

VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEW (VNR)2023 MALDIVES

MINISTRY OF NATIONAL PLANNING,
HOUSING, & INFRASTRUCTURE
REPUBLIC OF MALDIVES



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This report was prepared with data and information contributions from key national agencies, local councils and civil society engaged in the implementation of the UNSDGs and government policies and with information and support from UN agencies.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ARISE	Accelerating Renewable Energy Integration and Sustainable Energy
ASPIRE	Accelerating Sustainable Private Investment in Renewable Energy
BAU	Business as Usual
BCC	Business Centre Corporation
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
CSO	Civil Society Organisations
DC	Defined Contributions
DV	Domestic Violence
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
EIA	Environment Impact Assessment
ESP	Education Sector Plan
EU	European Union
EV	Electric Vehicles
FDC	Fahi Dhiriulhun Corporation
FTTH	Fiber-To-The-Home
GCF	Green Climate Fund
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GEAP	Gender Equality Action Plan
GER	Gross Enrollment Rate
GHG	Green House Gas
GIS	Geographic Information System
HALE	Healthy Life Expectancy
HDC	Housing Development Corporation
HIES	Household Income and Expenditure Survey
HLPF	High-level Political Forum
IARC	International Agency for Research on Cancer
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
INFF	Integrated National Financing Framework
INPFN	Integrated National Public Ferry Network
IRENA	International Renewable Energy Agency
IUU	Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated
LNOB	Leave No One Behind
MAPS	Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support
MBS	Maldives Bureau of Statistics
MEERY	Maldives: Enhancing Employability and Resilience of Youth
MFMC	Maldives Fund Management Corporation
MGEM	Maldives Gender Equality Model
MIFCO	Maldives Industrial Fisheries Company
MNPHI	Ministry of National Planning Housing and Infrastructure

MNU	Maldives National University
MoGFSS	Ministry of Gender Family and Social Services
MSME	Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises
MVR	Maldivian Rufiyaa
MW	Megawatts
MWH	Megawatt Hours
MWSC	Male' Water & Sewerage Company Pvt. Ltd.
NCD	Non-Communicable Diseases
NDC	Nationally Determined Contributions
NDMA	National Disaster Management Authority
NER	Net Enrollment Rate
NRRP	National Resilience and Recovery Plan
NSP	National Spatial Plan
OABPS	Old Age Basic Pensions Scheme
ODA	Official Development Assistance
PM2	Particulate Matter
PPG	Public and Publicly Guaranteed
PSIP	Public Sector Investment Programme
PSPH	Public Sector Pay Harmonization Policy
PV	Photovoltaic
PWD	People with Disabilities
RTL	Raajje Transport Link
SAP	Strategic Action Plan
SDFC	SME Development Finance Cooperation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SEN	Special Education Needs
SIDS	Small Island Developing State
SPI	Statistical Performance Indicators
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
SUP	Single Use Plastic
TRC	Teacher Resource Centers
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UMIC	Upper Middle-Income Countries
UN	United Nations
UNESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
UNFCCC	United National Framework Convention on Climate Change
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
URA	Utility Regulatory Authority
USP	Unsolicited Proposals
VNR	Voluntary National Review
WAMCO	Waste Management Corporation Limited
WDC	Women's Development committee
WHO	World Health Organization

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FOREWORD

The second VNR report of the Maldives focuses on a comprehensive review of the progress of the SDGs, achievements, lessons learned, and the impact of policies and strategies toward implementing Agenda 2030.

The main theme of the Voluntary National Review (VNR) Report of the Maldives focuses on the theme of “Socio-Economic Integration through connectivity as an accelerator to achieving the SDGs in the Maldives”. Our unique geographic distribution of the Islands made us think of new and innovative ways to overcome the physical and digital connection challenges.

The report focuses on the transformative power of connectivity that has led us to create a way of connecting the people through a systematic Integrated National Public Ferry Network to ensure the acceleration of the socioeconomic impacts on the livelihood of people. The Public Ferry Network has touched and impacted the lives of the people and the effort to fully complete the Public Ferry Network is underway ensuring that all communities, despite the geographical location or socio-economic background, have equal access to essential services, opportunities, and resources.

Other areas key includes Education, Gender Equality, Health, Economic Diversification, Tourism, Environment, Climate Action, Peace, Justice, and Partnership. The report also highlights the significance of good governance, informed decision-making, and capacity building throughout the institutions to ensure effective implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the SDGs. We are moving forward to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals leaving no one Behind.

I would like to thank the United Nations for the opportunity to present our VNR for the second time and I wish to thank all the stakeholders who have given their invaluable contribution consultative process of the VNR.

Mr. Mohamed Aslam
Minister of National Planning, Housing, and Infrastructure

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The Completion of the second Voluntary National Review Report on Sustainable Development Goals of the Maldives has been a combined effort and support of a number of stakeholders which was prepared by the Ministry of National Planning, Housing and Infrastructure (MNPHI).

First and foremost, we would like to express our appreciation to the institutions that have helped us in arranging the Stakeholder Consultation Meetings upon our request and have gathered technical expertise from various areas.

We extend our sincere thanks to Ministries, Local Councils, and WDCs who have shared their knowledge and experiences. The participation and on-the-ground perspectives of Civil Society Organizations and Individuals from the sectors in different regions of the country have enriched the report and ensured its inclusivity.

We are grateful to the Technical Committee members and Development Partners for their valuable contributions and technical expertise provided which is immensely appreciated and we are thankful for the continuous support in the VNR process.

We highly value the contributions from the Maldives Bureau of Statistics in identifying the data gaps and providing updated data for the report to ensure the relevance and authenticity of the report during this process.

Lastly, we would like to recognize the work of our consultant Ms.Nashiya Saeed for giving her full effort in completing the report.

KEY MESSAGES

Sustainable Growth

The Maldives is one of the most uniquely dispersed and geographically fragmented countries in the world. The island nation is scattered across 1,192 low lying small islands of which only about one percent is land. The geographic distribution of the population of 515,122 people dispersed across small islands is a major challenge for equitable development and shared prosperity across all islands of the Maldives.

As a country heavily dependent on tourism, the Maldives was one of the worst-hit from the unprecedented coronavirus disease (COVID-19) shock. When the country's border closed and tourism stopped during early 2020, many people experienced devastating consequences from income and livelihood loss. Women in informal sectors and youth were disproportionately affected. Income and business support programmes, a successful nationwide information and vaccination campaign prioritizing tourism sector workers, the vulnerable population, and foreign migrants, with over 80 percent vaccination coverage helped the Maldives overcome the COVID-19 impacts and reboot the economy. The dispersed nature of the islands helped slow down the transmission of the virus, and the country responded with implementation of strong health safety measures and leveraged the "one island one resort" tourist accommodation facilities to promote as a safe destination for international visitors. Thus, the Maldives was one of the first countries to have opened borders for international arrivals that accelerated the economic recovery of the country.

Vulnerabilities

Meanwhile, the country's fiscal and climate vulnerabilities have magnified. Climate change poses an existential threat to the Maldives, while threat from pandemics, climatic disasters, and other external shocks pose significant risks to the economy, income and livelihoods, and food security. Risks to safety and stability because of climate change are emerging concerns for the Maldives. Growing fiscal deficit is also a serious concern for the country with its heavy dependence on food and fuel imports and blanket social welfare spending. Thus, fiscal adjustments are needed to sustainably manage the high capital expenditure, subsidies, and welfare spending. Resilience of the economy and society depend heavily on our natural resources and speedy climate adaptation, and mitigation is crucial for the existence of the small islands and its biodiversity, which is the backbone of the economy and home to the people. The country is increasing investments in adaptation and mitigation measures and has set an ambitious commitment to achieve net zero by 2030, given financial support from the international community.

Poverty

The Maldives has made remarkable progress in reducing poverty. The national monetary poverty rate is low and economic opportunities and social protection programmes have improved the quality of life for the most vulnerable. However, income inequality persists, and 59 percent of the population resides in the atolls, where monetary and multidimensional poverty are more prevalent. At the national poverty line of MVR 71.4 per person per day, the national poverty rate was at 5.4 percent in 2019. At this poverty rate, poverty was heavily concentrated in atolls (9.5 percent) and was 10 times as high as in Male' City (0.9 percent).¹ In 2019, the poverty rate of the Maldives against the international poverty line of (US\$ 5.5 PPP) for Upper Middle-Income Countries (UMIC) was 1.7 percent, driven entirely by the atolls, where poverty rate was 3.2 percent.² The first ever multidimensional poverty report showed that multidimensional poverty in Male' was 10 percent compared to 40 percent in the atolls.³ Disparities in access to health care, years of schooling, sewerage systems, and clean water are the biggest multidimensional poverty in the atolls and quality education, access to health care and living standards are barriers for equal socioeconomic progress for people resident in the atolls.

¹ Poverty and Inequality in the Maldives

² Poverty and Inequality in the Maldives

³ National Multidimensional Poverty in Maldives

Accelerator

Physical and digital connectivity can accelerate socioeconomic progress in the Maldives. The Integrated National Public Ferry Network project has been initiated to connect the Maldives through an affordable, regular and high-speed public ferry network and improve access to services, reduce inequalities and improve opportunities for people in the atolls. This is in operation in the northern region of the Maldives by connecting people in 41 islands to atoll and regional hubs. The majority use it for health care services. Likewise, rapid transformation towards digitization is ongoing. The pandemic necessitated digital acceleration through online education, telemedicine, e-payment systems, and other digital uses. Expansion of digital connectivity across the country, combined with an affordable, efficient, and sustainable public ferry network can improve access and opportunities and enable SDG acceleration.

Health and Wellbeing

The Maldives has achieved significant strides in the health and wellbeing of its people. Maternal, neonatal and child mortality have decreased, and life expectancy has improved to 80 years. The national universal health insurance scheme, “Aasandha”, freely accessible to all Maldivian citizens has improved health outcomes significantly. Effort still needs to be done to improve nutrition and address obesity. Currently, Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) is a major disease burden, and mental health and cancers are growing concerns of the country needing preventive measures and promotion of healthy lifestyles. Furthermore, the Maldives is moving towards low fertility and an ageing population and needs better sustainable social protection planning and targeting. Social welfare spending as a share of GDP is estimated to double by 2050, due to population aging.

Human Capital

Progressive changes in the education sector have enabled the Maldives to build human capital and reduce poverty. Access to education and quality of teachers are being improved. Gender parity in primary and secondary education has been achieved in the Maldives, with girls and boys having equal access to education. However, inclusive education and access to quality higher secondary and tertiary education across the atolls remains a challenge. To empower youth with skills needed for the workforce and entrepreneurship, skills development programmes are being planned in targeted locations across the country.

Gender Equality

Women’s involvement in decision making has increased. One third local council seats and 33 percent of the current Ministers comprise of women. Likewise, first women justices to the Supreme Court were appointed in 2019. Women, however, are still underrepresented in politics, leadership and the Parliament and women’s participation in the formal economy is low. Violence against women continues to be prevalent and impact their agency to participate in economic development. Women’s empowerment, engagement, and participation are crucial for SDG progress.

Means of Implementation

Continued political commitment, long term strategy, social dialogue and partnerships are critical to drive the Sustainable Development Agenda forward. Maximizing 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.

Access to international finance mechanisms and concessional financing terms are major development needs for the Maldives. The implementation of the 2030 Agenda requires speedy international support in areas of climate adaptation, mitigation, and conservation, support for diversifying the economic base, and building human capital and skills for the Maldives to accelerate SDG progress.

BOX I: SNAPSHOT OF THE MALDIVES

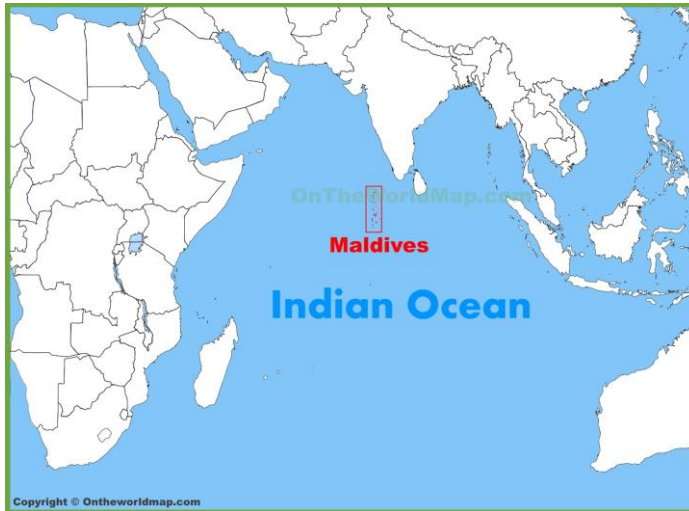


Figure 1: location of the Maldives in the Indian Ocean

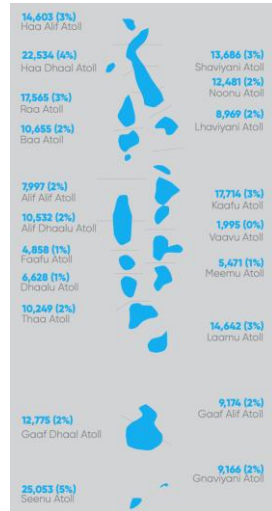


Figure 2: The Maldives archipelago

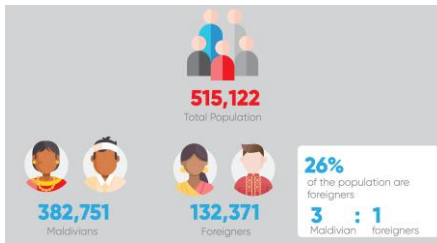


Figure 3: Resident population

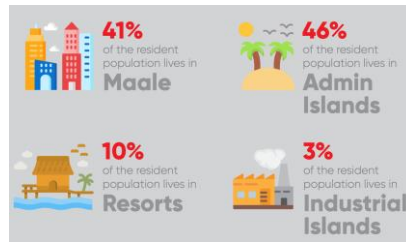


Figure 4: Distribution of residential population

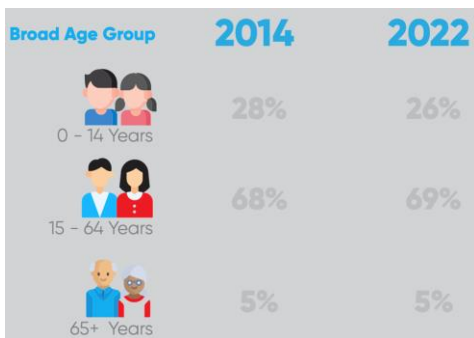


Figure 5: Resident Maldivian population age group

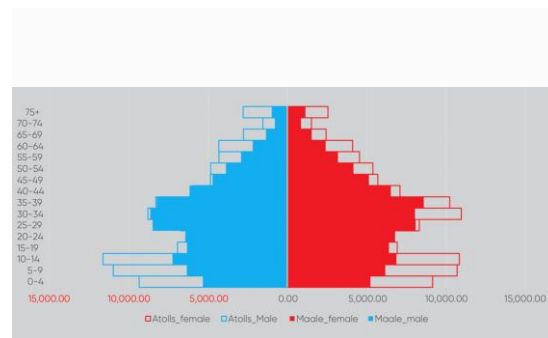


Figure 6: Resident Maldivian population by age group Male' vs Atolls

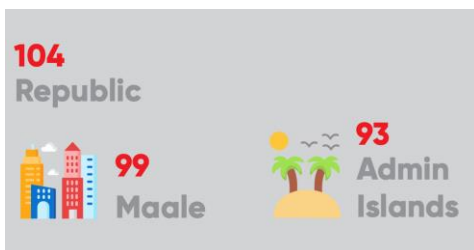


Figure 7: Sex ratio of resident population

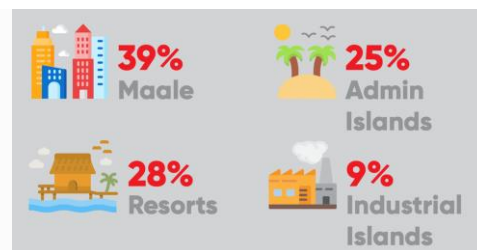


Figure 8: Distribution of foreign resident population

Source: Census 2022

INTRODUCTION

This is the second Voluntary National Review (NVR) of the Maldives. The Maldives submitted its first VNR in 2017. The VNR is an assessment of the national progress made in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with progress of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The mandate for SDG coordination in the Maldives is integrated into the Ministry of National Planning, Housing, and Infrastructure (MNPHI), and is officially within the National Planning and SDG Coordination Division of the Ministry. Thus, this report is prepared by the SDG Coordination Division of the MNPHI. The SDGs set direction for improving the overall economic and social wellbeing of the people and taking climate action. As a small island developing nation with limited resources, the Maldives faces several challenges for social, economic, and environmental development. Amidst the challenges, the Maldives has demonstrated strong economic growth, reduced poverty, and have made progress in human development. The COVID-19 pandemic however, exposed the extreme vulnerability of the Maldives’ economy to external shocks, extent of income and livelihood loss and the risk of a large population sliding back to poverty in a short period of time. With over reliance of the economy on tourism, the Maldives’ economy is extremely vulnerable to external shocks.

The second VNR of the Maldives focuses on the theme “Socio-economic integration through connectivity as an accelerator to achieving SDGs in the Maldives” and reflects on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the pathway to recovery. The distribution of the small islands of the Maldives poses several challenges for equal access to services for the people resident in the 187 inhabited islands. The second VNR of the Maldives aims to put emphasis on the importance of access to services and economic opportunities to improve the overall wellbeing of the people. The report then discusses the progress and challenges with goals related to social wellbeing, economic inclusion and resilience, and environment and climate action. The main themes and SDG progress is discussed as follows:




SOCIO-ECONOMIC INTEGRATION THROUGH CONNECTIVITY AS AN ACCELERATOR TO ACHIEVING SDGs IN THE MALDIVES		
Social Wellbeing	Economic Inclusion & Resilience	Environment and Climate Action
 <p><i>Ensure all human beings can fulfill their potential in dignity and equality in a healthy environment.</i></p>	 <p><i>Prosperous and fulfilling lives and economic, social and progress occurs in harmony with nature.</i></p>	 <p><i>Sustainably managing natural resources and taking urgent action on climate change.</i></p>
<p>Good Health and Wellbeing</p> <p>Quality Education</p> <p>Gender Equality, Empowerment of Women and Child Protection</p>	<p>Inclusive and Sustained Economic Growth and Fiscal Sustainability</p> <p>Human Capital and Reduced Inequalities</p> <p>Sustainable Cities and Communities and Resilient Infrastructure</p>	<p>Clean Water and Sanitation</p> <p>Clean Energy</p> <p>Conservation and Sustainable Marine Resource Use</p> <p>Climate Action</p>

Figure 9: The Second VNR reporting framework

THE VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEW PROCESS

The objective of the second NVR of the Maldives is to share progress of the SDGs, challenges, the lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic and the means of implementation for progress. Having arrived at mid-point to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and at a critical juncture of the development trajectory of the country, the need for sustainable and inclusive development is even more pertinent for the Maldives. Equal access to services and inclusive development for the people resident across the Maldives being limited by the geographic fragmentation, smallness and dispersed nature, physical and digital connectivity have been identified as the most crucial enablers for accelerating the SDGs in the Maldives. Thus, the second VNR of the Maldives discusses the importance of physical and digital connectivity across the dispersed islands of the Maldives as a key enabler for SDG acceleration in the Maldives.

The Report was formulated in four stages:

Stage 1: Scope setting, literature review and formulation of focus SDGs.

Stage 2: Data collection and analysis of the focus SDGs and lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Stage 3: Stakeholder consultations, drafting of key messages, report preparation.

Stage 4: Validation of the findings.

Stage 1: Setting the Scope and Defining the Focus SDGs

The scope for the report was guided early on by the SDG Coordination Division. The Maldives' Second VNR explores the theme "Socio-economic integration through connectivity as an accelerator to achieving SDGs in the Maldives", for the relevance and importance of connectivity as an enabler for access to services and inclusive development. Furthermore, the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) theme being "Accelerating the recovery from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at all levels" throughout the chapters, the report reflects on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the SDGs, measures undertaken in the Maldives by the public and private sectors for a sustainable and greener recovery. The existing literature guided the status of SDG integration into national development strategy, sectoral and local government planning, the level of policy alignment, the existing institutional mechanisms, human resource capacity, data, monitoring and capacity challenges, and gaps in multi stakeholder partnerships. This process also led to the discussion and formulation of the thematic topics and focus SDGs for reporting. The thematic topics identified for reporting are social wellbeing, economic inclusion and resilience and environment and climate action. Goals that relate to poverty, health, education, gender, decent work and economic growth, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, water and sanitation, energy, life below water and climate action, formed the key focus SDGs for reporting.

Stage 2: Data Analysis

Effort was made to incorporate quality and reliable disaggregated data by gender, sex, and geographic location where possible in interpreting the achievement of SDG progress for the Maldives. The report relied on the Maldives Bureau of Statistics (MBS) for the most recent Census 2022 data where possible to communicate the most updated information on population and gender, and the status of the SDG targets which is annexed in this report. The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) team prepared the infographic and analysis for the Leave No One Behind (LNOB) analysis used in the report using the most recent data available from the 2016-2017 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) and the 2019 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES). Although it was attempted to use Census 2022 data throughout the report, most data were not complete at the time of reporting, thus the Census 2022 data is used where available, and the most recent administrative data and data from the 2019 HIES were used where required. The report leveraged any data segregated by gender and the vulnerable groups where possible to recognize the

efforts of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to achieve gender equality, the empowerment of girls and women and to ensure inclusivity.

Stage 3: Stakeholder Consultations

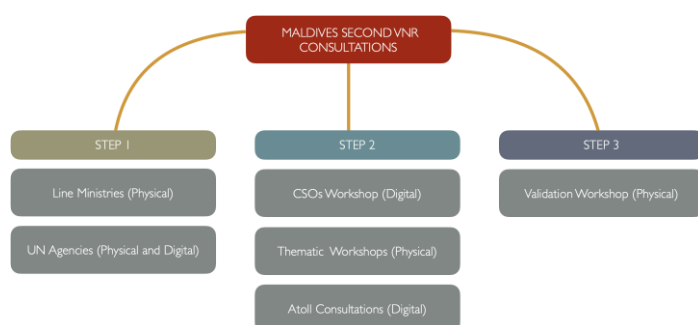


Figure 10: Second VNR consultations framework and method of engagement

A wide range of stakeholder consultations were undertaken for the formulation of the second VNR of the Maldives. The consultations focused on the thematic topics and the focus goals identified for reporting. Stakeholder consultations were held to the maximum extent possible to make it inclusive, participatory, transparent, and to support reporting by all relevant stakeholders. The SDG Technical Committee that is in place since the first VNR was utilized to contribute to the VNR Report. The Technical Committees are under five thematic clusters—economic, social, environment, infrastructure, and partnerships. The report utilized progress updates, impact of interventions and implementation challenges from the key government agencies responsible for SDGs implementation, guidance from the SDG Technical Committees, UN organizations, lessons, and information from Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and private sector through physical and virtual engagements.

The line ministries, state institutions, local councils, CSOs and other stakeholders were consulted to formulate the VNR. Face to face meetings were held with stakeholders in Male’ while virtual meetings were held with CSOs and other key informants in the outer atolls. These meetings were held to brief about the VNR report, discuss the progress on focus goals and gather updates on policies and the enabling environment, and existing literature and data on progress of the goals. The stakeholder consultations also explored the importance and lessons of physical and digital connectivity, impacts and lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic, preparedness for a future disaster/ pandemic, actions to be undertaken and those at most risk of being left behind. The stakeholders in the atolls included (i) institutions: the city/atoll/island councils, school, and hospitals/health centres, (ii) women and economic group: Women’s Development Committees (WDCs), farmers, fishers, tourism stakeholders, and CSOs. Representatives from Haa Alif, Haa Dhaal, Shaviyani, Noonu, Raa, Alif Alif, Alif Dhaalu, Vaavu, Faafu, Gaafu Dhaal, Gnaviyani and Seenu Atolls participated in the meetings for the stakeholder consultation with the atolls, which led to meaningful discussions on sustainable development progress and challenges in the atolls. The stakeholders consulted for the second VNR formulation are given in annex I of this report.

Stage 4: Validation

The information from the stakeholder consultations, literature review and data analysis informed the content of the key messages and the second VNR report. Following the key messages development and the draft report formulation, the report was sent out to all the government institutions and other agencies in the Technical Committees, UN agencies and CSOs for comments and feedback. The findings were also presented to the Minister of National Planning, Housing, and Infrastructure. A Validation Workshop was undertaken to further discuss and agree on the way forward for SDGs acceleration and implementation in the Maldives. The following chapters describe the enabling environment, the key thematic topic of the report, SDG progress, means of implementation, conclusions, and the next steps followed by the annexes.

POLICY AND ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

Since the first VNR, the Maldives has mapped out the Strategic Action Plan (SAP) of the government against the SDGs, which shows strong alignments with the SDGs. The SAP is a medium-term plan of five years from 2019 to 2023 and is grouped into five broad themes: the Blue Economy, Caring State, Dignified Families, Jazeera Dhiriulhun (Island Life) and Good Governance. Nine of the 17 Sustainable SDGs have 100 percent coverage of their respective targets with the SAP whereby at least one action in the SAP aligns with the individual targets under the goals. The mapping results showed 88 percent alignment between the SAP and the SDG coverage of targets.⁴

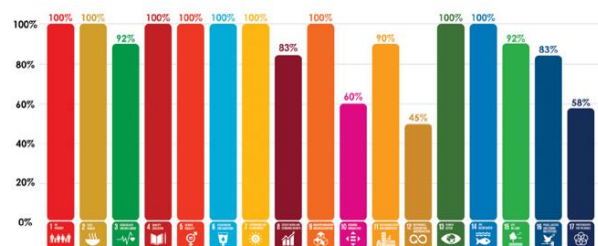


Figure 11: Coverage of SDGs in the SAP

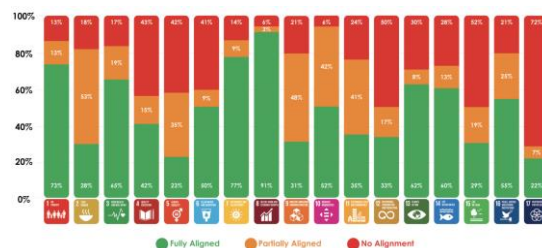


Figure 12: SDGs and SAP alignment

The “Jazeera Dhiriulhun” (Island Life) theme forms linkages across all 17 SDGs. The mapping showed the greatest concentration of interlinkages across 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.⁵

The MNPHI has been serving as the national SDG coordinator since 2018. The government elected in 2018 formulated a ministry for national planning and thus the overall mandate for SDG coordination, monitoring, and reporting was changed to the SDG Division under the planning arm of the MNPHI. 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, with the change in government in 2018, this Committee has not been active.

The formulation of the second VNR brought together stakeholders and discussed the progress and challenges for SDG implementation. The discussions also 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 resource is 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.

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 MBS has undertaken the exercise on national prioritization of SDG indicators and continues to engage with the UNESCAP team working on the SDG tracker to improve data and tracking for SDGs.

⁴ Maldives SDG Roadmap, United Nations Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support (MAPS) Engagement 2022

⁵ Maldives SDG Roadmap, United Nations Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support (MAPS) Engagement 2022

Upcoming works including the national target setting activity and updating the SDG tracker will form part of the continuation work. Data continues to be a major challenge for informed decision making and data driven decision making for improved planning. Capacity building in data administration, data storage and data analysis are identified as critical needs of the implementing partners. Organisations can benefit greatly from avoiding data duplication and having data sharing mechanisms. Maximizing on the digitization policy, using technology for data collection, ensuring quality of data, and having data sharing mechanisms are important for the 2030 Agenda implementation.

Although a National Planning Bill and a National Development Plan have been drafted, these documents have not been officially adopted. The National Spatial Plan (NSP) formulated by the MNPPI in 2021 is a forward-looking national document that sets out the strategic direction for regional development and decentralization through interconnectivity and integration of people and resources.⁶ The NSP identifies regions, zones and clusters for major service allocations, and strategic distribution for effective connectivity. An efficient multi-modal transport network is intended as the backbone of the NSP. Furthermore, the eighth National Development Plan was drafted with a 10-year (2019- 2028) vision for sustainable development to transform the Maldives to a vibrant, inclusive, and just society.⁷ However, both these documents have not been formally adopted in shaping the development trajectory of the Maldives.

Therefore, SDG alignment is lacking alongside a long-term development vision for the country.⁸ Although the SDG coverage in the SAP (2019-2023) and the National Resilience and Recovery Plan (NRRP) are strong, the SAP is five-year plan. The year 2023 marks a new presidential election cycle in the country, and having arrived at mid-point to SDG implementation, a cross party accepted long-term national vision is even more critical for SDG prioritization and implementation. The SAP and NRRP have given SDG focus to issues and created importance and momentum within the implementing organizations to think along the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Hence, continuation of the policy prioritization with SDG focus is critical for the country.

In the meantime, the new policies and legislations continue to demonstrate the commitment to drive the 2030 Agenda forward. Several policies and legal changes have been made improving the policy and regulatory landscape for SDG achievement. Likewise, well-planned, and sustainable implementation of the ongoing Integrated National Public Ferry Network (INPFN) project and improvements in digital connectivity across the 20 atolls of the Maldives can accelerate SDG progress by improving access to services and thus, socio-economic wellbeing across the country. Key challenges such as organisations working in silos, lack of institutional partnerships, and resource duplication need to be addressed. National partnerships for SDG implementation need strengthening, while CSOs and private sector can be better leveraged for acceleration of the 2030 Agenda. Similarly, more intensive effort is needed to ensure that no one is left behind with a special focus on marginalized groups in education delivery, health care services, minimum wage setting, and other key public policy initiatives.

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 INFF that supports to consolidate and coordinate the funding support for SDGs is a critical document that sets the right direction in this area. The economy and society depend on natural resources for its wellbeing. Climate adaptation is crucial for the Maldives. Meanwhile, the high capital costs for development and high public spending on subsidies and welfare to improve the lives of the people are resulting in high fiscal vulnerability for the country. Therefore, the implementation of the 2030 Agenda requires speedy international support in areas of climate adaptation, mitigation, and conservation, support for diversifying the economic base, and building human capital and skills for the Maldives to accelerate SDG progress.

⁶ National Spatial Plan 2021

⁷ National Development Plan, Third Draft 2019

⁸ Maldives SDG Roadmap, United Nations Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support (MAPS) Engagement 2022

SOCIO-ECONOMIC INTEGRATION THROUGH CONNECTIVITY AS AN ACCELERATOR TO ACHIEVING SDGs IN THE MALDIVES



The Republic of the Maldives is a small island nation of coral atolls located in the Indian Ocean. The archipelago comprises 1,192 islands, 860 km in length and between 80 and 120 km in width. For administrative purposes, the country is divided into 20 atolls and the capital is Male' City. 515,122 people were resident in the Maldives in 2022.⁹ The population is resident across 187 inhabited islands (87 percent), 168 resorts (10 percent) and 107 (three percent) industrial islands,¹⁰ distributed along a narrow stretch of islands. The Maldives is an upper middle-income country with a robust economic growth trajectory. Tourism is the main economic activity with heavy dependence on international tourism.

The geography of the small islands makes the Maldives one of the most uniquely dispersed and fragmented countries in the world. Due to the dispersed nature, most islands are accessible via sea transport. The resident male population (312,513) is 1.5 times higher than the females (202,609) resulting from the high foreign migrant population. The total Maldivian to foreign resident population ratio is 3:1 and of the total foreign population of 117,460 people recorded in Census 2022, overwhelming majorities of 88 percent are males. The high percentage of foreign male population is driven mainly by the human capital requirements for the construction and tourism sectors.

Table 1: Resident population distribution across different types of islands

	No of islands	Population	Foreign
Male' City (capital city)	1	212,138	51,030
Admin islands (excluding capital city)	186	236,747	32,470
Resort islands	168	52,396	36,707
Industrial and other islands	107	13,841	12,164

Source: Census 2022

41 percent of the population are resident in the greater Male' region. This comprise of the residential islands Male' City, and its satellite wards Hulhumale' and Villimale', the airport island Hulhule, and the industrial islands Gulhifalhu and Thilafushi. About nine percent of the population are resident in the other three cities (Addu, Fuvahmulah and Kulhudhuffushi), resulting in very low population densities in the remaining inhabited islands. The rest of the 50 percent of the population live in the remaining 178 inhabited islands. The wide dispersion of the population makes it difficult to achieve economies of scale, provide equal services and sustain socio-economic infrastructure across all the islands. Furthermore, rapid urbanization and population concentration towards Male' City pushes people into high cost of living and severe overcrowding.

Table 2: Resident population by administrative islands

	Number of administrative islands	Total population (percentage)
Male'	1	212,138 (47 Percent)
1,000 and more	2	23,996 (5 percent)
5,000 - 9,999	2	15,399 (3 percent)
1,000 - 4,999	70	131,623 (29 percent)
500 - 999	72	51,323 (11 percent)
< 500	40	14,406 (3 percent)

Source: Census 2022

Infrastructure and services are heavily concentrated in the greater Male' region where the population density is the highest. This unequal distribution of infrastructure and services has resulted in vast socio-economic disparities between the greater Male' region and the rest of the islands in the country. While the overall national monetary poverty has decreased resulting from improved education and better income opportunities, income inequality persists, and income poverty and multidimensional poverty are more prevalent in the atolls, with significantly vast differences across the greater Male' region

⁹ Maldives Census 2022

¹⁰ Maldives Census 2022

and the atolls. At the national poverty line of MVR 71.4 and international UMIC poverty line of US\$ 5.5 PPP in 2019, the national monetary poverty was 5.4 percent and 1.7 percent respectively. The poverty rate when compared between the capital Male' City and the atolls, in Male' City it was 0.9 percent and zero percent respectively, whereas it was 9.5 percent and 3.2 percent respectively in the atolls.¹¹

Access to essential services is a major barrier for equitable development across the islands of the Maldives. 87 percent of the multidimensionally poor are resident in the atolls compared to 13 percent in Male' City, accounting for disparities in access to education, health care, information and living standards related to sewerage system for sanitation, clean water in the atolls, and overcrowding in Male' City. This has resulted in a vicious cycle of migration to the greater Male' region in search of better education, employment, and health care, contributing to degradation of quality of life in Male' City driven mainly by overcrowding and congestion. This at the same time disincentivizes equal development across the atolls. Therefore, there is a need to formulate good public health and preventive social services where cost of services is more suitable for a small island country and can be sustained for small island development.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the inequalities in development and the vulnerabilities of the island communities. Although the geographically dispersed nature of the small islands acted as a natural barrier for the spread of the virus, when connectivity services between Male' City and other islands were suspended to control the spread of the virus, people who were otherwise dependent on Male' City for access to essential services and transport of goods were severely affected. Thus, island communities, especially women had to find alternative hospitals across different atolls for their urgent health care needs such as obstetrics services. The pandemic also exposed the greater risk and vulnerability of the tourism sector workers, informal workers, those in rental accommodations in Male' City, and islands dependent for essential services from Male' to fall to poverty, food insecurity, access to services and safe drinking water access for remote islands with risk of water shortages. Although communities quickly adjusted to the new circumstances and found alternative means, without the pandemic relief measures, the World Bank reported that the income poverty rate would have risen to 19.8 percent in 2020 from an estimated 3.9 percent against UMIC poverty rate of US\$ 6.85 in 2019.¹²

Therefore, comprehensive and meaningful regional development and decentralization of services is needed to overcome the current development challenges. The INPFN was formulated under the strategic direction set forth in the NSP. The government's commitment to improve domestic marine transport services is reflected under the "Jazeera Dhiriulhun" theme in the SAP.¹³ The ferry network was designed to be an efficient, reliable, and an affordable sea transport system connecting the islands and people and enabling the movement of goods and services.

The planned public ferry network spans across three regions of the Maldives and covers all 187 inhabited islands. The ferry network is designed to operate between strategically clustered groups of islands within each zone identified in the NSP, which is connected to six zones. The ferry network is currently operational across zone-one consisting of three atolls (Haa Alif, Haa Dhaal and Shaviyani Atolls) and Lhaviyani Atoll in zone-two. When this network is fully operationalized across all the islands of the country, it would facilitate inclusive and regional development by connecting people and services, accelerate social and economic growth, improve efficiency in the delivery of public services and improve mobility and accessibility for everyone across the country. The lessons from the currently operational zones have demonstrated positive impact on people's access to services, especially health care and people with special needs, such as people with comorbidities. Improvement in access to services and economic opportunities will improve the overall wellbeing of the people.

¹¹ Poverty and Inequality in the Maldives, 2022

¹² World Bank Maldives Development Update: Towards Resilient and Affordable Housing, October 2022

¹³ Integrated National Public Ferry Network 2020

Table 3: Zone classification and resident population distribution

Region	Zone	Cluster	Number of atolls and islands	Total population size
Region 1	Zone 1	Upper North	3 Administrative Atolls Haa Alifu, Haa Dhaalu, Shaviyani (41 inhabited islands)	50,823
	Zone 2	Lower North	4 Administrative Atolls Noonu, Raa, Baa, Lhaviyani (45 inhabited islands)	49,670
Region 2	Zone 3	Upper Central	4 Administrative Atolls Kaafu, Alifu Alifu, Alifu Dhaalu, Vaavu (32 inhabited islands)	38,238
	Zone 4	Lower Central	5 Administrative Atolls Meemu, Faafu, Dhaalu, Thaa, Laamu (43 inhabited islands)	41,848
Region 3	Zone 5	Upper South	2 Administrative Atolls Gaaf Alifu, Gaafu Dhaalu (18 inhabited islands)	21,949
	Zone 6	Lower South	2 Administrative Atolls Gnaviyani, Seenu (7 inhabited islands)	34,219

The planned ferry network consists of two main components: a passenger ferry network and a cargo ferry network. The focus is currently on establishing the passenger ferry network, which strongly aligns with the principles of SDG 1—no poverty and SDG 11—sustainable cities, and communities. It will also contribute to the achievement of several other SDGs through its interlinkages to several other goals and a broad range of socio-economic impacts such as access to health care facilities, access to university campuses in the region, access to job opportunities within the region, access to markets encouraging local production and enabling strong supply chain, safety and security for girls and women to travel, and transport of safe drinking water for islands during the dry season.¹⁴ It is equally important to leverage and empower island communities towards gender equality and empowerment (SDG5), responsible consumption and production (SDG 12) and minimize climate impacts (SDG 13).

Therefore, the ferry network will improve people’s access to services and economic opportunities, contributing to an overall improvement of quality of life, especially for the physically and socially marginalized populations. Improved connectivity within regions and across the country will have significant positive impacts on the lives and livelihoods of people at the local and national level through acceleration of the SDGs, catalytic socio-economic growth, inclusive regional development, improved inter-island connectivity and mobility of the people, reduced socio-economic disparities through improved access to services, reduced cost of transportation and improved viability of small businesses, efficient delivery of public services and optimization of resources, wider scope of job choices and lifestyles with better spread of job opportunities leading to diverse and empowered settlements, as well as improve disaster preparedness and response.¹⁵

Similarly, digital connectivity can be a driver for bridging the gap in access to services and enabling socioeconomic progress. The Maldives has made substantial progress in digital connectivity by expansion of internet coverage and high internet penetration across the country. The Maldives is the

¹⁴ Integrated National Public Ferry Network 2020

¹⁵ Integrated National Public Ferry Network 2020

first country in the region to launch 5G connectivity services. Meanwhile, internet fiber-to-the-home (FTTH) coverage is 85.8 percent and mobile market penetration is at 155.4 percent. Digital connectivity was a major advantage during the COVID-19 lockdowns to increase awareness of COVID-19 and for information sharing between health facilities. Digital connectivity also enabled telemedicine across the country especially improving access to health care for people in remote islands.

Technology and innovation have been prioritized as essential catalysts for national development. The SAP laid the groundwork with five key policies aimed at leveraging Information, Communication, and Technology (ICT) focusing on modernizing the governance of the ICT sector, establishing secure digital infrastructure, encouraging digital innovation, modernizing government services, and creating a digital-ready workforce. The NRRP further underscored the importance of a robust digital framework. This reformulation includes the establishment of a government technology agency, government digital service, optimization of internet service delivery, and digital transformation of government services. Emphasizing the importance of global connectivity, internet regulation, and data security, this plan seeks to enhance the digital accessibility of public services. Furthermore, it introduces measures to support remote work and decentralization of the workforce, establishing technology-driven policies that ensure secure and efficient online government operations from any location. Digital connectivity also will be an enabler for activities against poverty and in subsidy targeting enabling efficient and equitable services across the population, thus enabling SDG progress.

There is however significant room for improving the quality, reliability, and affordability of the internet services to take the best advantage of internet technology and innovation in service delivery. Internet prices in the Maldives are higher than the region, mainly due to the high network cost across the geographically fragmented island nation. The government and the technology providers in the private domain are investing in technological infrastructure to enable cheaper internet and better connectivity, while the government has also planned internet service provider expansion. High cost of internet and internet quality issues were the main challenges identified for online education during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially for students in the atolls. In this digital transformation journey, older generation and unskilled foreign migrants who are less digitally literate are at most risk of being left behind without timely interventions. Hence, investing in lifelong learning is important for these groups to increase their digital literacy especially with respect to protection within banking services and to protect them from digital fraud and reduce the digital divide. Equally important in this transformation journey are data privacy and maintenance of data integrity and confidentiality and preventing cyber-attacks.

Therefore, digital, and physical connectivity combined can accelerate SDGs attainment and socioeconomic growth in the Maldives. Improving regional connectivity between the hubs and the islands through an affordable, efficient, and sustainable ferry network can benefit students, health care service providers and populations within the zone to access services from the respective hubs, subsequently improving viability of services and enhancing efficiency and enabling better opportunities for the people living in the atolls. Digital services can integrate the self-employed into financial and social protection systems, as well as provide education and counselling for youth who risk dropping out of education, track cohorts who drop out of high school or colleges, as well as those who graduate, to identify and understand the reasons for dropping out and the consequences on the labor market, enabling mitigation interventions.¹⁶ Similarly, digital services can enable improved trade and financial services. The COVID-19 pandemic drove digital acceleration in the country through online education, telemedicine, e-payment systems, online banking, and banking services, and other digital uses, demonstrating the rapid transition to digital services across the government, businesses, and the public, enabling ease and access to services and transactions for people across the country. Inclusive physical and digital connectivity combined can achieve sustainable development across the Maldives through a balanced distribution of resources for integrated, smart, and resilient development and bring about inclusive development.

¹⁶ Poverty and Inequality in the Maldives 2022

BOX 2: RAAJJE TRANSPORT LINK (RTL)

The Raajje Transport Link (RTL) high speed ferry service commenced in the three atolls in zone 1 and one atoll from zone 2 of the Integrated National Public Ferry Network in June 2022. The service was launched with 12 high-speed ferries connecting the three northern most atolls of the Maldives, Haa Alif, Haa Dhaal, and Shaviyani (zone 1) and Lhaviyani Atoll (zone 2). Zone 1 covers 41 inhabited islands with a population of 50,823 people in 2022. This region comprises the second largest population cohort amongst the planned six zones. The RTL in this zone connects the people in all islands within the three atolls.

People in this region describe the ferry network as a game changer for their essential service needs. The ferries are airconditioned with a capacity of 50 seats, and two seats dedicated for wheelchair access and stretchers beds. The ferries are also equipped with USB charging ports at every seat, a restroom, and a luggage storage area. A dedicated website and mobile application were developed for ferry ticketing and route scheduling. The ferry service is free for children under three years old and people with special needs registered with the National Social Protection Agency (NSPA). The fare is between MVR 50 (US\$3.2) and MVR 200 (US\$ 13) one way for trips within the zone, depending on the distance. The availability of the speedboat ferry has benefitted several people in essential commute between their island and islands with key services such as the hospitals. The prices are extremely low compared to private boat hire, which was the ultimate choice in the past for people resident in these islands.



Image 1: Map of the Maldives with Zone 1 identified, Image 2: Ferry photo, Image 3: Ferry route

The ferry service is designed to improve mobility of people and improve access to services and return to their home island on the same day. The most popular use of the ferry has been for health services. Anecdotal evidence suggests over 60 percent use the ferry for health care services. In Dhidhdhoo, Haa Alif Atoll, and Funadhoo, Shaviyani Atoll, people who visit the hospital has doubled since the inception of the ferry. This demand has necessitated expansion of health infrastructure and services in these hospitals, which in turn will improve the services for people resident in the zone.

An elderly woman who looks after her disabled sister and mother explained how the ferry services has enabled for her to take them both for health care services from her home island to the regional hospital in Kulhudhuffushi. Previously if she were to seek health care, she had to prepare in advance to seek people who would assist in physically carrying her disabled mother and sister on to the ferries, which was a painful and humiliating experience for her. She is however now very satisfied with wheelchair access on the ferry and the ease of commute.

The ferry network also has enabled efficient and safe transfer of samples, medical supplies and improved access and affordability for health care workers to travel for outreach programmes to other islands.

BOX 3: NATIONAL ELECTRONIC IDENTITY SYSTEM “eFaas”

The national electronic identity system of the Maldives, “eFaas”, has established itself as a cornerstone of digital public infrastructure, fostering access to services and resilience. Initially utilized for online services across the government organizations, the platform's utility grew during the COVID-19 pandemic. “eFaas” grew exponentially from 8,125 users in 2018 to nearly 138,000 by 2022 and over 140 thousand “eFaas” users tap into more than 440 electronic services via 65 service portals as of March 2023. Notably, February 2023 saw an additional 2,700 registrations and more than 192 thousand uses of service portals. The government has decided to use “eFaas” as the National Digital Identification System. Currently, the National Centre for Information Technology (NCIT) is fine-tuning the upcoming “eFaas” mobile application, the country's National Digital ID, with nearly 1,000 users participating in its testing phase.

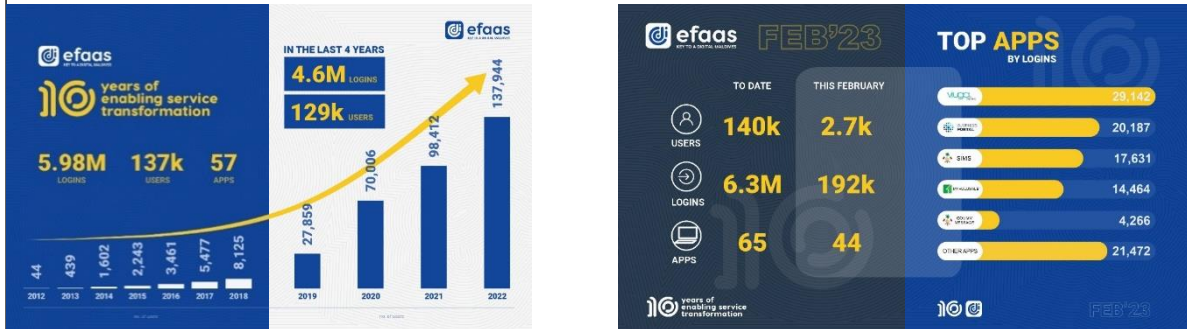


Image 2: eFaas use and growth

SDG PROGRESS



Photo: themaldivstravel.com

Social Wellbeing

Good Health & Wellbeing
Quality Education
Gender Equality, Empowerment of Women, Child Protection & Access to Justice



Good Health and Wellbeing

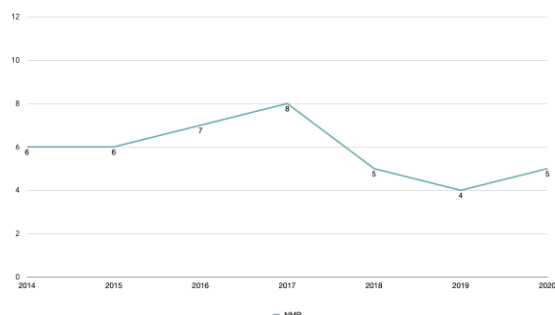


Figure 13: Neonatal mortality rate 2016-2021

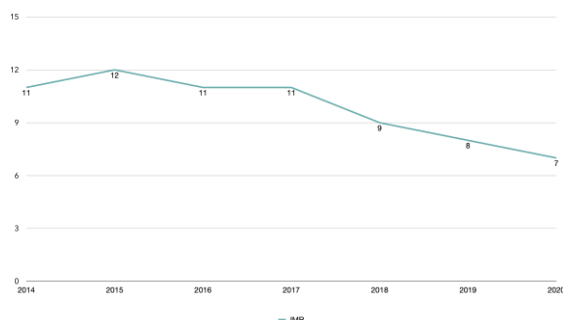


Figure 14: Under 5 mortality rate 2015-2021

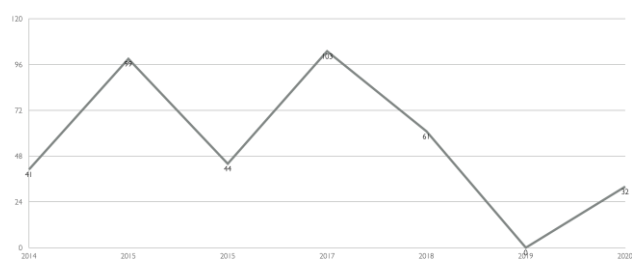


Figure 15: Maternal mortality 2015-2021

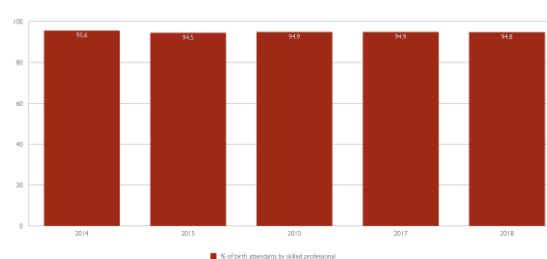


Figure 16: Births attended by a skilled health personnel

The Maldives has made significant strides in improving maternal and infant health and reducing maternal, infant and child mortality. The maternal mortality rate has been decreasing and stood at 103 per 100,000 livebirths in 2017 and 32 per 100,000 live births in 2020. The government has implemented a range of interventions, including improving access to maternal and child healthcare services, and promoting family planning. Nearly all births are attended by skilled health personnel. The percentage of birth attendants trained in midwifery has been above 99 percent for all types of birth outcomes in the past five years between 2017 and 2020. Of the birth attendants, 84 percent of the trained birth attendants were doctors and gynecologists in 2020, an increase of 10 percent from 2018. Death of infants remained low between 2016 and 2020 at 10 and below per 1,000 livebirths and continues to remain low. Infant mortality rate was at 10 per 1,000 livebirths in 2017 and 6 per 1,000 livebirths in 2019 and in 2020, (40 percent decrease), a significant decrease compared to the global target. Mortality of children under five years of age has decreased from 11 children per live birth to seven children per live birth during the same period.¹⁷ Neonatal mortality was at eight per 1,000 livebirths in 2017 and five per 1,000 livebirths in 2020 respectively. The target was maintained at a low rate of five which is a 37.5 percent decrease in the four years' time frame.

¹⁷ Health Statistics 2020, Ministry of Health

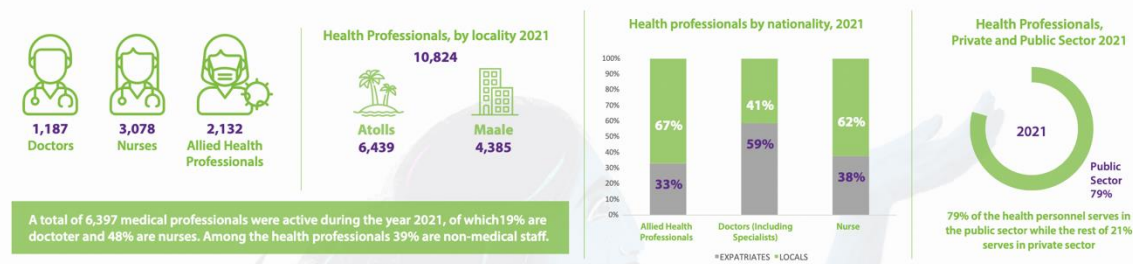


Figure 17: Health professionals by locality, nationality, and private and public sectors

The number of healthcare facilities and professionals in the Maldives has increased significantly, but access to higher levels of health care services for people in the islands remains a gap. As of 2020, the country had 199 healthcare facilities, including three tertiary hospitals and five hospitals in the capital, Male' City, six regional hospitals, 13 atoll hospitals and 164 health centers. In addition, the number of healthcare professionals per 1,000 population increased from 2.8 in 2017 to 3.3 in 2022. Additional facilities are being built across the country and urgent referral to higher care level is facilitated in medical emergencies through the government health insurance scheme "Aasandha". Although health care professionals have increased, reliance on foreign health care workers remains to be a major challenge for the Maldives. As health care expands across the country, there is a growing need for increasing health care professionals in various fields and expertise. In 2021, the ratio of total local to foreign doctors was 41:59, while the ratio of local to foreign nurses in the Maldives was 62:38. High turnover in foreign migrant health care personnel adds to health service provider's burden of maintaining professionals for the growing demand for health services.

Geographic dispersion of the islands is a challenge in accessing health care services. Distance of health care facilities with the required health services, and emergency obstetrics services only being available at secondary hospitals and above and their limited availability across the country requiring travel to Male' are constraints for access to healthcare for the people living in the atolls. This is particularly pertinent for sexual and reproductive health services for unmarried women and girls.¹⁸ As highlighted in the 2016/2017 Demographic Health Survey (DHS), the relatively high rate of caesarean births due to limited access to obstetrics services is a concern.¹⁹ Cesarean births in the Maldives increased from 46 percent in 2016 to 52 percent in 2020. Of this 52 percent, about half (23 percent in 2020) of the women underwent elective caesarean.²⁰ Furthermore, the contraceptive prevalence rate (CPR) in the Maldives is decreasing and did not achieve its contraceptive prevalence target of 39 percent in 2018 amongst married women.²¹ Modern contraceptive methods and demand for contraception also decreased between 2009 and 2016/2017 and unmet need increased from 28.1 to 31.4 percent in 2016/17 respectively and were higher amongst the small number of sexually active unmarried women compared to married women.²² The total fertility rate in the Maldives decreased from 2.5 in 2009 to 2.1 in 2016/2017. The 2017 VNR highlighted that special attention was needed for reproductive health and adolescence friendly health services. Since then, Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child, and Adolescent Health (RMNCAH) Strategy and Action Plan 2020-2025 has been formulated and align with and support achieving and reporting SDG progress.

The Maldives has the highest per capita health care spending in the region. The government on average spent MVR 3.4 billion (US\$220.5 million) per year on health between 2017-2022, an average of 12.2 percent of the budget on health during the same period.²³ "Aasandha", the universal health scheme accessible to all Maldivian citizens accounts for a significant portion of health care spending.²⁴ The COVID-19 pandemic increased health care costs exponentially including increase in "Aasandha" spending, social protection support and expenditure on additional infrastructure and services expansion.

¹⁸ CEDAW/C/MDV/CO/6: Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Maldives, 23 November 2021

¹⁹ CEDAW/C/MDV/CO/6: Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Maldives, 23 November 2021

²⁰ Health Statistics 2020, Ministry of Health

²¹ Maldives National Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health Strategy and Action Plan 2020-2025

²² Maldives National Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health Strategy and Action Plan 2020-2025

²³ Ministry of Finance. 2019-2021. Budget in Statistics.

²⁴ World Bank 2022. Telemedicine Readiness in Maldives for Pandemic Preparedness and Health Care Delivery in Atolls

Table 4: Government total budget, health care budget and “Aasandha” budget

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Total Budget (Millions MVR)	24951.1	28165.3	38397.8	30156.5	37145	42847.2
Health budgeted (Millions MVR)	3,750.4 (15.0%)	3,408 (12.1%)	3,372.3 (8.8%)	4,305.4 (14.3%)	4,752.3 (12.8%)	4,490.3 (10.5%)
“Aasandha” budgeted (Millions MVR)		1,591.0	1,313.5	1,206.4	1,562.4	1,637.6

Source: Ministry of Finance Budget 2023

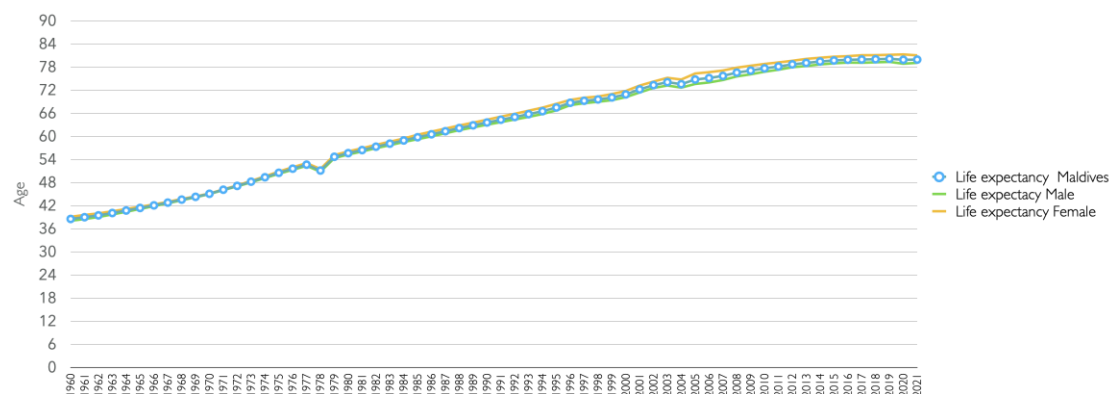


Figure 18: Life expectancy at birth for males and females for the Maldives

Life expectancy at birth has increased to 80 years in the Maldives in 2021.²⁵ The total life expectancy of Maldivians is significantly higher than the South Asian average of 70 years.²⁶ A Maldivian girl born in a particular year can be expected to live six to seven years longer than a Maldivian boy born in the same year.²⁷ The increase in life expectancy is contributed by improved accessibility to health care, improved levels of education and economic standard of living, access to safe water and hygiene, and increased awareness within the population leading to increased healthcare seeking behaviour and healthy practices at household levels.²⁸ Although the healthy life expectancy (HALE) of 70 years in 2020²⁹ in the Maldives is higher than the regional average, efforts are needed to improve healthy life expectancy.

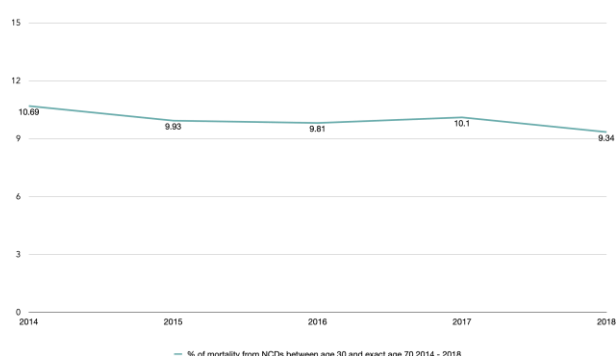


Figure 19: Mortality from NCDs between age 30 and exact age 70 years

NCD deaths are on the rise and accounted for 65.5 percent of the total deaths in 2020.³⁰ NCDs is a major disease burden of the country and with an expected shift in demographics towards

²⁵ Health Statistics 2020, Ministry of Health
²⁶ WHO Maldives Health Data Overview. <https://data.who.int/countries/462>
²⁷ Health Statistics 2020, Ministry of Health
²⁸ Health Masterplan 2016-2025
²⁹ WHO Maldives Health Data Overview. <https://data.who.int/countries/462>
³⁰ Health Statistics 2020, Ministry of Health

increase in adult and elderly population by 2050, NCD trends are also likely to rise and harshly affect these populations. The need for preventive services and reinforcing health promotion is important as highlighted by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2020, as the government expenditure will increase when more people need high-end curative care. The top five leading causes of death for both genders in the Maldives are other cardiovascular diseases (13 percent), cerebrovascular diseases (8 percent), ischemic heart disease (8 percent), other respiratory diseases (6 percent) and lower respiratory infections (5 percent).³¹ Following the WHO 2020-2021 STEPS survey, a pilot project is being planned to integrate NCD services into primary health care service delivery and a National Multi-Sectoral Action Plan to control NCDs has been formulated.

It is also worrying that cancer was the third most common cause of death amongst NCDs in the Maldives resulting in 125 deaths in 2020.³² More male deaths (60 percent) resulting from cancer occurred compared to 40 percent women.³³ Cancer is a leading cause of death globally and likewise the epidemiological transition has been observed in the Maldives. The disease burden of the Maldives from cancer is likely to increase, considering the increase in demographic changes towards an ageing population³⁴ and lifestyle changes associated with development, and prevalence of risk factors such as tobacco use, consumption of sugary and fatty foods and drinks, and sedentary lifestyle engrained within the society.³⁵ A more holistic approach is needed with emphasis on disease prevention and health promotion to minimize the dependency on high end curative care in the long run for NCDs. With a focus primarily on prevention, changes to other sectors such as spatial planning to enable physical activity and increasing access and affordability to health foods etc. needs to be enabled. Not enough research is undertaken locally to understand changes in diseases patterns and related social trends. Similarly, health information for preventive health measures is lacking amongst the society and the existing health data on surveillance systems are not utilized effectively. Top prioritization and urgent efforts are needed in implementing preventive measures and ensuring early detection and care, health monitoring and evaluation, promoting healthy lifestyles, improving access to screening and treatment services, and implementing policies for healthy lifestyles. A National Cancer Control Plan 2022-2026, the blueprint to advance cancer prevention, management and monitoring in the country has been formulated.

The country is heading towards an ageing population. According to the 2022 Census, five percent of the resident Maldivian population is 65 years or older and is projected to grow to seven percent by 2030 and to 14 percent by 2050, increasing the elderly dependency population ratio.³⁶ Given the continuation of the current trends, the burden on the health care system, health expenditure, and fiscal vulnerability will worsen with the increase in ageing population. High immobility and isolation of the elderly population in Male' City due the compact, small, multi-storey accommodation in Male' City is a growing concern. If the focus on healthy ageing starts through a lifecycle approach, people can live a healthy and independent life in the older ages. The "Ranveylaa campaign" is designed to create community awareness on healthy ageing, nutrition, and exercise. "Naadhee Thamaddhun", is an intergenerational social program that is a first of its kind one stop service center being developed for the elderly and a venue to enrich their participation in social activities and engage in programmes that promote active and healthy lifestyles. Similar centres, "Israhvehinge Ijuthimaaee Marukaz" is planned to be opened throughout the country. Work is also ongoing on drafting a law for the rights of the elderly. Similarly, outreach through primary health care programmes is being revamped. From 2015 onwards, home visit basic healthcare services have been carried out for the bedridden elderly throughout the country.

³¹ Health Statistics 2020, Ministry of Health

³² Health Statistics 2020, Ministry of Health

³³ Health Statistics 2020, Ministry of Health

³⁴ WHO 2023. <https://www.who.int/maldives/news/detail/15-02-2023-who-collaborates-with-ministry-of-health-to-develop-and-launch-the-national-cancer-control-plan-of-maldives-2022-2026-to-reduce-the-growing-burden-of-cancer-in-maldives>

³⁵ WHO STEP survey on Risk Factors for NCDs Maldives, 2020-2021

³⁶ National Transfer Accounts 2020

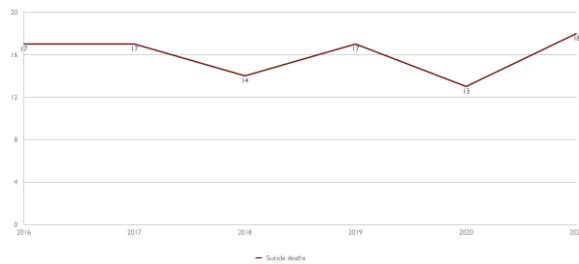


Figure 20: Suicide deaths in the Maldives 2016-2021

Mental health is a growing concern in the country and one in every five people experience different aspects of depression.³⁷ The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the situation for those experiencing mental health issues, which was an emerging issue in the country prior to the pandemic. The lockdown to manage the virus spread created a high degree of fear, anxiety, and worry concerning the health and wellbeing of the people in quarantine, isolation or in relocated temporary shelters. Likewise, People with Disabilities (PWDs) with difficulties accessing public information (such as the blind, hearing impaired etc.), experienced social isolation and faced challenges in meeting the needs of their physical and mental health during the pandemic.³⁸ SDG 3.4 is about preventing premature mortality from NCDs through prevention and treatment and promotes mental health and wellbeing. 13 deaths due to suicide occurred in 2020.³⁹ Although improving mental health facilities and care has been given high priority recently, lack of disaggregated data on mental health pose challenges for policy and targeted programme development and adequate health care professionals to cater for the demand in services is lacking. The Maldives National Centre for Mental Health was established in 2019 and budgetary support has been allocated for mental health care. “Aasandha” coverage has been expanded to include treatment and medicine for mental health patients for both public and private sector. A Mental Health Communications Strategy and Campaign has also been launched with the aim to promote social and behavioral change around the current perceptions and attitude towards mental health.

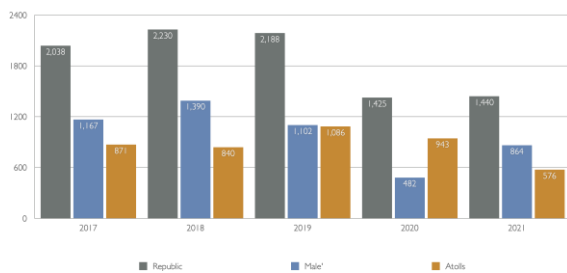


Figure 21: Number of logged drugs cases by Male' and atolls

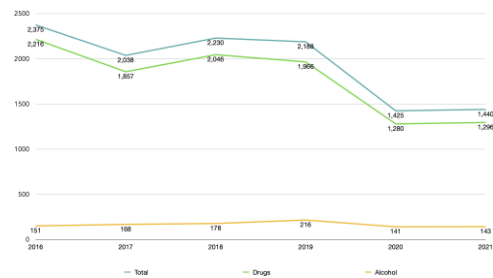


Figure 22: Number of logged drugs and alcohol cases

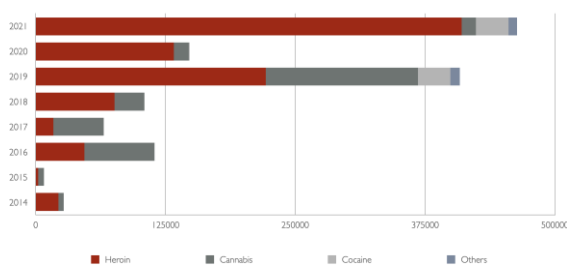


Figure 23: Drugs seized by police, 2014 – 2021

Substance abuse remains to be a major social issue of the country and needs prioritization. SDG target 3.5 is about strengthening the prevention and treatment of substance abuse, including narcotic drug abuse and harmful use of alcohol. Substance abuse was identified as the main cause for increase in crimes and the most influential factor for domestic violence in the 2020 “Rights Side of Life” survey and in the same survey, prevention of substance abuse was identified as the third most significant

³⁷ UNICEF 2022. <https://www.unicef.org/maldives/press-releases/government-maldives-and-unicef-launch-national-mental-health-communications-strategy>
³⁸ United Nations 2020. Strengthening Resilience of the Most Vulnerable to Future Shocks in the Maldives
³⁹ Maldives SDG updates 2021, Maldives Bureau of Statistics

protection to provide for children.⁴⁰ The 2019 “Youth Vulnerability Study” highlighted the low treatment reach and lack of aftercare support to help people stay off drugs as serious problems in the community.⁴¹ As highlighted in the 2017 VNR, the prevalence of substance abuse in the country was last studied in 2011-2012 and needs to be studied to understand the current prevalence and trends for improving policy, treatment, and care. Currently, medication from Opioid use disorders is being provided in the major urban areas Male’, Addu and Kulhudhuffushi cities. Data from the Maldives Police Service shows 1,490 people were detained on drugs related offences in 2019, of whom 97 percent were males and 69 percent were between the ages of 18 to 34 years. Drug seizures increased by four-fold within a year between 2018 and 2019, from 104.7kg to 408.3 kg respectively and increased to 463.4kg in 2021, with heroin accounting for 88 percent in 2021. It is also worrying that two babies are taken to state care per month, born for drug using mothers. At any given time, neonatal ICU has more than 10 babies born for drug using mothers.⁴² Addressing substance abuse needs priority focus with additional financial, human, and technological resources. Substance abuse needs to be integrated into primary health care response. Multi-sectoral approaches need to be adopted to tackle the issue of substance abuse from both supply and demand side and improve and enhance treatment, rehabilitation, and reintegration and increasing human resource capacities in technical sectors.

BOX 4: SUBSTANCE ABUSE & SAFETY RISKS

Substance abuse also constitutes to an increased safety and security threat to the country attributing to its connection to other organized crimes including transnational crimes such as terrorism and money laundering.

The involvement of foreigners in drug related crime has increased. About 8 to 10 percent of the detainees in drugs related cases were foreigners in the past 5 years.

A National Strategic Plan to control drug abuse has been formulated.

Table 5: Number of people covered through different social protection schemes by locality

	Health Insurance Scheme	Single Parent Allowance		Foster Parent Allowance		Emergency Medical Welfare	Disability Allowance	Food Subsidy
		Parent	Children	Parent	Children			
Republic	349,727	3,067	5,290	109	144	6,590	9,646	623
Male’	63,123	855	1,322	17	18	1,624	3,056	236
Atolls	286,604	2,212	3,968	92	126	4,966	6,590	387

Source: National Social Protection Agency

To better target the most vulnerable people and ensure fiscal sustainability of the programmes, there is a need to restructure the social protection system. The current social protection programme is a combination of social assistance, social insurance and labour market programmes and has cash benefits for targeted vulnerable groups including single parent, foster, disability allowances and old age and retirement pensions. However, these programmes need a holistic review to provide an effective guarantee of basic income security to all the Maldivians. A social protection framework has been developed recently and needs to be supported with revisions to the relevant legislations on social protection.⁴³ As part of ongoing works, minimum standards for disability recognition have been established and type of disability can be assessed by degree and level, while disability allowance is under review. In the absence of a policy on social protection in the country, the SAP has a target on implementing a nationally appropriate social protection system and floors. Under the current definition of social protection, the budgeted social protection expenditure is over MVR 4.7 billion amounting to 5.6 percent of GDP, but the ratio drops to 2.9 percent of GDP when revised against the technical definition

⁴⁰ Rights Side of Life Survey 2020

⁴¹ Youth Vulnerability in the Maldives 2019

⁴² UNFPA for 2023 VNR

⁴³ Government of Maldives 2023 Social Protection Framework Draft

in the new framework. The social protection system and programmes thus need effective revision to best support the most vulnerable people.

Furthermore, health care data management and digitization of health care services is a growing need. The government health insurance system “Asandha” is currently integrated across most hospitals and private clinics in Male’ City and major hospitals in other cities but focuses on healthcare transactions. Medical record digitalization is yet to be implemented and made available across all health facilities. Digital vaccination register for electronic immunization tracking has been recently completed and is being used to monitor vaccination across the Maldives. Digital connectivity for healthcare will benefit the people in the remotest islands with reduced financial burden and improved access to health services. Building on the lessons from the use of online services for health care during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Health is currently working towards piloting a telemedicine facility in Faafu Atoll with high quality equipment and services, to be launched in July 2023. Telemedicine when fully operational would ease the financial burden on patients who require travelling for medical treatments for services not available on their native or residential islands. There is also a need for digitalization of public health surveillance data to enable more efficient data collection for public health action and to strengthen monitoring of progress towards SDG indicators.

BOX 5: RTL CONNECTIVITY AND HEALTH CARE SERVICES

The RTL connectivity in the northern region of Haa Alif, Haa Dhaal and Shaviyani Atolls have boosted demand for health services in the Atoll Hospitals and the Regional Hospital. Both Dhidhdhoo and Funadhoo Hospitals have experienced doubling of patient rate. The main lesson is to expand health care service and infrastructure in these hospitals.

The connectivity also has enabled health care workers to travel between islands for health awareness programmes. They are now able to travel and return on the same day or travel on Thursday and return the following morning. This is a much affordable and efficient alternative to previous options of private boat hire

BOX 6: DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY AND HEALTH CARE SERVICES

Shaviyani Atoll Hospital has been using social media for promoting health promotion works. They have increased social media reach to 200,000, a significant reach for a hospital in a remote island and has good engagement with the public on health awareness posts. Their “Ehee” page followers also increased significantly.

They are further planning to expand health awareness through other popular social mediums such as TikTok and through a community Viber group channel.

Improved digital connectivity with affordable prices would enable to promote health and wellbeing in remote and small islands of the Maldives

BOX 7: COVID-19 IMPACTS ON HEALTH CARE & ITS MANAGEMENT

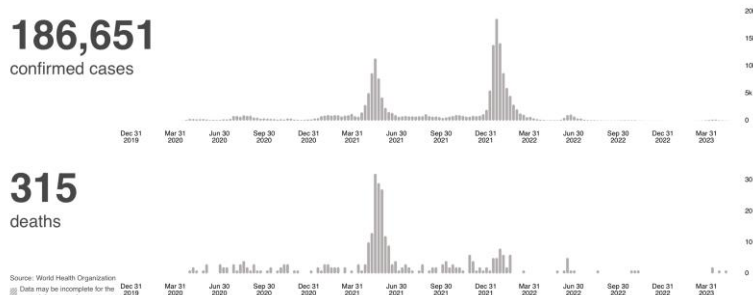


Figure 24: The Maldives situation – COVID-19 confirmed cases and deaths

The direct health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Maldives have been modest compared to the rest of the countries in the region. However, it had a significant impact on the country when its relatively small health care system experienced multiple waves and surge in cases in late 2020 and early 2021. Between 3 January 2020 and 31 March 2023, 186,651 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 311 deaths were recorded in the Maldives. As of March 2023, a total of 951,645 vaccine doses had been administered. The fully vaccination rate of 71.25 persons per 100 people in the Maldives is higher than global average of 65.55. In the Maldives, 31.93 out of every 100 people were boosted. Nonetheless, the pandemic affected the health and well-being of the people in several ways resulting from disruptions to healthcare services, social isolation, and impacted on mental health, with increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression reported.

Although the dispersed nature of the islands helped slow down the transmission of the virus, the health care system was overburdened in responding to the pandemic. Most cases were recorded in the densely populated capital city Male'. The Maldives had no testing laboratories for the virus when the first case was confirmed on 8 March 2020 and at the time there were a total of 97 ventilators nationwide. Although these ratios compare favorably to the rest of the region, the country was not well equipped to respond to the pandemic. A range of measures were implemented by the government to contain the spread of the virus.

The Maldives also implemented several measures to ensure that no one was left behind in the vaccination campaigns. Vaccination outreach programmes with mobile teams travelling to remote locations, vaccination education campaigns, prioritization of the vulnerable groups and tourism sector workers, and ensuring enough vaccination was available for the entire population were some of the key measures implemented to ensure equitable access to vaccines. Foreign migrants being one third of the population, the government and CSOs undertook several programmes to ensure their wellbeing and inclusion in the national vaccination rollout plan. Mobile teams travelled to worksites and densely populated foreign migrant living quarters for vaccine outreach programmes to target regular and irregular workers. Vaccine information was provided in multiple languages, to ensure that migrant workers had access to information about the vaccine. Partnerships were formed with employers especially in the construction sector to ensure workers were informed about vaccination. Most importantly, to ensure no migrant worker was left behind, no negative consequences for workers without legal status was ensured.

Meanwhile, the communities in different islands who were otherwise reliant on Male' City for health services accessed services from different hospitals across the country. For instance, Raa Atoll Ungoofaaru Regional Hospital experienced a surge in patients since people from Alif Alif, Alif Dhaalu, Baa, Haa Alif and Haa Dhaalu Atolls travelled for medical care during the pandemic. People from Alif Alif and Alif Dhaalu Atolls also had to travel to Laamu Atoll for even basic services and the health care cost burden on transportation was very high. Special transport arrangements by the private sector enabled the mobility of people for these health care visits, while currently these linkages are no longer operational. In the remote island Shaviyani Atoll Narudhoo, 11 cases of COVID-19 were reported. To manage the mental health aspects of the pandemic, teachers were trained as support groups. A critical lesson from the pandemic was for atolls like Alif Alif and Alif Dhaalu, the second most prominent tourism zone, health care access is not limited to their resident population but also the working population resident in the resorts and the floating tourist population. These are important lessons for future health sector planning.

Leave No One Behind

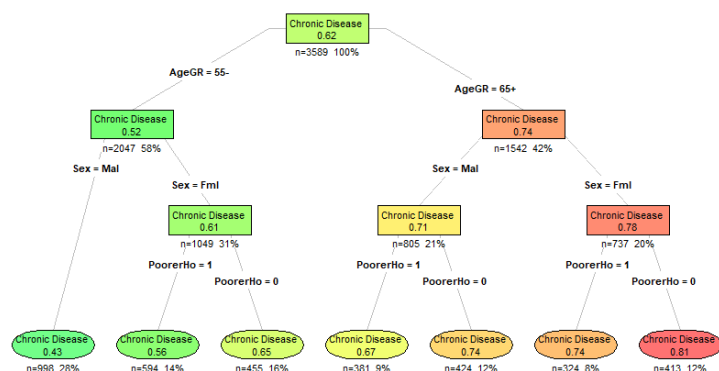


Figure 25: Prevalence of chronic diseases
Source: UNESCAP illustration using DHS 2016/2017 HIES 2019 data

- In 2019, about 16 percent of the population in the Maldives had at least one chronic disease. Among people aged 55 and above, the prevalence reached 62 percent (light green box on top of Figure 21). Furthest behind group is comprised of women 65+ years living in relatively higher income households (in red at bottom right) among whom 81 percent has at least one type of chronic disease. Furthest ahead group is 55–64-year-old men (in green at bottom-left) among whom 43 percent have at least one type of chronic disease. Overall, there is a gender gap against women within each age group which should be tackled given ageing society and particularly female longevity.
- People at the bottom of poverty line, those multidimensionally poor from lack of access to basic health and education services and with disadvantaged living standards, PWDs, children in poor and vulnerable households and women in informal economy, poor households and abusive environments are most at risk of being left behind. They need targeted policies with better social protection to improve their lives. Similarly, women with children born out of wedlock face multiple layers of challenges for them to access services.

Actions for progress

In the immediate term within the next 1 to 2 years

- Strengthen focus on preventive healthcare and early detection to reduce NCDs and premature mortality from NCDs.
- Revitalize the primary health care programme and strengthen support for mobile health care service expansion to improve the services for people in the islands including support for mental health, victims of substance abuse, victims of sexual and physical abuse and foreign migrant health.
- Strengthen implementation of the policies for reducing substance abuse and establish effective and modern rehabilitation and aftercare.
- Strengthen accountability and responsibility of health system and services and increase elderly and women's and girl's access to health-care services including unmarried women.
- Adapt the legislative framework for social protection harmonization and ensure targeting is aligned with social protection principles by identification of the vulnerable groups including PWDs.
- Partner with the academia and international organizations for health research to identify and understand the growing concerns related to NCDs for evidence-based policies and decision making.

- Introduce foreign migrant health policy and strengthen access to health care and services for all foreign migrants to ensure their wellbeing and public health safety.
- Increase health awareness and outreach by targeting those at risk of being left behind from accessing health care services and ensuring early detection of diseases and improved wellbeing.
- Strengthen partnerships across the islands for promoting healthy lifestyles and improving access to screening and treatment services.
- Increase density of health care workers and strengthen training and retention of health care workers and ensure establishment of improved wage and working conditions for health care workers.
- Strengthen psychosocial and mental health support and capacity building for local communities in addressing violence related to mental health.

In the medium to long term within the next 5-7 years

- Strengthen and implement policies for promoting health and healthy lifestyles and improving nutrition, diet, and active lifestyle.
- Strengthen psychosocial and mental health support and capacity building for local communities in addressing violence related to mental health.
- Enhance access to health information and awareness amongst the community across all age groups, gender, and locality.
- Establish institutional support and facilities for mental health patients needing inpatient services and care.
- Strengthen the monitoring of the impact of public health interventions.
- Strengthen data driven decision making for health sector.

Quality Education

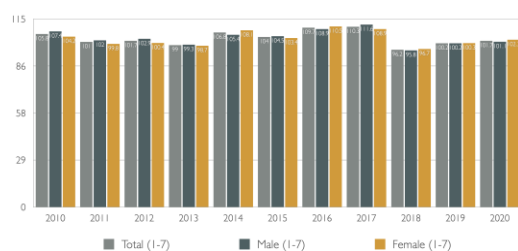


Figure 26: Net enrollment ratio in primary 2010-2020

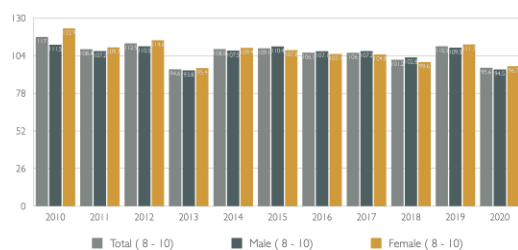


Figure 27: Net enrollment ratio in lower secondary 2010-2020

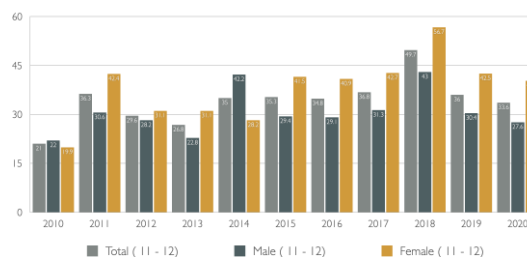


Figure 28: Net enrollment ratio in higher secondary 2010-2020

The Maldives has made good progress in primary and secondary education, having achieved gender parity in these levels of education. The net enrollment rate (NER) in primary grades (1-7) in the Maldives has been on average 103.7 between 2015 and 2020 and NER in lower secondary grades (8-10) declined from 109.1 to 95.6 during the same period. The gender parity in primary and secondary education has been achieved, with girls and boys having equal access to education and participation at all levels. The pass percentage of students sitting for O'level following year 10 completion was 52 percent and 67 percent respectively in 2018 and 2019, with a significantly higher ratio of girls passing compared to boys. Students who do not have the required O'level passes to continue to A'levels have the option of continuing education by enrolling in a vocational and technical trainings with a national level 3 certification, and trend in enrollment for this course level has been increasing between 2019 and 2021. Currently, only about 20 percent of the total lower secondary graduates enroll in higher secondary education, and the total NER for higher secondary education has decreased from 35.3 in 2015 to 33.6 in 2020. NER in higher secondary education for boys changed from 29.4 to 27.6 while for girls it changed from 41.5 to 40.3 during the same period. NER trends for the past eight years show a gender disparity in favour of girls in higher secondary education.

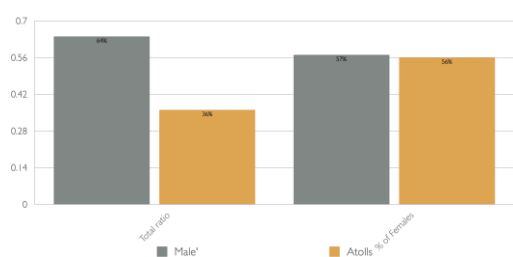


Figure 29: Higher secondary enrollment Male' and atolls

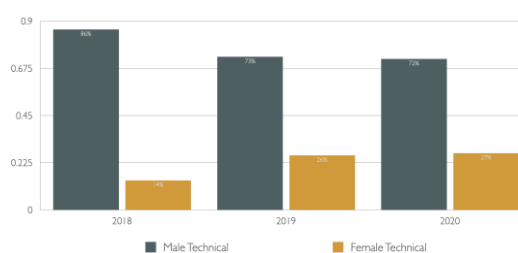


Figure 30: Student enrollment in technical education

Access to higher secondary education and higher education in the atolls, however, is a key challenge to continuing education. Reduction in gross enrollment rate (GER) in higher secondary education across the atolls compared to Male' City is a key issue for participation of youth in formal education and training contributing to SDG 4.3. There were in total 46 schools across the country in 2020 offering higher secondary education in comparison to 207 schools offering lower secondary education. Of the 46 higher secondary schools, six were in Male' City while 40 were across the 20

administrative atolls and they are disproportional against the pipeline of students in different atolls.⁴⁴ There are no higher secondary schools in Kaafu, Alif Dhaal, and Vaavu Atolls. Meanwhile, the high ratio of A-level dropouts reduces the available pool of students with the required entry criteria for scholarships, especially in the technical field. However, A-level dropouts can continue education by enrolling in a foundation level programme which is offered by several local higher education institutes. Ratio of females completing A-level is significantly higher than the boys and reached a 61:49 female to male ratio in 2019.

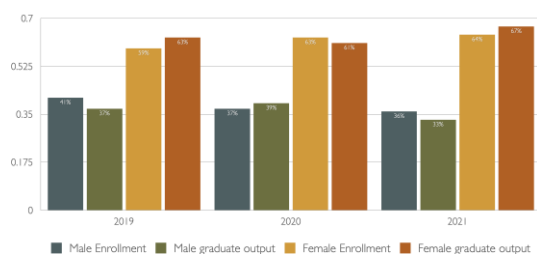


Figure 31: Percentage of student enrollment and graduate output

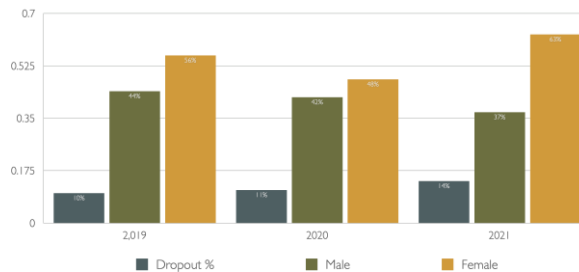


Figure 32: Percentage of dropouts by gender in higher education institutions

Higher education enrollment in the Maldives has increased from 13,999 to 23,011 between 2019 and 2021. There are two government universities and three government colleges and nine private colleges offering higher education in the Maldives. Although in 2019 the government introduced the “Bachelor’s Degree Grant Scheme”, higher education opportunities across the atolls remain limited, making young people who want to continue education likely having to move to Male’, discouraging several young people from doing so mainly due to high costs. Although opportunities remain limited in the atolls, since 2022, students who are studying under the “Bachelor’s Degree Grant Scheme” who reside in an island other than their native or usual resident island can apply for the student loan scheme, which covers stipend, book allowance and programme fees where full programme coverage is not allowed. Although higher education enrolment is increasing, the rate of dropouts also increased between 2019 and 2021 and the ratio of female dropouts was higher compared to males. Availability of jobs and no incentive for higher education completion maybe a contributing factor for the trend especially in the atolls, whereas the job competition in Male’ City may incentivize them to complete education.⁴⁵

The country has a high functional literacy rate. The functional literacy rate for individuals aged 15-24 years in the Maldives was 98.5 percent in 2019. There is no difference in functional literacy between males and females, with functional literacy of 98.4 percent amongst males and 98.5 percent amongst females respectively. Functional literacy for 15 + population was 97.8 percent in 2019. The high functional literacy is a key enabler for lifelong learning.

The Maldives has made concerted efforts to improve the quality of education and increase access to education for all. In 2019, the country adopted the Education Sector Plan (ESP) 2019-2023, which outlines the country’s vision for education. The plan sets out several targets related to SDG 4, including increasing access to education, and ensuring all students receive a relevant and high-quality education. In 2020, the country adopted an Education Act which makes education a right and attending schools mandatory and covers education between the ages four and 18 years. Furthermore, in 2021, the country adopted a Higher Education Act which ensures establishing a higher education system with equal opportunities for all Maldivians and promotes longevity of the educational services.

⁴⁴ Poverty and Inequality in the Maldives 2022

⁴⁵ Poverty and Inequality in the Maldives 2022

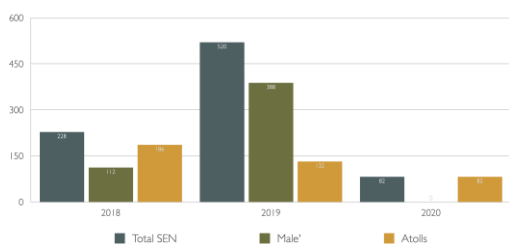


Figure 33: Student enrollment to special classes with SEN

Although, progress has been made in ensuring marginalized children including those with Special Education Needs (SEN) have access to education, challenges remain in providing access and quality education to children in these groups. The lack of equality in access to education is a barrier for equal opportunities for education, including higher education, and technical and vocational skills. Although all public schools are mandated by law to cater to children with disabilities, of the total 213 schools in 2019 only 89 (42 percent) catered to children with disabilities.⁴⁶ Physical accessibility in schools remains a barrier. In 2019, a new school was opened in Male' with physical access enabled for PWDs. Inadequate SEN trained teachers remain a gap resulting in high student to SEN teacher ratio and thus capacity challenges in addressing the education needs of children with different forms of disabilities.⁴⁷ The Inclusive Education Policy (IEP) adopted in 2013 was revised in 2021 to align with the Education Act that came into effect in 2020. Under the IEP, children with SEN are to be enrolled in mainstream schools and the assessment policy for the 2015 new curriculum allows for educational adaptations for these children. In 2018, the Special Education Unit was upgraded to the Department of Inclusive Education under the Ministry of Education.⁴⁸ Early identification of certain disabilities initiated through schools can prevent lifelong disability and help those children integrate with other students. Currently, for early identification purposes, developmental screening of students who are four years of age entering into the formal learning at age four into LKG is carried out and digital data collection has been enabled. The lack of availability of analyzed reliable, comprehensive, and disaggregated data on children with disabilities and children with complex learning profiles and capacity constraints remain a challenge.

⁴⁶ UNICEF 2021. Disability Inclusive Education Practices in Maldives

⁴⁷ UNICEF 2021. Disability Inclusive Education Practices in Maldives

⁴⁸ UNICEF 2021. Disability Inclusive Education Practices in Maldives

Knowledge and skills to promote sustainable development is an important part of achieving SDG goal 4. Thus, global citizenship education, mainstreaming of education for sustainable development in national education policies, curricula, teacher education and student assessment are part of SDG 4.7. A Green School programme is being piloted in seven schools to match the existing curriculum to the SDGs. The curriculum includes modules such as green economy, blue economy, and healthy living. The programme is planned to be rolled out to 28 schools across the country. Teacher trainings are yet to be undertaken to complement the execution of the curriculum.

BOX 9: VAAVU A.E.C SKILLS PROGRAMMES

Vaavu Atoll Education Centre (Vaavu A.E.C) is based in Vaavu Atoll Felidhoo, the capital island. The school provides primary and secondary education. with a low student population due to small population size. Vaavu Atoll has the smallest population across all atolls but has a good overall performance in school education.

The national priority for vocational programmes for Vaavu A.E.C is low. Hence, the school in partnership with the parents raised funds to establish skills programmes such as graphic design, electrical wiring, and carpentry for students in grades six to nine. Students are required to choose their preferred skills programme at the start of the academic year. Similarly, delayed delivery of financial literacy within education is a concern of the school. The school is working on bridging the gap by teaching students to open a bank account and practice saving behaviour.

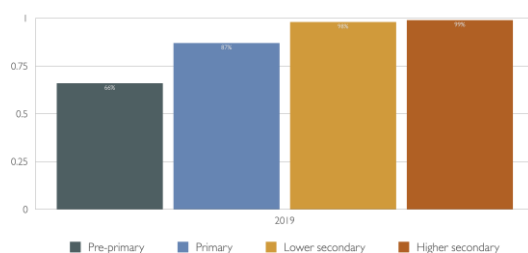


Figure 34: Ratio of teachers with the minimum required qualification by education level

The Maldives continues to make efforts to improve the quality of education by focusing on teacher training, however unavailability of trained teachers to fully execute the curriculum across all islands remain a challenge. 72 percent of the total share of teachers in the Maldives is females. 24 percent of the teachers are foreign, with 43 percent and 45 percent of secondary and higher secondary teachers being foreign. Ratio of teachers with the minimum required qualification is highest in lower and higher secondary levels. Student teacher ratio is also lowest amongst these levels. The country faces challenges in improving the quality of education, particularly in remote islands. The quality of education is affected by teacher shortages, insufficient training, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient learning resources.⁴⁹ However, teacher trainings are being revamped through innovative means, such as virtual learning, video conferencing and the Teacher Resource Centers (TRC) adapted to overcome the challenges particularly limited by the remoteness.⁵⁰ Continuous professional development and training programmes for teachers to improve their skills and knowledge, particularly in areas such as special education and language instructions has increased the number of teachers resulting in a higher teacher-to-student ratio and improved learning outcomes. COVID-19 necessitated online delivery of education resulting in all teachers being Google certified, enhancing their digital skills for education delivery. A teacher license is planned to be introduced soon and is expected to bring about positive changes to the quality of teachers in education delivery. Furthermore, with the salary increments to teachers, it is expected that the pool of quality teachers will increase. The challenge of teacher shortages however remains, with about 2,500 teachers still needed for the system.

⁴⁹ Maldives Education Sector Analysis 2019

⁵⁰ Maldives Education Sector Analysis 2019

BOX 10: “TELIKILAAS” FOR EDUCATION DURING COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted education at all levels and affected the learning outcomes of the students. To minimize the negative impact to learning, the Ministry of Education (MOE) undertook several efforts to continue education during the pandemic. In the Maldives, schools closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, which coincided with the period right after the mid-term school break. In May 2020, the MOE developed an Education Response Plan (ERP) for COVID-19. School education was continued through a condensed curriculum, reduced daily hours, and a shortened four-day school week, with one day for lesson preparation. Schools continued to be closed until July and began to reopen from 5 July 2020 onwards, first in islands free from COVID-19, followed by schools in the greater Male’ region, from 4 October 2020 onwards. For education delivery during the school closure period, the MOE adopted remote learning in various forms that included pre-recorded lessons broadcasted on television (“Telikilaas”), live internet-mediated classes, voice calls, video calls, and document-sharing and messaging (one-to-one or in groups) using the popular mobile phone application, Viber. The Maldives was first in the region to commence education during the pandemic lockdowns.

The online education platform, “Filaa”, a resource repository that includes digital textbooks and lessons was made available for students. Google Classroom and other G-suite education apps allowed students, teachers, school administrators, and government staff to create personal accounts and share notes, assignments, and worksheets. To boost the confidence of the teachers to use the G-suite effectively, all teachers were trained to become Google-certified teachers. The prompt and timely response to continue education virtually was largely made possible due to the pre-preparedness. Prior to the pandemic, the MOE had distributed digital tablets to all school students of Grade 3 and above, which became an important tool for continuity of learning across the country. Therefore, all schools managed to shift teaching entirely online, using various applications approved by the MOE, and teachers were given intensive training on the use of the new technology. However, this was not without constraints, with the main challenges being internet connectivity barriers, high cost of internet, and the quality of online learning materials. Other challenges included limitations in providing support to remote learners, inexperience and low technical expertise in online teaching, difficulties in monitoring and assessing students’ work and providing psychosocial support to students.

Meanwhile efforts were undertaken by the Department of Inclusive Education (DoIE) to ensure the inclusion of students with Special Education Needs (SEN). However, several challenges faced in education delivery included the broad range of Individualized Education Plans (IEP) to serve a limited amount of input suited to individual students with SEN, challenges such as lack of adequate data on vulnerable groups, children in poverty, and the inclusion of situational vulnerable groups such as those with limited internet access and those who temporarily moved to their home islands from Male’ City.

The “Telikilaas” was recognized and awarded the UNESCO Wenhui Award for Educational Innovation. To implement online learning through Telikilaas, teachers broadcasted lessons nationwide to students through partnerships with three public television channels. Telikilaas materials included videos developed specially for learners with an IEP or SEN.

BOX 11: CONTINUATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION & LIFELONG EDUCATION DURING COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered nearly every aspect of tertiary education, including the operation of universities, colleges and higher education institutes, their teaching and learning, admissions, and enrolment to student support service, raising concerns over the quality of higher education provision during the emergency teaching period.

Prompt and timely policy changes made to higher education enabled online delivery of education for higher education institutions. While this enabled higher education to continue and opened opportunities for students from across the Maldives to enroll, this also exposed the digital divide in the country faced primarily by students in the outer atolls, with slow internet speed and high internet costs. Meanwhile, online programmes targeting those not enrolled in universities or schools flourished, encouraging lifelong learning, and benefitting older groups of people in remote islands.

Leave No One Behind

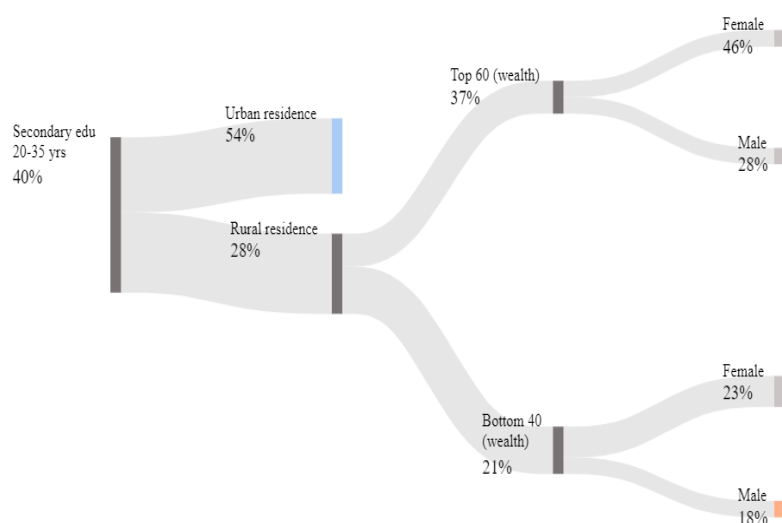


Figure 35: Secondary education completion 20-35 year age group
Source: UNESCAP illustration using HIES 2019 data

- At the national level, the completion rate of secondary education for 20–35-year-olds stood at 40 percent in 2019. The furthest behind group is comprised of men living in poorer households outside Male’ (orange node in Figure 32). Only 18 percent completed secondary education among them. The furthest ahead group is comprised of individuals living in Male’ among whom over half completed secondary education. There is a threefold gap between those furthest ahead and furthest behind.

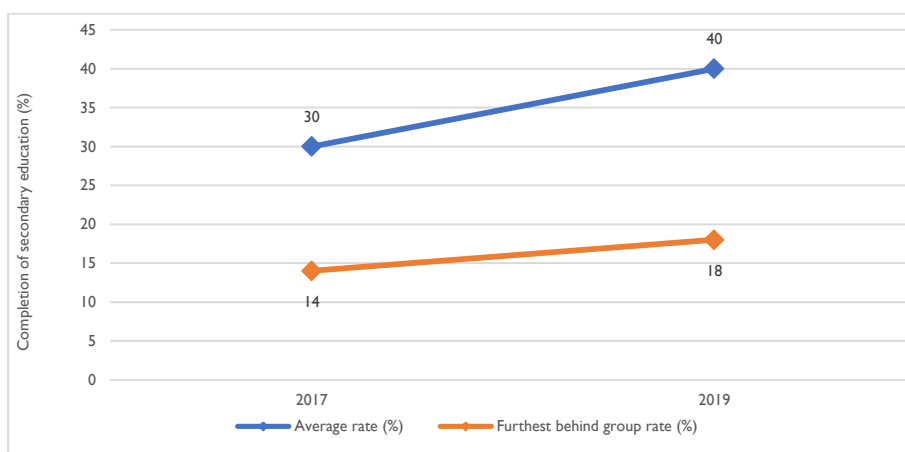


Figure 36: Secondary education 20-35 year olds
Source: UNESCAP illustration using HIES 2019 data

- Over time, there has been significant progress in completion of secondary education in the Maldives. Completion rate among the furthest behind group increased from 14 percent in 2017 to 18 percent in 2019 while average national completion rate increased from 30 percent to 40 percent. More importantly, the size of the furthest behind group shrunk from 29 percent of the 20–35-year-olds in 2017 to 9 percent of the same reference group in 2019.

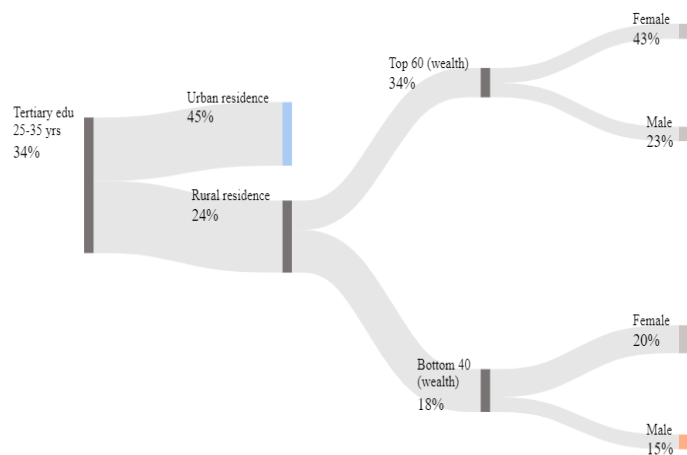


Figure 37: Tertiary education attendance
Source: UNESCAP illustration using HIES 2019 data

- Attendance rate of tertiary education among men and women aged 25-35 years stood at 34 percent in 2019. Furthest behind group is comprised of men living in poorer households outside Male'. Furthest ahead group is comprised of individuals living in Male'. There is a threefold gap between attendance rates of those furthest ahead and the furthest behind.

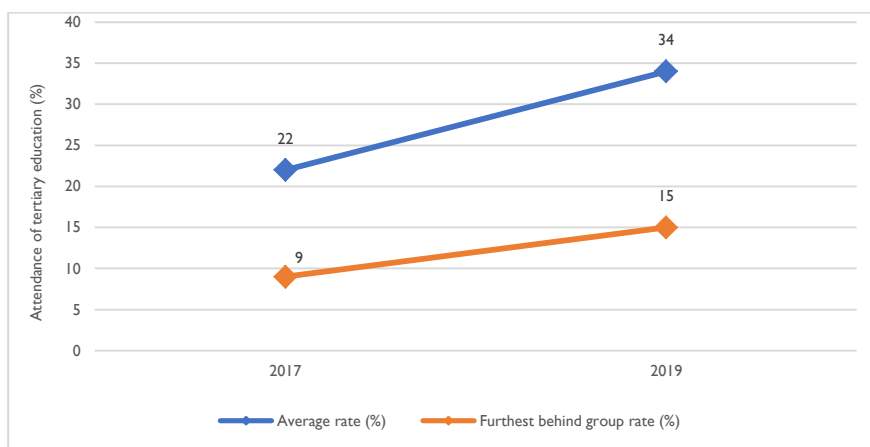


Figure 38: Attendance of tertiary education 25-35 year olds
Source: UNESCAP illustration using HIES 2019 data

- Attendance of tertiary education also increased significant from 2017 to 2019 in the Maldives. While on average this figure jumped from 22 percent to 34 percent among 25-35-year-olds, attendance among furthest behind group increased from 9 percent in 2017 to 15 percent in 2019. While the gap between furthest behind and average widened, the size of the furthest behind group shrunk significantly from 30 percent of the reference population in 2017 to 11 percent in 2019. Consequently, the Maldives progressed significantly on both secondary education completion and tertiary education attendance.
- Children in conflict with the law, state care and in violent environments, who drop out of school or do not continue education, are at higher risk of being left behind. They are at a bigger loss in attaining better education and income opportunities and are at higher risk of being faced with future health impacts. Children in conflict with the law are provided with alternative learning provisions; however, challenges remain due to limitation in the enabling environment.
- PWDs are another group of people who are disadvantaged with equal opportunities and access, and quality education and health care. Where services exist too, PWDs face several challenges.

Actions for Progress

In the immediate term within the next 1 to 2 years

- Strengthen early childhood development through quality education delivery across all islands by targeting children in remote islands and children in socioeconomically vulnerable households.
- Expand implementation of education for children with SEN across the schools and ensure SEN monitoring data is used for effective decision making for improving quality of SEN provision in all schools.
- Improve access to higher secondary education including improving physical access and access to special needs of PWDs to engage in and continue education including higher education.
- Provide access to training and continuation of education opportunities by targeting secondary education dropouts and intensify enrolment, retention, and completion of higher secondary education.
- Establish career guidance, mentoring and counselling support for secondary school students and youth about higher education and employment opportunities to improve choice of study and enable decent jobs creation matching labour market trends and needs.
- Accelerate the implementation of ICT education across all schools and improve STEM education access and delivery across the country.
- Diversify TVET and skills programmes and higher education trainings across all atolls of the Maldives for enhanced opportunities for skill building.
- Leverage virtual education and satellite schooling to improve the access to quality education provision for children in remote islands.
- Review and revise teacher training programmes including basic pedagogy in inclusivity to all educators and accelerate quality teacher training and licensing for the full implementation of the curriculum across all schools and grades.
- Mainstream and fast-track implementation of sustainable development knowledge and skills through knowledge dissemination and demonstration of sustainable pathways and lifestyles across all schools.

In the medium to long term within the next 5-7 years

- Strengthen multistakeholder partnerships to create safe and effective learning environments in schools to improve quality of schooling for all groups by preventing issues such as bullying, substance abuse, gangs, and radicalism within school and higher education environment.
- Fully implement the national curriculum and ensure knowledge of sustainable development and twenty first century skills including digitally literacy is achieved for all students across all schools.
- Strengthen alternative education options such as vocational qualifications across the country with knowledge on pathways and career options and introduce alternative pathways to improve inclusivity and encourage continuing education for all.
- Enhance lifelong learning for all by leveraging digital education delivery and targeting women, men, elderly and school dropouts to continue learning and skills building.

Gender Equality, Empowerment of Women & Child Protection

Women's involvement in decision making in the Maldives has increased, however, the country has a stagnant score in SDG 5, largely due to gender gaps with women's economic empowerment and political participation. 33 per cent quota for women in local councils has resulted in the election of 388 women to local councils (with 39.5 percent of local council seats held by women in 2020). Female ministers account for 33 percent of the current cabinet and include some non-stereotypical portfolios such as transport, environment, climate change and technology, and defense.⁵¹ The first ever women justices to the Supreme Court were appointed in 2019 and the first woman judge to the Criminal Court was appointed in 2020. Furthermore, male-female ratio of ambassadors in the Maldives is 50-50 according to Presidency Maldives. In 2019, Women's Development Committees (WDCs) gained legal recognition as key partners in community development with their responsibilities and powers being defined and a specific budget of five percent of each island council's budget allocated for WDCs. However, women still do not have the space to set the political agenda and are underrepresented in leadership positions within political parties, in the Parliament, the Government, the judiciary and at the decision-making level in the civil service.⁵² Only 11 percent of the total judges/magistrates are women, while only 4.6 percent of the seats are held by women in the Parliament.

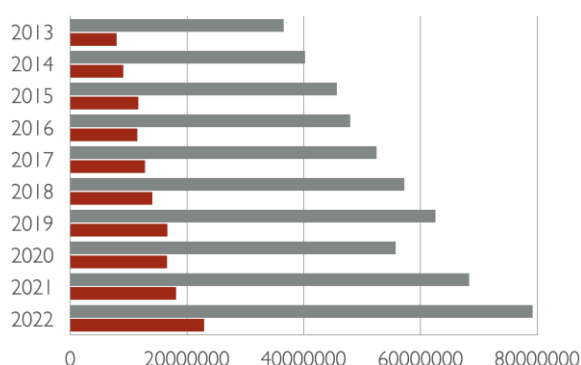


Figure 39: Pensions contributions by private sector by gender

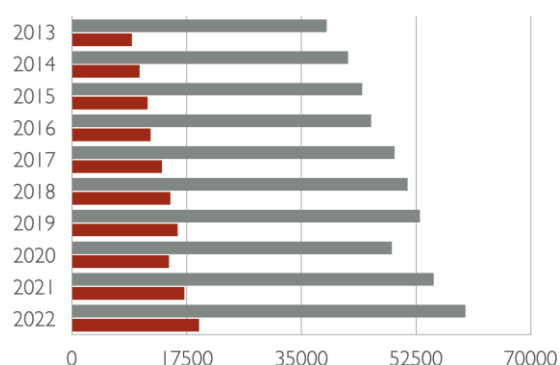


Figure 40: Private sector pensions participation by gender

Women are underrepresented in the economy with just 45.6 percent participation in the labour force compared to 77 percent men. This is comparatively lower for women resident in the atolls.⁵³ Women in informal sector are nearly three times higher compared to men and higher in the atolls, resulting in being left out of contributory pensions and paid sick leave. Women's participation in the retirement pension scheme has however increased over the past eight years, indicating an increase in women in formal employment. In 2022, women constituted 65 percent of the civil service according to Census 2022, and only 24 percent of the formal private sector as seen from the pension data. These data suggest the growth of females in the formal economy has been minimal compared to males and the average monthly contributions by females are lower than male counterparts. Women also take three times the burden of unpaid domestic and care work compared to men, and this is higher for women in the atolls compared to Male'.⁵⁴

Nonetheless, the penetration of ICT amongst women in the Maldives is equally as high as men, with 94 percent ownership of mobile telephone. However, women's ownership of bank account is significantly lower (86 percent) compared to men (95 percent), with unemployment or low participation in formal sectors being factors.⁵⁵ Similarly, women who have never used internet or mobile banking are much higher (30 percent) compared to men (17 percent) and is more prevalent amongst the 65 plus and higher age groups in the atolls.⁵⁶ More women on the other hand are completing higher secondary and tertiary education and performing better in education. Therefore, consolidated effort and modern solutions are needed to increase women's participation in the economy, ensure better social protection and empower women and improve gender equality.

⁵¹ CEDAW/C/MDV/CO/6: Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Maldives, 23 November 2021

⁵² CEDAW/C/MDV/CO/6: Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Maldives, 23 November 2021

⁵³ Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2019

⁵⁴ Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2019

⁵⁵ National Financial Inclusion Survey 2022

⁵⁶ National Financial Inclusion Survey 2022

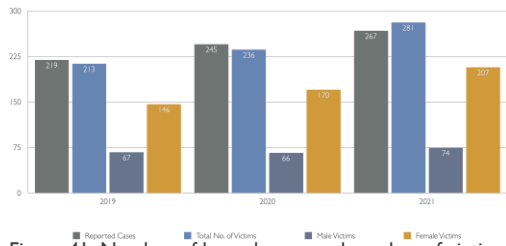


Figure 41: Number of logged cases and number of victims of domestic violence

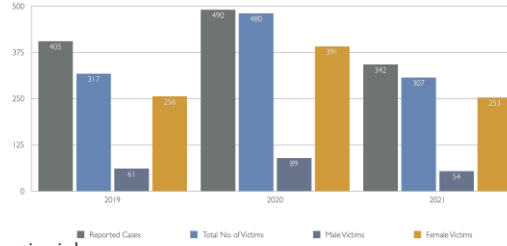


Figure 42: Number of logged cases and number of victims sexual offences

Policies towards gender equality have progressed, however, progress in implementation is a challenge. Violence against women is on the rise. Over 80 percent of the victims of sexual violence cases are females, and females are also the main victims of domestic violence and have increased from 69 to 74 percent between 2019 and 2021. Reported cases increased in Q3 of 2020 following the COVID-19 lockdown ease. The Gender Equality Act promoting equality and women’s rights came into effect in 2016 but is lagging in implementation. The Gender Equality Action Plan (GEAP) 2022-2026 was formulated to speed up implementation of laws and regulations, establishing a reporting mechanism and appointing gender advocates in all government entities and enable the Maldives to stay on track to achieving SDG 5, and includes outcomes such as increasing women’s representation in the parliament, women’s labour force participation, and access to sexual reproductive health services. Gender mainstreaming has not been effectively implemented nationally and thus, the Maldives Gender Equality Model (MGEM) was formulated in 2022 and endorsed at the highest level nationally to measure the extent institutions address gender issues, policies, guidelines, and works. MGEM includes an award certification and a review every two years. Furthermore, a gender module has been introduced into the civil service induction programme to mainstream gender. A gender audit is also planned for the judiciary and health sector as health sector is the first respondent in gender-based violence and in violence against children which are primary health issues.

BOX 12: “RIGHTS SIDE OF LIFE” SURVEY

Amidst progress in women’s participation in governance and education, declining support for women perceived by the respondents of the 2020 “Rights Side of Life” survey is a serious concern. Findings reveal that support for gender equality has diminished since its previous survey undertaken six years back and women’s rights has suffered. It also highlighted the emergence of a religious extremist narrative to diminish support for gender equality and women’s rights and the acceptance by both men and women that marriage is not an equal relationship and women are considered subordinate, more so by women than men.

According to the findings, efforts to address violence against women is also at risk, considering more women have begun to accept and justify violence. Relationships outside of marriage are not considered domestic relationships and therefore violence in these relationships will go unreported, while victims of violence perceive the system to be ineffective in providing a remedy. It is also worrying that women victims of violence reported that the biggest abuse suffered by them being forcefully impregnated while trying to end harmful marriages.

Furthermore, child sexual abuse remained to be a serious concern among the respondents, indicating the ineffective response to remedy the issue. The survey also highlighted that protection ensured for PWDs are not satisfactory and access to education and elimination of discriminations against PWDs were identified as the most important area to be strengthened for better protection. The respondents perceived that substance abuse, financial stress and lack of adequate housing were root causes for domestic violence, signaling key areas of focus for improving social wellbeing.

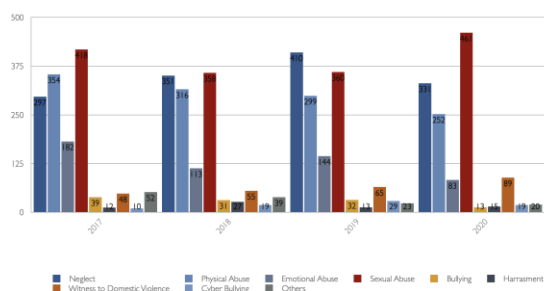


Figure 43: Reported cases of child abuse

Adoption of the Children’s Rights Protection Act in 2019 is a big achievement towards creating a secure environment and landscape for the right of the child and their voice. It recognizes the right of children to be protected from all traditional and cultural practices affecting their well-being and sets the legal minimum age of marriage at 18 years for women and men.⁵⁷ Violence, substance abuse, and mental health are serious concerns affecting the wellbeing of children. As the society and economy transforms, the risks to child safety remain serious concerns. Safety risks in school environment is evolving and exposure of children to sexual violence and crimes is increasing. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the risks to child safety and security including increase in incidences of sexual abuse, cyber bullying, and online grooming. As the country transforms towards digitization for service delivery, carefully designed additional safety strategies and interventions are needed to ensure child safety in schools, homes, communities and in the digital space.

BOX 13: CHILDREN IN STATE CARE

Although state care is the least preferred option for child protection, about 150 children of different age groups are under state care. These children of different age groups were all in one facility in the greater Male’ region and lately incidences of misbehavior and violence were on the rise. A policy shift towards community-based rehabilitation was introduced in 2021 and separate facilities have been created in seven islands with maximum capacity of 18-20 children. This has shown improvement in the wellbeing of these children. Although resistance from the communities was a concern initially, the reintegration with communities is improving. It is however worrying that children in these facilities have experienced a lot of traumas and there is not enough capacity for providing trauma-based healing and psychosocial support for these children.

Although policies and legal frameworks exist, justice remains a challenge particularly for the wellbeing of women and girls. Small size of the community and sociocultural factors are key challenges for the social system to work effectively. Police and judiciary have key responsibilities in ensuring access to justice through effective remedy, and service delivery needs to be strengthened to address gender-based violence. Currently, only less than five percent of the reported cases lead to prosecution. Evidence is the biggest challenge and delayed reporting timeframe is a critical factor which affects evidence. Cybercrimes, online grooming, and black mailing are among emerging issues, exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. The Maldives CEDAW report highlighted that despite measures to prevent and investigate online abuse being announced, no perpetrators have yet been held accountable.⁵⁸ Highlighted in the consultations of the second VNR and also discussed in the CEDAW report, “discriminatory gender stereotypes among police officers, gender-insensitive investigation methods, lack of protection for women who report rape, fear of revictimization and retaliation, women’s underrepresentation in frontline policing and in the judiciary, lack of lawyers, particularly in remote islands, and the fact that legal aid is available to victims only in relation to ‘major criminal offences’ constitute barriers to women’s access to justice”.⁵⁹ Only 15 percent of the police personnel are women. Under the police reform process, the institution’s strategic plan 2019-2024 prioritizes redefining investigations towards a victim centered approach and developing specialized child abuse and victim centered investigation capacity in the atolls. Community focused policing and developing

⁵⁷ CEDAW/C/MDV/CO/6: Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Maldives, 23 November 2021

⁵⁸ CEDAW/C/MDV/CO/6: Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Maldives, 23 November 2021

⁵⁹ CEDAW/C/MDV/CO/6: Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Maldives, 23 November 2021

multi-skilled and competent first respondents are also identified as strategic priorities and special considerations are given to increase the number of female officers in police basic recruitment and train female officers in investigation areas other frontline areas.

Absence of land for social infrastructure and services is a key challenge for service delivery.

Absence of land for social infrastructure in land use plans and the high cost of land acquisition or leasing for social services such as domestic violence (DV) shelters in greater Male' area where service demand is higher and land rent is very high is a key challenge. Recently with support from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), three DV shelters have been planned and will be operationalized. These centres are planned to be in Hulhumale', Addu City and Raa Atoll. The main outcome is to increase access to sustainable social services to reduce women's unpaid care burden and minimize domestic violence and gender-based violence.

To promote the role of women in the economy, society and at the leadership, efforts need to be stepped up with capacity, resources, and empowerment of women.

Women's participation in the formal economy remains low and lack of protection for women in unpaid care work is a concern, particularly for the wellbeing of single mothers. The unpaid care and household services is most often provided by women. Unpaid services such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for the children and the elderly add considerable value both to family welfare and to national economic output.⁶⁰ Although trends show that education completion and performance of women in the Maldives are higher, women still face barriers to entry in certain jobs, and lack of equality in some professions remain a concern. Consultations undertaken for the second VNR highlighted the challenge for women highly skilled and educated in ICT field facing barriers to entry in the job market and the wage gap. Women's participation in the largest economic sector of the country, tourism, continues to be very low. Public perception and media representation of women needs positive change in pro-female direction to improve gender equality and support for women. While many women are engaged in the informal economy, it fails to provide adequate income, protections, and safeguards for women. Furthermore, women's share of ownership of land and assets is not known, to address policy gaps for economic opportunities. The Maldives is a country with high divorce rate and lack of adequate legal protection in divorce cases in land and property ownership for women, especially who acquire joint assets is a concern.

⁶⁰ National Transfer Accounts Maldives 2020

BOX 14: “IBAMA” FOR SOCIAL SERVICES

IBAMA is a multi-sectoral support mechanism formed at community level in all inhabited islands for prevention and responding to violence against children, and other vulnerable groups. IBAMA focuses on providing protection for the vulnerable children, elderly, PWDs, women, and men in the community. In addition, relevant sector-related government authorities with an official mandate for social protection of the communities work together holistically, as a cohesive group, to ensure the functioning of IBAMA. These government authorities include Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services, local councils, Local Government Authority, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Maldives Police Service, Department of Juvenile Justice, and Women’s Development Committees.

Furthermore, IBAMA ensures that the most vulnerable and at-risk individuals and families are identified, assisted, and provided with the necessary services to uplift their life and living standards to reflect the standards of the community. Supporting the identified individuals and families would include referral to and assisting with the existing social protection schemes.

Overall, IBAMA works for the promotion, protection, and fulfilment of human rights of each individual in the community, and in doing so, ensures a safe society that embraces full and equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms guaranteed by the Maldivian Constitution and the international conventions and treaties.

To ensure a safe community for all, especially for the vulnerable population, IBAMA members undergo relevant trainings. As such, IBAMA members receive IBAMA initial training before the establishment of IBAMA in their respective islands. In addition, the IBAMA members also carry out vulnerability mapping of the island once they complete the initial training. Initial training of IBAMA has been conducted and IBAMA has been established in 3 cities and 96 islands from 11 atolls and 658 people have been trained to date.

Source: Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services

Leave No One Behind

- Women in vulnerable social and economic situations were identified as key groups who are at higher risk of being left behind in equal development attainments. These include women in poorer households, single mothers, women in violent relationships, women not economically active and women in informal economy. More women are in the informal economy, and they lack adequate social protection. The findings of the impact of COVID-19 also show that women were disproportionately affected during the pandemic in economic and social aspects such as increased unpaid care work, higher stress, and greater income loss for informal workers. Data suggests there was a surge in reported cases of DV once the first lock down was eased. As the Maldives is moving towards an ageing population, women who are not in employment and do not contribute to pensions risk equal future opportunities and attainments.
- Children in poorer households, in violent households and without adequate supervision are at higher risk of being left behind. Early exposure to violence in the family and families with low socio-economic status inhibit the normal course of adolescent development leading to other socio-economic and mental health outcomes. The presence of gangs and illegal markets is a risk for the wellbeing of the vulnerable children who are often targeted for recruitment. Similarly, youth (18 – 25 and 26– 30 years old) population requires strategies to prevent them from entering criminal activities. Protection and reintegration strategies are required for those already subjected into the criminal activities. Records from criminal activities and domestic violence related cases show that the number of male perpetrators is significantly higher than females.
- To understand the magnitude and a better LNOB analysis, quality data disaggregated by gender and other key indicators and information needs to be collected, analyzed, and reported.

Actions for Progress

In the immediate term within the next 1-2 years

- Develop a whole of government strategy and policies to increase women’s engagement in the public and private sector, in leadership positions and in entrepreneurship.
- Develop policies and implement support mechanisms to promote shared domestic responsibility.
- Strengthen the performance of key agencies in policy, investigation, justice, and social services to better respond to violence against women and children and promote gender equality.
- Strengthen accountability of reported cases of violence against women and children through improved tracking and auditing from the stage of reporting to delivery of justice.
- Provide systematic training to police, lawyers, judges, prosecutors, and law enforcement officers on women’s rights and ensure speedy and improved justice to women and children.
- Introduce a quota to ensure fair and equal representation of women in the Parliament.
- Enhance awareness amongst the population targeting women, men, girls, and boys on their rights.
- Strengthen knowledge and information on governance and leadership for women in leadership in civil service, island councils, WDCs and public and private companies to enhance their capacity and empower women with managerial and leadership skills through practical trainings.
- Introduce positive discrimination to increase women in leadership in civil service, public companies, and the private sector.
- Strengthen laws to protect women in the workplace.
- Develop safe spaces for social dialogue for both genders in vulnerable situations, particularly women and children and take advantage of public libraries mandated to be developed by the councils to operate as one stop centres for social service delivery, social dialogue, and to conduct support programmes.
- Ensure the participation of “IBAMA” in prevention and responding to violence against children and women and other vulnerable groups at island and atoll level.
- Develop effective implementation mechanisms and timely monitoring of policies, laws, and action plans promoting gender equality.
- Develop strategies and effective response to boys in vulnerable situations, low socioeconomic background, and those dropping out of school to prevent falling victim to violence and being perpetrators of violence.
- Strengthen Family law and other related laws to ensure women rights to land, property and assets build are shared in cases of divorce.

In the medium to long term within the next 5-7 years

- Strengthen multi-agency coordination and partnership for effective promotion of gender equality with support from the highest level.

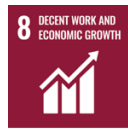
- Strengthen the independence and effectiveness of the judiciary to improve access to justice for children and women.
- Strengthen the human resource capacity including by increasing social service workers and their capacity to respond better to gender equality and service delivery across all islands.
- Strengthen gender data across the agencies and report on gender parameters to promote equality and justice.

Economic Inclusion and Resilience

Inclusive and Sustained
Economic Growth and Fiscal

Human Capital and Reduced
Inequalities

Sustainable Cities and
Communities and
Resilient Infrastructure



Inclusive and Sustained Economic Growth and Fiscal Sustainability

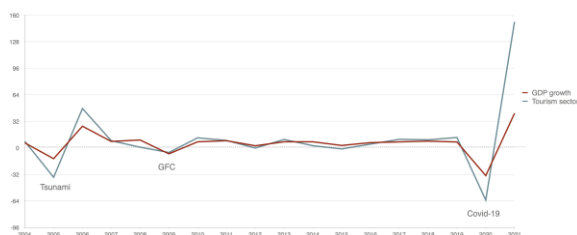


Figure 44: GDP growth rate and tourism growth rate

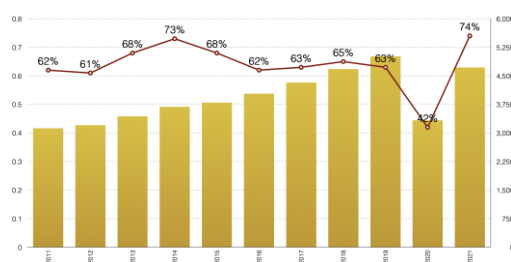


Figure 45: Tourism receipts as a share of GDP

Successful tourism has advanced the Maldives economy from a least developed country to an upper middle-income country. Tourism continues to be the main base of the economy and one fourth of direct contribution to the GDP, while it indirectly contributes much higher to GDP, with strong sectoral interlinkages to construction, transport, trade, and information and communications technology. Robust economic growth trajectory in the past has resulted in increase in GDP per capita and reached US\$ 11,119 in 2019. Real GDP growth rate was 7 percent in 2019. The country was on path to becoming a high-income country, when the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic slowed down the course of economic growth. The overdependence on tourism, however, poses significant risk to the economy.

Tourism continues to be the key focus of economic growth. The Maldives is amongst the most tourism reliant countries in the world and the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the economy unprecedentedly with 66 percent decline in tourism growth rate and consequently a decline of 33 percent in GDP growth rate in 2020, affecting income and livelihood loss for several thousand people.

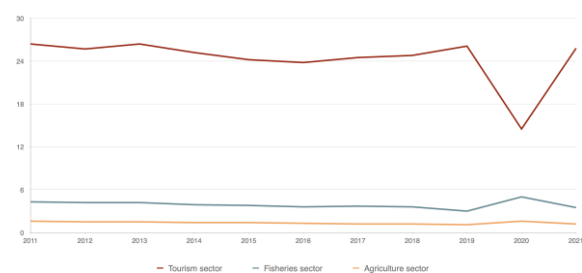


Figure 46: Tourism, fisheries and agriculture sector growth 2011-2021

Fisheries and Agriculture sectors have been crucial for the livelihoods of people, especially for those living in the outer atolls. Fisheries and agriculture sectors have been contributing on average 3.8 and 1.3 percent to GDP between 2015 and 2021 respectively. Fish is an important source of staple for the population and is a key livelihood activity for people resident in the atolls. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the importance of fisheries to the economy and both agriculture and fisheries to food security. The NRRP prioritized the expansion of both sectors. Farming activities and land allocation for farming increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. There were approximately 17,589 fishers and 7,568 farmers employed in the fisheries and agriculture sectors in 2020. These two sectors contributed to 7.4 of total employment in 2019. The fisheries sector however is highly reliant on government subsidies and needs commercial viability to support larger contribution to the economy. The ongoing fisheries sector development works include the expansion of fish storage and fish processing capacity, fish buying, and ice plant expansions planned in multiple strategic locations across the country. Both the fisheries and agriculture sectors are highly vulnerable to the growing effects of climate change.

BOX 15: SHARED BENEFITS FROM TOURISM

Accommodation in tourist resorts generate over 90 percent of the tourism share to GDP, however, tourism development is uneven across the country. Although the one-island-one-resort tourism has matured into a 50-year industry and the guesthouse segment of beds development in inhabited islands has been in effect for over a decade now, centralization of tourism development continues to increase. More than one third of resort beds are in Kaafu Atoll, and the zone inclusive of Kaafu Atoll comprises more than half of the tourist resort beds and over 80 percent of the guesthouse beds. As tourism expands, the inadequate development of resort beds across different regions of the Maldives risks equally shared benefits from tourism to people living in outer atolls further from the greater Male' region. Meanwhile, long term lease of islands for tourist resorts and related activities lacks adequate measures to ensure the rights and livelihoods of island communities and especially women, affecting their traditional lifestyles and livelihoods, conflict with resources for tourism operations in inhabited islands and resource conflicts with fisheries sector.

Table 6: Tourism bed distribution by zones by end of 2020

Region	Zone	No of resort beds	No of guesthouse beds
Region 1	Zone 1 <i>Haa Alifu, Haa Dhaalu, Shaviyani</i>	2.6 percent 5 resorts	2.4 percent 41 inhabited islands)
	Zone 2 <i>Noonu, Raa, Baa, Lhaviyani</i>	27.8 percent 46 resorts	7.7 percent 45 inhabited islands
Region 2	Zone 3 <i>Kaafu, Alifu Alifu, Alifu Dhaalu, Vaavu</i>	51.8 percent 81 resorts	82.7 percent 35 inhabited islands
	Zone 4 <i>Meemu, Faafu, Dhaalu, Thaa, Laamu</i>	10.6 percent 15 resorts	2.7 percent 43 inhabited islands
Region 3	Zone 5 <i>Gaaf Alifu, Gaafu Dhaalu</i>	4.9 percent 9 resorts	1.3 percent 18 inhabited islands
	Zone 6 <i>Gnaviyani, Seenu</i>	2.5 percent 3 resorts	2.9 percent 7 inhabited islands

The National Fisheries and Agricultural Policy (2019-2029) have been formulated for the first time. It highlights the commitment to the development of the sectors by renewal of 21-year leases for 15 uninhabited islands dedicated to commercial fisheries, 50 uninhabited islands for commercial agriculture and eight additional uninhabited islands for both commercial fisheries and agriculture. The pillars of the Policy are aligned with all 17 SDGs. Similarly,

AgroNat has been formulated for the development and expansion of agriculture sector. Soon after the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the economy, AgroNat was launched as a 100 percent subsidiary of the state-owned enterprise, Maldives Fund Management Corporation (MFMC), as a priority resilience initiative for diversification of the economy and to reduce dependency on food imports. 17 crops of importance for food security have been identified and supported for expansion of agricultural output. AgroNat adopted contract farming approach by facilitating farming across inhabited islands and by enabling with resources for farmers and to deliver quality and affordable products to the market. By the end of 2022, more than 700 contracts were signed between farmers from over 20 islands and over MVR 2 million was paid to farmers for harvests receive. Agriculture sector however needs to modernize and ensure safe and good quality produce are available.

BOX 16: CHALLENGES FOR FISHERIES SECTOR

The stakeholder consultations undertaken for the second VNR learnt that the growth of tourism on inhabited islands and increase in wage jobs across the islands have completely transformed some islands who were previously engaged in fishing to shift to tourism sector and shift to other wage jobs. This posed risk to fisheries sector employment where some vessels have had to stop fishing completely due to shortage of fishers available to join fishing trips. Income from fisheries sector is seasonal, disincentivizing especially young people, whereas employment in fixed monthly wage jobs and increase in minimum wage has created demand for these jobs.

Furthermore, fishers in the south of the Maldives, Huvadho Atoll, a popular fishery zone are concerned that they have to wait for over a week to be able to sell their fish due to low capacity of the fish buying companies. Fishers thus experience lost income opportunities and lost catch and having to sell fish at lower prices. Although policies are in place for fisheries sector expansion, timely implementation delays have affected fisheries sector growth.

Fishermen engaged in the prime tourism zone, Alif Dhaalu Atoll, highlighted the growing natural resource competition between the tourism and fisheries sectors and the importance of mariculture for consumption and for aquarium fisheries export. They expressed concern about the impact of reclamation on fisheries sector and the detrimental losses on fish habitat and fish life. Reclamation for tourism was expressed as a serious concern, and the concentration of tourism in already high tourism zones impacting carrying capacity and importance of expansion of tourism to other atolls was expressed as critical consideration for sustainable economic growth.

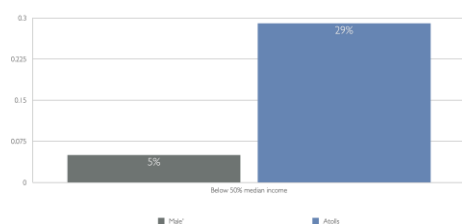


Figure 47: Proportion of population living below 50 percent median poverty line

The Maldives has a low poverty rate resulting from strong economic growth in the past, but inequality persists. At the national poverty line of MVR 71.4 per person per day, poverty was at 5.4 percent in 2019. At this poverty rate, poverty was heavily concentrated in atolls and was 10 times as high as in Male.⁶¹ In 2019, the poverty rate of the Maldives against the international poverty line of (US\$ 5.5 PPP) for Upper Middle Income Countries (UMIC) was estimated to be 1.7 percent, driven entirely by the atolls, where poverty rate was 3.2 percent.⁶² Furthermore, variations in poverty exist within atolls, with atolls better off and worse off within the same zone. With growing global economic uncertainties, climate change risks, extreme vulnerability to external shocks, and with overdependence on tourism, negative impact to tourism poses significant risks to poverty of the country, risking disproportionate impacts to the poor. The World Bank October 2022 country update highlighted that poverty rose to 19.8 percent in 2020 due to the pandemic, however, this ratio was expected to reduce sharply to 3.8 percent by the end of 2022 due to strong economic recovery demonstrating the risk of a large population group sliding back to poverty.⁶³ Furthermore, the consultations for the second VNR highlighted the risk of urban poverty in the Maldives, which is currently cushioned by the high subsidies and welfare assistance by the government. With growing fiscal vulnerability and high debt situation, the vulnerability of the population, especially those in informal sectors, vulnerable economic sectors, and the urban population to fall to poverty is high.

Positive development in income for the formal sector will lead to a rise in household income. 113,721 people contribute to the Maldives Retirement Pensions Scheme, roughly the size of formal employment. According to the 2022 Census, 28,294 people are employed in the civil service, with 65 percent of the civil service workforce being women. 94 percent of the civil service earned less than

⁶¹ Poverty and Inequality in the Maldives, 2022

⁶² Poverty and Inequality in the Maldives, 2022

⁶³ World Bank Maldives Development Update: Towards Resilient and Affordable Housing, October 2022

MVR 10,000 (US\$ 649) per month in 2021.⁶⁴ Minimum Wage Order introduced in late 2021 is a first of its kind initiative and applicable to all Maldivian workers in the public and private sectors with variations in rates across these sectors. The ongoing Public Sector Pay Harmonization Policy (PSPH) for the civil service will also lead to a rise in household income. Pay harmonization has been completed for teachers in the education sector and has been planned for the health sector. Furthermore, service charge of 10 percent was made mandatory for tourism sector workers impacting positively on household income. The pay harmonization needs to be prioritized and implemented soon to ensure that the high pay disparity is removed.

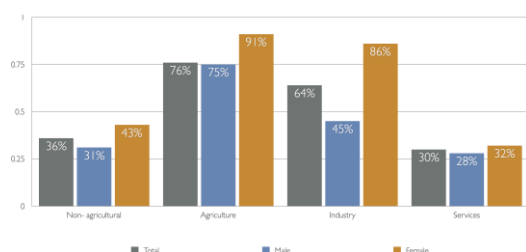


Figure 48: Informal employment by sex

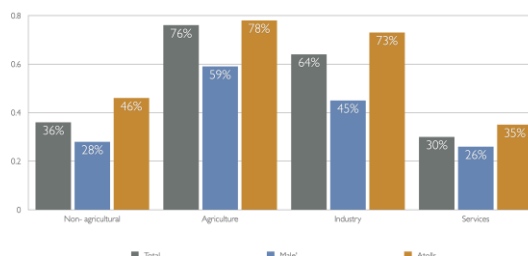


Figure 49: Informal employment by Male and atolls

Informal employment remains a concern for equality, especially in the atolls. Women's informal employment remains high and informality in the atolls remain high, increasing inequality especially for women and people resident in the atolls and inflationary pressure further impacting the vulnerable households. The COVID-19 impact on income and livelihood loss affected informal sector and thus women disproportionately. While subsidy reforms are being discussed, better targeting the reforms with a well-designed targeting mechanism to identify the poor and those in real need and targeting of tax and transfer instruments would help mitigate negative impacts of subsidy reforms on the poor.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Statistical Yearbook of Maldives 2022

⁶⁵ World Bank Maldives Development Update. Navigating a Tight Line. April 2023

BOX 17: MULTIDIMENSIONAL POVERTY

Nearly one in three people across the Maldives were multidimensionally poor in 2016/2017 according to the first Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) of the Maldives published in 2020. A non-monetary metrics consisting of eight indicators was identified for classification of poor and non-poor, and while only about 10 percent of the population in Male' was multidimensionally poor, 40 percent was poor in the atolls.

At the time of reporting, 61 percent of the population was resident in the atolls and 87 percent of the poor were in the atolls. Access to healthcare is the biggest deprivation across the country. The multidimensional poverty in atolls is driven by lack of access to health care, low years of schooling, lack of access to safe drinking water and sewer system connection for sanitation. In contrast, multidimensional poverty in Male' is driven by overcrowding and access to health care. Male' is the third most congested city in the world, and the region, slightly behind Dhaka and Islamabad. Furthermore, policies to expand Male' region risks driving further overcrowding, congestion and public health risks. Meanwhile access to infrastructure and services in the atolls remain limited.

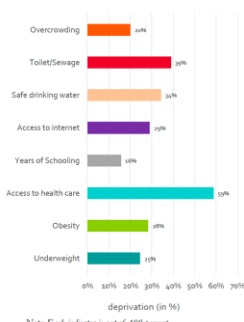


Figure 50: National uncensored headcount ratios (in percent), 2016/17

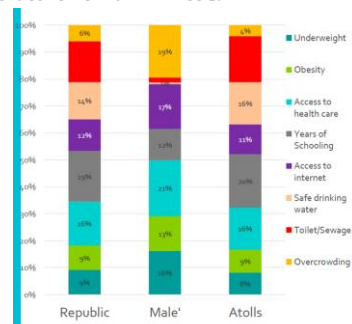


Figure 51: Percentage contribution of each indicator to MPI for National, Male' and Atolls, 2016/17

Multidimensional poverty is more prevalent in children and people with disabilities further exposing the risk of these groups to fall into poverty.

Secondary and higher education is associated with reduced poverty and wage employment is associated with low incidence of poverty. Similarly, employment in the tertiary sectors such as services and trade are associated with low incidence of poverty. In contrast, informal employment risks twice higher poverty rate compared to formal employment. Self-employment is three times more likely than wage earners to report income loss.

Extracted from the report "Multidimensional Poverty in the Maldives 2020", published by the Maldives Bureau of Statistics and Poverty Report 2022

The benefits programme "Zakaat Nafaa" introduced to support the poor people will improve their household income and wellbeing. The programme targets people who have declared themselves as poor in the in the "Zakaat" poverty ledger at Ministry of Islamic Affairs. Over 7,778 people were registered in the poverty ledger in 2021 and the programme was launched with a vision to eliminate poverty and empower financial independence. The programme entails assets pricing up to MVR 150,000 (US\$ 9,727) to each family to earn a sustainable income. Housing, poultry farming, hydroponic farming, reef fishing, tailoring, and training/ on-the-job training/apprenticeships have been identified as areas of assistance under the programme. Under phase one of the program, 98 islands were identified for assessment targeting 1,071 people from 346 households. To date, the programme has assigned assets for business activities to 97 households totaling MVR 7.5 million in allocations.

Opportunities for small and medium enterprises' (SMES) financing and entrepreneurship have been expanding. The SME Finance Development Cooperation (SDFC) launched in 2019 has enabled low interest loans to more than 1,300 SMEs. SDFC was initiated to provide low cost and easy access to finance the micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs). With a loan portfolio of MVR 1.6 billion, one third was financed for tourism businesses. SDFC loans give priority for women, youth, and PWDs, giving a high credit rating score enabling these groups to access loans at a lower interest rate and at a lower equity investment to loan. About 25 percent of the portfolio is held by women owned and

women inclusive businesses. Soon after SDFC was launched, COVID-19 impacted several businesses, especially new startups and MSMEs. The government’s COVID-19 Recovery Scheme “COVID-19. “Viyafaari Ehee” loan was an economic relief package launched in 2020 for 8 months, administered through SDFC whereby more than 4,000 MSMEs applied, and resulted in assisting more than half of the applicants with over MVR 300 million in loans. About 15 percent recipients were women who received over MVR 44 million (12 percent) in loans. Furthermore, online applications for SDFC services have enabled businesses from across the Maldives to access the service. A dedicated loan scheme for agriculture sector “Danduveri Nafaa” loan program initiated by the government is also administered by SDFC.

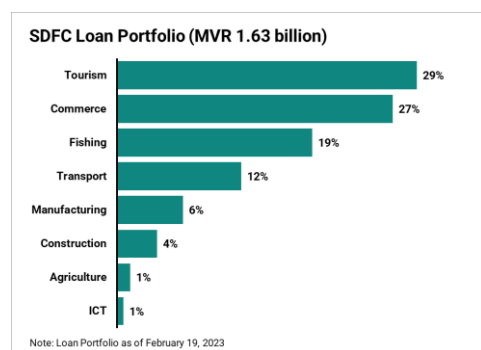


Figure 52: SDFC loan portfolio 2023
Source: SDFC

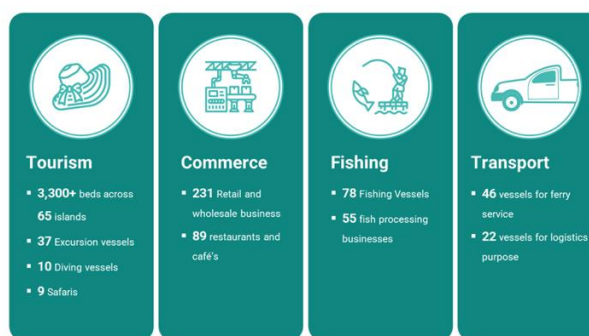


Figure 53: SDFC loan portfolio by number of beneficiaries
Source: SDFC

The “Authentic Maldives” initiative to nurture creativity, talent and entrepreneurship has enabled over 200 MSME suppliers to showcase their products. The first Authentic Maldives shop, operationalized under the Business Centre Corporation (BCC), was launched in January 2020. Nearly 60 percent of the suppliers are females, and the shops have generated year on year increase in disbursements between 2020 and 2022. For the fiscal year 2022, a total value of more than MVR 19 million was disbursed to suppliers benefitting several small and medium female suppliers across the Maldives. Expansion of such market space coupled with training, and low-cost finance could enable women to participate in the formal economy creating benefits from pensions and incentivized economic policies.

2020: MVR 4,377,436.63
2021: MVR 14,511,633.96
2022: MVR 19,061,357.30

Figure 54: Year on year disbursements to Authentic Maldives suppliers
Source: Business Centre Corporation

Table 7: Tourism revenue 2016 - 2020

Year	Total Government Revenue ¹	Tourism Revenue ² (Million Rufiyya)					Total Tourism Revenue	% Share of Tourism Revenue in Total Government Revenue
		Land Rent	Tourist Bed-night Tax	Green Tax	Tourism Goods & Service Tax (T-GST)	Lease Period Extension Fee		
2016	18,578.06	1,449.68	0.15	633.55	3,964.86	569.10	6,617.34	34.8
2017	20,258.67	1,401.64	-	693.97	4,182.93	117.41	6,395.96	32.6
2018	21,322.69	1,535.32	-	810.35	4,783.34	76.70	7,203.34	34.4
2019	21,161.34	1,646.55	-	851.18	4,903.59	306.80	7,708.12	34.9
2020	12,550.23	702.18	-	351.90	2,220.26	153.50	3,427.83	23.0

Source: Ministry of Tourism
Data provided by Ministry of Finance, Maldives Inland Revenue Authority
1 Revised

The growing fiscal vulnerability, however, is a serious concern for the Maldives. The main revenue source is from tourism and with heavy dependency on food and fuel imports, the economy is highly vulnerable to external shocks. The rising global commodity prices following the COVID-19 pandemic impacted domestic inflation, putting further pressure on the government to manage the high capital expenditure, subsidies, and welfare spending. This, amplified by the need for finance to support the

Public Sector Infrastructure Programmes (PSIP) puts added pressure on the current account balance.⁶⁶ Although PSIP in infrastructure projects such housing and renewable energy will contribute to economic growth in the long term, the short and medium-term fiscal risks are high. As highlighted by the World Bank October 2022 country update, the cost of debt service for housing sector loans is a major fiscal risk that will likely have to be borne by the public sector.⁶⁷ Although spending on welfare and social insurance keeps increasing, policies being shaped without key principles of social protection, doesn't guarantee adequate protection for the most vulnerable, unemployed people and for the informal sector and the self-employed. Meanwhile, leakages of "Aasandha" are predicted to be high and lacking proper monitoring for leakages and fraud. Strengthening the policies for better targeted subsidies for the vulnerable and to contain expenditure is important for sustainable economic development.

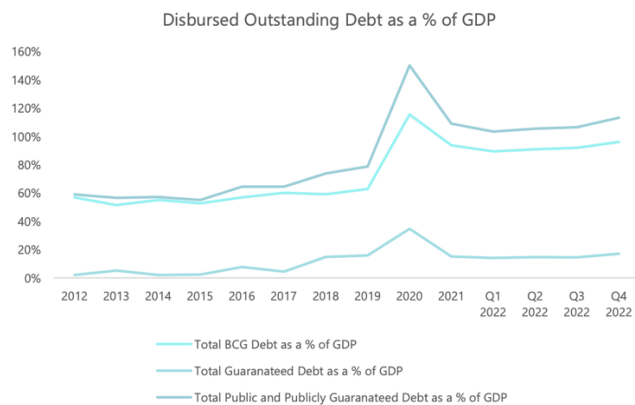


Figure 55: Total PPG as a share of GDP 2012-2022

Furthermore, high public debt exceeds the size of the Maldives economy. Continued public expenditure on PSIP projects contribute to high levels of debt. Public and publicly guaranteed (PPG) debt rose to 114 percent of GDP in 2021 before dropping to 103 percent of GDP in Q1 of 2022 and increased to 113 percent of GDP in Q4 of 2022.⁶⁸ Of the PPG debt, domestic debt accounts for 62 percent while external debt accounts for 51 percent. High fiscal vulnerability combined with high debt leaves no fiscal space to divert finance for sustainable development initiatives for important sustainability services and initiatives in the short term.

⁶⁶ World Bank Maldives Development Update: Towards Resilient and Affordable Housing, October 2022

⁶⁷ World Bank Maldives Development Update: Towards Resilient and Affordable Housing, October 2022

⁶⁸ <https://www.finance.gov.mv/public/attachments/N9rqFoLaFin2xeqTXkZbsNGkY30BWxEFUbzWf8px.pdf>

BOX 18: IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE MALDIVES ECONOMY

The Maldives economy was progressing well until the unprecedented shock from the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The country's border closed during early 2020 and tourism stopped resulting in devastating consequences on people's lives and livelihoods and forcing businesses to permanently shut down. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the vulnerability of the Maldives economy, with its overdependence on tourism and the interconnectedness of other industries to tourism. GDP declined by 33.5 percent in 2020. Subsequently, the pandemic led to a record high level of layoffs, complete and partial income loss, and livelihood loss. The income impact was mitigated to some extent through stimulus packages introduced by the government. New policy initiatives and multistakeholder partnerships rebound tourism and reboot the economy. The economy continued to recover strongly by the end of 2022.

Employees in the accommodation and food services took the brunt of the impact, with around 61 percent of the employees being affected. While the highest number of job terminations and salary reductions were associated with the adverse effect experienced by the tourism sector, prolonged closure of workplaces and ceased business activities magnified the negative impact on employment. Additionally, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and self-employed people were severely impacted and unable to continue with their startups and or high cost of operations, constrained by credit and low demand for services. However, with the gradual relaxation of containment measures from June 2020 onwards, business operations resumed, resulting in an improvement on the employment and business operations. To minimize the economic impact of the pandemic, the government introduced an Economic Recovery Plan (ERP) of USD162 million (equivalent to 3.4 percent of GDP) in March 2020. This mainly included a loan scheme to support resorts, large businesses and SMEs, and an income support allowance scheme to support individuals who lost their jobs and faced salary reductions. The loan scheme provision was conditioned on retainment of employees in those businesses. Tourism rebound has led to strong economic recovery in 2021 and 2022.

Sourced from the report "Impact of COVID-19 on employment in the Maldives" published by the Ministry of Economic Development

Leave No One Behind

- The share of women in the labour force is significantly low and the share of women in informal sector is high lacking social protection and other benefits. The COVID-19 affected women in the informal sector disproportionality. Women out of labour force and in informal sectors are at higher risk of being left behind from the economic employment benefits. Likewise, women's low ownerships of assets hinder their financial independence and economic development opportunities for with disadvantages to access to financial instruments.
- Households with income poverty at the bottom of the poverty line are at greater risk of being left behind without targeted policies to improve their wellbeing. Children and adults living in atolls with low-income households and low economic activities are also at greater risk of being left behind.

Actions for Progress

In the immediate term within the next 1-2 years

- Accelerate fiscal adjustments through reforms to pensions, welfare and subsidies and harmonization of the national social protection system to better target the vulnerable and people at the bottom of the poverty line to increase shared wealth, decrease fiscal vulnerability, and ensure sustained growth.
- Strengthen the capacity of MSMEs through mentorship, knowledge exchange, access to finance, and data driven decision making and enhance their access to markets.
- Create opportunities for women and youth entrepreneurship through empowerment, capacity, and knowledge sharing and demonstration, access to finance and development of managerial skills.

- Complete tagging of the government’s programme budget with SDGs and ensure monitoring of the budget for SDGs implementation.
- Accelerate the adoption of digital technologies across the country to improve services for trade expansion, service provision and efficiency.
- Extend support for hybrid working and remote working particularly targeting youth and skilled women, eg: graphic design, web design, digital marketing to enhance their employability and entrepreneurship.
- Complete the pay harmonization for all public sector employees to reduce the wage gap and increase the average hourly earnings of the public sector labour force.
- Reduce informal employment by incentivizing micro and small businesses and especially women in the informal economy to formalize and improve their income and ensure better social and income protection.

In the medium to long term within the next 5-7 years

- Enhance access to trade and establish market linkages across atoll by leveraging the national public ferry network and ensuring sustainability, reliability, and quality of service provision.
- Reduce overdependency on tourism by diversification of other sectors such as education and health care, strengthened delivery of blue economy strategy and enhanced fisheries and agricultural production for sustained economic growth.
- Recognize the gig-economy trends amongst the local community and ensure income and social protection for people in the gig-economy.
- Enable the ongoing tourism sector expansion to benefit people living in zones with low tourism and increase their employment and participation in the tourism sector.
- Increase women’s participation in employment and entrepreneurship in the country’s largest industry, tourism, to increase benefits to women from the industry to increase their wage and income.
- Enhance the agriculture sector for safe food production and accelerate the use of technology and improved market access within the domestic market.
- Accelerate the shift of the tourism sector towards more inclusive and sustainable development models that promote sustainable production and consumption.
- Ensure advancement of technology and infrastructure at workplace for institutional modernization.
- Formulate a national financial inclusion strategy.

Human Capital and Reduced Inequalities

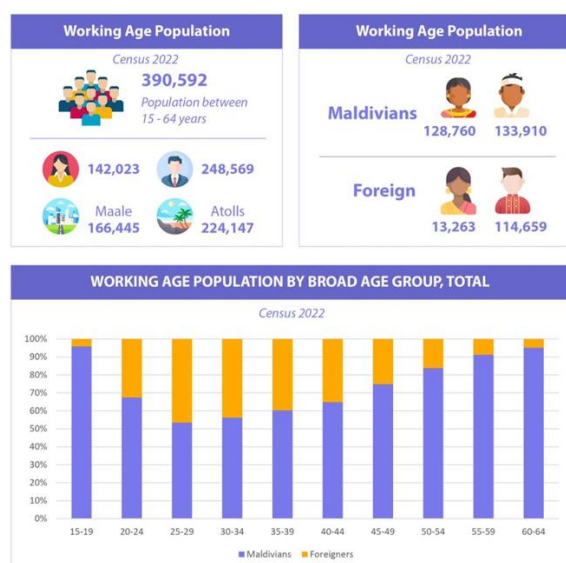


Figure 56: Working age population Census 2022

The labour force participation rate (LFPR) of the Maldives in 2019 was 60.2 percent. The working-age population of the Maldives was 390,592 persons according to Census 2022, an increase of 23 percent compared with HIES 2019 estimates. The LFPR of women (46 percent) is comparatively lower than that of men (77 percent). The unemployment rate was 4.8 percent for females and 5.6 percent for males in 2019. The low economic participation of women is a serious concern for the country considering the higher participation and completion of higher secondary and higher education by women. The low participation rate of women in the labour force indicates that domestic and childcare responsibilities are key barriers to their participation in the economy.



Figure 57: Employees contributing to MRPS by sex 2013-2022

At the end of 2021, the Maldives Retirement Pensions Scheme (MRPS) had 119,062 contributors, with men making up a significant majority. This indicates a large proportion of women who are not economically active or are not participating in formal economic activities. According to HIES 2019, approximately 40 percent of the working-age population is not part of the labour force and nearly 73 percent are women. Furthermore, about 40 percent of the informal employment sector is comprised of women, posing significant challenges for the labour and social protection of women, as they face heightened risks. Moreover, their access to loans, financial assistance, and credit is often restricted or limited. The COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted the disproportionate impact on women working in the informal economy. Despite accommodation and food services being the largest employment generating sector in the private sector, only around three percent of Maldivian women are involved in the sector, leading to missed opportunities for achieving wealth equality. Although the introduction of the

Old Age Basic Pensions Scheme (OABPS) aimed to provide a basic pension for all Maldivians aged 65 and above, the absence of women in the MRPS poses risks to their future well-being. This situation also places a significant fiscal burden on the government due to the increasing aging population and higher life expectancy among women.

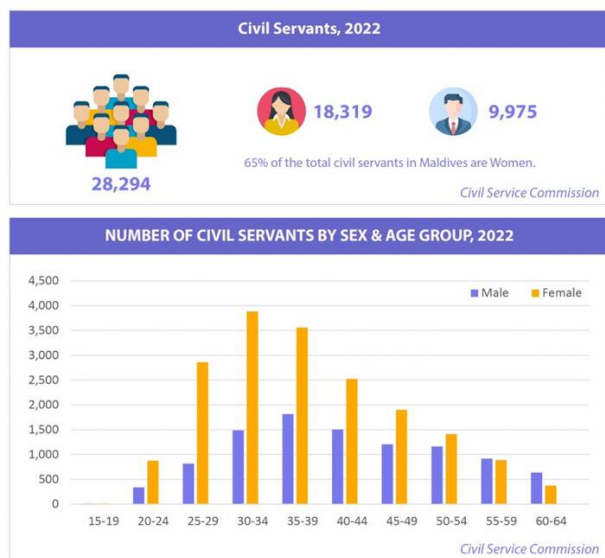


Figure 58: Civil servants by sex and age group 2022

Extension of the paid maternity leave of six months for government employees benefits many women in the government civil services. The extension of six months paid maternity leave and one month paid paternity leave for government employees was introduced from March 2019. Maternity leave by law is 60 days while paternity leave is limited to three days. While the extension of maternity and paternity is beneficial for the government employees, and for those organisations in public sector and private sector who have voluntarily adopted it, the extension of a similar policy adopted universally by public and private sector employers will likely create the enabling environment for women to take up and continue work. Likewise, policies encouraging equally shared domestic work will encourage and enable women to be equal partners of development. It is noted that the high number of women in the civil service cushioned the impact of household income for those families with a working woman in the civil service, as they did not experience complete loss of income during the COVID-19 pandemic.

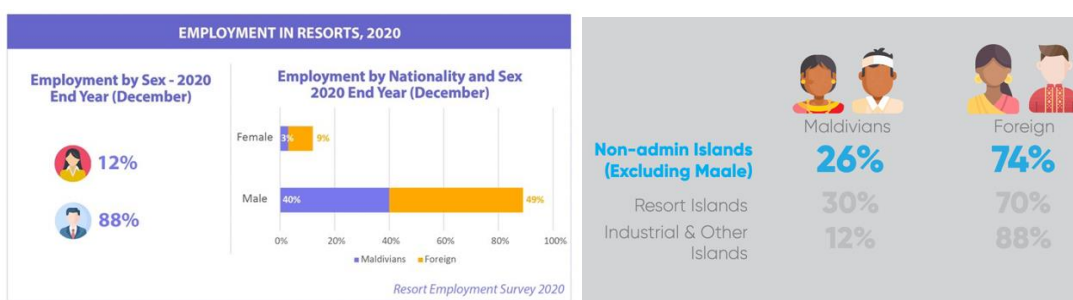


Figure 59: Employment in resorts by locality and gender

Although, the Maldives has made significant strides in building the human capital of the country through education investments, there is a gap in technical and vocational skills for employment, decent jobs, and entrepreneurship. Skills mismatch with the job market is a concern of school leavers seeking jobs. While the Maldives is heavily dependent on the tourism industry, Census 2022 data shows a ratio of 30:70 Maldivian to foreign workers in the tourist resorts of the Maldives. Meanwhile, more than 6,000 students complete secondary education every year and there is a significant gap in skills mismatch and knowledge to join the tourism industry and the job market. Likewise, skills development opportunities for PWDs remain a gap. There are also gaps in providing support for PWDs in access to services and in providing support during academic examination. Competency of PWDs has

been assessed through a merit-based system to date, however a tool is currently being set up for competency-based assessment. There is also a gap in ensuring the productivity and participation of PWDs in the job market. Similarly, women’s participation in STEM education remains to be low and those who have completed and are highly qualified in STEM fields for example in skilled digital areas face discrimination in a male dominated workforce losing out on job opportunities and in equal pay. Biggest challenge for the expansion of vocational and skills development are the availability of qualified teachers and lecturers as well as the capacity to design and implement the programmes across the atolls of the Maldives. Reskilling, upskilling, and improving ICT skills are priority needs for achieving the SDG 4.

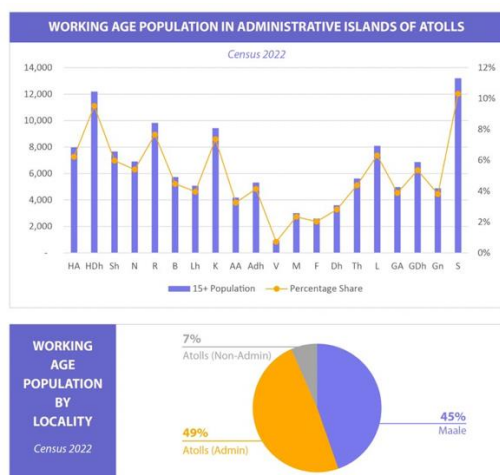


Figure 60: Working age population by locality Census 2022

The percentage of youth who left the labor market increased between 2016 and 2019.⁶⁹ Between the labour market entrant age group 16 to 25 years, discouragement as the reason for not participating in the labor market rose from 8.2 percent to 12.2 percent in atolls while non-participation due to enrollment in education as the reason fell from 40.7 percent to 34 percent between 2016 and 2019. The wide availability of jobs compared with the opportunity cost of staying in school increased for the youth, while in 2019 youth between 16 to 25 years both in Male’ and atolls were likely to look for a job, however, the success rate was higher for those in Male’ compared with those in atolls, losing out to older cohorts.⁷⁰ Although youth labor force participation increased in both Male’ and the atolls between 2016 and 2019, youth unemployment also increased in the atolls.⁷¹ The employment rate among 16 to 25 years in the atolls is about 17 percentage points lower than for young professionals, between the ages 26 to 35 years and for older adults between 37 to 64 years.⁷² The COVID-19 pandemic also affected youth in the labour market entrant age group disproportionately compared to other age groups in formal employment.

The Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) has partnered with the World Bank to implement the “Maldives: Enhancing Employability and Resilience of Youth” (MEERY) for skill development and entrepreneurship training. The MEERY project is designed to empower youth with skill sets and entrepreneurship training. The Project will develop the skills relevant to address the job market to foster livelihoods. The project is a collaboration between the Ministry of Higher Education and the Ministry of Economic Development, funded by the World Bank. The project is providing the equipment, furniture and machineries required for one junior college targeting youth between the ages of 17 to 24 years in Haa Alif Atoll Dhidhho and one technical, vocational and education training (TVET) center in Raa Atoll Alifushi.

⁶⁹ Poverty and Inequality in the Maldives, 2022
⁷⁰ Poverty and Inequality in the Maldives, 2022
⁷¹ Poverty and Inequality in the Maldives, 2022
⁷² Poverty and Inequality in the Maldives, 2022

BOX 19: FOREIGN MIGRANTS

The reliance on foreign migrants for employment is increasing. Census 2022 showed that there is one foreign migrant for every three Maldivian residents and most of the working age population between 30 to 39 years comprise of foreign workers. Foreign migrants are mostly concentrated in Male' City (39 percent) followed by 28 percent in resorts, 25 percent in administrative islands and 9 percent in industrial islands. The main sectors of engagement are construction, tourism, wholesale and retail trade and hotels and restaurants. Furthermore, as labour shortages in traditionally protected sectors like fisheries is experienced, the sector is now open for foreign migrant labour recruitment. The dependency on foreign migrant workforce is projected to grow with increase in labour demand for economic activities, while Maldivian population growth shows declining trends.

According to the National Transfer Accounts, the share of the resident foreign population between 2019 and 2050 is expected to grow from 30 to 41 percent respectively. The consultations undertaken for the VNR highlighted the risk of exploitation and the need for policies in all dimensions for foreign population in the Maldives, especially the unskilled migrants to ensure sustainable development and respect for their human rights. Increase in exploitations related to recruitment and labour of unskilled migrants, and justice and health protection of undocumented foreign migrants in the country are serious concerns. Meanwhile, these issues also pose security risks for the country as well as the exploitation of the free visa policy by a few, posing border security risks.

Gaps exist in national policies for equal treatment towards migrant workers. Although minimum wage was initially introduced with a two-year moratorium for foreign migrant inclusion, the risk of that not realizing is high and has implications for local workers as well, as incentive for cheap unskilled labour would dominate and incentivize migrant recruitment. Furthermore, as the Maldives moves towards accelerating digitization in service delivery, digital divide amongst unskilled illiterate foreign migrants in the country will increase. Unskilled foreign migrants are also amongst the most at risk of being left behind in health care access. Lack of policies especially for health management of migrant workers remains a public health risk for the country as well a concern for their wellbeing as unskilled migrants do not have adequate health insurance; thus, medical care often gets neglected. Furthermore, the domestic workers are most at risk of losing from the occupational health and safety safeguards as they are not included in the upcoming occupational health and safety legislation.

For sustainability of foreign migrants within the community, it is important to undertake pre-departure and on arrival orientation for first-time foreign migrants to the Maldives about the Maldives culture, religion, lifestyle, and society. Targeting the right skilled workers for recruitment and upskilling workers who are in different sectors is equally important. Eg: Unskilled foreign migrant labour in agricultural sector needs to be given skills training and made aware about pesticide use to ensure the wellbeing of everyone.

Leave No One Behind

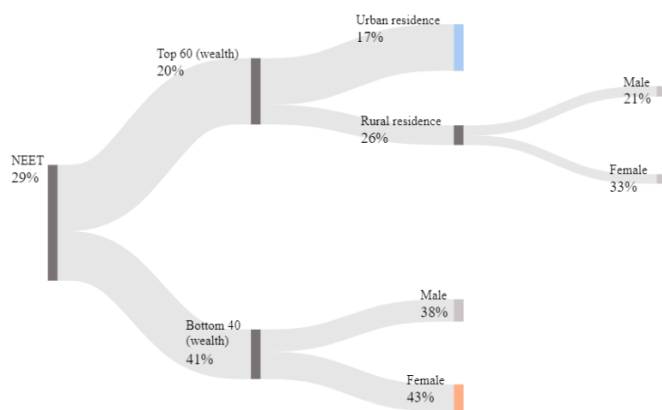


Figure 61: Youth Not in Employment, Education or Training
Source: UNESCAP illustration using HIES 2019 data

- In 2019 across the Maldives, 29 percent of the men and women aged 15-24 years were not in employment, education, or training (NEET). Furthest behind group is comprised of poorer women aged 15-24 years among whom 43 percent are NEET (orange node in Figure 61). They represent 24 percent of the 15–24-year-old individuals in the Maldives. Youth living in richer households in Male are much less likely to be NEET with only 17 percent in this category (blue node in Figure 61).

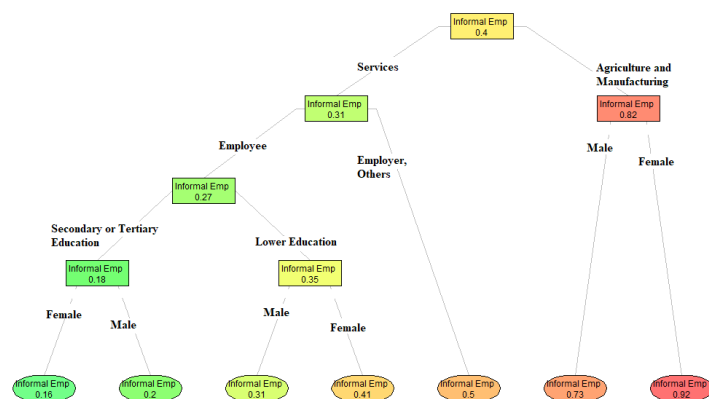


Figure 62: Informal employment
Source: Source: UNESCAP illustration using HIES 2019 data

- On average, 40 percent of employed people in 2019 were in informal employment (yellow box in Figure 62). Informality was much more prevalent in agriculture and manufacturing (82 percent) relative to services sector (31 percent). Furthest behind group is comprised of women in agricultural and manufacturing sector (red box in Figure 62 bottom-right) among whom 92 percent are in informally employed. Furthest ahead group is also comprised of women, but they have at least completed secondary education and work in the services sector as employees. (green box in Figure 62 bottom-left).

Actions for Progress

In the immediate term within the next 1-2 years

- Implement vocational and skills trainings to match the needs of the school leavers and youth in the labour force requiring upskilling and match the “Bachelor’s Degree Grant Scheme” programme with provisions to prioritize according to national skills and industry needs to enhance decent work for all.
- Undertake targeted programmes for youth aged 15-24 years and other vulnerable groups for continuation of education and participation in the economy.
- Enhance the employability of youth through skills development and enabling smooth education to work transition.
- Enact the Industrial Relations Bill and the Occupational Safety and Health Bill ensuring health and safety for all including domestic workers.
- Establish policies for alternative working arrangements such as work from home and flexible working arrangements.

- Widen the access to information and strengthen referral mechanisms and pathways for improved services and assistance for migrants.
- Ensure full implementation of minimum wage across all including foreign migrants.

In the medium to long term within the next 5-7 years

- Accelerate digitalization through skills enhancement in the workforce and work adoption to enable more women to take part in the economy including from remote locations.
- Increase the number of affordable childcare facilities across strategic locations and support women and single parents to engage in the economy.
- Formulate the amendment of laws to extend the coverage of social protection, such as minimum wages, paid leave, and maternity leave, to parents in the private sector and informal economy.
- Enhance skills development and trainings for all including unskilled migrants in the workforce.
- Strengthen labour migration to widen access to safe, orderly, and regular migration through interventions to reduce exploitation/ethical recruitment / improved monitoring.

Sustainable Cities and Communities and Resilient Infrastructure

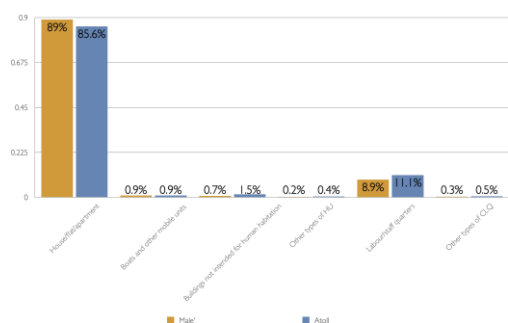


Figure 63: Households by type of living quarter Male' and atolls 2022

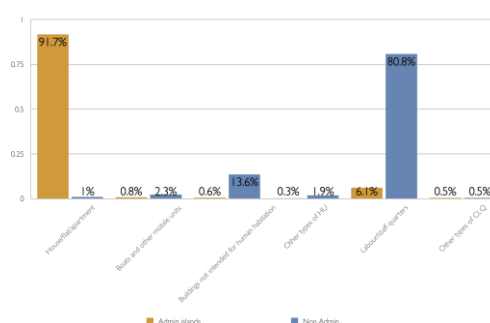


Figure 64: Households by type of living quarter admin and non-admin islands 2022

The average national household size has decreased from 5.24 to 4.7 during the intercensal period between 2014 and 2022. For Male' region this decrease is from 5.4 to 4.5 while in the atolls it's from 5.14 to 4.8. Total households in the Maldives increased by 38 percent to 93,000 during the same period. Buildings not intended for human habitation was 0.7 percent of the total households in Male' and 1.7 percent of the total households in the atolls and this ratio within the atolls was 0.6 percent in the administrative islands and significantly higher (13.6 percent) in the non-administrative islands.⁷³

Housing shortages throughout the nation has been a long-standing concern. Public investments in housing have been ramped up between 2010 and 2021 to address the lack of affordable housing. Although housing investments are high, it is short of SDG target of safe, adequate, and affordable housing.⁷⁴ The government driven housing sector expansion is a key source of fiscal risk and accounts for about one third of total external PPG debt outstanding and disbursed. US\$ 1.1 billion has been spent to finance the construction of housing over the last decade.⁷⁵ The latest social housing opportunities in greater Male' region in Hulhumale' phase two was extended to civil servants, married people between the ages of 18 and 35 years, and Male' residents who had previously experienced issues with public housing projects. Other priority categories included teachers, single parents, doctors, and nurses. While housing would contribute to the wellbeing of the beneficiaries, the practice of prioritizing employment type, with several in the highest income segment, counters the social housing targeting principle to serve those most in need of government support.⁷⁶ As a result, the rental rate for the latest government social housing project, "Hiyaa" flats in phase two of Hulhumale' is the same across all employment categories, regardless of income of the household and their capacity to pay. Meanwhile, the government has capped "Rent to Own" programme beneficiaries, tolerated high delinquency on rent payments and provided lengthy repayment periods.⁷⁷ One size fits all housing strategy, overlapping and weak institutional arrangements, multiple government agencies planning housing and the lack of an integrated housing project data system are critical risks.⁷⁸

The "Gedhoruveriyaa Loan" scheme was introduced for residents living outside of the main urban areas to allow easier access to housing finance. The loan was introduced with low interest of 6 percent and a 20-year repayment period and implemented by the Housing Development Finance Corporation (HDFC). The main purpose of the loan is for completion of unfinished houses in the atolls and to provide finance for the reconstruction of houses.

⁷³ Census 2022

⁷⁴ World Bank Maldives Development Update: Towards Resilient and Affordable Housing, October 2022Part B Housing

⁷⁵ World Bank Maldives Development Update: Towards Resilient and Affordable Housing, October 2022Part B Housing

⁷⁶ World Bank Maldives Development Update: Towards Resilient and Affordable Housing, October 2022Part B Housing

⁷⁷ World Bank Maldives Development Update: Towards Resilient and Affordable Housing, October 2022Part B Housing

⁷⁸ World Bank Maldives Development Update: Towards Resilient and Affordable Housing, October 2022Part B Housing

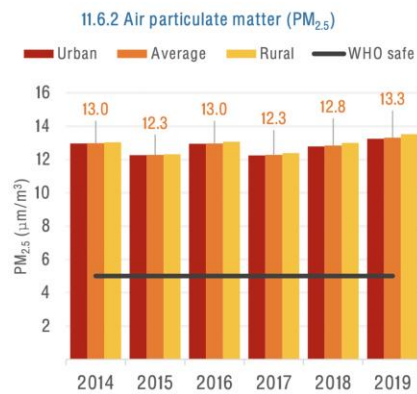


Figure 65: Air particulate matter PM_{2.5} 2014-2019
Source: IRENA

Overcrowding and health risks such as air pollution are increasing concerns especially in the greater Male' region. Uncontrolled internal migration to Male' has led to overcrowding and overdevelopment of Male', that continues to grow. Over the past three decades, Male' has transformed to greater Male' region with its satellite islands/wards. Unplanned population growth in the region has resulted in traffic congestion, air pollution, poor waste management, high crime rates, and increase in road accidents and fatalities. A bridge and linking road, connecting more than 200,000 residents in Male' and Hulhumale' became operational in 2018. Meanwhile, another bridge is planned to connect the rest of the greater Male' region—Villingili, Gulhifalhu and Thilafushi. There has been a 65 percent increase in vehicles across the Maldives between 2017 and 2022 and thus, more than 160,000 vehicles are on the roads, of which 80 percent are motorbikes.⁷⁹ Highest ratio of vehicles is concentrated in the greater Male' region, where traffic congestion and overcrowding are serious concerns for the people's wellbeing and quality of life. As reported by International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) in its SDG updates for the Maldives, the annual level of PM_{2.5} exceeds WHO safe levels. 30 percent of the air pollution is from local sources while 70 percent is from distant sources. A National Air Pollution Action Plan published in 2019 outlines the actions required to reduce air pollution and emission. It also includes a roadmap for air quality management in the Maldives.

The compelled lifestyle in greater Male' region due to overcrowding and multistorey buildings has led to cramped living, isolation, and immobility of the aging population. Furthermore, the consultation for the second VNR highlighted that loss of active lifestyle due the lack of backyards, and opens green spaces, unsafe roads, and loss of neighborhood concept in Male' City that has led to socioeconomic and psychosocial issues such as, children and youth inactivity, isolation, loss of daily neighborhood socializing and wellbeing checks, alienation, and urban stress, etc. A common vision for sustainable city development is lacking and while the Maldives has announced net zero ambition, there has been no clear direction on sustainable vehicle use for individuals and private sector.

Investments in infrastructure in outer atolls have been ramped up to enhance the development for the residents in the atolls. The SAP has a specific focus on the Jazeera Dhiriulhun (Island life) theme. The government PSIP programmes include roads, harbours, bridges, ferry network, ports, airports, sewerage, water, and internet network infrastructure development across the atolls. Currently, 19 domestic airports are operational across the Maldives. The INPFN ferry network is in operation in the northern region and Lhaviyani atoll of the Maldives and is soon planned to expand to the southern atolls of the Maldives. The availability of sustainable finance and human resources with knowledge of infrastructure maintenance and upkeep are critical aspects to be accounted for in the development of infrastructure. Similarly, the climate resilience of the infrastructure, and other aspects for net zero attainment such as energy efficiency, are critical aspects for the sustainability of the infrastructure development in the atolls.

The ongoing INPFN programme can be an enabler for overcoming disparities and enhancing services in the atolls. By 2022, the resident population distribution across Male' City and

⁷⁹ Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation

inhabited islands was 49:51. In 2019, 61 percent of the people were resident in the atolls and 85 percent of the multidimensionally poor were in the atolls. The INPFN designed with the vision to bridge the gap in access to services through regionalization and decentralization with frequent and affordable ferry connections would enable better opportunities for people in the atolls with improved access to health services, school education, higher education, and economic activities between the islands in the zones. This would create opportunities for improved income and decrease poverty. However, the fiscal burden of the programme is huge as it is heavily subsidized by the government.

Investments geared towards enhancing public digital infrastructure are crucial for the improvement of services driven by digital technology, while also paving the way for the emergence of innovative services. The Digital Action Plan for 2021-2023, assigns priority to the establishment of robust institutional and regulatory leadership for digital transformation and the development of transformative digital public infrastructure. The dispersed nature of the island is a major challenge in creating robust digital infrastructure requiring substantial resources and intricate logistics. The geographical dispersion also hampers the uniform distribution of ICT services and the provision of stable and high-speed internet connectivity to everyone, an essential requirement for successful digitalization. The challenges to modernize the digital services include the integration of various data centers and public services into a single, cohesive, and efficient system.

BOX 20: INTERNET USE IN THE MALDIVES

The Maldives had a noteworthy increase in internet growth rate of 12.1 percent between January 2020 and January 2021. As of January 2023, there were 448.4 thousand internet users in the Maldives, representing an 85.8 percent internet penetration rate with respect to the total population. However, this trend began to plateau with a more modest growth of 1.3 percent from 2021 to 2022, followed by a slight contraction of 0.4 percent by January 2023. The country also has a remarkably high mobile service penetration.

Early 2023 statistics showed 812.3 thousand mobile subscriptions, equating a penetration rate of 155.4 percent. Nonetheless, at the beginning of 2023 an estimated 74.2 thousand individuals in the Maldives were not utilizing the internet, highlighting an area for improvement in bridging the digital divide. These patterns signify the continuing need for proactive measures to promote digital inclusivity within the country, especially considering the transformative potential of digital tools for socio-economic development.

Source: Ministry of Environment, Climate Change and Technology

BOX 21: THE GOVERNMENT E-LETTER MANAGEMENT SYSTEM (GEMS)

The Government e-Letter Management System (GEMS), established in 2010, has since become a vital conduit for official communications among government entities. By February 2023, it had facilitated over 9.3 million official messages across 512 public sector organizations, enabling nearly 80 thousand electronic exchanges monthly among approximately 500 agencies. The necessity of this platform was underscored during the COVID-19 pandemic, as its VPN technology facilitated work-from-home setups for several government officials. The temporary closure of face-to-face public services led to the rollout of an alternative digital communication service, GOV.MV Message, in September 2021. This service provides the public with a standardized means to send and track letters to government offices. Leveraging insights from the usage of GEMS and GOV.MV Message, the NRRP prioritized the development of Gems Workspace. This modern app, with a 'digital first' focus, is designed to enable transformative, seamless, and hybrid work through integrated Message, Case, Task, and Staff management. It allows completely digital communication, including electronic signatures, thus obviating the need for third-party apps or traditional signatures, and propelling a new era of internet-based hybrid work environments.



Source: Ministry of Environment, Climate Change and Technology

Amidst all the development, increase in waste generation is a serious concern for the Maldives. Increase in single use plastics, is a major challenge for the Maldives. With heavy dependence on tourism and the main reason for the visitors to the Maldives being the pristine natural beauty of the Maldives,⁸⁰ plastic waste in the ocean, on coral reefs and untouched islands is a serious concern. The dispersed nature of the small islands, growing waste on the islands, difficulties in managing waste on each island and the challenges for transport of waste to a waste management site are serious impediments for proper waste management. Because of the lack of management facilities, the waste had been collected and openly dumped on Thilafushi island in the greater Male' region until open burning was stopped in late 2021. Over 800 metric tons of municipal solid waste is generated every day from the Greater Malé region and 32 inhabited outer islands and 86 tourist resorts.⁸¹ It is estimated that solid waste generated per person per day is at a rate of 1.8 kg in Malé, 0.8 kg in the other inhabited islands, and 3.5 kg in tourist resorts.⁸² In 2021, the country declared a list of Single-Use Plastics (SUPs) banned for import into the Maldives. Although the Maldives enacted the Waste Management Act in late 2022, it came with serious implications to the country, as the law allows importation of waste into the country, which is currently in the process of being revised. The country is planning to establish three regional waste management facilities which facilitate energy recovery (waste to energy). These include Thilafushi Regional Solid Waste Management Facility in the greater Male' region, Raa Atoll Vandhoo and the Addu City Facility. The Thilafushi facility being established with support from the ADB, and other financing partners is planned to be equipped with waste-to-energy technology, with installation of 8 MW of solar. Adopting sustainable waste management is an imperative for the Maldives and would need to be a key area of focus for sustainable development in the short and medium term.

⁸⁰ Maldives Visitor Survey

⁸¹ Asian Development Bank. Tackling the Solid Waste Management Challenge in Maldives, 2021

⁸² <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2017/06/23/maldives-improve-solid-waste-management>

Leave No One behind

- People in remote islands, in poor households and in congested households are most at risk of being left behind in their human wellbeing and development outcomes.
- In the rapid digital transformation across the country, people with the required digital skills and digital literacy are at risk of being left behind. These include elderly, especially people in the atolls and unskilled foreign migrants. Women are dropped out never joined the formal workforce also particularly at risk of being left behind with historically low participation rate in economy and lower opportunities for formal development.

Actions for Progress

In the immediate term within the next 1-2 years

- Communicate the vision and strategy for affordable and sustainable housing for the Maldives and ensure public spaces and housing are designed to ensure safety for all including women, children, elderly and PWDs.
- Strengthen public funds utilization for housing sector targeting according to the specific needs of Male' City and the atolls and spent on targeted policies and supporting households with the greatest need.
- Strengthen neighbourhood concept and urban development and promote active lifestyle through infrastructure development and increased awareness.
- Strengthen the building codes targeted at safety and sustainable consumption for strengthened implementation in Male' City and across other islands.
- Improve ambient air quality through increased green spaces and vegetation cover especially in Male' City and ensure adequate coverage of green belt and vegetation in land use plans of island development.
- Accelerate digital literacy amongst the workforce and the society by targeting those with highest digital divide including elderly, PWDs women and unskilled foreign migrants.
- Develop cross sectoral linkages for the full and effective utilization of the public transport network services for improving access to health care, education, social services, driving entrepreneurship and establishing economic linkages across the atolls.
- Strengthen preparedness for the digital economy acceleration with mandatory legislation to prevent cybercrimes and enhance cybersecurity and confidentiality and privacy of data.
- Ensure responsible consumption of waste across households and industries and enable sustainable waste management across the country.

In the medium to long term within the next 5-7 years

- Strengthen resilience and climate proofing of critical infrastructure through green building codes and standards.
- Increase green spaces and recreational spaces especially in the greater Male' region.

- Strengthen atoll and island council and community capacity with information on the critical water, sanitation and energy infrastructure being developed on the islands for effective monitoring, oversight, and sustainable consumption.
- Ensure responsible consumption of waste and develop a sustainable waste management solution for all inhabited islands, tourist resorts, industrial islands, floating vessels, and uninhabited islands for waste transportation and management.
- Enhance mechanisms for collection on information on losses and damages from natural and economic disasters and health pandemics.
- Strengthen the preservation of cultural and natural heritage for sustainable development of islands through enhanced capacity and resources.
- Strengthen policies to enable vehicle reduction and safe pedestrian spaces.
- Increase the use of sustainable e-vehicles for public transport in all cities.

Environment & Climate Action

Clean Water and Sanitation,
Clean Energy

Conservation and Sustainable
Marine Resource Use

Sustainable Consumption and
Use of Terrestrial Ecosystem

Climate Action



Clean Water and Sanitation

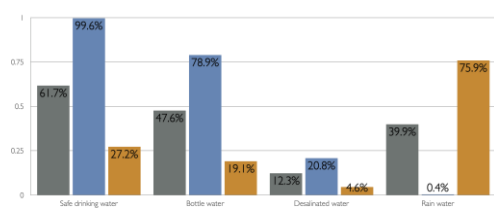


Figure 66: Proportion of population using safely managed drinking water services in 2019

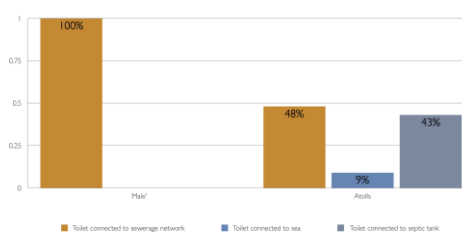


Figure 67: Percentage of households by type of sewerage facilities used in 2019

78 percent of the population has access to pipe-water supply and 85.5 percent of population has access to a sewerage system as of March 2023. The water and sewerage sector of the Maldives is closely aligned with SDG 6, and over the years, provision of safe water supply and adequate sanitation for all is recognized as a high priority for development. Access to fresh water is limited in the country and ground water and rainwater are the main sources of freshwater. Degradation of the water from climatic and non-climatic factors such as population growth and concentration and pollution impact freshwater resources in the Maldives and the risk of salinizing of the groundwater are serious concerns for people living in the low-lying small islands.⁸³ The existing water reserve is facing increased pressure from overuse and pollution. Increased rainfall and rising sea levels due to climate change polluting the ground water lens is a persisting risk to the communities. Pipe-water has been available in Male' City since 1992.

Pipe-water is currently available in 66 islands of the Maldives and sewerage connections are available in 97 islands. According to HIES 2019, only 27.2 percent of the population in the atolls use safe drinking water and the large majority of the islands used rainwater. While 100 percent of the households in Male' are connected to a piped sewerage network, only about 48 percent of the households in the atolls were connected to a sewerage network, and the rest of the majority in the atolls had toilets connected to a septic tank. Proportion of households using safely managed sanitation services including a hand washing facility with soap and water was 98.9 percent and 97.9 percent in Male' and the atolls respectively in 2016/2017. To improve the quality of drinking water in the islands, the government launched an ambitious target of installing pipe-water facilities across all 187 islands of the Maldives by the end of 2023. The initiative was however affected by the unprecedented financial impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic. Pipe water and sewer network connections in several islands have been contracted out for installation and are at different phases of implementation. Nonetheless, the sewerage networks designed to pump raw sewage into the ocean without proper treatments pose health and environmental risks.

Drinking water shortages during the dry season have become common which poses risk to health and safety of the community. A total of 1,460 tons of water was shipped out of Male' in 2018 to 48 islands, with a total population 45,798 people (10 percent) and increased nearly three times in 2019 to 3,887 tons of water to 82 islands with a population of 73,622 people (16 percent). The government spent a total of MVR 3.3 million in 2018 and MVR 11 million in 2019 respectively to provide desalinated water to these islands.⁸⁴ To combat this issue, the government had conducted several projects such as; provision of individual rainwater harvesting systems to all households across the inhabited islands, development and rehabilitation of community rainwater harvesting systems in the islands, installation of stand-alone reverse osmosis (RO) plant systems, development of improved rainwater harvesting systems and a long term sustainable approach by developing water supply network with household connections in all the inhabited islands, irrespective of island size or population. RO technology is dependent on energy for its operation. The legal framework for water and sanitation—Water and Sewerage Act was enacted in 2020 with a Utility Regulatory Authority to enforce it. The Act mandates water production within the country to be fully powered via renewable sources addressing dependency on fuel imports for water security and net zero ambition of the country. The National Water and Sewerage Action Plan (2020-

⁸³ Second National Communications of the Maldives to UNFCCC

⁸⁴ Maldives National Water Accounts 2018 and 2019

2025) developed in line with the Act outlines the strategic implementation and monitoring framework to implement the Act. Renewable energy has been integrated in 32 islands for water production.

Leave No One Behind

- Multidimensional poverty is higher in households and population without clean water and improved sanitation as they are at higher risk of health impacts from consequences of poor quality and unhygienic water and sanitation.

Actions for Progress

In the immediate term within the next 1-2 years

- Ensure water security particularly those at risk of water shortage and safe drinking water is available in all islands.
- Increase public awareness and implement water efficiency measures with focus on safe drinking water through knowledge-based water resources management and nature-based solutions.
- Strengthen the systems for water use management and improve efficiency.

In the medium to long term within the next 5-7 years

- Strengthen partnerships between the enforcement agencies and councils on enhancing information on critical water and sanitation infrastructure management, water resource management and maintenance and problem solving.
- Strengthen the participation with civil society and local communities in improving water and sanitation management.
- Reduce pollution and improve water quality through sustainable methods of treatment of sewage across all islands and increase recycling and safe use.
- Ensure the use of integrated water resource management across the islands for sustainable consumption of water.

Clean Energy

The Maldives has achieved 100 percent electricity connectivity across all islands, including the most remote islands since 2008. However, coupled with high reliance on imported diesel for power generation, lack of economies of scale and poor infrastructure has resulted in one of the highest tariffs in the region—as high as MVR 4.5 (US\$ 0.29 cents) for domestic users and MVR 7.5 (US\$ 0.49 cents) for institutions.⁸⁵ Equity and adequacy of electricity capacity on some islands are concerns. In 2022, the country imported more than 804,495.52 metric tons of oil,⁸⁶ with diesel accounting for 80 percent of the total fuel imports. Bulk of the imported fuel is used to generate electricity. The power production is near-completely reliant on diesel to run the generators. Moving from a fossil-based to a renewable-based energy model is the best way to make electricity cheaper for everyone, reduce fuel subsidy and carbon emissions improving the fiscal and climate vulnerability of the country.

Thus, the Maldives is increasing renewable energy mix in the total final energy production. Coupled with investment by the public sector and the private sector (mostly in tourist resorts), solar powered renewable energy has been increasing in the Maldives. The renewable energy projects funded by the World Bank—Accelerating Sustainable Private Investment in Renewable Energy (ASPIRE) and Accelerating Renewable Energy Integration and Sustainable Energy (ARISE)—combined is expected to install more than 53.5 megawatts (MW) of solar capacity and 50 megawatt hours (MWH) of battery storage.⁸⁷ Resulting in reduction in diesel consumption of approximately 30 million liters per annum. This is estimated to reduce the fuel import bill by approximately 23 million liters per annum (approximately US\$ 12 million annually) with a projected lifetime saving of US\$ 300 million over 25 years. The two projects have supported the gradual increase of renewable energy capacity in the country from 1.5 MW to 17.5 MW.⁸⁸ Similarly, the Preparing Outer Island for Sustainable Energy Development – POISED undertaken in collaboration with the Climate Investment Funds (CIF) and the ADB is designed to install solar hybrid systems in 160 islands across the Maldives. The project added 1,794 businesses with improved access. Similarly, the improved energy systems benefitted 39,939 in 2020 and increased to 117,692 in 2021. The annual electricity production surpassed its target of 9.7 MW per year to over 17.5 MW. The annual greenhouse gases (GHGs) emissions were reduced by 34,166 tons.⁸⁹ In 2019, six percent of energy generation was from renewable sources with solar PV being the source of renewable. Renewable energy share in the total final electricity consumption was however just one percent in 2019 as reported by IRENA. These partnerships and international support demonstrate the importance of clean, renewable, and cost-efficient energy solutions especially for the small island developing countries such as the Maldives to shift to low carbon and climate resilient development, and to accelerate climate action.

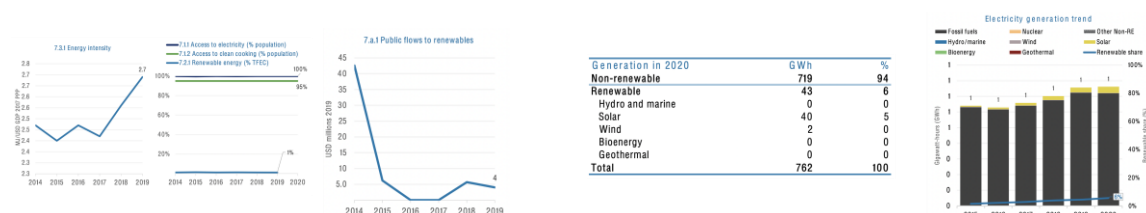


Figure 68: SDG 7 progress update for Maldives by IRENA 2014-2019
Source: IRENA

Renewable energy investment opportunities have been increasing in the Maldives. These have come in the form of unsolicited proposals (USPs), competitive bidding—Engineering Procurement and Construction (EPC), Independent Power Producer (IPP), and Power Purchasing Agreement (PPA). The ASPIRE project mobilized US\$ 28.3 million for 17.5 MW PV installations by the government, resulting in an increase in investment volume in renewable energy.⁹⁰ In 2014, the first 1.5 MW solar project under ASPIRE had only four investor bids and resulted in a high-power purchase price (PPA) of 21 US cents per unit of electricity. In 2020, however, the number of bids for the 5 MW project in Male’

⁸⁵ World Bank 2022. De-risking Investments to Build a Green Maldives, April 2022

⁸⁶ Maldives Customs Service, 2023

⁸⁷ <https://blogs.worldbank.org/endingpovertyinsouthasia/why-maldives-5-mw-solar-project-game-changer>

⁸⁸ Ministry of Environment, Climate Change and Technology

⁸⁹ <https://www.cif.org/news/project-spotlight-preparing-outer-island-sustainable-electricity-development-project-poised>

⁹⁰ World Bank 2023. Powered by the Sunshine: Achieving Cheaper, Cleaner and Sustainable Energy in the Maldives

increased to 15 and resulted in a PPA price of 10.9 US cents. Furthermore, in 2022, 58 investors expressed interest in the third 11 MW solar project in the remote outer islands at a record low price of 9.8 US cents. This is one of the lowest tariffs for any small island developing state (SIDS)⁹¹.

Energy efficiency standards and labeling programme “Hakathari” has been introduced with a financing scheme. The programme is a demand side measure to promote energy efficiency and reduce GHG emissions. It is currently voluntary and includes air conditioners (up to 24,226Btu/Hr.), refrigerators (100-650 liters) and washing machines (up to 14kg). The programme provides consumers at the time of purchase with a simple and clear indication of the energy saving potential of the electrical appliances. A label on the appliances showcases a five-star rating system, indicating level of energy efficiency and energy savings.⁹²

A Road Map for the Energy Sector 2020–2030 has been developed. Two scenarios conducive to the Maldives’ national energy sector vision of “provision of sufficient, reliable, sustainable, secure and affordable energy for a prosperous the Maldives” are presented in the Road Map. They include (i) the base case scenario—achieving unconditional and conditional greenhouse gas (GHG) emission reduction targets as established in NDC. This scenario forecasts a continuous and sustained moderate transformation of the energy matrix that will result in 29 percent of fossil fuels reduced compared to a BAU situation and (ii) the paradigm shift scenario—representing a fundamental transformational change for the country beyond the target established in the current the Maldives’ NDC, with a profound impact on the energy matrix that will result in 52 percent of fossil fuels reduced compared to a BAU situation. The paradigm shift scenario requires a strengthened policy framework and a well-functioning financial scheme duly considering the challenges and risks associated with the nationwide transformation.⁹³ The Road Map is currently being updated to incorporate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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- Islands and households without adequate electricity and high electricity costs would face challenges especially with growing demand for energy for cooling, lighting, and the need for digital devices and services in the rapid shift towards digitization.

Actions for Progress

In the immediate term within the next 1-2 years

- Increase awareness and empower households for sustainable energy utilization and consumption.
- Promote the energy efficiency programme to all consumers and lead towards behaviours change from suppliers and consumers through evidence-based design using multiple mixes of technologies to address contextual issues of islands with varying population densities landscape/land use to ensure sustainable energy use.
- Enable increase of household uptake of renewable energy in islands to increase national clean energy uptake, reduce fiscal vulnerability as well as decrease household cost for electricity and empower households to become prosumers.
- Develop and strengthen policies for sustainable land transport use in Male’ City and other atolls of the Maldives with focus on reduced congestion and emissions.
- Develop policies for sustainable maritime transport.

⁹¹ World Bank 2023. Why the Maldives 5 MW Solar Project is a Game Changer

⁹² <https://www.environment.gov.mv/v2/en/hakathari-program>

⁹³ Asian Development Bank. A Brighter Future for Maldives Powered by Renewables: Road Map for the Energy Sector 2020–2030

- Strengthen the financial landscape and availability of diverse financial instruments and innovative finance with participation of households, and private sector to increase benefits from the energy industry and enhance their engagement in the implementation of renewable energy.
- Strengthen partnerships with the private sector, especially the tourism sector as the largest consumer of energy and fisheries and agriculture sectors to increase renewable energy output and enhance energy efficiency and energy security.

In the medium to long term within the next 5-7 years

- Increase public and private sector participation including tourism sector uptake of renewable energy integration into their energy systems to increase total national clean energy uptake.
- Enhance information and knowledge of local councils, WDCs, CSOs and community members on critical energy infrastructure management, maintenance and problem solving.
- Strengthen partnerships between the utilities, councils, and local communities on enhancing information on sustainable energy consumption sustainable, energy infrastructure management and maintenance and problem solving.
- Facilitate clean energy research and testing in the Maldives in the context of small island energy needs and utilization.

Conservation and Sustainable Marine Resource Use

Corals are a vital resource for the Maldives economy and human settlements. The economy of the Maldives is based on its rich biodiversity, and tourism and fisheries are critical economic sectors for livelihood, employment, and food security. Coral reefs of the Maldives constitute 3.14 percent of the world's coral reef area—seventh largest coral reef system in the world.⁹⁴ These reefs are a shelter to more than 700 marine lives and globally significant populations of whale sharks, manta rays, reef sharks, and more than 21 species of whales and dolphins and significant coral reef species—Napoleon wrasse, giant grouper, giant clam, and black coral.⁹⁵ The impacts of climate change on the coral reefs of the Maldives are very high. Approximately 70 percent of the coral reefs in the Maldives were affected from the 2016 global bleaching event.⁹⁶ Ocean acidification is also a growing threat to the coral reef ecosystem and by the end of 21st century; calcification rates may decrease by up to 60 percent with a doubling of atmospheric CO₂ concentrations.⁹⁷ A future decline in fisheries poses serious risk for food security as tuna is the primary source of protein for the people of the Maldives. When the COVID-19 impacted the tourism industry and threatened income and food security for several people, fisheries was an important buffer for the people in remote islands who were cut off from Male' City with its supply of food and necessities. Similarly, the reefs provide ecosystem services such as climate regulation, storm buffering and coastal protection to the people resident in the low-lying small islands of the Maldives. The National Fisheries and Agriculture Policy 2019 – 2029 was formulated with seven pillars, all linked to SDGs and with a mission to sustainably manage all marine living resources in the maritime zones of the Maldives.

The country has leveraged on the natural ecosystem and biodiversity of the island nation to develop a successful tourism sector. The Maldives has enjoyed robust tourism growth while having gone through negative impacts from external shocks related to global events, the largest of which was felt in 2020 from the unprecedented COVID-19 shock. More than 1.6 million tourists visited the Maldives in 2021 and the reef systems and fish life are the basis for the key tourism activities such as snorkeling, diving and fishing in the Maldives. The most popular motivations for visitors to choose the Maldives as their holiday destination were the pristine beaches and the underwater beauty of the Maldives.⁹⁸ While climate change impacts on the reefs are detrimental, development related to expansion of tourist beds, reclamation, beach replenishment, solid waste and wastewater disposal, and high visitor numbers in popular dive sites impacts the coral reef ecosystems and tourism. As tourism keeps expanding, arrivals target has been increased, and tourism beds expansion continues. The implications of these changes on the environment from emissions, biodiversity loss, consumption patterns such as chemical discharge from laundry, untreated wastewater discharge and poor waste disposal practices are concerning threats to marine life and coral reefs.

The first ever Maldives Red List of threatened species showed 92 percent of the coral species are among threatened with extinction categories.⁹⁹ The three priority taxa identified for initial assessments included marine reptiles, corals, and mangroves. Of the 39 coral species assessed, 23 (59 percent) are critically endangered, six (15 percent) endangered, seven (18 percent) vulnerable and three (eight percent) near threatened. Under the Maldives Red List, assessments of five marine reptiles were assessed. Two turtle varieties were classified as critically endangered while data was deficient for the other three turtle varieties.¹⁰⁰

The Maldives joined the worldwide aim of protecting 30 percent of the global ocean by 2030. A total of 79 areas with 54,314.67 hectares have been designated as protected sites in the Maldives. This includes 14 percent of the coral reefs.¹⁰¹ The percentage of terrestrial protected areas was 2.3 percent in 2020.¹⁰² Baa Atoll was designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 2011 and Addu Atoll and Fuvahmulah were declared UNESO Biosphere Reserves in 2020. Education and awareness are

⁹⁴ <https://www.cbd.int/doc/world/mv/mv-nr-05-en.pdf>

⁹⁵ <https://www.cbd.int/doc/world/mv/mv-nr-05-en.pdf>

⁹⁶ Rapid Assessment of Natural Environments in the Maldives

⁹⁷ Second National Communications of the Maldives to UNFCCC

⁹⁸ Maldives Visitor Survey

⁹⁹ <https://www.iucn.org/story/202211/maldives-launches-assessments-39-coral-species>

¹⁰⁰ <http://www.environment.gov.mv/v2/en/maldives-red-list>

¹⁰¹ <https://presidency.gov.mv/Press/Article/26871>

¹⁰² <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/ER.LND.PTLD.ZS?locations=MV>

key to valuing biodiversity at all levels especially within the school students and youth and the adult population.

There is growing pressure on reef-based fish stocks due to increasing local demand and from tourism driven demand. Fish stock assessments for local species have never been conducted in the Maldives to date due to capacity constraints and a lack of suitable data. Anecdotal evidence shows an increase in reef fish consumption by local communities and for tourism consumption. The increased tourist arrivals have potentially increased the pressure on the reef resources, from marine activities and from consumption. The loosely regulated reef fish catch is a risk for the country dependent on marine activities for its tourism revenue. Bulk of the recorded total annual fish catch comprises of tuna species, namely, skipjack and yellowfin tuna. A large portion of the skipjack caught is used for consumption, but they are also exported as frozen and canned products, while large yellowfin tuna is mostly exported to countries in the European Union (EU) as fresh or chilled products. A catch documentation and verification scheme is in place for all tuna (bar Maldivian fish) and groupers. Illegal, Unregulated and Unreported (IUU) fishing by foreign vessels from the Maldives' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is a concern for the country. However, the number of infringements appears to have decreased since the adoption of the new Fisheries Act and implementing regulations in 2019. It is estimated that annually 10,000-15,000 tonnes of tuna are caught illegally by foreign vessel.¹⁰³ The Maldives National Plan of Action to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing was formulated in 2019. It identifies action points to reduce the negative social, economic, and environmental impacts of IUU fishing in the Maldives, and of Maldivian vessels operating outside of the Maldives' EEZ. The Plan also contributed towards the SDG Goal 14 on life below water.

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- Population entirely dependent on the natural resources for income and livelihood are at higher risk of being left behind. Women in informal economy in agriculture sector, fishermen and youth in tourism sector at higher risk of being left behind given loss of resources and resource driven income generation. People in the atolls in the informal economy are also at a greater loss of being left behind.
- Girls and women with low connection and engagement with the ocean and marine environment are further at risk of being left behind from the increase in opportunities in the tourism and other sectors with required marine skills.

Actions for Progress

In the immediate to short term within the next 1-2 years

- Incorporate and take into account the threats (e.g, predicted El Niño events) and vulnerabilities, available data and information (e.g. and sea surface temperature forecasts) of the marine environment in policy decisions and development projects that may affect the marine environment.
- Strengthen management of protected and conserved areas to maximise benefits from the conservation measures.
- Strengthen the capacity for environmental monitoring and surveillance through management solutions, improved resources, and technology solutions across all islands.
- Strengthen policies for sustainable consumption of natural resources by all economic sectors and balance of natural resources for consumption by communities and businesses.
- Increase awareness and empower island communities with digital technologies, skills, and reporting tools for increased management of natural resources through technology use.

¹⁰³ <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/mdv195981.pdf>

- Strengthen the implementation of the policies and legal framework for marine pollution reduction.
- Increase awareness of the people including children in schools and community about the natural habitat and biodiversity of the Maldives, including care for vulnerable and threatened species
- Strengthen the role of CSOs in conservation and promotion of sustainable resource use.
- Introduce ‘renewable energy industrial precincts’ where businesses can exchange information on resources and technology.

In the medium to long term within the next 5-7 years

- Develop policies and implementation measures for facilitating research on fish stock management.
- Enforce management of protected areas by ensuring adequate human resource capacity and resources.
- Empower island communities including girls with knowledge and skills to identify threats and manage their marine ecosystems and fish life and regular monitoring of these ecosystems.
- Strengthen disaster preparedness through awareness, human resources, technology and data and information use.
- Increase technology use for surveillance, monitoring, and management of oceans and biodiversity.

Climate Action

The Maldives is one of the lowest and flattest countries in the world, with over 80 percent of the total land area less than one meter above mean sea level. The double chain of islets that form the Maldives archipelago of small islands is around 860 kilometers (km) from north to south and varies from 80 to 120 km from east to west. The total land area of the entire nation is estimated to be approximately 298 km², making the country the sixth smallest in terms of land area, as well as one of the world's most geographically dispersed sovereign states. The reef system is seventh largest in the world with 4,513 km², and the largest in the Indian Ocean. About 99 percent of the Maldives geography is ocean. Due to its location over the equator in the Indian Ocean, the Maldives experiences a typical equatorial monsoonal climate and experiences warm and humid tropical climate throughout the year, with seasonal fluctuations in temperature and rainfall due to the monsoon. The weather is dominated by two monsoons—the southwest monsoon and the northeast monsoon.¹⁰⁴

The Maldives is extremely vulnerable to climate change and climate change poses an existential threat to the low-lying islands of the Maldives. The islands of the Maldives are particularly vulnerable to sea level rise. Observed erosion has increased and in 2016 was reported to have caused an overall land loss between 0.81 to 3.66 ha during the observation periods. The risk of flooding is high and is likely to grow in significance and threaten the ability of livelihoods with significant damage to human settlements and infrastructure on many islands. The Maldives' economy's heavy reliance on tourism represents a major vulnerability, and the sector is likely to come under pressure from sea-level rise, temperature extremes, and changes to global tourism behaviour and preferences.¹⁰⁵

The country's economy and society are particularly sensitive to sea level rise, coastal storms, and flooding. The country's critical infrastructures such as utility services, hospitals, transport, communication infrastructures and waste management centres are located within very close proximity to the coastlines and exposed to coastal hazards such as sea swells, storm surges and related coastal flooding. Similarly, a vast portion of the tourism industry's infrastructure, fisheries sector, population and housing structures, and over critical infrastructure are primarily located in regions that are within 100 m of the coastline.¹⁰⁶ The 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami demonstrated the extreme vulnerability of the country with significant impacts to the country's critical infrastructure—noteworthy the only international airport of the country being shut down for several days. Climate change impacts on people's health from heat and extreme weather events, especially floods due to heavy rainfall have direct health impacts with vector borne diseases being the most prominent indirect impacts on the human health for the Maldives. With access to secondary and tertiary health care being a concern for the dispersed islands of the Maldives, at extreme weather events, access to higher tiered health care facilities is a challenge and a risk to human wellbeing.¹⁰⁷ Reported incidences of coastal erosion, flooding and storm surges have been increasing.

Adaptation measures in the Maldives are limited and hindered by limited financial and human capacity. Adaptation measures and actions range from soft and 'hard' engineered coastal protection measures, enhanced water security, improved access to health care and strengthened public health response, population consolidation and development to larger islands where the necessary facilities could be provided and adaptation in difference sectors and through community initiatives.¹⁰⁸ The National Adaptation Plan of Action (NAPA) was adopted in 2006 and identified eight areas vulnerable to human induced climate change—land loss and human settlements, critical infrastructure, water resources, agriculture, human health, coral reef biodiversity, fisheries, and tourism. Following the 2004 Tsunami, Safer Island Development Programme (SIDP) was initiated and in 2012 the Tourism Adaptation Project (TAP) was launched. In 2021, Building Climate Resilient Safer Islands in the Maldives was initiated to utilize Green Climate Fund's funding, co-financed by Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the government of the Maldives to reduce vulnerability of the Maldives to climate change from increase in coastal disaster risk and land loss due to acceleration of coastal erosion.¹⁰⁹ Effort also has been made to

¹⁰⁴ Second National Communications of the Maldives to UNFCCC

¹⁰⁵ Asian Development Bank 2021. Maldives Climate Risk Country Profile

¹⁰⁶ Asian Development Bank 2021. Maldives Climate Risk Country Profile

¹⁰⁷ Second National Communications of the Maldives to UNFCCC

¹⁰⁸ Second National Communications of the Maldives to UNFCCC

¹⁰⁹ <https://www.environment.gov.mv/v2/en/news/19423>

transform the energy sector towards renewables. Given the small island geography and small land area of the islands, shore protection/ elevation is the only adaptation option for the Maldives. ¹¹⁰ The adaptation component of the revised Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) includes disaster risk reduction and management including improving the country's preparedness for possible future extreme weather events and strengthening collaboration with other island communities.

Table 8: GHG emissions inventory comparison 1994 and 2011

Indicators	1994	2011	Annual Growth
Total GHG emission (Gg CO ₂ e)	152.977	1225.598	13.05%
Energy	128.995	1152.869	13.05%
Waste	23.982	72.729	6.75%
Emission per Capita (kg CO ₂ e/ capita)	624.692	3696.604	11.025%

The total GHG emission for the Maldives for the year 2011 was 1,225.598 Gg CO₂e—less than 0.0035% of the global GHG emissions. Carbon dioxide (CO₂) is the main greenhouse gas (GHG) emission for the Maldives. Total CO₂ emissions in 2011 was 1,225.598 Gg CO₂ and accounts for 94.8 percent of the total emission, with emission from energy sector being the highest— 1152.869 Gg CO₂ (94 percent). Within the energy sector, electricity generation accounts for the highest GHG emission. Tourism sector constituted over 51 percent of the electricity use in the country, followed by transportation. The GHG emissions of the country have grown at an average rate of 13 percent per year in the past 16 years, an increase from 625 kg CO₂e per capita in 1994 to 3,697 kg CO₂e per capita in 2011, from 170 g CO₂e per GDP(PPP) US\$ to 291 g CO₂e per GDP (PPP) US\$. GHG emission from the energy sector increased approximately at 7 percent per year over the last 10 years. According to the various government estimates for the GHG emissions, it is projected to have increased between 2,000 and 2,500 Gg CO₂e by 2020.

The Maldives has set an ambitious target to achieve net zero by 2030. The Maldives reported its Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDC) targets to reduce its emission by 10 percent from business as usual (BAU) and reduce emissions to 24 percent by 2030 subject to availability of donor assistance.¹¹¹ An update to the NDC in 2020 stated to reduce emission by 26 percent and strive to reach net zero by 2030 with adequate international support and assistance. The updated NDC also included the vision towards a 'Blue Economy'—promoting sustainable economic growth while safeguarding the oceans, the plans to phase out single use plastic and initiatives to protect and preserve the environment such as the commitment to protect at least one island, one reef and one wetland from each atoll in the country.¹¹²

The Maldives announced the country's ambition to become net zero by 2030 at the UN Climate Ambition Summit in December 2020. This strengthened the country's commitment towards climate change and renewable energy targets following the projections to lose 80 percent of its land over the next few decades. A Climate Emergency Act was enacted in 2021, which mandates carbon budgeting and an ambitious target to achieve carbon neutrality by 2030. Both mitigation and adaptation measures require transformative levels of technology transfer—impeded by the lack of necessary financial resources, human and technical capacity in the country.

¹¹⁰ Second National Communications of the Maldives to UNFCCC

¹¹¹ Maldives Nationally Determined Contributions Implementation Plan

¹¹² Update of Nationally Determined Contributions of Maldives

BOX 22: ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS ON AGRICULTURE

Agriculture is an important sector for food security and livelihoods of farmers, mostly women in informal economy. Although agriculture can't cater to the local demand, 17 crops of national significance have been identified for prioritization for farming. Introduced species is a major risk for agriculture, along with climate and disaster risk. A coconut rehabilitation programme has commenced recently with 11 islands in seven atolls identified for rehabilitation of 5,000 coconut palms.

In the stakeholder consultations with farmers undertaken for the VNR, farmers from popular farming islands in Shaviyani Atoll explained the climate change impact on farming, especially the case of decreased natural pollination and severe economic losses resulting from increase in climatic events such as flooding, and not having insurance mechanisms to account for losses. The introduction of new pests and diseases are also a threat to farming. Adequate quarantine periods are necessary for imported plants, to prevent the spread of diseases to ensure economic and environmental cost to farming and especially the threat to coconut palms is minimized.

The stakeholder consultations undertaken for the VNR also highlighted the concern about increase in pesticide use. The fertilisers and pesticides used are very dangerous and are affecting the soil quality and composition, challenging growth of crops. This is also affecting the water lens detrimentally and ultimately affecting the health of the people. The increase in unskilled foreign migrants in the agriculture sector and lack of knowledge, easy availability of these products without the right information is worsening the situation. Farmers need more than information, but demonstration centres and technology investments for transforming the industry to move towards improved farming practices and attract the next generation of farmers. Some critical challenges to farmers are timely transport of crops, storage facilities in strategic locations, low market access and penetration to tourism industry and price competition with imported products.

Leave No One behind

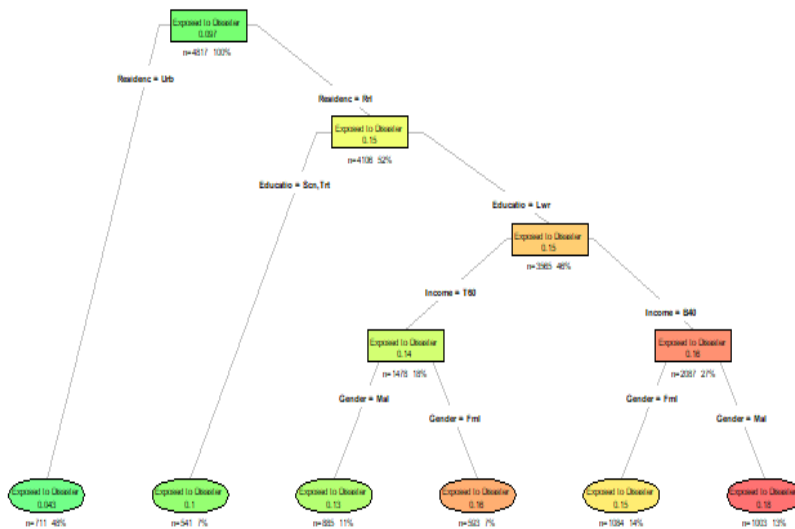


Figure 69: Informal employment
Source: Source: UNESCAP illustration using HIES 2019 data

- On average, 11 percent of households in the Maldives have been exposed to at least one type of disaster in 2019. However, some households are much more vulnerable than others. Furthest behind group (red box at the bottom-right for Figure 69) is comprised of poorer households headed by men with lower education living outside of Male'. Among such households, 17 percent have been exposed to at least one type of disaster. Furthest ahead group is comprised of households living in Male'

among whom 5 percent have been exposed to disasters. Overall, being a resident in Male' decreases exposure to disaster by threefold.

- People resident in low lying remote small islands with increased climate vulnerability to disasters and incidents as well as people in agriculture and fisheries sector are at higher risk of being left behind with loss to income, assets, property, culture, and lifestyle given climatic incidents.

Actions for Progress

In the short term within the next 1-2 years

- Increase investment volume for disaster preparedness tools and technology.
- Increase investment volume for climate proofing critical infrastructure and implementation of adaptation and mitigation measures.
- Increase knowledge and awareness amongst people on resilience and climate adaptation and mitigation.
- Empower communities with knowledge and information and tools on climate resilient infrastructure development.
- Strengthen early warning systems and risk management tools for natural and climatic disasters.
- Introduce demonstration hubs for improved agriculture practices for safe food production.
- Increase awareness and demonstration of climate resilient smart islands and increase investments in developing climate resilient islands.

In the medium to long term within the next 5-7 years

- Increase participation of women in disaster and post disaster recovery decision making.
- Strengthen the capacity of women in women headed households in islands to best respond to disasters and post disasters.
- Strengthen island councils with information and tools on disaster and pandemic preparedness, response, and management.
- Strengthen climate risk insurance mechanisms for building resilience against the loss of assets and livelihoods due to extreme events, particularly for farmers.
- Enhance the climate and weather forecasting tools for decision making and increase public awareness on climate change.
- Strengthen co-ordination among finance, industry, community, and all government departments to increase investments in adaptation measures and achieve emissions reduction goals.

MEANS OF IMPLEMENTATION

Planning System

A long-term sustainable development agenda and planning system is essential for the Maldives to mainstream and implement the SDGs. While the SAP (2019-2023) and its alignment to SDGs and the NRRP are progressive steps for the 2030 Agenda implementation in the Maldives, it is a medium-term document and lacks continuity to give people ambition and hope in long-term sustainable development. The Maldives is at a critical juncture in its governance cycle, with five-year election pledges shaping the development trajectory and risks policy changes and policy U-turns¹¹³, especially affecting regional and island development, decentralization, economic policy, and priority sectoral development when governments change. The country is preparing for a new Presidential election in 2023, followed by a Parliamentary election in 2024, the outcomes of which will inform public policy, development agenda, fiscal priorities for the next five years and transform people's lives and livelihoods, lately in unimaginable ways over a very short period. Meanwhile, the cost of such changes on people's wellbeing, the resilience of the economy, fiscal sustainability, disaster resilience and impact on biodiversity and nature are not fully accounted.

The prioritization of national planning through a ministerial function by the incumbent government since late 2018 was seen as a step forward for the planning system. SDG coordination function was thus transferred to the MNPHI. Although the MNPHI formulated a NSP and undertook work on drafting a long-term National Development Plan, these documents failed to be adopted. A Bill on National Planning was also drafted but has not yet been successful in forming into law. However, important policies and laws continue to be shaped by the government and the Parliament. The SAP, NRRP the changes to the Decentralization Act, GEAP, the NDCs, and the Climate Emergency Act are some key policies and laws that can contribute to social and economic progress, gender equality and preservation of biodiversity and natural ecosystems and address climate vulnerabilities, which in turn can drive wellbeing and sustainability. However, the absence of a planned long term sustainable development strategy risks important policies and legal framework never being realized and thus resulting in disproportionate impact on the vulnerable population with risk of these groups being left behind.

Shaping development through long term strategy with focus on human wellbeing, and fiscal and climate resilience for sustainable development is pertinent to the Maldives. Having arrived at mid-point to 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development implementation, a long-term vision and strategy would benefit the country in shaping its direction of socioeconomic development, ensure continuous support for advancement of regional development and enhanced decentralized governance, gender equality, promote environmental protection, take urgent climate action, and achieve sustainable development.

Financing for SDGs

Fiscal vulnerability and mounting public debt are serious concerns for continuous sustainable development in the Maldives. The main revenue stream continues to be from the tourism sector. Fiscal vulnerability has been worsening in the recent past due to high capital expenditure, blanket subsidies, and welfare spending.¹¹⁴ The shock from the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the revenue and income stream in unprecedented ways with devastating consequences to people's income, livelihoods, and businesses. Several MSMEs were forced to shut down and youth in formal economy and women in informal economy were disproportionately affected. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic risked nearly 20 percent of the population falling to income poverty from a pre-pandemic monetary poverty of 3.9 percent against the UMIC rate of US\$ 6.85 in 2019.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, with high vulnerability to external shocks, the global inflation and the Russia-Ukraine war further worsened the fiscal position.

¹¹³ Maldives SDG Roadmap, United Nations Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support (MAPS) Engagement, 2022

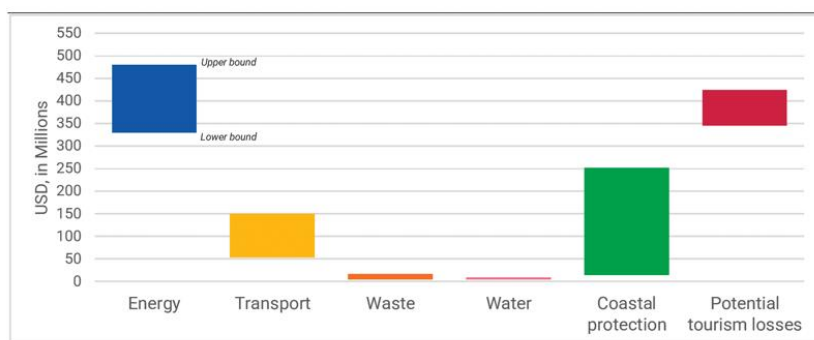
¹¹⁴ World Bank Maldives Development Update: Towards Resilient and Affordable Housing, October 2022

¹¹⁵ World Bank Maldives Development Update: Towards Resilient and Affordable Housing, October 2022

The vulnerability of the Maldives economy to external shocks poses significant risk to the continuity of the programmes and wellbeing of people.

The available finance and investment flows are unmatched with the national development requirements.¹¹⁶ The growing recurrent and capital expenditure are key drivers for widening fiscal deficit and growing debt. By the end of 2021, the total PPG was 120 percent of GDP with new debt of US\$1 billion drawn by the government to finance government expenditure, support budget deficit, rollover maturing debt, and finance PSIP projects.¹¹⁷ While the government spent more than US\$ 300 million for its PSIP in 2021, the largest chunk was for water and sewerage systems (US\$ 82 million), transport (US\$ 76.4 million), and housing and infrastructure such as land and roads (US\$ 48 million) compared to US\$ 40 million spent for environmental protection, climate mitigation and climate adaptation.¹¹⁸ Furthermore, the second VNR presents the importance of expansion of physical and digital access across the islands of the Maldives to accelerate the SDGs. However, this requires massive investments in transport and ICT and services and would require ongoing recurrent expenditure, especially to continue the ferry services.

The recently formulated INFF articulates an SDG financing strategy. The document published in March 2023 discusses two priorities: financing for climate action and the delivery of quality social services and proposes a coordination, monitoring, and evaluation framework.¹¹⁹ The INFF is also structured to be gender responsive in that gender considerations are integrated into climate adaptation and mitigation measures in all forms of development projects across all sectors of the economy. The framework also outlines the actions for laying the foundations for implementing decentralized fiscal policies. The financing strategy proposed in the INFF reinforces the proposition that all forms of future finance flows are climate-consistent finance flows and to re-orient and leverage new climate finance opportunities for the Maldives to channel required investments from domestic and international sources.¹²⁰



Note: Bars are representing lower and upper bounds. For coastal protection, the timeframe is assumed at 35 years considering the type of activity and its long-term effect. For mitigation sectors, timeframe is considered until 2030. Rescaled to yearly investments needs in USD millions. Source: Based on UNDP calculations, including the Second National Communications of the Maldives to the United Nations Framework (2016); Maldives Investment Plan for Net Zero Final Maldives' 2030 Net-Zero Roadmap Document. ARISE Maldives; UNFCCC (2022): Needs-based climate finance project. Technical Assessment of Climate Finance for Island States in the Indian Ocean; ADB (2020): A Brighter Future for Maldives Powered by Renewables: Road Map for the Energy Sector 2020–2030; GoM (2010): National Economic Environment Development Studies. Ministry of Housing and Environment. "Potential tourism losses" are calculated based on Bigano et al. (2007) in the Tourism Adaptation Project (TAP, 2015). Calculation: Deducting potential % loss in tourism revenue under climate change scenario multiplied (lower and upper bound) with average tourism recipients in 2030, by projecting average 2014-19 numbers with 4% growth of receipts per year. Investments to protect coral reefs, other biodiversity related services as well as other adaptation areas such as water, agriculture and fishery are not shown in this figure.

Figure 70: Lower and upper bound quantitative investment requirements per sector and per year
Source: INFF report

Efficiency and effectiveness of public spending needs to be improved and prioritized to enhance sustainability and promote better development outcomes. As such the targets to implement the clean energy technologies and clean transport to achieve the NDCs and pursue the ambitious net zero target by 2030, as well as the massive finance need for adaptation measures such as coastal protection becomes critical alongside other development finance needs. The low-lying islands of the Maldives faces an existential threat from the rising climate risks. The effects of climate change pose

¹¹⁶ Ministry of Finance Integrated National Financing Framework, March 2023
¹¹⁷ World Bank Maldives Development Update: Towards Resilient and Affordable Housing, October 2022
¹¹⁸ Ministry of Finance Integrated National Financing Framework, March 2023
¹¹⁹ Ministry of Finance Integrated National Financing Framework, March 2023
¹²⁰ Ministry of Finance Integrated National Financing Framework, March 2023

serious threat to coral reefs of the Maldives harboring the islands and contributing to the livelihoods of people and risks impact to tourism and fisheries sectors. Therefore, efforts being undertaken by the Ministry of Finance (MoF) to tag the government budget against the SDGs which would enable monitoring of the impact of finance on SDG progress needs speedy implementation.

Furthermore, effective international commitments and partnerships are needed for small island countries like the Maldives to overcome its finance challenges. Access to international finance mechanisms and concessional financing terms are major development challenges for the Maldives. Given the budgetary focus on infrastructure development needs and inadequate funds allocated for climate adaptation and mitigation coupled with growing climate vulnerabilities, urgent international finance is even more crucial for the Maldives to address climate adaptation, mitigation and ensure sustainable development.

Human Resource Capacity

The capacity and knowledge of sustainable development, sustainable socioeconomic planning, oversight, and good governance across the leadership and executives are pertinent to prioritize and drive the 2030 Agenda forward for the Maldives. Leadership capacity across the public sector organizations including the local councils on sustainability knowledge can contribute to changing public mindsets and bringing about transformational change. It would also enable priority focus across institutions and levels of governance to strengthen capacities for SDG implementation, improving service delivery, and monitoring for effectiveness of the policies and programmes.

Likewise, strengthening the capacity for SDG coordination would enable better oversight in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The SDG targets have been effectively integrated into health and education functions only. Although SDGs are somewhat reflected in the programme implementation of some government agencies, it is not effectively embedded within the core mandates of the government agencies and the private sector. The commitment to carry forward and implement the SDGs needs better prioritization and capacity for coordination, oversight, monitoring, and to ensure engagement with stakeholders for partnerships. The SDG Coordination Division is understaffed. The role of the SDG Coordination Division needs to be reviewed and enhanced with capacity to fulfill their mandate.

Strengthening the institutional capacity across implementing partners including the state and government organisations and the local councils will improve implementation of the SDGs. The implementing agencies have a key responsibility to ensure budgeting is aligned with SDGs and report on data and progress. Although MBS has a team of well-trained statisticians, statistical capacity of the agencies responsible for administrative data and SDG implementation needs strengthening to effectively execute their functions. Similarly, the research capacity of the country and technological capacity across all sectors needs strengthening. The Maldives could gain from improving research capacity in the academia to enable informed planning and decision making for sustainable development. There is also a renewed drive for decentralization through mandatory legal requirements and responsibilities assigned to the councils. Only through effective decentralization, the massive infrastructure projects planned across the islands can be effectively monitored and maintained. Decentralization also needs to be supported with rigorous capacity building of the councils. This should include the capacity to identify, consider and accommodate the needs of the population, especially the segments that maybe marginalized. Additionally, the councils need to be empowered to locally manage their marine, terrestrial and land resources and be able to make policies to ensure sustainable use for the benefit of the future generations. Furthermore, the capacity of the councils needs to be strengthened for the execution of sustainability planning function, effective oversight and monitoring of the large-scale projects being implemented to drive the wellbeing of people as well as form partnerships for effective oversight and implementation.

Development and enhancement of a nationwide physical and digital library network to operate as one stop centers can provide information resources across a range of SDGs. Thus, the National Library, university and college libraries, and special libraries such as the Parliament, school libraries and the public libraries mandated to be developed by the island councils could create the

space for effective capacity building, social dialogue, and partnerships and improve social service delivery, and social dialogue conduct and support programmes and training in digital and related skills. Island and atoll councils need to be able to make policies to manage sustainable socioeconomic development, sustainable tourism use, and shared resource use etc. without compromising the needs of the future generation for ecosystem services, housing, and other development needs.

Statistical Capacity

Data continues to be a major barrier for informed decision making and data driven decision making in the Maldives. Reliable, quality, and timely statistics are essential for evidence-based policymaking and decision-making. According to the Statistical Performance Indicators (SPI) Framework compiled by the World Bank, the Maldives' statistical system performs below its potential. The overall country score for the Maldives on a scale of 100 increased from 49.5 in 2017 to 52.9 in 2019, yet, signaling relatively poor performance and is below the average for South Asia and UMIC.¹²¹ Data services score especially low (29.9), and significantly below the performance of the region. Indicators behind the data services pillar relate to the quality of data releases, the richness and openness of online access and the availability and use of data access services, such as secure microdata. The Maldives scores better in data use score, and data infrastructure and data sources, on par with the average performance of UMICs and has steadily improved its overall score since 2017.¹²²

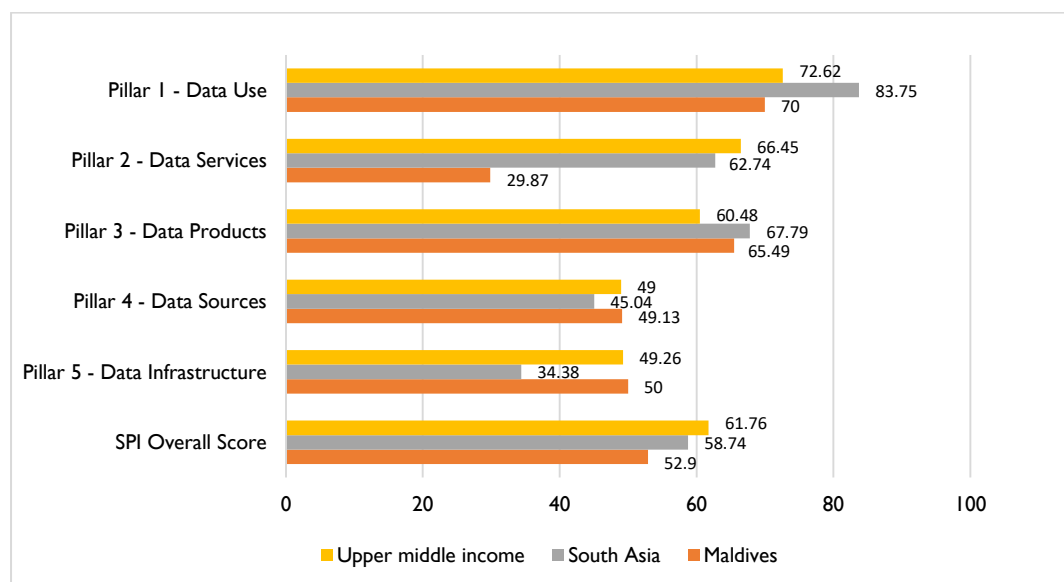


Figure 71: Statistical Performance Indicators overall scores for the Maldives in 2019

A National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (2021-2030) has defined the vision for the national statistical system for monitoring and reporting the SDGs. The National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS) sets out the strategy for strengthening and further developing the Maldives Statistical System (MSS). The MBS is the lead agency of the MSS and is responsible for data standardization and access, production of key statistical data series, leadership and coordination of official statistics, and capacity development and strengthening of official statistics. The government and the public sector provide the administrative data, and the councils are also mandated with essential data at local island level. Development of localized SDGs and targets, including a national monitoring framework are part of the NSDS.

The commitment to implement the SDGs demands that the government takes measures to step up efforts for implementation through improved capacity. To track SDG progress, target values for 2030 need to be set for all goals and timeseries data and minimum two data points needs to be maintained. The SDG tracker developed by the UNESCAP is a useful tool to demonstrate

¹²¹ Maldives SDG Roadmap, United Nations Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support (MAPS) Engagement, 2022

¹²² Maldives SDG Roadmap, United Nations Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support (MAPS) Engagement, 2022

progress against the SDGs and for easy comparison across peers, and the tool for LNOB analysis can generate meaningful results to generate information for ensuring no one is left behind. Although useful data is collected nationally, two data points to demonstrate progress is lacking. Capacity building in data administration, data storage and data analysis are identified as critical needs of the organisations. Organisations can benefit greatly from avoiding data duplication and by having data sharing mechanisms. Strengthening the statistical system through quality administrative data collection within the local councils, line ministries and state institutions, ensuring data collected gets reported and using technology for data sharing and analysis are important. Similarly strengthening the capacity of CSOs and the community to contribute to data collection and ensure participation in data needs and dissemination will benefit SDG implementation. Maximizing on the digitization policy, using technology for data collection, ensuring high quality, reliable data disaggregated by income, gender, age, migratory status, disabilities, geographic locations, and other nationally relevant context, and having data sharing mechanisms are needed in the Maldives for the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Technology and Innovation

The Maldives is well positioned to leverage digital technologies for sustainable development. Internet coverage and mobile market penetration in the Maldives is very high. The COVID-19 pandemic transformed digital acceleration in the country through online education, telemedicine, e-payment systems, and other digital uses, demonstrating the rapid transition to digital services across government services and businesses enabling ease of access to services for people across the country. Leveraging technology for hybrid working and remote working could enable young people and women in remote locations to engage in the economy empowering them with financial independence and digital literacy.¹²³ However, there is significant room for improving the quality, reliability, and affordability of the internet services to take the best advantage of internet technology and innovation in service delivery. Internet prices in the Maldives are higher than the region, mainly due to the high network cost across the geographically fragmented island nation. The government and the technology providers in the private domain are investing in massive technological infrastructure to enable cheaper internet and better connectivity, while the government has also planned internet service provider expansion.

Investments in digital infrastructure will enable digital technology-based services to flourish and enable availability of new services. The introduction of the government's single digital identity will be a step forward to enable digital services through a secure and private domain. Digital services have been expanded for several public services and for MSME business support, including the SDFC online portal. Digital connectivity will be an enabler for activities against poverty and in subsidy targeting enabling efficient and equitable services across the population, thus enabling SDG progress. Digital services also can integrate the self-employed into financial and social protection systems¹²⁴, as well as provide education and counselling for youth who risk dropping out of education, track cohorts who drop out of high school or colleges, and those who graduate, as well as the consequences on the labor market, enabling mitigation interventions.¹²⁵ Similarly, digital services can enable improved trade and financial services. However, the rapid digital transformation also risks certain groups, particularly women, elderly, and unskilled foreign migrants from being left behind in the transition to the digital economy due to barriers in digital literacy. Likewise, if not monitored well, digital transformation also risks impacting children and young people falling victim to cyber bullying and cybercrimes and elderly being victims of digital financial crimes. Hence, speedy enhancement of digital skills and digital literacy amongst the public and the workforce which involves retraining and upskilling efforts at a national scale, ensuring a legal framework that can keep pace with the rapidly evolving digital landscape for cybersecurity, data protection and data privacy and ethics are essential for the Maldives.

Meanwhile, technology can enhance improved sectoral development planning, monitoring, and implement climate measures and better manage the marine resources. Innovative technologies and software need to be adopted for modelling and infrastructure design, and in conservation management and measuring sustainable use of marine resources with technologies for data

¹²³ Poverty and Inequality in the Maldives, 2022

¹²⁴ Poverty and Inequality in the Maldives, 2022

¹²⁵ Poverty and Inequality in the Maldives, 2022

collection and monitoring to fulfill the role of the custodians of oceans and seas. Technology also could enhance progress across sectors such as the fisheries, agriculture, and tourism, and enhance access to markets for the fisheries and agricultural products. An application has been developed with assistance from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) for disseminating information and as a two-way communication platform for the agriculture sector, to be launched this year. The Maldives is also implementing massive infrastructure such as renewable energy systems, water and sewerage systems and adaptation infrastructure across the country that would require regular and timely maintenance, upkeep, and monitoring. With limited human resource capacity across the islands of the Maldives and given the vast spatial element of marine biodiversity management of the Maldives, technology and innovation are prerequisites for SDG acceleration across the Maldives.

Partnership for progress

The implementation of the SDGs requires a whole of government approach and strong multi-stakeholder partnerships across agencies and stakeholders. Continuous political commitment and support and strong multistakeholder support is critical to drive the SDGs. The SAP mapping exercise for SDG alignment highlighted the sectors and agencies working in silos missing out on linkages to the economy, social institutions, and governance mechanism. The consultation exercise undertaken for the second VNR formulation also showed duplication of programmes and resource such as duplicate transport systems for different service delivery that could be avoided for better fiscal management and benefits to the communities as well as partnerships that could result in better achievement of goals such as the net zero ambition of the government. In 2019 The Auditor General's Office (AGO) undertook an audit on the preparedness for the implementation of the SDGs, as a first response of the AGO in contributing to SDGs implementation, follow-up, and review by providing independent oversight on government's effort in early implementation of the SDGs. The AGO is also working on undertaking performance audits related to all SDGs and a specific audit on the implementation SDG 6 – Clean Water and Sanitation. Similarly, some sectors like education could play a larger role such as in enhancing sustainability knowledge and strengthening interlinkages with health and wellbeing, gender equality and civic engagement. Institutions working in silos are identified as a major issue for effective implementation of the SDGs. Given the geographical dispersion of the islands of the Maldives and the vast marine spatial element, stakeholders are dispersed across the country.

Effective partnerships are also needed between local councils and communities for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Maximizing the benefits of decentralization to yield more from the governance function can only be achieved by strengthening partnerships with local councils and communities for effective check and balance mechanism. The WDCs can be leveraged better for development issues and in services delivery. Likewise, strengthening civil society partnerships, community engagement and private sector engagement is critical to increase the impact of SDG implementation and results achievement. SDGs acceptance by the whole society is needed to transform and accelerate SDG implementation. Currently, the space for public dialogue on societal issues is limited, overpowered by politicization of issues and political agenda driving issues of the country. It is important for the Maldives to create safe public spaces for social dialogue with meaningful impact to address public problems and strengthen accountability in governance and ensure senior citizens are involved in understanding and passing on the traditional knowledge. The implementation of the SDGs and programmes for sustainability and wellbeing across the Maldives needs social dialogue amongst the public and a platform for regular and coordinated multi sectoral engagement and partnerships.

Partnerships with the private sector need to be strengthened. Private sector plays a critical role in shaping and driving the Maldives economy. The economic engine of the Maldives, tourism, is run by the private sector. Tourism has several interlinkages with the SDGs—socioeconomic wellbeing, prosperity, and environmental impact in its business operations. About half of the electricity generated by the country is for the needs of the tourism sector, and its business operations have impacts on sustainable consumption, waste generation, impacts to marine life and biodiversity both positively and negatively. Likewise, the one-island-one-resort model of tourism operation has lasting impacts on families with workers spending long durations away from families on islands far from their home island. The tourism industry in the Maldives has played a major role in reducing poverty and is also currently increasing investments in renewables. Partnership with the tourism industry is key to strengthen and improve the

efforts and account for national progress. Similarly private sector engagement in fisheries, agriculture, construction, ICT, and transport sectors is high and needs better coordination and partnerships to drive the SDGs forward.

CONCLUSIONS

Successful tourism has advanced the Maldives economy, improved prosperity for all and reduced poverty. Robust economic growth has enabled the Maldives to maintain high GDP growth, with a GDP per capita income of US\$ 11,119 in 2019. The country is on track to becoming a high-income country. The unprecedented shock from the COVID-19 pandemic however, had a devastating impact on people's lives and livelihoods and businesses. Like most other countries, the pandemic slowed down the pace of economic growth, implementation of important work and reprioritized areas and impacted the accomplishment of the SDGs. The pandemic also exposed the vulnerability of the Maldives' economy and the risk of a large population sliding to poverty. The first ever multidimensional poverty index of the Maldives demonstrated the vast differences in poverty and inequality across Male' City and the atolls.

The country's economic growth is tied to tourism sector growth and growing economic vulnerabilities is highly concerning. Although tourism has been the driver of economic growth, tourism growth across the atolls has been disproportional, and therefore equal wealth distribution from tourism across the atolls of the Maldives remains a gap. Furthermore, the narrow base of the economy with entire dependency on tourism is a macroeconomic risk. Likewise, heavy reliance on import of fossil fuels for electricity generation is both a fiscal and climate concern. Reducing the overdependence of the economy on tourism and diversifying the economy is needed to minimize economic shocks from external factors, reduce impacts from climate and other risks and to ensure sustainable growth. Similarly, increasing local investments to swiftly shift to renewables for electricity generation is needed to minimize fiscal and climate risks. The improvement of the fisheries and agriculture sectors for increased value addition and to enhance food security of the local community and improve better market access to cater to the needs of the tourism industry has not been fully utilized.

The second VNR of the Maldives articulates the importance of regional development and the need to expand physical and digital access across the islands to improve access to services, opportunities and reduce inequalities. It is considered that the expansion of digital connectivity across the country, combined with a sustainable public transport network can enable SDG acceleration and improve the overall wellbeing of the people. The report also discusses the progress and challenges in human development and wellbeing and the critical challenges imminent with the growing fiscal vulnerability and mounting debt of the country, as well as the climate vulnerabilities of the country posing significant risk to livelihood and income loss. Large scale investments in transport, and ICT infrastructure and services are needed to improve access to services across the atolls and would require ongoing recurrent expenditure especially to sustainably continue the public transport network.

Immense challenges lay ahead for the country to improve the overall wellbeing of the people, build quality human capital, and ensure social justice. The fertility rate of the country is decreasing, and the ageing population is increasing. The main health concerns relate to NCDs prevention. Substance abuse remains a key challenge and a root cause for other social ills in the country. Overcrowding, congestion, pressure on land, air pollution, fire safety, deteriorating mental health, isolation and immobility of the elderly, children and PWDs are growing concerns in Male' City. Although we have achieved high NER and completion in primary and secondary education, NER in higher secondary education remains low and gap in higher secondary and higher education between Male' City and other atolls remain a challenge, while increasing dropouts is a concern. The demand for labour in professional, skilled, and unskilled sectors is unmet by the available labour force of the country. The local to foreign migrant ratio in the country is 3:1 and the need for foreign labour force is expected to grow to cater to the growing sectoral development. Decent work, income prosperity for all, minimum wage benefits to everyone, and SME growth is important for an inclusive and just society.

Furthermore, as the country is headed towards a high-income country, shaping an inclusive economy with gender equality, presence of a highly qualified educated community, ensuring high employment levels, and an advanced social security system is pertinent. The low participation of women in the economy is a key concern in the Maldives. More women are completing

and performing better in higher secondary and tertiary education. However, additional effort is needed to increase women's participation in the labour market and in entrepreneurship. Although women's involvement in decision making has increased, women are still underrepresented in leadership and the Parliament. At the same time boys' disengagement in higher secondary and tertiary education needs to be evaluated and timely action taken to ensure they are not left behind. Furthermore, the social protection system of the country needs a holistic review to provide an effective guarantee of basic income security to all the Maldivians and support the vulnerable people in a more equitable manner.

Having arrived at midpoint to achieving the 2030 Agenda, the Maldives is at a critical juncture in its national development. Medium term political agenda shape the development trajectory of the country, and a long-term development vision and direction is lacking for the country. To improve human wellbeing and sustainable development, ending all forms of violence and crimes and ensuring peace and justice are equally critical for the Maldives. Gender based violence and violence against children remain serious concerns and effective implementation of rule of law to ensure equal access to justice to all and reduce discrimination and empower women is important for attaining human wellbeing, peace, and justice. Equally important for the 2030 Agenda achievement is ensuring good governance and accountability of institutions to reduce disparities and enable shared benefits to all. Similarly, inclusivity principles including gender equality in governance, leadership and in access to opportunities and the full development of PWDs are critical. Likewise, enforcing non-discriminatory laws and having effective mechanisms to ensure ending abuse, exploitation and trafficking are important development issues for the Maldives.

The unique small island geography, rich biodiversity and natural beauty are the backbone of the economy, habitat for the people and contribute to their livelihoods. Only about one percent of the country is land, and climate change and threat of natural disasters pose a significant risk and an existential threat to the low-lying small islands of the Maldives. Fresh water is limited on the islands and pollution of ground water is a concern. Marine conservation related risks include overfishing and fish depletion, threat to coral reefs from global warming threatening the loss of important biodiversity. At the same time, risks to the environment from human and business activities and poor agricultural practices are increasing. Sustainable consumption is at risk with increase in pressure on the land in Male' City and land creation activities undertaken across the country. Meanwhile, disaster risk resilience of critical public and industry infrastructure across the Maldives is a serious risk to the country. Furthermore, growing waste, and its sustainable management are concerns. With increase in climatic events affecting the low-lying islands, climate action is urgent for the country and investment focus on climate adaptation and mitigation has never been more pertinent for the Maldives.

The available finance and investment flows are unmatched with the national development requirements. High fiscal vulnerability combined with high debt leaves no fiscal space to divert finance for sustainable development initiatives for important health and education services and climate adaptation in the short term. International support and partnerships will benefit the country in overcoming its development challenges and barriers. Access to international finance mechanisms and concessional financing terms are major development needs for the Maldives. The INFF that supports to consolidate and coordinate the funding support for SDGs is a critical document that sets the right direction in this area. The implementation of the 2030 Agenda requires speedy and effective international commitments and partnerships for small island countries like the Maldives to overcome its financial challenges to address climate adaptation, mitigation and ensure sustainable development initiatives are continued.

NEXT STEPS ON THE WAY FORWARD

Long term sustainable development vision: As the Maldives develops and advances, shaping development through a long-term sustainable development strategy with focus on human wellbeing, and fiscal and climate resilience is pertinent to the Maldives. This could enable the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda and give people hope and direction towards a long-term sustainable development vision. A sustainable development vision encompassing social wellbeing, just economic development and sustainable use of the natural resource can enable equitable growth supporting regional development, increase investments in economic diversification and climate adaptation and enable fiscal adjustments to reduce fiscal vulnerabilities. Increased investments in the growth of digital economy, net zero achievement, health and education sector expansion will create professional and technical skilled people in these areas which needs to be leveraged in shaping the sectors for future economic diversification and growth.

Access to justice and good governance: Justice, transparency and good governance are essential for the wellbeing of the society and to fast track social and economic wellbeing of everyone. Capacity of institutions administering services and ensuring justice across the country needs strengthening to fast track access to justice and ensure the wellbeing of the society. Similarly, modern systems, tools, and methods to reduce inefficiencies and ensure transparency are needed. Reducing gender-based discrimination and enabling the full potential of the society including women in governance, leadership and economy is crucial for the Maldives to accelerate the 2030 Agenda. This includes proactive measures such as quotas to increase women's engagement. Ensuring inclusivity in society and economy requires decision making through clear identification of the biases and improving the system to eliminate the bias. Social justice, ending abuse and exploitation needs strengthening through speedy implementation of the laws and capacity and knowledge enhancement.

Reducing poverty and improving social protection: The country's social protection system needs strengthening, harmonization, and advancement by identification of the vulnerable groups through clearly set criteria. Such criteria can help target national subsidies, welfare programmes and income protection to improve the lives of the people at the bottom of the poverty line, reduce income disparities within the society and ensure adequate labour rights and social protection for the vulnerable. Building on the lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, young people and informal workers need better social protection and basic labour rights. Strengthening the social protection system to address the evolving labour market trends, such as the growing gig-economy and gig-workers would need to be supported with better labour and social protection policies.

Human capital development, inclusivity, and decent work: Identification of the human resource requirement of the country needs prioritization to meet the existing and emerging needs. An entity and a strategy that solely focuses on the human resource development needs of the country and ensures decent work for all is a need for the country. Investments aimed at climate adaptation, net zero emissions attainment, digital economy growth, and achieving SDG 3 and SDG 4 alone is expected to grow human capital and employment in these sectors. There is a need to fast track vocational, technical and ICT skills to cater to twenty first century education and the needs of the existing and emerging occupations. The labour force being traditionally male dominated, a cultural shift is needed in advancing economic opportunities for women and ensuring women engage in traditionally male dominated technical sectors and reduce women's economic vulnerabilities. Policymakers would therefore need to urgently address labour market barriers faced by women. Childcare services and care services for the sick and elderly need prioritization to enable full potential of both genders to contribute to the economy. Equally important is to shape policies to ensure boys continue to maintain progress in education and in labour force participation. Policies are also needed to support modern work, work from home and the evolving labour market trends amongst young people such as gig-economy trends and better integration of the vulnerable and marginalized groups such as PWDs into the economy. Guaranteeing freedom of association, the right to collective bargaining and equal pay for work of equal value and preventing and eliminating violence and harassment need to be ensured for all workers in the economy through improved policies and legislation.

Health and wellbeing of the people: A more holistic approach for health is needed with emphasis on disease prevention and health promotion. Building a healthy society needs special focus to address the concerns of growing NCDs including cancer and mental health issues. Availability and consumption of fresh foods needs strategizing for both healthy living and responsible consumption to minimize waste generation. Allocating resources to ensure locally grown and imported foods meet the quality standards and creating awareness amongst the society for healthy and active lifestyles is a growing need of the country. The focus on prevention needs strengthening through changes such as spatial planning to enable physical activity and active lifestyles for everyone including women, children, elderly and PWDs. Availability of affordable, quality, and safe food needs to be ensured immediately. Similarly, health surveillance data systems need to be revamped and utilized effectively for early detection and monitoring to prevent public health risks.

Sustainable cities and communities through regional development: The country needs to prioritize and act on a regional development strategy and model suitable for small island economic development through better allocation and distribution of national resources across the country by reprioritizing the development needs across the country. Demonstration of sustainable cities and islands would benefit the country to fast-track sustainable development models for cities and communities. Male' City being the capital city, needs a sustainable city strategy to lead by example to demonstrate quality living in a sustainable manner, improve quality of life and wellbeing that supports sustainable transport, facilitates decongestion, reduces overcrowding, and ensures inclusivity by improving mobility and safety for all including women, children, elderly and PWDs. Furthermore, the national housing development policy needs a clearly communicated vision that supports home ownership for everyone and empowers more people with low-cost finance and housing development in the islands. This supported with schools providing high quality education and connectivity with efficient public transport services and digital services can enable the development of other cities and islands with higher population that could attract better population growth and improve services and quality of life and drive regional development.

Biodiversity management: The fragile natural ecosystem and the biodiversity that supports the economy, livelihoods, and home to the people need to be preserved, protected, and sustainably used. As the biodiversity of the Maldives is under threat from climate change and human made changes, minimizing the impacts on the biodiversity and the ecosystems with sustainable development measures is a priority. Land creation for development needs to be reevaluated at a national level to ensure sustainable use of natural resources and maximization of these resources for effective and efficient growth. Similarly, the tourism industry's sustainability can be ensured only through sustainable resource use. Land creation for tourism development needs reevaluation and there is a need for improved tourism development strategies to ensure regional spread of tourism activities. Likewise, the impact of the release of untreated wastewater and chemicals from inhabited islands, tourism and industrial islands and agriculture practices to the ocean needs to be evaluated to understand the impacts on marine life and ensure threat to biodiversity and any negative impacts on human health is prevented.

Renewable energy, sustainable transport, and water security: The net zero vision of the country needs to be supported with improved policies, innovative financing schemes and strong local and international partnerships. Sectoral growth and housing growth is expected to increase demand for energy and the shift towards RO for production of water further increases the demand for energy through water production. The dependency on fossil fuel-based electricity generation is a fiscal and climate concern of the country. Adoption of renewable energy needs to be accelerated through innovative financing schemes and increasing the adoption of renewable energy technologies by households and empowering households to be prosumers of energy. This would enable speedy adoption of renewables across the country and drive the SDGs forward. Similarly, private sector partnerships, especially with the tourism sector are needed to ensure their rapid transition towards renewables. It is also imperative that speedy action is taken to adopt sustainable e-vehicles powered by solar for public transport to be used in the cities and islands with large populations and those islands where road infrastructure development has been completed. Furthermore, a complete shift in water production by RO in all islands needs to be reevaluated and hybrid and sustainable measures need to be in place to ensure water security and safety for all.

Innovation, industry, and infrastructure management: As the country increases investments in public infrastructure development, including the development of airports, harbours, roads, housing, transport, energy and water and sanitation systems that would require regular maintenance and upkeep, it is important to ensure sustainable consumption, minimize wastage and deterioration from ineffective utilization. Adequate human resource capacity, technological resources and financial resources would need to be assigned for the upkeep and maintenance of these critical infrastructures. Maximizing decentralization, empowerment of communities in the island and enabling the councils and communities with digital technologies, financial resources and knowledge on efficient and effective infrastructure use, maintenance, and upkeep will be crucial for the Maldives to continue the 2030 Agenda forward. The country is investing heavily in ICT and technology can enhance improved sectoral development planning, monitoring, and implement climate measures and better manage the marine resources.

SDG prioritization and coordination mechanism: SDG coordination function needs strengthening to administer the functions fully and to enable strong partnerships between public sector organisations, private sector, and the civil society for the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Through the second VNR, the importance of the planning system, finance for SDG implementation, statistical and human resource capacity improvements, technology and innovations and partnerships for goals for the enabling environment were identified. As the country is advancing towards a high-income country, capacity building in data administration, data storage and analysis is a critical need of the country. The statistical system needs strengthening with human and financial resources to enable critical data collection, using advanced data analytics tools and ensures the data collected gets reported. Maximizing on the digitization policy, using technology for data collection, ensuring high quality, reliable data disaggregated by income, gender, age, migratory status, disabilities, geographic locations, and other nationally relevant context, and having data sharing mechanisms are needed in the Maldives for the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Strong partnerships: A whole of government approach and collaboration is needed to improve efficiency, effectiveness, coordination, and implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Strong partnerships are needed for strengthening domestic resource mobilization, increasing official development assistance, investment promotion of legal and financial landscape and regime, and enable local and foreign direct investments for the development of industries. Access to science, technology and innovation and enhancing knowledge amongst local and global partners on mutually agreed terms would enable the progress of SDGs. The Maldives has been increasing its investments in ICT that needs to be leveraged for SDG progress. Due to its dispersed nature, equally pertinent to the Maldives is the partnerships between the inhabited islands, resorts, and industrial islands to achieve human, economic, and environmental development. Similarly, partnerships between the government, councils and the community are important to establish the linkages for effective implementation of the SDGs. Private sector plays a key role in national development and has strong linkages with the SDGs implementation. Therefore, to achieve the 2030 Agenda, strong partnerships with the private sector is equally pertinent. Furthermore, civil society can be better leveraged as important partners in the implementation of the SDGs. To enable these partnerships, facilitating regular dialogue, exchange of information and communication through a systematic channel is important for the Maldives.

A2: Stakeholders

Stakeholder Consultations		
Group	Institutions/Organisations	Purpose
Advisory Group	Ministry of National Planning, Housing, and Infrastructure (SDG Division) Maldives Bureau of Statistics (MBS) UNRCO UNESCAP	Provide timely feedback on the findings and advise on key messages, analysis, and discuss solutions to complex problems
Focus Goals Key Informant Group	Ministry of Education Ministry of Higher Education Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture Ministry of Tourism Ministry of Economic Development Ministry of Finance Ministry of Transport Ministry of National Planning, Housing, and Infrastructure, Ministry of Environment, Climate Change and Technology Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) Local Government Authority (LGA) National Social Protection Agency (NSPA)	Inform on the progress of the goals, policies, data interpretation and advise on existing literature and data on the envisaged focus goals to be reported in the 2023 VNR
UN Agencies	UNRCO UNDP UNICEF UNFPA UNESCAP UNCT	Inform on key issues, share existing literature and data, and provide support for consultations and feedback to report and provide facilitation support during workshops
Community Based Organisations (CSOs)	CSOs working in education, health gender, disability, child rights, migrant worker rights, economic and social empowerment, SME development, environmental rights	To update on SDG progress on economic development, social development, environment, infrastructure, and partnerships. To discuss enabling environment, emerging issues, challenges, Covid-19 lessons, how connectivity can accelerate the goals achievement, preparedness for a pandemic/disaster
Technical Committee	Technical Committees (Social, Economic Development, Environmental, and Infrastructure Development, Partnerships) CSOs (youth, women, disability, social and economic, health, education, child rights, environmental groups) Academia (public & private) Private sector (tourism, fisheries, agriculture, SMEs)	To update on SDG progress on economic development, social development, environment, infrastructure, and partnerships. To discuss enabling environment, emerging issues, Covid-19 lessons, how connectivity can accelerate the goals achievement, preparedness for a pandemic/disaster
Regional/ Outer Atolls	City Councils, Hospitals and Health Centres, Schools, NGOs, Farmers, Fishers, Tourism: Haa Alif, Haa Dhaal, Shaviyani, Raa, Alif Alif, Alif Dhaal, Vaavu, Faafu, Addu, Fuvahmulah Economic Groups, WDC: Haa Alif, Haa Dhaal, Shaviyani, Raa, Alif Alif, Alif Dhaal, Vaavu, Faafu, Gaaf Dhaal, Fuvahmulah, Addu	Share lesson on connectivity. To update on progress, and update of critical issues in on economic development, social development, environment, governance, implementation challenges based on lessons from Covid-19
Validation		

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