

Infrastructure

Male', Republic of Maldives.

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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 515,122 people across dispersed small islands is a major challenge for equitable development and shared prosperity across all islands of the Maldives.

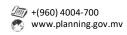
As a country heavily dependent on tourism, Maldives was one of the worst-hit from the unprecedented COVID-19 shock. When the country's border closed and tourism stopped, many people experienced devastating consequences from income and livelihood loss. Women in informal sectors and youth were disproportionally affected. Income and business support programmes, a successful nationwide information and vaccination campaign prioritizing the tourism sector workers and the vulnerable, with over 80 percent vaccination coverage helped the Maldives overcome the COVID-19 impacts and reboot the economy.

Meanwhile, the country's fiscal and climate vulnerabilities have magnified. Climate change poses an existential threat to the Maldives, while threat from pandemics and disasters pose significant risks to income and livelihood loss, and food security. Growing fiscal deficit is a serious concern and 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. Maldives is increasing investments in renewable energy and has set an ambitious commitment to achieve NetZero by 2030.

Maldives has made remarkable progress in reducing poverty. Economic opportunities and social protection programmes have improved the quality of life for the vulnerable. However, income inequality persists, and 59 percent of the population reside in the atolls, where income and multidimensional poverty are more prevalent. Disparities in access to quality education, health care and living standards are barriers for equal socioeconomic progress for people resident in the atolls.

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 affordable, regular, high-speed public ferries and improve access to services, opportunities and reduce inequalities for people resident in the atolls. This is in operation in the northern region of the Maldives by connecting people in 41 islands. 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 a sustainable public ferry network can improve access and opportunities and enable SDG acceleration.

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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 79 years. However, Non-Communicable Diseases are a major disease burden needing immediate attention, and mental health and cancers are growing concerns. Furthermore, Maldives is moving towards an ageing population and needs better social protection planning and targeting.

Progressive changes in the education sector have enabled the Maldives to build human capital. Although gender parity in primary and secondary education has been achieved, inclusive education and access to quality higher secondary and tertiary education in the atolls remain to be challenges. To empower youth with skills needed for the workforce and entrepreneurship, skills development programmes are being planned in targeted locations across the country.

Furthermore, 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 leadership and the Parliament and women's participation in the formal economy is low. Women's empowerment, engagement, and participation is crucial for SDG progress.

Continued political commitment, long term planning, social dialogue, and partnerships will drive the Sustainable Development Agenda forward. Maximizing on decentralization, building economic and climate resilience, improving human wellbeing, ensuring gender equality, and expansion of connectivity for improved access to services can enable SDG acceleration in the Maldives.

Nonetheless, access to international finance mechanisms and concessional financing terms are major development challenges for the Maldives. Given the budgetary constraints for development needs and growing climate vulnerabilities, urgent international finance is even more crucial for the Maldives to address climate adaptation, mitigation and ensure sustainable development.





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