for career development, lack of retention policies, unattractive employment packages and a rigid organizational structure within the civil service.⁷² At the same time, there has been a shift towards facility-based curative care rather than community based primary health care. Frequent and ad hoc changes to the organization of health systems with changes in government and policies has also resulted in inefficiency, disruption of the health information systems, weak coordination and loss of trained local technical staff, threatening the sustainability of health service delivery.⁷³ To further enhance accessibility to healthcare, out-reach programs and innovative mechanisms to provide diagnostics and service enhancements including integration and digitalization of health systems needs to be addressed. During the lockdown, service delivery platforms were optimized to maintain essential health services. This included strengthening digital health services by leveraging existing internet connectivity in the country. The strengthening of telemedicine services aided the continuity of care at all levels of the health system during a time of significant disruption. This has created momentum for integrating digital health strategies into service delivery platforms in the future.

⁷² Ministry of Health and Gender (2014). National health workforce strategic plan 2014-2018

Mental health vulnerability among adolescents is a concern, with 13% of students self-reporting that they had seriously considered attempting suicide. With the establishment of the Centre for Mental Health in 2019, Mental Health services are gradually expanding, yet the need exceeds the available specialists.

Essential health services are established in all inhabitant islands with speed boats as ambulances for emergency transfers. However, there are no specific actions to improve access to health care for vulnerable population groups such as those with disabilities, mental health conditions and the elderly. In order to ensure universal access to healthcare, all Maldivians are covered by Aasandha, a healthcare financing scheme fully funded by the Government. Spending on health is high in Maldives when compared to other countries in similar developmental situations with the Total Health Expenditure (THE) in 2015-17 being 8.5% of GDP.⁷⁴ Over the last one and half decades, the level of per capita health expenditure has risen phenomenally from USD 454 during 2000 to about USD 1,048 in 2015-17. With the introduction of Aasandha and other improvements in the provision of public healthcare services, out of pocket (OOP) expenditure for Maldivian households has decreased from 49 to 29%

Improving access to and availability of quality healthcare services has been challenging. Factors include the geographically dispersed nature of the population, with unreliable transport networks, high reliance on international migrant health professionals (who are sometimes underutilized) and high turnover of the health workforce, as well as issues arising from total reliance on private and state-owned enterprises that operate on a business model for the purchase and supply of medicines and medical supplies.

⁷³ World Health Organisation (2017). Maldives: A journey of health

⁷⁴ Ministry of Health (2019). National Health Accounts 2015-2017.

A robust health system is imperative during a public health emergency such as COVID-19. The pandemic has exacerbated challenges faced by the sector in terms of capacities in the areas of procurement, supply chain management, forecasting, and stock management.

Drug abuse

Over the last 30 years, availability of drug types in the Maldives has increased. A prison-based study in 2011 found that 70% of inmates were sentenced for drug use. Among this group, a majority had used heroin (69.1%) and cannabis (63.3%) followed by alcohol (47.9%). Recently, the country is facing an increasing abuse of methamphetamine and synthetic drugs.

Increasing drug abuse has been fuelled by the large influx of adolescents and young people coming to Malé for education and to seek work away from family and parental guidance; overcrowding with poor housing conditions in Malé that forces young people to the streets, and unemployment and low productive engagement among youth. Peer pressure and social acceptance play a major part in escalating drug use, which is fast becoming the leading recreational activity for Maldivian youth.⁷⁵ The situation is fuelled by inadequate law enforcement to control gangs and trafficking groups.

While the law seeks rehabilitation, its implementation is through the criminal justice system for all offenses. A substantial proportion of drug users (61% in Malé and 79% in the Atolls) reported being arrested at least once. A significant proportion were convicted. As a result, large numbers of youth face criminal charges. Once a person is identified as a drug user (either through voluntary treatment or the police system), the drug court requires the National Drug Authority (NDA) to undertake an

assessment and propose a treatment plan. The criminal charge is suspended for those who complete treatment - if not they are sentenced to prison.⁷⁶ The situation is alarming, as clients who await assessment are kept in prison. This is particularly detrimental for young substance abusers, who might otherwise have a bigger chance of recovery if supported at an early stage.

Social protection

The Government adopted a 'minimum social protection floor' in 2009 and established the National Social Protection Agency (NSPA) to coordinate and implement national social protection programmes.⁷⁷ The Social Protection Act (2014) allows for a total of 11 social protection schemes of benefits, the current four programmes implemented by NSPA include allowances for single parents, foster parents, persons with disabilities, fisherman's income assurance scheme, food subsidy, 'Aasandha' (health care financing scheme), and medical welfare for those services not covered by Aasandha.⁷⁸

Maldives' pension system has witnessed tremendous reform since 2008. The Maldives Pension Act (2009) establishes a two-pillar pension system, including a new contributory pension scheme based on a defined contribution (DC) model with centralized recordkeeping - the Maldives Retirement Pension Scheme (MRPS), and a non-contributory citizen's pension - the Old Age Basic Pension (OABP), aimed at providing an income floor for all Maldivians aged 65 and above.

The existing social protection programmes in Maldives cover a good part of the population but there is a number of gaps according to the social

⁷⁵ Adyb, A. (2014). Maldives under the Burden of Drugs. Journal of Alcoholism & Drug Dependence.

⁷⁶ Stakeholder interviews, National Drug Authority

⁷⁷ Ibrahim A (2012). Republic of the Maldives: Updating and Improving the Social Protection Index

⁷⁸ National Social Protection Agency (2019). Services.

sector assessment of 2022.⁷⁹ The coverage of the elderly population is nearly 100 percent – meaning that almost all Maldivians of 65 years and over are covered by at least one pension programme and a large proportion are covered by two pension schemes. Moreover, the elderly also benefit from the National Social Health Insurance (Assandha), and can benefit from the Emergency Medical Welfare scheme, the Disability Allowance scheme, and various subsidies.

The overview of the social protection programmes in Maldives shows that the system is lacking programmes to cover risks of the working population.⁸⁰ Moreover, there are no national provisions on pregnancy- and parental-leave and a national standard for dealing with short-term illness and work injuries is lacking. The unemployment benefit scheme is stipulated in legislation but has not been rolled out to date except for a set of ad hoc measures during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While the eligibility criteria for the Disability Allowance should theoretically ensure coverage of near 100 percent, the implementation shows that the actual reach of the scheme is around 30 percent of the persons with disabilities.⁸¹ Since persons with disabilities are more likely to live in (near) poverty and suffer from deprivations like food insecurity and lack of access to education, exclusion of such a large share from the programme implies that there is a real gap in programme implementation.

The low coverage of the Disability Allowance scheme is an example of challenges with implementation of otherwise adequate and comprehensive legislation in Maldives.⁸² The reported main bottleneck with implementation of social protection programmes are the limited

capacities of the NSPA due to the high caseload and the numerous and cumbersome administrative procedures to assess and determine eligibility for other programmes such as the Single Parent Allowance and the Foster Care Allowance, and medical certification for the Disability Allowance. These findings suggest that the eligibility criteria for different programmes might need to be reviewed and simplified.⁸³

Impact of Fiscal Challenges

A recurring concern in relation to health and social protection spending is that costs have continued to escalate annually with Aasandha health insurance in particular noted as an area requiring reform to manage the government's fiscal constraints. Reform efforts are underway including with UN technical assistance to ensure that better health outcomes can be achieved at lower costs as costs escalations under the scheme are considered unfeasible to maintain with issues of unregulated pricing of drugs and treatments further compounding costs.

Other areas of social protection that would be affected include proposals to remove blanket subsidies for essential goods such as fuel, energy, water and food staples and replace it with direct cash transfer schemes targeting up to 60% of the poorest households in the country. Such schemes, if enacted properly, can manage any risks of compounding social exclusion. But an untested targeting scheme would require extensive planning and revisiting of eligibility criteria to ensure LNOB concerns are met. Some vulnerable groups such as low-income and undocumented migrant workers will remain at risk of exclusion in these reform processes.

State-owned enterprises (SOEs), while being a source of concern in terms of government expenditure on persistent losses in some SOEs, also provide employment and services across the

⁷⁹ UNICEF & SPRI (2022). Maldives: A Social Sector Analysis.

⁸⁰ *ibid*

⁸¹ *ibid*

⁸² *ibid*

⁸³ *ibid*

country. A possible contraction in the role of SOEs will therefore need to consider how mechanisms such as direct cash transfers may compensate for losses in incomes in the outer atolls which are already lagging behind the capital in development outcomes. For example, the most recent Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) data from 2019 show that poverty headcount in the four atolls – Raa, Gaafu Dhaalu, Thaa and Alif Alif – being close to

or exceeding 15% of the population with Raa atoll recording the highest poverty rates of nearly 19%. This is in sharp contrast to the Greater Male Region where poverty is estimated at under 1%. As such, SOE employment and services can play a key role in leaving no one behind, and their reforms would need to factor in such considerations.

G | ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION ANALYSIS

The Maldivian economy has made substantial progress in terms of economic growth, per capita GDP and human development indicators. The economy has transitioned considerably from a subsistence economy dependent on basic fisheries (approx. 35% of GDP in 1980) to an Upper Middle-Income Country with a per capita income of over US\$ 9,300 and a growing services sector contributing to 66% of GDP⁸⁴. The improving business environment for tourism development generated fiscal resources allowing state financing of extensive welfare and social services.

Yet the Maldives continues to face great challenges in making growth more socially inclusive and regionally balanced. Economic disparities have increased between Malé and the other islands and between groups of different socioeconomic status. The wide dispersion of the population, coupled with limited transport infrastructure, hampers the creation of sizeable domestic markets, and presents a formidable challenge in sustaining growth and providing equitable and adequate public services. The benefits of growth have not spread evenly across sectors, across segments of the population, and

across regions. Many remote atolls continue to be marginalized and cut-off from the mainstream growth trajectory. The current pattern of reliance on foreign direct investment in tourism and foreign labour for services and other professional activities has not spread the gains of growth to the less-skilled and less-educated population, to people living in the more remote atolls, and to young people with new job aspirations. There are emerging labour market challenges for the youth, with rising aspirations.

In the past decades, the economy faced external shocks from natural disasters, health pandemics and hikes in fuel prices. COVID-19 has illustrated the risks of excessive reliance on the tourism industry as an economic driver. The Maldives need to identify potential priority areas that could drive forward the economy over the medium and long-term and create jobs. Attempts to address these constraints have largely focused on infrastructure development including a greater supply of housing in the capital and infrastructure in outer atolls. However, this has seen limitations both in terms of outcomes achieved and the high costs and

⁸⁴ Followed by the secondary sector 12.8%, and agriculture and fisheries 5.6%

consistently large budget deficits putting the country on a pathway to higher risk of future debt distress.

Attempts to address these constraints have largely focused on infrastructure development including a greater supply of housing in the capital and infrastructure in outer atolls. However, this has seen limitations both in terms of outcomes achieved and the high costs and consistently large budget deficits putting the country on a pathway to higher risk of future debt distress.

The Maldives has among the highest budget deficits globally in recent years (approx. 12% of GDP per annum), worsened significantly by a brief collapse in tourism arrivals during the COVID-19 pandemic. The issue has been exacerbated by sustained high levels of government expenditure post-pandemic recovery, leading to increased borrowing. The debt-to-GDP ratio, which stood at 77.2% in 2019, rose above 100% during the pandemic and has remained elevated through 2023. Persistent fiscal deficits see public debt projected to increase from 118.7% to 122.1% of GDP in 2024 - a level assessed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as "unsustainable" under current policy settings that urgently requires "*...a strong and credible form of fiscal consolidation*". The fiscal constraints faced by the country have also renewed the focus on economic diversification.

In 2024, some key steps towards long-term economic diversification efforts include the Ihavandhippolhu bunkering facility in Haa Alifu Atoll as a step toward establishing a new industry. Additionally, the development of an agricultural economic zone in Uthuru Thilafalhu (UTF) aims to reduce reliance on imports and food prices by cultivating 70% of essential foods. The establishment of the Maldives Development Bank is intended to attract investor funds. Key legislative reforms include the Foreign Investment Act which establishes a

comprehensive framework to attract foreign capital, technology, and expertise replacing the previous 45-year-old legislation. Accompanying amendments to the Financial Securities Act and Business Registration Act further facilitate foreign investment by allowing investments in permitted securities.

There are four critical constraints to inclusive growth in the Maldives:

- (1) Mismatch of the education system and the required skill sets for the employment sectors: The education system is presently not in a position to provide the right variety of skills needed for industries such as ICT, health, and finance.
- (2) Inadequate and poor-quality maritime infrastructure that constrains connectivity, limits provision of basic goods and services, and results in high transport and logistics costs.
- (3) High public debt and narrow fiscal space, which limit public investment in infrastructure and social services.
- (4) Weak financial intermediation that inhibits the development and expansion of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), which are important for generating productive employment opportunities. Difficulties in accessing credit for the private sector (excluding tourism and construction).

Tourism and related service sectors contribute to two thirds of the GDP. The country is now extremely susceptible to global travel market conditions and trends over which Maldives has no control. Going forward, the Maldives needs to lay the foundations for a more resilient economy that can withstand external shocks. It thus needs to steer away from an economy dominated by a single sector to a diversified broad-based economy.

The Maldives also needs to shift away from import dependency towards investment and net exports. The development goal for a diversifying strategy would be to promote the creation of

high-quality jobs by improving competitive export industries. It needs to create new job opportunities that match the aspirations, skills, and interests of Maldivian youth. It needs to shift to renewable energy sources to ensure a secure, low-carbon and sustainable energy.

Diversification helps to manage volatility and provides a more stable path for equitable path for equitable growth and development.

Successful diversification is all the more important now in the wake of slowing global growth and the imperative to increase the number and quality of jobs. Trade expansion is central to creating new, higher productivity jobs that will facilitate growth through structural transformation. Transformation and diversification would ensure that the economy delivers prosperity and opportunity for all Maldivians.

H | ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE

ANALYSIS AND PROGRESS ON GLOBAL COMMITMENTS

The Maldives is one of the most vulnerable places on Earth due to its low elevation and small landmass. Rising sea levels are already accelerating coastal flooding and erosion, which threatens the country's 1,190 islands. A Small Island State, 99% of its territory comprises of water.

The Maldives Constitution grants citizens the right to a healthy and ecologically balanced environment (Article 23). The main environmental law, the Environment Protection and Preservation Act of 1993, predates the Constitution. While new laws like the Climate Emergency Act (2021) and Waste Management Act (2022) have been introduced, important reforms, such as those related to waste management and fossil fuel subsidies have been developed but remain unimplemented.

Despite contributing just 0.0003% of global emissions, the Maldives faces a disproportionate share of the impact of the climate emergency. This is further exacerbated by unsustainable

development efforts. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has emphasized that immediate action is needed to avoid irreversible damage to the country and secure a sustainable future.⁸⁵

Climate change threatens various human rights, including the right to life, health, food, water, housing, and a healthy environment, disproportionately affecting marginalized groups such as women, children, the elderly, persons with disabilities, migrant workers and those living in poverty.

Following his visit to Maldives in April 2024, the Special Rapporteur on the human right to a healthy environment noted that despite its commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 26% by 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality by the same year, the Maldives relies heavily on fossil fuels for electricity and transportation, importing over 800,000 tonnes of fuel in 2022. Fossil fuel subsidies strain the

⁸⁵ IPCC (2022). AR6 Synthesis Report: Summary for Policy makers Headline Statements

government budget, costing hundreds of millions annually.⁸⁶

Land reclamation is a highly controversial issue in the Maldives, particularly regarding its environmental and human rights implications. While the government argues that land reclamation is necessary for housing, infrastructure, and climate change adaptation against rising sea levels, it poses significant threats to marine ecosystems, including coral reefs and lagoons, which are vital for local livelihoods given tourism is the main source of income. The SR on environment noted that to address this challenge, land reclamation for climate adaptation should be clearly differentiated from projects aimed at luxury tourism. It is crucial for development and application of evidence-based government policy to address the human mobility dimensions of climate change.⁸⁷ This requires strengthening of the capacities of the Government and communities to better respond to the impacts of climate change on human mobility.⁸⁸

Fulfilling the right to safe and sufficient water has been a significant challenge for the Maldives. As of 2019, 78% of the population had access to piped water, and 86% had sewage network access.⁸⁹ However, groundwater is limited in quantity and often contaminated by human waste and saltwater intrusion. Some households rely on rainwater collection, but maintenance of these systems is inconsistent, especially with unpredictable rainfall patterns due to climate change. The government provides water by tanker to around 80 islands during dry seasons, but this method is costly, environmentally

damaging, and subject to delays from bad weather.

Desalination plants are increasingly used to provide water, particularly when powered by renewable energy, which offers a more sustainable solution. A USD 25 million project funded by the UN Development Programme and the Green Climate Fund improved access to safe drinking water for 20,000 people across 29 islands and enhanced groundwater resilience for 49 islands. Additionally, a collaboration between China and the Maldives established five solar and wind powered desalination plants, each capable of producing 200,000 Liters of water daily, at a total cost of USD 13 million.⁹⁰

The Maldives faces significant waste management issues, including open burning, waste dumping, and microplastic contamination. Hundreds of tonnes of trash from the Greater Malé Region and tourist islands are transported to Thilafushi. Although burning waste on Thilafushi is prohibited, it continues on remote islands, releasing carcinogenic smoke and toxic substances that threaten human health and ecosystems.⁹¹

In 2022, the Maldives enacted the Waste Management Act, which includes initiatives for waste separation, closed containers for inter-island waste transfer, a 13-megawatt waste-to-energy incinerator, and a biodigester for organic waste. However, a last-minute amendment allows for the importation of waste, which should be reconsidered given the country's existing garbage challenges. While waste management centres have been set up on 79 islands, they often lack proper fencing, coordination, and waste stream separation.

⁸⁶ OCHR (2024) Statement of the Special Rapporteur on the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment

⁸⁷ IOM (2022). Maldives: Strengthening Government and Community Capacities to Facilitate Effective Responses to the Human Mobility Dimensions of Climate Change

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

⁸⁹ Ministry of National Planning, Housing and Infrastructure (2023). Voluntary National Review

⁹⁰ Edition News (2024). Desalination plants in five islands established through China aid

⁹¹ Statement of the Special Rapporteur on the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. 2024

Additionally, many sewage systems are rudimentary, leading to the discharge of untreated sewage into the ocean, which endangers marine environments.

Plastic pollution is also a major problem. Visible plastic pollution, including bottles and debris, affects streets, beaches, and marine areas due to inadequate solid waste management and currents from neighbouring countries. Recently, the Maldives introduced a ban on specific single-use plastics, such as straws, plastic bags, and Styrofoam containers, which is a positive step but requires effective implementation and enforcement to succeed.

Maldives is home to diverse marine ecosystems, including coral reefs, mangroves, and seagrass meadows, crucial for local livelihoods and global biodiversity. However, coral health is declining, primarily due to climate change, pollution, and tourism, exacerbated by unsustainable development efforts such as land reclamation. The 2016 bleaching event resulted in a 75% loss of corals. A 2022 Environmental Impact Assessment projected significant economic costs for coral and seagrass losses due to reclamation projects. The destruction of mangroves for infrastructure development also threatens local communities, particularly women who depend on these resources.⁹²

Despite commitments under the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, only 2.3% of terrestrial and 0.7% of marine areas in the Maldives are protected. Recent policy changes allowing dredging in marine protected areas undermine the government's responsibility to uphold the right to a healthy environment, and existing protected areas lack adequate government support, particularly for sites like the Addu Atoll UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

To fully realize the right to a healthy environment, individuals must have access to

information, opportunities for participation in decision-making, and access to justice for effective remedies. Concerns have been raised about delays in obtaining information, particularly regarding state-owned enterprises, and the use of "national security" as a reason to deny access. Public participation is often limited and seen as a mere formality, leading to a "communication gap" between the government and the populace.

The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) process is crucial for implementing the right to a healthy environment and sustainable development. However, there are criticisms regarding its effectiveness, such as inadequate integration of disaster risk reduction, reliance on outdated data, rushed studies, and political pre-approval of projects.

There is a rising number of court challenges regarding government actions that threaten environmental health. Instances of local magistrates being swayed by pro-development pressures highlight issues within the judicial system. The Recommendations by the SR on environment for improvement include training judges on environmental human rights, expediting environmental cases, and encouraging pro bono legal representation for environmental issues. Additionally, the local communities are not consulted in the decision-making process and environmental human rights defenders face harassment and intimidation.

⁹² Human Rights Watch (2023). Still We haven't Recovered

GOVERNANCE AND POLITICAL ANALYSIS

The Constitution adopted by the Maldives in 2008 heralded an entirely open and liberal constitutional democracy with genuine universal adult suffrage and an extensive Bill of Rights enforceable by an independent judiciary. This radically new set of values and rules was not fully internalised by political stakeholders or Maldivian society. The decade after 2008 saw a succession of political confrontations and crises, often involving the Supreme Court. An assessment of judicial reform in 2019 concluded that the inexperienced and poorly trained judiciary had proved incapable of assuming the role envisioned in the 2008 Constitution, guiding inexperienced constitutional organs through their awkward early days in a constitutional democracy⁹³.

The 2023 presidential election resulted in a change in administration, with the then opposition ascending to power, securing both the presidency and a commanding supermajority parliament in April 2024. This change was driven by widespread dissatisfaction with the previous administration's foreign policy choices, unresolved corruption scandals, and perceived failures in delivering justice and transparency. The new ruling coalition has solidified its hold on power, allowing it to pursue an ambitious legislative agenda centred on religious nationalism, national sovereignty, and large-scale infrastructure development. Key priorities include addressing land scarcity through housing initiatives and the creation of new urban centres, as well as nurturing Islamic values among the youth. The consolidation of power and a refocused political agenda signals a clear

departure from the previous government's approach, ushering a realignment in both domestic and foreign policy priorities. However, the fiscal outlook poses significant challenges, with rising public debt and external vulnerabilities influencing governance priorities. The need for fiscal consolidation is expected to impact household incomes and drive a focus on fiscal stability alongside broader policy reforms.

Youth marginalization, unemployment and rising conservatism have hampered the ability of Maldives to capture the benefits of its demographic dividend. There is a considerable disconnect between state and society. A recent study by UNDP and the National University (Values in Crisis Study) indicates that 50% of the population is interested in politics, and 1 in 4 Maldivians is politically active. However, 82% were found to be cynical about politics, interpreted as emotional disengagement and distrust of the political classes in society, which may indicate citizens' lower propensity to engage in public affairs.

The EU conducted elections observation mission for the Presidential Elections in 2023 and concluded that "the presidential election was technically well-administered and professionally delivered by the Elections Commission of Maldives (ECM). There was a plurality of candidates and diversity in their campaigning, but women did not feature among the nominees. While the legal framework provides for genuine elections, equity in campaigning was significantly undermined by extremely high spending limits, poorly enforced rules on campaign finance, and the widely acknowledged

⁹³ UNDP (2019). Assessment of the Justice Sector Reform Proposals: Final Report (unpublished)

practices of vote-buying and instrumentalization of public office. Political partisanship of media was prevalent, including in public service media, while there were some indications of information manipulation in social media”

The 2010 Decentralisation Act details the objectives to allow island communities to make their own decisions in a democratic and accountable manner, to improve people’s living standards through social, economic and cultural development, and to create an environment conducive for peace and prosperity. A review of decentralised governance⁹⁴ in 2018 identified challenges as lack of political will to implement decentralisation, in particular, fiscal decentralisation, the politicisation of local government authorities, and lack of capacity of some local councils, and conflict with the administrative staff, who are accountable to the civil service rather than the council. Amendments were made to the Decentralisation Act in 2019, including provisions for one third representation of women in the councils and allocation of 40% of government revenues from the atoll jurisdiction to its council. Maldives ranks as one of the lowest countries in South Asia for women’s representation, with just three women in parliament. While the allocation of a gender quota in local council elections at the beginning of 2021 is commendable, problems remain.

At the local governance level women’s representation is now at 39.5% compared to the 4.6% in Parliament. Maldives ranks 179th out of 185 countries for the number of women representatives in the Parliament.

While these amendments addressed some of the legal issues, challenges related to capacity at atoll level, financing gaps, politicisation and

conflict with administrative civil service staff remain.

Corruption continues to be one of the major risks for democracy and governance in the Maldives. For eight consecutive years since 2016, the Maldives is among the two-thirds of countries scoring below 50 in the Corruption Perception Index (CPI). In the 2023 CPI, the Maldives ranked 93 out of 180 countries with a score of 39.

The most prevalent type of corruption in the Maldives is grand corruption, which the United Nations describes as “corruption that pervades the highest levels of government, engendering major abuses of power”. One of the areas in which grand corruption is most concentrated is public procurement. According to the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), the majority of the complaints received by the commission from 2017 to 2021 concern corruption in public procurement.

The Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights acknowledged “the Government’s commitment to judicial reform. Functional and effective courts are essential to prosecuting terrorism, violent extremism and other acts of violence, bringing justice to victims of these crimes. She is concerned at allegations of lack of accountability, independence and impartiality, as well as political influence, collusion, corruption and lack of effectiveness of this sector in both regular and highest courts, from all walks of society, including the political establishment in power. This undermines the fragile confidence that the public places in the judiciary to address complex and sensitive issues addressed in this report. She also notes that there are concerns related to the presence of the Attorney General on the newly established Bar Council’s Executive Committee.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Transparency Maldives (2019). Review of the decentralisation framework in the Maldives

⁹⁵ Report from the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights while countering terrorism. 2022, Para 25.

J | NATIONAL VISION AND DEVELOPMENT PLAN VIS-À-VIS THE 2030 AGENDA

The Maldives' development agenda will be guided by the government's five-year Strategic Action Plan (2024-2029) that is anticipated to be completed shortly. The SAP outlines the governments' priorities and targets for its term as the executive. The SAP does not provide a long-term vision for national development. It will be an election manifesto pledges-based operational plan for the Government. It is envisaged to be aligned to the SDGs. The SAP will be the key document that will guide the resource allocation of the current administration from

budget and development assistance. The Government has committed to broad public finance reforms to tackle the ongoing debt repayment challenges.

The government has also committed to formulate a visionary 20-year National Development plan using global expertise and applying participatory planning and consultative process across a wide range of stakeholders. It is envisaged that the NDP maybe completed in 2025.

K | FINANCIAL LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS

The growing fiscal constraints (noted in the Economic Transformation section) are changing the financial landscape of the Maldives significantly. The effects of these longer-term issues were felt more acutely in 2024 with the government seeking short term financing throughout the year to manage financing gaps and debt servicing requirements. External observers including rating agencies assess the financial position of the government as continuing to weaken with Fitch Ratings, a major credit rating agency announcing two ratings downgrades, with the second downgrade reducing the credit rating to CC on 29 August 2024. The reasons for the downgrade included falling foreign exchange reserves, external imbalances, higher external debt servicing and persistent USD liquidity shortages that were assessed to heighten risks of future sovereign default.

As an economy that is also heavily import-dependent, Maldives is now facing significant current account deficit (the highest in South Asia) which is expected to remain elevated due to higher imports; and inflationary pressures due to the sharp rise in global commodity prices, which is also putting pressure on public finances. Although medium-term growth prospects are promising, the short-term outlook remains uncertain. Countries in South Asia are also grappling with rising commodity prices, supply bottlenecks, and vulnerabilities in financial sectors.

Despite the downside risks, robust growth is expected on the medium term and revenue mobilization measures are projected to help narrow the fiscal deficit. According to the IMF, the Maldives remains at a high risk of external debt distress and a high overall risk of debt distress. Public debt is still at unprecedented

levels (120% of GDP) while the MMA and banks' exposure to sovereign bond holdings climbed. Medium term debt vulnerabilities remain high, in particular an estimated USD 843.3 million external debt servicing in 2026. Sustained fiscal consolidation relying on both expenditure rationalization and domestic revenue mobilization, and supported by conservative debt management, is a priority.

Reforms are needed to improve the fiscal outlook and ensure debt sustainability. More effective revenue mobilization measures, coupled with reforms to health care system and existing subsidy programs, and better investment management are critical to bring down the high level of public debt, replenish fiscal buffers against future shocks, and lower the cost of growth-enhancing investments.

The inherent structural constraints facing this small island developing economy remain a challenge. Maldives has a narrow economic base that relies heavily on tourism and fisheries and its economy is extremely vulnerable to external shocks. To promote more sustainable growth, the Maldives is gradually focusing on diversifying the economy and assess the potential of other sectors besides tourism, for example fisheries, agriculture, and information and communication technology.

A key challenge for the Maldives is to balance large investments needed in infrastructure gaps (to boost tourism, increase resilience to climate change and improve service delivery) and the rapid accumulation of public debt. Overall indebtedness is high and reserves low. Yet the Maldives continues to face great challenges in making growth more socially inclusive and regionally balanced. Economic disparities have increased between Malé and the other islands and between groups of different socioeconomic status. The wide dispersion of the population, coupled with limited transport infrastructure, hampers the creation of sizeable domestic markets, and presents a formidable challenge in

sustaining growth and providing equitable and adequate public services. The benefits of growth have not spread evenly across sectors, across segments of the population, and across regions. Many remote atolls continue to be marginalized and cut-off from the mainstream growth trajectory.

Ensuring the stable growth of the economy in and sharing of its benefits in an equitable manner will be challenged unless the Maldives diversify its economy, renew efforts in economic and social inclusion of all regions across the country, foster private sector job creation, build human capital and skills, and reduce vulnerability by enhancing disaster risk preparedness.

The socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed the limited reserves and capacity that the country has available to tackle the recovery for a more resilient Maldives, in line with the 2030 Agenda. In the absence of a meaningful international agreement for supporting countries such as the Maldives to access affordable debt alleviation, and to finance the recovery taking into account a green and inclusive recovery, the country will face significant obstacles in meeting its international obligations.

As an upper-middle income country, the Maldives is no longer a recipient of significant levels of overseas development aid. The Maldives has thus far not had a programme or results-based budget, making it extremely challenging for parliament or the public to oversee and scrutinize the budget, establish accountability, and address corruption. It is also difficult to determine what is being spent on the SDGs, and what fiscal space exists for further investing in reducing inequalities. Now the SAP seeks to develop infrastructure to assure, for instance, that no one in the country is more than 30 minutes away from medical care. Such efforts are taking place across many sectors.

L | STAKEHOLDERS / PARTNERSHIPS

Long-standing technical partnerships with the Government, civil society organizations and other relevant partners remain the backbone of joint initiatives of development. However, the UN's work in the Maldives has faced challenges and successes in fostering stakeholder partnerships across different sectors. Limited capacity and coordination among government entities, civil society organizations (CSOs), and youth have affected effective implementation, especially in securing resources. Despite these challenges, progress has been made through collaborations with the Government of Japan, UNDP, and ESCAP on clean energy and disaster risk reduction. Joint efforts with UNICEF and WHO have advanced healthcare, education, and disability inclusion. The creation of the Integrated National Financing Framework (INFF) and a Sustainable Finance Hub has improved public-private partnerships and encouraged investments in sustainable development goals (SDGs).

To achieve long-term SDGs, it is crucial to address capacity issues and improve coordination among stakeholders. The UN Independent Expert on promoting democratic governance has stressed the need for collaboration among various stakeholders to foster inclusive governance and development. Meanwhile, the Special Rapporteur on the right

to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment has pointed out the Maldives' critical need for partnerships amid a climate crisis.

Legislative measures like the Waste Management Act and the Green Climate Smart Hospital Policy show the government's commitment to sustainability. However, there is a pressing need for greater transparency, public participation in decision-making, and support for community-led initiatives. Engaging local communities, especially marginalized groups and women, in resource management and land reclamation is vital for protecting their rights and livelihoods.

Collaborating with research institutions can provide essential data for making informed policies about climate change and health risks. Furthermore, addressing the situation of migrant workers highlights broader human rights issues tied to economic development. The involvement of international organizations and wealthy nations in climate financing is crucial for helping vulnerable countries like the Maldives secure a sustainable future. This complex web of stakeholders, government agencies, civil society, international partners, and local communities plays an essential role in tackling the climate crisis and advancing human rights in the Maldives.



UNITED NATIONS
MALDIVES



CONCLUSIONS

CHALLENGE #1 | ENSURING EQUITABLE AND STABLE ECONOMIC GROWTH AND SHARED PROSPERITY

Ensuring the stable growth of the economy and sharing of its benefits in an equitable manner will be challenged unless the Maldives can balance the large investments needed in infrastructure gaps (to boost tourism, diversify the economy to be less dependent on tourism, increase resilience to climate change and improve service delivery) and the rapid accumulation of public debt. Ensuring equitable economic growth that benefits all – leaving no-one behind - requires strengthened fiscal planning and management; economy diversification, particularly in the private sector; the Maldives to grasp the current demographic dividend; prepare for an ageing population; and more systematic workforce planning and job creation, particularly for women, youth, and populations located in specific geographical areas.

Improving fiscal management: Given the persistent fiscal deficits and the related indicators, there is a need for transformative structural changes needed in the fiscal and financial governance with credible consolidation measures in line with the new Medium Term Fiscal Strategy 2022-2024 (MTFS)⁹⁶. According to MTFS and other policy communications, notable measures to reduce expenditure include: (i) eliminating fuel, electricity, food and

sanitation subsidies, and replacing them with a targeted cash transfer mechanism (ii) changing the coverage policy of health services for high-income earners, and implementing measures to reduce drug costs (such as bulk procurement of medicines from India and other countries, which also requires an upgrade in the

storage capacity of STO) (iii) reducing and prioritizing the PSIP envelope; and (iv) improving the efficiency and viability of SOEs with spending cuts and market-based pricing adjustments⁹⁷. Implementation of these reforms will require strong commitment and effective communication with all residents of Maldives accompanied by an effective mechanism to offset welfare losses among the vulnerable groups.⁹⁸

Diversification of the economy: Dependence on high-end tourism remains. Both tourism and construction, the other major growth area, largely employ foreign migrant workers. Maldivian school-leavers are not prepared for existing skilled jobs and eschew manual trades: labour shortages coexist with youth unemployment and high non-participation in the labour force. Without a long-term national development plan, an effective tertiary and vocational education system to build the skills for jobs of the future cannot be achieved.

Grasping the demographic dividend and preparing for an ageing population: A low birth rate has created a 'youth bulge' in which people in their productive years outnumber young and old dependents combined. This creates the potential for a 'demographic dividend' of faster growth and high national savings, but it cannot be realized unless a dynamic private sector is created to provide jobs, and measures are agreed to prepare for the demographic shift and the education system prepares youth to provide the skills the market requires. Low fertility rates

⁹⁶ Ministry of Finance (2024). Medium Term Fiscal Strategy 2022-2024 (MTFS)

⁹⁷ World Bank (2024). Maldives Development Update – Scaling Back and Rebuilding Buffers

⁹⁸ World Bank (2024). Maldives Development Update – Scaling Back and Rebuilding Buffers

along with the other demographic and societal trends are leading the country towards an ageing population, which needs to be accounted in the long-term development planning and budgeting in the country.

More systematic workforce planning: The situation of young people will continue to worsen unless a systematic review and overhaul of the education and labour force skills is conducted. A combination of policy levers will be needed: from reimagining a future economy through 2050 which aims to strengthen resilience and protection from global shocks, improving transition from lower secondary to upper secondary and reducing the dropouts at upper secondary level, consolidating technical and tertiary education capacities and streams in

order to deliver the skills needed to support this future economy.

Leaving no-one behind: There is a lack of inclusive development policies that facilitate participation of persons with disabilities and elderly. Specific groups are not benefitting equally from current patterns of development, and experience inequality, discrimination, and inequity and limited participation. Women, children, youth, and migrants are the most impacted. Their vulnerabilities are further increased by reduced access to educational or training opportunities, limited access to income generating opportunities and/or productive assets, having a disability, being poor, living in the atolls, coming from a broken home, or having a different gender identity or sexual orientation, or religious identity or minority.

CHALLENGE #2| ENSURING LIFELONG GOOD HEALTH, WELLBEING AND FULFILMENT OF THE POPULATION

The Maldives geography and dispersed population makes equitable and inclusive social development difficult and expensive to ensure. The country faces challenges in providing equitable access to quality social services and economic opportunities across the islands, overcoming overcrowding in Male and unaffordable housing, improving learning to allow young people to benefit from and contribute to the 4th industrial revolution, and putting systems and structures in place to deal with the ageing population.

Promoting healthy lifestyles: Despite the universal financial cover for health care cost of the Maldivians, access to health care, particularly for those with disabilities, mental health and long-term condition remain a

significant challenge for those living in the Atolls, and foreign migrant workers.

Ensuring education access and relevance of learning for future work and life: Education does not prepare young people for employment. Access to secondary education in the atolls is a major limitation, with only limited access to lower-secondary and much less for higher-secondary education. Many children end schooling early and face uncertain futures – sometimes leading to risky behaviour.

Quality social services for all: The extremely dispersed population across 200 islands has meant that providing easily accessible quality social services – particularly education and health – is unaffordable. This has contributed to the rapid urbanization over the past 30 years.

The use of digital platforms has a unique potential for the Maldives to deliver quality social services.

Accelerating a decentralized approach to urban development: Large-scale migration to the Malé region – while most atolls has experienced a shrinkage due to outmigration – has led to severe overcrowding that is aggravating social and environmental vulnerabilities of inhabitants. To address demographic pressures in Greater Malé, the Government has pursued a two-pronged approach: (i) A focus on the sustainable development of the Greater Malé region; (ii) A regional development strategy looking to reduce migration pressures through the provision of needed economic, social service and cultural assets in outer atolls.

Ensuring dignified housing and living conditions: Overcrowding in urban areas has

also contributed to Maldives facing a crisis in affordable housing, driven by limited land, low earnings and savings capacity of the population, limited supply of affordable housing, and an under-developed mortgage market. The Government's affordable housing finances schemes appear to be ineffective in obtaining buy-in from the banks, while the social housing programs are not adequate to meet growing needs.

Preparing for an ageing population: Whilst the country is currently experiencing a current youth bulge, it is also rapidly moving towards an aged population. There is an absence of suitable housing for families living with elderly; and there is a lack of environmental, social and health support services that are dedicated towards the elderly.

CHALLENGE #3 | PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT

The environment of Maldives comprises a delicate and complex series of ecosystems that are unique to the Small Island Developing States and many have found it a pleasure to gaze upon. The Maldives has a rich biodiversity, and the coral reef ecosystem is one of the most productive ecosystems. However, the Maldives is very vulnerable. The very small size and virtual isolation of the islands make their ecosystems, both on land and the sea, particularly fragile. Until the past 20-30 years, the lifestyles of Maldivians had minimal impact on the environment. However, the rapid socio-economic development and fast-growing population have greatly contributed to the degradation of the environment. Environmental issues for Maldives include beach erosion, coral bleaching, coral mining, dredging, biodiversity loss, population growth and its impact on distribution and lifestyles, freshwater

availability, soil degradation, and most importantly, the slow onset of rising sea level due to climate change and global warming.

Climate vulnerability: Maldives, with its low elevation and reliance on marine ecosystems, faces severe risks from rising sea levels, coastal flooding, and erosion.

Legal framework: The Environmental Protection and Preservation Act is outdated, and recently enacted laws remain unimplemented. Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Process is not as strong as it needs to be. The Environment Protection and Preservation Act needs to be amended, particularly to reflect the Constitution and international human rights law. To strengthen the EIA process, it is necessary to make the EIA recommendations legally binding provide additional resources for the Environmental Protection Agency to enforce

recommendations and incorporate health and human rights considerations into EIAs.

Dependency on fossil fuels: Despite climate commitments, the Maldives heavily relies on fossil fuels for the provision of services such as desalination of water, transportation system between islands, generating electricity, all of which is straining the national budget. To reduce dependency, implement fossil fuel subsidy reforms and transition to renewable energy sources for transportation and electricity.

Land reclamation: Land reclamation for housing and tourism threatens vital marine ecosystems and livelihood. It is necessary to separate climate adaptation efforts from luxury tourism developments to protect marine ecosystems.

Water scarcity: Limited freshwater access, reliance on rainwater, and the need for desalination present ongoing challenges, with tanker deliveries proving costly and inefficient. Enhance water security by expanding sustainable desalination projects and improving rainwater collection systems.

Waste management issues: Inadequate systems lead to waste dumping, burning, and pollution, harming ecosystems and human health. Improve waste management infrastructure, reconsider importing waste, and enforce bans on single-use plastics.

Sustainable management of protected areas: Maldives has a high number of marine protected areas, reaching up to 70 and at least 14% coral reefs are protected legally. But management of these areas remains a challenge for the government and the local communities. There is a need for further increase and sustainably implement management plans for the protected areas.

Public participation and information access: Currently there are CSOs and organizations carrying out awareness and active learning sessions within the islands on environment, climate change and also on legal environmental issues, which needs to be scaled up. Issues within the judicial system is also a challenge. To tackle this, training judges on environmental human rights, expediting environmental cases, and encouraging pro bono legal representation for environmental issues is necessary. Local communities are not consulted in the decision-making process and environmental human rights defenders face harassment and intimidation. The government needs to introduce and strengthen protection mechanism for human rights defenders.

CHALLENGE #4| ENSURING MORE EFFICIENT AND ACCOUNTABLE GOVERNANCE AND JUSTICE

The last National Development Plan was formulated for 2006-2010, which has been followed by implementation of 5-year Strategic Action Plans based on the election pledges of the incumbent governments. The development partners are now supporting the development of a 20-year long term National Development Plan for the country. The absence of a longer-term

development plan is a barrier to making tangible progress towards achieving the SDGs by 2030.

Pursuing and promoting decentralization: Comprehensive plans targeting local islands have been developed along with medium to large scale public infrastructure projects, but with contradicting re-centralisation policies.

With the fiscal challenges facing the country, the outcome of decentralisation remains to be seen.

Establishing accountability and addressing corruption: In recent years the Maldives has taken important steps to strengthen its anti-corruption system. These include criminalizing illicit enrichment, enacting the Whistleblower Protection Act, enacting the Right to Information Act, establishing a legal framework to criminalize money laundering, and the ACC introducing the country's first National Anti-Corruption Policy (2022-2026) to guide the Maldives' efforts to combat corruption.

However, there are still serious deficits that make the country vulnerable to corruption, not fully compliant with the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC), and less likely to fully meet the specific targets for tackling corruption under SDG16.

Systematic human resource capacity development: A decade of polarized politics has reduced already limited trust and created a high turnover of staff in institutions and in the civil service. The loss of experienced senior staff is especially devastating in a small island nation. There is an urgent need for a comprehensive review of human resources capacity development, to improve effectiveness and availability of quality public services.

Broadening development financing options: Mobilizing domestically controlled resources held offshore is key to advancing the Maldives' future economic, social and institutional

transformation. Advocacy for private sector financing of the SDGs has not been featured in Government approaches, however it is anticipated that the launch of the Integrated National Financing Framework (INFF) in 2020 will see the launch of these efforts accelerated.

Accountable justice and human rights: Institutional instability and a limited culture of judicial independence, limited safeguards for victims, witnesses and offenders alike, including children, a failure to demonstrate accountability for past abuses, the limitations of systems, and weak capacities are major risks for the justice sector.

Extensive reform is required in terms of infrastructural, law reform, training and capacity building within the judiciary. Law enforcement and security sectors also need additional technical assistance to counter illegal acts such as those related to terrorism, drugs, and organized crime taking place at land and sea.

Democratic space and social cohesion: As a maturing democracy, the concept of a social contract is in early stages of articulation. Conservative narratives are used successfully to influence policy making and to discourage the efforts to address root causes of vulnerability, such as wide-spread corruption, unequal distribution of wealth, gender inequalities, youth disillusionment and urban poverty. Opportunities must be sought through international partnerships, empowerment of community groups and professionals to shift the current narrative.

CHALLENGE #5 | ELIMINATING GENDER-BASED DISCRIMINATION AND ENSURING GENDER EQUALITY

Underrepresentation of women in decision-making roles: Women's representation in the cabinet has shifted towards more traditional roles in the current administration, with fewer women in non-stereotypical positions. To increase political participation of women, implementing recommendations from CEDAW and other human rights bodies to introduce legislative quotas, improve campaign financing, leadership training, and media access for women is essential. Further, efforts need to be made to achieving the 33% women's representation target in the National Gender Equality Action Plan (2022–2026).

Lack of legislative measures: Despite the 2016 Gender Equality Act, achieving gender parity in politics is left to the discretion of political parties, with no strong provisions in the Political Parties Act to increase representation. There has been no progress on the proposed amendments to introduce measures for women's representation in parliament. The legal framework needs to be strengthened to achieve gender parity. Temporary special measures have proven effective in other countries in increasing women's participation in decision-making. As such, it is vital to support the proposed constitutional amendments to increase women's representation in parliament. Furthermore,

amending the Political Parties Act to introduce measures for gender parity in politics, particularly party politics is needed.

Persistent stereotypes and systemic barriers: Women face stereotypes when it comes to public and political participation. Women in leadership position continue to be confined to traditional gender roles. It is crucial to focus on eliminating obstacles that prevent women from running for office or fully engaging in such a position. These efforts must challenge traditional gender norms, encouraging women's leadership beyond stereotypical roles.

Gender gaps in the labour market: There is a significant disparity in labour force participation (42% for women vs. 73% for men). Income inequality persists, with women earning significantly less than men. Women are burdened with unpaid care work and have low representation in key sectors like tourism (11%), public administration, agriculture, and fisheries. It is imperative to introduce and implement policies to reduce the gender gap in labour force participation and income inequality. Supporting women's participation in key economic sectors like tourism, public administration, agriculture, and fisheries is necessary for closing the gender gap.

CHALLENGE #6 | BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE AND CREATING ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

With an internet penetration rate of 83.9% and mobile connections surpassing the total population at 158.5%, the Maldives shows strong digital adoption. The country's significant engagement with social media, covering 69.9% of the population, further indicates a high level of digital interaction. However, approximately 16.1% of the population remained offline at the start of 2024, highlighting the digital divide that needs to be addressed⁹⁹. Therefore, many of the communities on outer islands in Maldives lack reliable access to digital technology in comparison to the capital; and for many others across the country, wireless technology is unaffordable, even when available. People without robust internet access are being left behind academically and economically. Through early investments and targeted deployments, lower-cost internet access will create value across local and the national economies and contribute to economic stimulus. As experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic, internet access and use of digital platforms can transform the delivery of social services like education and healthcare, job and skills training, as well as promote civic engagement. Many of the health-related data systems established post-pandemic including the electronic Immunization registry and the communicable disease data platform is revolutionary. The impact of digitalization has been shown across the world to improve health systems, logistics and supply-chain resilience – priorities for the Maldives with the dispersed population.

Maldives has made significant progress in implementing several digital health initiatives during the last 10 years. Ministry of Health is currently developing a digital health architecture blueprint which provides a high-level view of the technical infrastructure, data flows, and system interactions that underpin a digital health system. It will serve as a roadmap for the design, development, and implementation of digital health solutions in the country.

Additionally, the Health Management Information System (HMIS) in Maldives is deployed on dhis2 platform and reports aggregate data from across all 192 health facilities in Maldives. These modules comprise of Immunization, PHC, Nutrition & Growth Monitoring, ANC/PNC, Communicable Diseases Surveillance and Cancer Registry.

The absence of comprehensive data protection and cybersecurity frameworks hinders the growth of a secure digital economy. Weak data-sharing standards and regulatory gaps limit the effectiveness of digital initiatives and raise concerns about privacy and data security.

Gender disparities in digital access and literacy, along with the offline population, highlight the need for inclusive digital policies. Ensuring that digital transformation benefits all communities, particularly those in remote areas, is crucial for equitable development.

⁹⁹ DataReportal (2024). Digital 2024 – The Maldives

Annex: Analysis of Risks

SDGs	Risk Areas	Risk factors	Likelihood	Impact	Early warning indicators
All SDGs	<u>Political Stability</u> : risks to stability of established government structures and strategies in the Maldives resulting from politically driven factors	Highly politicized, competing national visions create risk of abrupt reversal of national strategy (centralization/decentralization) upon change of government	Medium	High	Absence of national vision and long-term plan developed with participation of all political alignments. Number of political appointees Transparency Indices Perception of corruption
		High number of political appointees in government causes disruptions in governance continuity.	High	Medium	Numbers of political appointees by new administrations
		Lack of defined role and powers of the opposition leads to “winner take all” mentality and polarization in politics	Medium	Medium	Opposition participation in national processes (commissions, committees & etc.)
		Low accountability/transparency provides space for corruption and rent seeking	High	High	Transparency International ranking
16, 17, 10	<u>Internal Security</u> :	Extremist ideology leads to radicalisation of vulnerable populations in remote communities leading to internal conflict and violence (i.e., attacks on tourists, moderate social voices)	High	High	Numbers of incidents, online threats
		Failure to successfully promote inclusive development, tolerance and respect for diversity leads to increase in social tensions and increased radicalisation.	High	High	Support for inclusive development, tolerance and respect for diversity in Rights Side of Life surveys
16, 17, 10	<u>Democratic Space</u> : limited roles and capacities of civil society and the political opposition result in shrinking civic space and polarization around civil	Targeting, limiting the work of and closing human rights organizations	Medium	Medium	Number of active human rights organisations CIVICUS Monitor Freedom of the World Report World Press Freedom Index

SDGs	Risk Areas	Risk factors	Likelihood	Impact	Early warning indicators
	and political rights	Lack of defined role and powers of the opposition leads to “winner take all” mentality and polarization in politics	Medium	Medium	Opposition participation in national processes (commissions, committees & etc.)
		Democratic space is occupied by political actors with extreme ideologies	Low	High	Analysis of local media and social media including during elections
1, 4, 5, 10, 13	<u>Social inclusion and cohesion, gender equality and non-discrimination</u> : risks to social unity and equality resulting from direct and indirect discrimination, geographic inequalities, and demographic trends	Limited opportunities for Maldivians to access decent jobs lead to higher income inequalities, migration to larger islands, in particular the Greater Malé Region, resentment of international migrant workers and loss of human capital	Medium	Medium	Share of employment of Maldivians in high-end resorts, share of self-employed, average wage in fisheries & agriculture compared to average national wage. Occupational gender segregation, gender wage gap
		Young people face increasing barriers in entering the labour market, due to limited skills not matching labour force needs, jobs located away from home islands	Medium	High	
		Lack of access to basic services and opportunities for migrants, along with public perceptions, of undocumented migrants leads to further marginalization and exploitation.	High	High	Inclusion of undocumented migrants in studies and surveys
		Lack of access to quality population and other social data prevents accurate targeting of policy measures	Low	Medium	Use of data analyses by parliament and presidency
		Inadequate implementation of policy recommendations and legislative provisions on gender equality	High	High	Rate of enforcement of gender sensitive policies
		Negative attitudes toward gender equality increasing	High	High	Perception surveys
		Urban and outer island inequalities in access and quality of public services persist	High	Medium	Key health/education indicators by urban/outer island

SDGs	Risk Areas	Risk factors	Likelihood	Impact	Early warning indicators
		Social norms, practices, religious fundamentalism and attitudes act as barriers to women entering higher education, vocational training, and senior positions in political and economic structures as well as to pursue their own professional careers, influencing the reproductive health decisions and gender power dynamics in families	Medium	High	Qualitative studies on social attitudes on women and men's roles
		Inadequate disability-inclusive policies, coupled with social stigma and limited accessibility hold back inclusion of children with disabilities (CWD) into mainstream education, and inclusion of persons with disabilities (PWD) into the work world	Medium	Medium	CWD attending mainstream education. Employment of PWD Qualitative studies on attitudes to inclusion of PWD
		Inequalities, discrimination and GBV remain invisible, due to lack of sex disaggregated data, or lack of use/ data sharing and culture of privacy around "family matters"	Medium	High	Open access guaranteed to a robust SDG data base.
16, 17	<u>Regional and Global Influences</u> : Risks to the integrity, stability, safety and prosperity of the Maldives and its people as a result of the actions of external actors, or the influence of external events or ideologies	Rivalry for influence among major powers, leading to conflicts or interventions in national affairs and regional geopolitics	Low	High	Analyses of debt and financial inflows. Reports on national and regional responses to terrorism, violent extremism.
		External promotion of fundamentalist Islam leads to heightened social discord.	Medium	High	Perception surveys on tolerance.
		Absence of an open and evidence-based public discourse on migration and migrants leads to negative perceptions of migrants in society	Low	High	IOM indicators on migrants. Global Compact for Migration (Objective 17)
16,18	<u>Rise in violent extremism</u> : Risks of a rise in intolerance fuelled by unchecked hate speech, exploitation of	Individuals rally people on basis of perceived threats to faith and practice;	High	High	Analysis of content and organization of mass protests

SDGs	Risk Areas	Risk factors	Likelihood	Impact	Early warning indicators
	perceptions of internal marginalization by violent extremist actors and action by State forces during counter-terrorism operations, both in communities and prison-setting.	Overly broad definition of terrorism in current laws leads to misuse of Counter-terrorism capabilities as well as legal and penal provisions	High	High	Human rights data, judicial verdicts, evidence act
		Rise in instances of hate speech deepening polarisation	High	High	Violence against expats/ foreign migrant workers
		Rise in censorship/ curbs against fundamental freedoms	Medium	High	Executive decrees, judicial verdicts and parliamentary resolutions
16, 17	<u>Justice and Rule of Law</u> : risks to the fair, effective and comprehensive implementation and application of law and accountability	Lack of access to legal aid for women, child victims, asylum seekers / refugees, and atoll population	Medium	Medium	Progress in meeting treaty body and Rapporteur recommendations
		Lack of system guaranteeing human rights safeguards during criminal proceedings in practice: independent judicial control over detentions, effective investigation of torture allegations, legal aid, fair trial.			
		Inadequate budget allocations and expenditures linked to access to justice			
		Mistreatment, including physical abuse and torture, of persons while under arrest or incarcerated			
		Limited rehabilitation services for drug users results in their criminalisation	Medium	Medium	Recommendations to improve prison conditions, and allow access to independent observers to monitor closed facilities, Address issues of disappearances.
		Limited capacity for rehabilitation of violent extremist returnees	High	Medium	
		Lack of confidence in investigations of past human rights abuses	High	Medium	Publication of findings
		Weak capacity of the human rights machinery	High	Low	Number of complaints processed and leading to accountability
		Lack of capacities of law enforcement and security agencies to prevent and counter crimes taking place at	Medium	High	Crime statistics

SDGs	Risk Areas	Risk factors	Likelihood	Impact	Early warning indicators
		land and sea, including those related to organized crime and gangs.			
		Difficulties in border management to prevent smuggling of drugs.	High	High	Crime statistics
8, 9, 17	<u>Economic Growth & Stability</u> : risks to the economic, financial, and fiscal stability of the country, and inequality which could impact governance, social cohesion, or people's ability to satisfy their needs	Limited workforce planning, investment in quality education and job creation for youth lead to missing potential demographic dividend	High	High	National human resources capacity plan; Employer satisfaction with capacity of new hires; Number of private sector jobs created
		Vulnerability of current economic growth model to fluctuations in tourist demand due to reliance on high-end premium market; disruption in supply chains, global demand (tourism influx) and COVID-19 pandemic	Medium	High	Share of high-end tourism in GDP Unemployment rate, disaggregated by sex.
		Slow progress in diversification and lack of conducive environment for private sector growth	High	Medium	Share and composition of private sector.
		Debt burden and/or investment climate change causes financial crisis and debt service impacting on the availability of revenue for economic, social and cultural rights	Medium	High	Size of debt burden and debt service; Share of FDI in GDP; Diversity of FDI origin by country; diversity of FDI destination by sector.
4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 17	<u>Infrastructure and access to social services</u> : risks to society and the population resulting from a lack of availability or limitations on access to physical infrastructure, and or quality social services	<p>Urban and outer island inequalities in access and quality of public services persist.</p> <p>Investment in physical infrastructure not matched by sufficient quantity and quality of human resource capacity to deliver public services, leading to slow progress in improving maternal and child mortality rates, and tackling NCDs.</p> <p>Water stress risks increased by droughts.</p>	High	Medium	<p>Use of MICS data to collect maternal, child, infant, neonatal mortality rates; and access to pre-school by urban/rural, accessibility of schools.</p> <p>Budget expenditures to social services, including health, social protection, education.</p>

SDGs	Risk Areas	Risk factors	Likelihood	Impact	Early warning indicators
		Slow progress on promoting disability rights and disability-inclusive development, including improving accessibility for CWD and PWD	Medium	Medium	Incidence of key non- communicable diseases disaggregated by region, and urban and rural areas, Washington Group disability indicators;
		Lack of community-based social services means that vulnerable households and individuals fall through the cracks, and their needs cannot be addressed in a cross-sectoral way.	Medium	Medium	Number of social workers trained and employed in communities
8, 10, 16, 17	<u>Migration</u> : risks to the population and social cohesion resulting from improperly managed internal (domestic atoll to Malé) and/or international migration / asylum seekers / refugees	Large numbers of atoll residents continue to migrate to Malé, exacerbating social and environmental strains	High	Medium	Internal migration data; employment data on internal migrants; MICs data
Inadequate governance of migration continues to limit access to jobs in resorts for Maldivians		High	Medium	Employment data on resort industry	
Absence of an open and evidence-based public discourse on migration and migrants leads to negative perceptions of migrants in society. Conditions of work and health of international migrants continue to be inadequate, undocumented migrants lack access to basic services and human rights		High	Medium	Data on migrant numbers; Registration data; Health data; Prosecutions for trafficking Global Compact for Migration	
3, 13, 17	<u>Public Health</u> : risks to the population, the economy and stability of the territory resulting from actual and emerging public health emergencies and impact of pandemic in disrupting supply chains, demand and leading to livelihood losses.	Lack of data on migrant health may lead to unpreparedness to cope with communicable disease outbreaks (potentially including TB)	High	Medium	Incidence of communicable diseases in migrant population.
		Urbanisation may lead to increases in NCDs	Low	Medium	Incidence of cardio-vascular illnesses
2, 17	<u>Food Security, Agriculture</u> : risks to people, agriculture and/or food production in the territory resulting from crop, food production. Reliance on	Poor management of water and land resources leading to increases in land and water salinization, and reduction in productivity and land available for food production	High	Low	Land salinity

SDGs	Risk Areas	Risk factors	Likelihood	Impact	Early warning indicators
	food imports, impacts of global and regional shocks (such as pandemic) and climate change with regards to food security.	Limited capacity for food safety leads to biological, chemical or physical foodborne illness	High	Medium	Food safety checks performed to international standard
9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17	<p><u>Environment and Climate Change</u>: risks to the islands, freshwater lenses, eco-systems, and people resulting from issues associated with the environment, climate change and natural resources.</p> <p>Increasing risks of natural and man- made disasters, driven by climate change.</p>	Islands affected by worsening environmental degradation due to untreated sewage, pollution, and waste	High	High	Reporting of island erosion Decrease in water quality and purity Increase in global warming/climate change
		Lack of firm country commitment or nationally defined contributions under Paris Agreement; Limited capacity and financing for adaptation.	High	Medium	New climate change strategy and defined contributions adopted
		Open waste burning continues to negatively affect health of local communities;	Medium	Medium	Ad hoc studies of waste burning
		Contamination of human and natural environment by pollution and waste	High	High	Progress toward a circular economy
		Climate induced internal migration among islands leading to overcrowding in underserved settlements, access to housing, WASH, etc.	Medium	Medium	Sample surveys
		Loss and damage e.g. disruption to access to services, livelihood disruptions, increased costs to provide emergency relief (drinking water, etc.). loss of heritage and culture, etc. Malé and atolls are not prepared to deal with floods or other disasters arising from extreme weather events. Projected sea level rise and coastal inundation and increase average precipitations from climate change projections.	Medium	High	Number of islands with comprehensive disaster management plans

SDGs	Risk Areas	Risk factors	Likelihood	Impact	Early warning indicators
		Exposure to flood, erosion, drought and hazards, and increasingly severe impacts of climate extremes; leading to increased vulnerabilities in terms of food security, water security, infrastructure disruption and damage, damage and losses on productive sectors, livelihood losses, etc.	High	High	Monitoring of Sendai Framework Targets and Indicators on human (mortality, people affected), economic (losses across sectors) and infrastructure impacts due to disasters, and strategies and actions (early warning systems, investments) reducing disaster risks.