

BACKBITING BACKWARDS BEAUTIFUL  
 BELONGING BLACK MAGIC  
 BROTHERHOOD CLEAN CLOSED-MINDED  
 COMMON COMPETITIVE CORRUPT  
 CONSERVATIVE COOL DEVELOPMENT  
 DISCRIMINATORY DISPERSED DIVIDED  
 CRIPPLED DEMOCRACY DISASTER  
 DISCONNECTED DIVISION DRUGS  
 FRIENDSHIP FAMILY HYPOCRISY  
 HYPOCRITICAL IGNORANCE ISOLATED  
 JIHADI EMPLOYMENT FUTURE GANGS  
 GOALS HAPPINESS HARMONY HATRED  
 HOME HOSPITABLE TOGETHERNESS  
 UNCIVILIZED UNEQUAL VISION VALUES  
 JOBLESS JUDGMENTAL KINDNESS  
 MAGIC MESS NATIONALIST NOSY  
 OPPORTUNITY OVER-RELIGIOUS  
 PEACEFUL PEOPLE POLITICS PRIDEFUL  
 PROUD PROBLEMS SKILLS SLAVERY  
 SOCIAL STEREOTYPE STRONG  
 TEAMWORK UNITY RELATIONS  
 RESPECT ROUGH SELFISH SHARED

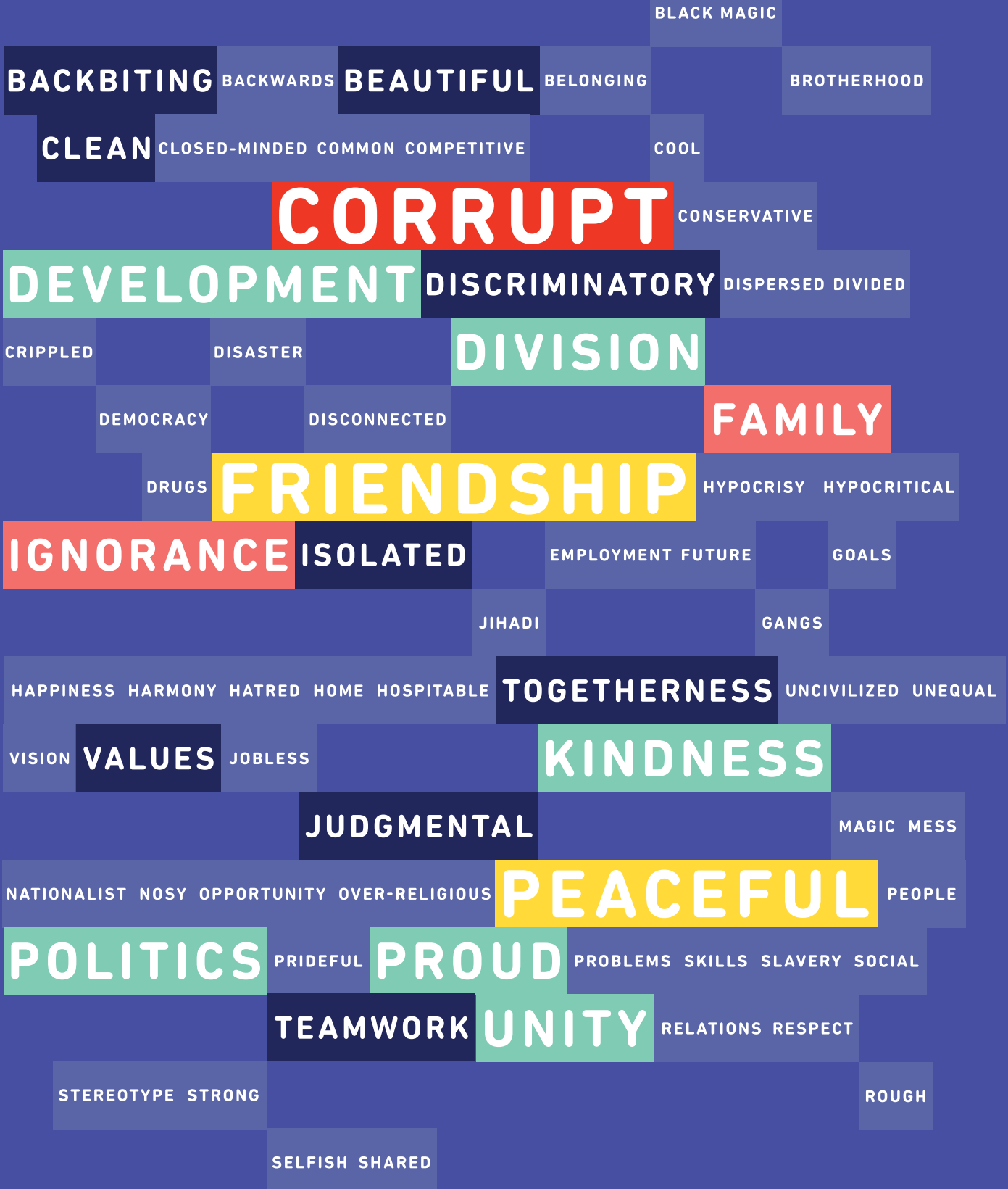
# YOUTH VULNERABILITY IN THE MALDIVES

FEBRUARY 2019



Empowered lives.  
Resilient nations.

# WHAT WORD WOULD YOU USE TO DESCRIBE YOUR COMMUNITY?



# FOREWORD

I gratefully acknowledge and appreciate the initiative of National Counter Terrorism Centre and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in the Maldives, in formulating and conducting the nationwide study on Youth Vulnerability in the Maldives. This pioneering study identifies and analyzes the concerns raised by the Maldivian youth, their outlook towards government policies, issues within the larger society and their expectations for the future.

More than 40% of the Maldivian population is between the ages of 18-34. It is an undeniable fact that the youth represent the hopes and aspirations for this nation's future. At the same time, we must remain cognizant of the responsibility that current policymakers and leaders have in laying the foundation for our youth to realize their true potential.

The concerns raised by the participants in this study are all too real. Limited educational opportunities, unemployment, housing shortages, discriminatory practices, drug abuse, gang related violence, spread of extremism and radical ideologies and domestic violence are issues that we as a society are grappling with. These problems have exacerbated over years of neglect, disproportionately centralized economic and industrial development, poor demographic planning, systemic and procedural corruption and failures within the criminal justice system. Support networks that once served as societal 'safety nets' have all but eroded, and traditional norms and values that once buttressed our families and communities have disappeared.

Deprived of meaningful social engagement, and facing discrimination and isolation, it is all too natural for the youth to engage in destructive patterns of behavior such as drug abuse, gang violence and even enlistment in radical and violent extremist entities. While we hold these individual young men and women accountable, we must also pay attention to the socio-political milieu from which they emerge. We must persevere to work on addressing the underlying causes and drivers of these symptoms.

The aim of the government is to empower the youth, integrate them fully into the social and economic decision-making process, empathize with their concerns and work on finding common solutions through a participatory process at all levels. Creation of greater employment opportunities across Maldives through economic diversification, economic and industrial decentralization and developing eco-friendly economic investment zones are a key priority for the government.

Likewise, projects aimed at social and political decentralization through the establishment of major hubs across Maldives that provide critical services like high-quality health care, educational opportunities and an enriching socio-cultural life are already underway. One of the most important stakeholders, and in fact, the most suitable vanguard for these projects are the youth.

The bright future we envision for this nation can only be realized if we listen, empathize with and understand the issues and concerns raised by the youth. More importantly, these issues and concerns must also be documented and publicized so that they could register in the collective memory of our nation. In this regard, this study is a critical endeavor which will serve as a historical reference point for future generations as well. We must also look back at our documented history, or what remains of it, and identify lessons and learnings to be applied for the betterment of our present, and ultimately, our future.

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 **Uza. Mariya Ahmed Didi**  
Minister of Defense

Congratulations on the publication of the report, "Youth Vulnerability in Maldives."

As Japan being UNDP's lead partner on Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) programs, I commend UNDP Maldives for undertaking the nation-wide study as part of the project, "Partnership for a Tolerant, Inclusive Bangladesh and Maldives," and successfully identifying the issues faced by the youth in Maldives.

I am also pleased that the project provided significant support to the National Counter Terrorism Centre as well as local and migrant communities in the country.

The next step is critical. The report presented comprehensive recommendations and policy priorities in the near term. Collaboration and coordination among all stakeholders is the key to finding effective approaches to the challenges surrounding the youth.

I am hopeful that with our collective effort we can move towards putting an end to violent extremism.

**Ms. Keiko Yanai**  
Ambassador of Japan to Maldives

" UNDP partners with people at all levels of society to help build nations that can withstand crisis, and drive and sustain the kind of growth that improves the quality of life for everyone. On the ground in nearly 170 countries and territories, we offer global perspective and local insight to help empower lives and build resilient nations."

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It gives me great pleasure to partner with Ministry of Defense, the National Counter Terrorism Center of Maldives, with a generous support by Government of Japan, to bring forth the 'Youth Vulnerability in the Maldives' report.

Young people are the demographic group that is most susceptible to take part in violent extremist activities, when they have limited access to education, jobs, leisure and space for voicing and participation. But they also remain our biggest hope in preventing them. Significant investments need to be made for their political, economic and social empowerment, harnessing the idealism, creativity and energy of many youth who may feel disenfranchised today.

It's our sincere hope that the 'Youth Vulnerability in the Maldives' report with policy recommendations, will be an invaluable tool for the government, development partners, academic institutions and civil society in our collective efforts to better understand the intersectionality of youth issues, and further strengthen our work towards achieving truly inclusive development and the attainment of the SDGs.

I would like to thank all stakeholders for their contributions to the study.

**Ms. Akiko Fujii**  
UNDP Resident Representative

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Efforts to improve the well-being of young people have lagged behind economic growth in the Maldives. Tourism has turned the atolls into the richest country in South Asia but the benefits are concentrated in few hands, power is misused for personal gain, public institutions are weak, and many people lack the tools they need to improve their lives. Disengagement or exclusion from the norms of society is particularly stark among the young: whether it is because of drugs, criminal gangs, or extremism, too many Maldivians are living on the margins of a society that offers them little.

Many under 35 have found few legitimate ways to express their frustration. They have come of age in a period of political turmoil and polarization, even seeing their families wrenched apart by partisan divisions. Widening mismatches between education and jobs mean a quarter of them are out of work. Those on outer islands have seen opportunities ever more concentrated in Malé and out of reach to all but a few. It is no surprise to find that many of them are deeply disillusioned, frustrated by corruption, and bitter about politicians who pay them little heed.

Despite this, more than 80 percent of the young Maldivians interviewed for this report said they were optimistic about the future. They still believe in government, but want to see it provide more support to those living outside Malé. They want better education and more help setting up businesses. They reject violence and feel that extremism has no role in their lives. Most think social isolation is a widespread problem and worry about the lack of mental health care. But asked if they would leave the country to live elsewhere if they had a chance, only a third said no.

They ranked corruption at the top of the list of concerns, followed by jobs. For many, the issues were linked: across the country we heard complaints that it was almost impossible to get a job without political connections. Political change at the local or national level meant those with jobs in the government or state businesses found themselves replaced by loyalists. The lack of merit in determining appointments was particularly dispiriting to many who felt it negated any point in investing in education. Nearly two-thirds felt they could only get a job through connections.

This report was commissioned to examine and identify grievances of youth, why young people in the Maldives are vulnerable to recruitment into certain groups of the society and to examine the problems that young people face and the different vulnerabilities that they are exposed to. The aim has been to consult widely with young adults about their lives and to develop some responses based on their views.

There is a perception that the Maldives is susceptible to extremism. The unsupported but widespread assertion that the country has sent more people to join armed groups in the Middle East compared to its population has raised anxieties, as has a visibly more conservative religious outlook.

A handful of violent incidents have shaken the country but these appear to be connected as much to political turmoil as to extremism. A number of Maldivian men and women are believed to have gone abroad to join armed groups, mostly in Syria. Some are believed to have been killed, some are believed to have been held by militant groups, and some are believed to be still fighting. From what we know of those who have joined these groups, they seem to share troubled and even criminal backgrounds, often having spent time in prison. Others, however, have been well-educated and come from prosperous families. As is often the case with extremism, there are few clear patterns of origin, education, or employment.

Recruiters, some of them brought in from abroad to preach on the islands, target vulnerable groups in communities, as gangs often do. Those in drug rehabilitation programmes or prison are frequent targets, while an overlap has developed between criminal groups and extremists. The prevalence of drugs, gangs, and unemployment, as well as confrontational politics of the past decade, has stirred up disillusioned young men.

Meanwhile, prisons in the Maldives are overflowing: the country imprisons its people at 15 times the rate that people are imprisoned in India while still suffering from gangs and drug-related crime. Most of those jailed are non-violent drug offenders whose incarceration raises the risks of radicalization while doing nothing to diminish crime. Prison reform has been mooted since an outbreak of violence in 2003, but progress in this area is limited.

Global research has shown that extremism is much more strongly linked to issues of exclusion, identity, disillusionment, and psychological trauma than to a lack of economic or educational opportunities. Due to the complexity of the problem, there are few proven development responses. Tackling issues of jobs and training in the Maldives is worthwhile so that the country can fully realize the demographic advantage of a young workforce. Dealing with drugs, gangs, and social isolation reduces social and economic costs and improves community spirit. Engaging more people in decision-making, volunteering, and entrepreneurship may help broaden an economy that is too heavily concentrated in tourism and fishing. Addressing corruption would crack open a political economy that has hindered reforms. Expanding the space for education and discussion might liberate young minds to find new ways to engage with their society. These steps are all worth taking on their own terms. Together, they have the potential to improve the lives of young people and reduce their risk of turning to violence or crime.

Prisons and drug use seem to be routes to extremism, as they have been in many countries. Working to reduce the number of people jailed and cutting demand for drugs are probably the most worthwhile immediate steps the country could take.

Education is a top concern. It is expensive, limited, and rarely matches either expectations or the job market. On outer atolls, higher education is often just not available. Reform of the education system is a long-term commitment that must go beyond political cycles. The government needs a plan, based on wide consultation, to improve access to education at all levels, particularly the higher levels. As costs in Malé rise, many young people can no longer afford to study in the capital without increased support. More vocational training is needed in areas such as engineering, tourism, and environmental management, as well as the arts.

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Drug treatment reaches too few people, and the support given to them after they leave programs does too little to help them stay off drugs. Most of those interviewed pointed to drugs as a serious problem in their communities, along with gangs and crime. Drugs and associated crimes, imprisonment, and corruption, are eroding faith in government and undermining communities.

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Social isolation and untreated mental health issues are regarded as significant problems. Sports programmes have been the typical response in the past to anomie felt by the young, but these are evidently no longer sufficient. Improved mental health treatment and awareness of mental health issues are needed. The Maldives has laws and institutions for better social protection, but they do not function adequately: implementing institutions should be re-invigorated and, where necessary, laws reformed to make them effective.

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Prisons are, poorly managed, and hold too many drug users and small-scale dealers. Expanding and reforming rehab care and community reintegration would save money and improve lives.

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Young people need more economic and political opportunities: within the tourism sector; to start their own businesses; in creative arenas such as arts and music; and involvement in policy discussion and development. The economy must be rebalanced in favor of the many, rather than the resort-owning few.

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Many of the problems discussed in this paper have been examined repeatedly in past (see list of references at the end). What is clear is that the Maldives does not lack awareness of these problems or the ability to solve them. There has instead been a lack of political will to implement reforms.

# 10 POLICY PRIORITIES IN THE NEAR TERM

1

An updated mental health evaluation is necessary, along with an updated survey on drug use. Existing reports are outdated and some major changes have taken place in the Maldives. Not enough is known about either areas even though there has been a full assessment of the 2011 Drug Law and its effects.

Prison reform must start by reducing prison populations, mostly through offering parole and more non-custodial sentences for drug users and non-violent offenders. House arrest, island arrest, or electronic monitoring should be considered to reduce the prison population by at least 50 percent. There is an urgent need to reform sentencing to allow for restorative justice as well as imprisonment.

2

3

Develop an urgent plan to segregate violent and non-violent prisoners and prevent prisons from becoming places of radicalization.

The Disability Act and the Mental Health Strategic Plan should be re-invigorated urgently along with full implementation of the 2011 Drug Act to ensure that vulnerable groups no longer lack support or access to decision-making.

4

5

Start designing a national dialogue and consultation programme on access to quality education to envision a plan for guiding policy over the next few decades.



Ensure that ad hoc investigations into prison conditions, disappearances, and corruption eventually lead to expanded institutional powers and greater independence for the agencies responsible for monitoring these areas. Use these ad hoc processes to identify what needs to be done to improve institutional resilience.



Develop a plan for the return and reintegration of those who have gone to fight in Syria and Iraq, focusing on families and their return to their communities. Any such plan should involve community leaders, healthcare workers, social workers, and religious figures. Those returning may need mental health care for post-traumatic stress.

Fast-track efforts to improve access to credit for young people, especially women.



Expand the roles of resort owners and managers in helping young people and addressing the key problems of training, employment, and business development, particularly for women and those on outer atolls. Tourism in the Maldives must be sustainable in both environmental and social terms.

Begin consultations with businesses on vocational education planning and identifying what skills are most in need.



# INTRODUCTION

Young people in the Maldives are facing many of the stresses of modern life without much help from what they regard as a distant and unresponsive state. Although they live in the wealthiest country in South Asia, with a similar per capita GDP (measured in PPP terms) to Mexico or Argentina, many have limited educational or employment opportunities.<sup>1</sup> While the Maldives has enjoyed significant economic growth and social improvements, it has a political economy that hinders the government's capacity to meet the rising expectations of an upper middle-income country.<sup>2</sup> At the heart of this is corruption: the government is the main employer, but obtaining a civil service job requires connections. According to the young people everything from housing to getting a degree depends on a willingness either to pay or to use connections. A deep unfairness at the heart of the system is both inefficient and corrosive to community spirit.

Many countries are worse off than the Maldives—which ranks 101<sup>st</sup> on the Human Development Index—but the sense of disillusionment and mistrust among young people exceeds that of many poorer nations.<sup>3</sup> The escalation of expectations in a population that is increasingly well travelled and exposed to the world has far exceeded development and provision of public services. Tensions are bound to arise when people live in basic conditions next to some of the most luxurious resorts on earth. Democracy has led to polarization, with deep rifts over party support and even the desirability of an elected government. The findings in our polling and conversations match other reports that have highlighted disillusionment over institutions and politicians.<sup>4</sup>

This report focuses on the concerns of young people, but due to limitations of time and space there are some important issues it does not address: the unsustainable financial situation in the Maldives; the increasing effects of climate change; the mismanagement of some areas of healthcare and education that have worsened expenses; and the rent-seeking that dominates the economy in too many ways. These have been covered in many of the papers listed at the end of this report.

At first glance the Maldives has all the institutions and laws expected in a modern state. It has signed up to most international conventions and has a relatively liberal

constitution. But like every other developing country it has challenges in implementation.

Decades of neglect in education, housing, employment, and justice have created widespread disenchantment and frayed the social fabric. Crime has worsened, education is poorly matched to the job market, and housing has become all but unaffordable. Drugs and gangs have become a significant problem, and according to young people governments have been more inclined to close the political and cultural space open to the young than to enhance their opportunities. In short there is a deep sense of malaise among many young people, mostly because of corruption and the contentious political environment.

The Maldives have had a very rapid confrontation with modernity. In fewer than 50 years, the islands have gone from an isolated and underdeveloped archipelago to a celebrated tourist destination with foreign-born workers making up a quarter of the population. During this period, there has been a sudden change in the political system to a multiparty democratic system. This process has led to the intense polarization within families and society in general.

The rise of foreign terrorist groups, coincided with a difficult political moment for the Maldives. The appeal of these violent groups arose when the country was also undergoing a volatile political environment. Political divisions that came with democracy created challenges for communities at a time when social media and other forces were creating an environment supporting extremism. This combination of political shocks, globalized religion and information, as well as the use of religious conformity as a political tool, is likely to have contributed to radicalization in the Maldives.

It is estimated that a number of Maldivian men and women have gone to join violent extremist groups. We do not know what has happened to all of them: some are believed to have been dead, some widows are believed to have married other men and elected to stay, some are believed to be in the custody of certain terrorist groups in Syria. Some may want to return. Their presence in the Middle East has led to concerns that the Maldives is becoming a “breeding ground for jihadis” and that their return might lead to violence at home.

<sup>1</sup>GDP per capita reached 10,675 USD in 2017, up from 200 USD in 1978. Measured by PPP, GDP is above 16,000 USD. Growth in 2018 was above 7 percent. The World Bank Overview. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/maldives/overview>

<sup>2</sup>Jayasooria S.P. Growth Slowdowns, Middle Income Traps and Demographic Profile in South Asia. Asian Development Bank Institute. May 2017. <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/316186/adbi-wp736.pdf>

<sup>3</sup>Human Development Reports online at <http://hdr.undp.org/en/composite/HDI>

<sup>4</sup>Transparency Maldives. A Troubled Future for Democracy. 2015. Available at <http://transparency.mv/files/media/b64f58f6f145339ffdcfe74d929c80.pdf>

This has led some to claim that the Maldives had the highest number of fighters joining ISIS per hundred thousand Muslims.<sup>5</sup> There is huge uncertainty over the numbers that have travelled to Syria and Iraq but there are two problems with this claim: most Maldivians are believed to have joined Al Nusra, and several countries—including Tunisia, Jordan and Russia—have probably sent more per hundred thousand Muslims.<sup>6</sup>

Although the term “drivers of extremism” has become widely used, it suggests a simpler link between social issues and violence than can be shown. What we do know is that education, economic status, or religiosity does not seem to play a direct role. Most research has shown that structural factors such as economics or education show little effect when measured at the country level: indeed, there is evidence of higher levels of education among extremists.<sup>7</sup> Simply put, economic development does not discourage extremism.

What seems to be more important are issues of identity, fairness, exclusion, and disenchantment. Many of those drawn to violent extremism come from criminal backgrounds or from marginalized communities. In some cases, joining a group such as the Islamic State is about the search for identity. For others, it is about adventure or feeling powerful after a life of disenfranchisement. We do not have biographies of all those who have left the Maldives. But from what we do know, a significant number were drug users, former prisoners, or people from troubled families. This has been a similar pattern

across many countries.

Extremism is defined in many ways, but one of the most useful is the notion that the in-group sees violence as the only way to protect itself from being undermined by the out-group. In this case, the in-group must be tightly defined and feel itself to be under threat. That threat is used to justify violence. Education and public discourse that hardens the boundary with the out-group can legitimize violence when combined with the idea that the in-group is under threat.

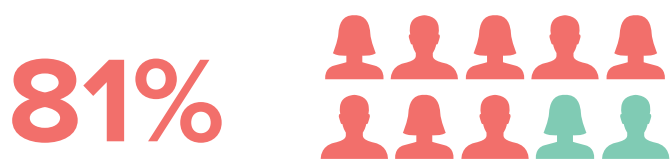
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<sup>5</sup> See the widely cited but highly inaccurate article by Francesca Borri. Where Jihadis are Heroes. 14 March 2017. Norwegian Refugee Council. <https://www.nrc.no/perspectives/2017/where-jihadists-are-heroes/>

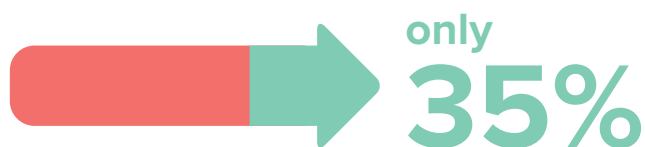
<sup>6</sup> According to figures from the Soufran Center, about 6,000 Tunisians have joined ISIS (~50/100k Muslim population). About 3,500 Russians (~30/100k) have joined along with a similar number of Saudis (~10/100k) and about 3,000 Jordanians. (30/100k). If 50 Maldivians joined ISIS, the figure would be ~15/100k, but is almost certainly lower as most Maldivians joined Al Nusra, not ISIS. See Richard Barrett, Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees. The Soufran Center. October 2017. <http://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017-v3.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> For a summary of research on the subject, see J.M. Berger. Extremism. MIT Press. 2018.

# YOUNG MALDIVIANS, A SNAPSHOT



of the young people interviewed said they were optimistic about the future.



felt that the Maldives were heading in the right direction.

Many are deeply disillusioned by politics, which they see as dividing their communities and families. They are angry about corruption and feel that too often jobs go to the connected rather than the qualified. Almost every person who attended the discussions complained of the difficulties of getting work given the stranglehold of political patronage. Not only were positions allocated to political supporters, but it is common to lose a job if your party loses power.



felt the government cared about young people.



believed that they had a say in their future.

Young Maldivians are healthier, better educated, and better off than almost all their counterparts across South Asia. They live longer than any of their neighbors and have enjoyed higher and more sustained economic growth. More of them use the Internet than anywhere else in the region and almost everyone has a smartphone. But most of the benefits are concentrated among those who live in Malé. Youth unemployment is at 26 percent and attendance at university is lower than would be expected for a country at this level of development.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Asian Development Bank. Maldives: Overcoming the Challenges of a Small Island State. Country Diagnostic Report. 2014. <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/172704/maldives-overcoming-challenges-sm-all-island-state.pdf>

# 55%

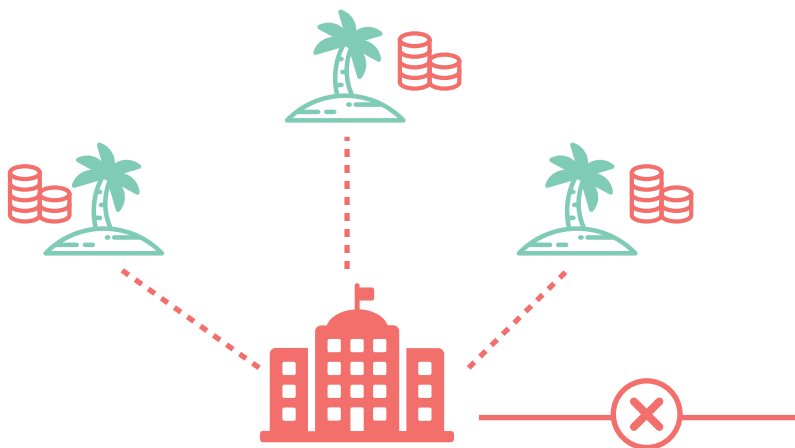
felt their education had helped them get a job.



# 51%

said their education had prepared them for adult life.

Likewise, there was deep resentment over the fact that islands that did not vote for the government in power in Malé felt they were punished for their lack of support.<sup>9</sup>



Fewer than a quarter believed their island could prosper without more government help.

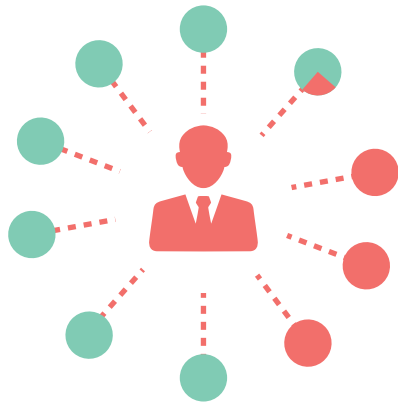


# 88%

thought the government should spend more money on islands outside the capital.

Corruption, money politics, and patronage have corroded community spirit across the country. Many now view the state as exclusionary, partisan, and dishonest. But expectations of decent government and the provision of services are high. Most young Maldivians still believe that government is necessary to help their islands, and want to see action by the central authorities. Almost all want to see more local control of resources and more spending outside Malé, even those who live in the capital.

<sup>9</sup> Interviews with Island Council officials in Addu City, Kaafu, Baa and Raa atolls, December 2018.



67%

believed you could only get a job if you had the right connections.

Most are optimistic about life despite the problems they face. Most would stay in the country even if they had a chance to move elsewhere, and most believe they have a say in their future. People have pride in their communities, their identity as Maldivians, and in their religion. There is a commitment to the values of peace, non-violence, and equality. Almost all believe women should be able to work outside the home and hold positions of power in government, although women complained of profound obstacles to their advancement. They want better religious education that allows them to ask more questions.



84%

believed women should work outside the home.



Those aged below 35 will face enormous problems. Above all they must tackle the burdens of climate change in one of the most vulnerable places on earth. They are also operating in a world of global competition in a country that is not favored by geography. Their parents have seen the country develop from resources that are fragile and easily undermined, such as fisheries and the natural beauty of the islands. There are limits to how far the Maldives can develop using these resources unless far more is done to focus on sustainability of communities and protecting the environment.

70%

believed women should have a greater role in government.



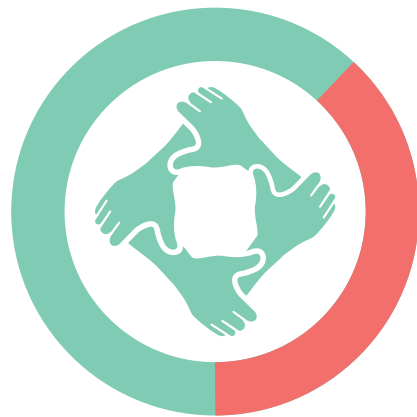
**69%**

felt social isolation was a serious problem for young people.

Only

**39%**

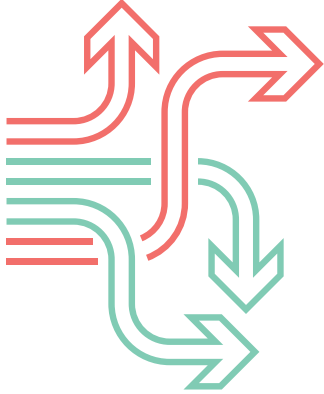
percent agreed that the community spirit was strong on their island.



**10%**

believed that people on their islands supported extremism.

# CHALLENGES



- 1. CORRUPTION**
- 2. EDUCATION**
- 3. DRUGS**
- 4. UNEMPLOYMENT**
- 5. HOUSING**
- 6. GANGS**
- 7. VIOLENT JIHAD**

The 173 people who completed our questionnaire listed these seven issues in this order of concern. Corruption was at the top of the list, selected as the first or second choice by half of those who answered. Extremism was by far the least important to them, put in last place by 60 percent of respondents.



# CORRUPTION

They tell you if you work hard you can get ahead but that is not true.

I was even told to change the color of the font on emails to the color of the ruling party.

If you are seen voting in a primary for the opposition party, you are told you will lose your job.

You are told you have to go to a political rally and then post a selfie on Twitter to prove you were there.

Corruption puts people off studying. Why bother getting a higher degree when it doesn't help you get a job?

Democratic politics has created deep rifts in the Maldives. Any transition to democracy is likely to expose differences within a society but these have been exacerbated by the turmoil that has accompanied the move away from autocracy. One of the side effects of political polarization has been a deepening of patronage culture and the creation of “winner-takes-all” politics. Young people believe that at all levels of government, when new leaders take over they not only replace the top staff, but also provide jobs for many of their loyalists. Getting a job means supporting the party in power—or at least pretending to—which causes a profound sense of grievance.

The government is the main employer outside of tourism. On many islands it is the sole source of regular, permanent employment. These jobs are coveted because of fewer opportunities elsewhere, and because they do not involve leaving home for extended periods, a frequent requirement with resort work. It was a near-universal complaint among all our respondents that jobs were now awarded due to political loyalty rather than qualifications or ability.

This is just one form of corruption that pervades life in the Maldives, but it is the one that most concerns young people and has the greatest direct impact on their lives. Corruption has corroded faith in the idea that working hard and getting a good education is rewarded with success. “Why bother getting a degree when it doesn’t help you get a job now?” One participant asked. As women are concentrated in state- controlled sectors such as education, healthcare, and administration, this form of corruption disproportionately affects them, and is amplified by the perceived lack of suitable opportunities for women in growth areas such as tourism and fishing.

In discussions with young people, some acknowledged that everyone took advantage of whatever connections they had to jump queues or gain access to services. But it comes at a profound cost to young people in terms of economic advancement. Some research suggests a link between corruption and extremism as people move towards violence when other channels for improving their lives are blocked.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Lizundia E. and Waggoner L. Preventing Violent Extremism and Tackling Corruption through Citizen-Centered Government. International Republican Institute. March 2018.

# EDUCATION

**There is no structured network of support in schools. The few counsellors they have are not qualified.**

**Education doesn't focus on values. They teach a syllabus but nobody pays any attention to behavior.**

**The system is only producing people for white collar jobs but not everyone can be a doctor or an architect.**

**Everything has become so commercialized. Now you even get colleges offering a free umrah trip to those who sign up.**

Students in Malé have a range of options and access to higher education, but those living on outer atolls often have poorly equipped schools that teach only to the age of 16. To go beyond 'O levels', most people must leave home, and move to the capital or to a larger island. Almost all young people on the outer atolls complained about the quality and variety of education, saying that many sciences were not taught, schools lacked equipment and laboratories, and there was no career guidance. Half of those questioned said their education had neither helped them get a job nor prepared them well for adult life.

The consolidation of education in Malé has worsened crowding there and enabled only those with financial resources to study. Education is misaligned from job opportunities. Many people are now educated beyond the point that they are looking for an entry level job in tourism or fishing. But few have the vocational or technical qualifications for managerial and engineering jobs, which are in great demand in resorts and which are mostly filled by foreigners. A shortage of educational opportunities in the outer atolls and the reduction of average years of education for those who live there are major sources of inequality in the country.<sup>11</sup>

Most young people we spoke to were disenchanted by many aspects of their education, saying it neither prepared them well for jobs or for adult life. They believed there was too much emphasis on qualifications

and not enough on creativity or critical thinking. Teachers were often poorly trained and prepared, teaching only to a narrow syllabus and refusing to answer questions. Curiosity was discouraged and pupils were told to focus on exam success, a particularly dispiriting way to teach the less academically inclined.

Careers guidance was almost entirely lacking as was vocational training, even though the country suffers from some skills shortages. Girls were encouraged into teaching or nursing while boys were pushed into fishing or tourism. While education levels for the country are high compared with others in South Asia, they are below what would be expected for an upper middle income country, in part because of the difficulty of providing public services across the atolls but also due to failure of investment and innovation. Careers guidance, backed by a research unit, could help balance job demand with education and encourage young people into new opportunities. Many young people complained of feeling a lack of direction as they emerged from their education uncertain about what jobs were out there.

Housing is a linked problem because many people leave their home islands to continue their studies and find the costs in Malé hard to meet. A lack of affordable student housing has become a hindrance for some, while many would prefer options closer to home.

<sup>11</sup> Maldives Human Development Report 2014. Bridging the Divide: Addressing Vulnerability; Reducing Inequality. UNDP. June 2014 at [http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/maldives\\_hdr2014\\_full\\_report\\_0.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/maldives_hdr2014_full_report_0.pdf)

Several of those interviewed complained about the lack of cultural education in their upbringing and a lack of opportunities for artistic expression. There is no art school on the islands, nor are there many spaces for exhibitions or performances. While traditional music and some celebrations persist, there was a sense of loss of local culture. Very little in the way of funding has been put into either the study or preservation of traditional culture. While some groups do exist that promote links among people from other islands now living in Malé, the capital lacks any venues or mechanisms to perpetuate or celebrate diversity among the atolls.

Participants in the discussions complained about the quality of religious education, saying teachers were mostly unprepared to answer questions and shied away from controversial topics for fear of complaints from parents. One participant said, “But if the teachers don't answer, people will go to the Internet and get the wrong sort of information.” There was a strong view from many that most teachers of religion lacked suitable qualifications, and failed to link what they were teaching to everyday life. Several participants complained that a lack of education had opened the door to harmful influences. One participant said “Random sheikhs can say anything and they get believed because we don't have an authoritative source to go to.”

Few schools teach either life skills or civics classes, although most of the young people interviewed believed they should. Many felt the lack of education on political and social issues accounted for the numerous problems with democracy in the country. “People don't know the value of their vote,” said one man. “There is no civic education so we talk but nothing changes,” said another. The narrowness of the curriculum and its focus on exams undermines engagement for many, particularly those who do not wish to follow an academic track. Even those who do often find family pressure unbearable. One participant said, “Everyone wants you to be a doctor or an architect but not everyone can do that.”

Those with disabilities face even greater problems when it comes to education. For the visually impaired, one of the few options is to become an imam after learning to recite the Koran. Those with sensory disabilities are often taught by unqualified teachers who mostly ignore them. One of the few options is to come to Malé, but that is out of reach for some. Several people with disability who took part in this research highlighted that they were physically abused by teachers and accused of being stupid because they failed to understand instructions. Some teachers are trained in special education, but the number is small and the training is brief.

# DRUGS

I could send a text and have drugs here in five minutes. It takes 40 minutes to order a pizza

There is a lot of stigma even if you are clean. There is not much understanding.

Everything here is about competition but what do you do when you keep on failing?

Drugs are a serious and growing problem. As with any underground activity it is hard to know how widespread drug use is, but on some islands, people said that there was at least one heroin user in every household. The last major study is now out of date, and since it was completed, synthetic party drugs have arrived on the islands. Some 80 percent of those incarcerated are in prison on drugs charges, while there is a year-long waiting list for court-determined rehab. There is a lack of clear information on the scale of the harm caused by heroin, but many of the young people interviewed described it as a serious problem. The 2011 study on drug use prevalence put it at 6.64 percent in Malé and 2.02 percent in the other atolls.<sup>12</sup>

Under the 2011 Narcotic Drugs Act,<sup>13</sup> the Maldives has in theory a fairly tolerant approach to drug users. Offenders are remanded to a Drugs Court, which can sentence them to a suspended sentence and drug treatment. If they complete treatment and remain drug free for a certain amount of time, they do not serve time in prison. After five years, their record is wiped clean.

In practice, the system rarely enables users to leave drugs behind and often traps them in long periods of enforced waiting for treatment, during which time they are likely to return to drug use or dealing. During this waiting period for treatment if they are caught again for any other offence, they end up in prison.

There is a huge shortfall in treatment options for drug users. All drug users, whatever they use, are put through the same treatment programme even though this is rarely effective. The long waiting list for treatment also ends up enmeshing people in a difficult limbo as they wait for a place to open up. Treatment is only available in Malé—and to a lesser extent in Addu City and Fuvahmulah City—meaning that those from other islands

are forced to move to the capital despite the expense and difficulty of finding work and housing. Drug users, prison officials, and drug workers all say that relapses are common and that the current system is not effective at reducing demand.

Strengthening drug education for students at vulnerable ages can be improved through better coordination among the National Drug Agency, Education Ministry and non-governmental organizations. Gangs and dealers recruit younger teenagers to handle drug transactions as they cannot be prosecuted as adults under the age of 18. Unfortunately, this introduces them to crime at a very early age and in some cases, they become an important breadwinner for families.

The Maldives had an incarceration rate of 499 per hundred thousand of population in 2017, according to the World Prison Brief.<sup>14</sup> That is one of the highest in the world, exceeded by only a handful of countries such as the United States, Cuba, and El Salvador. In Asia, only Thailand has a higher rate. The Maldives imprisons its people at 15 times the rate of India despite having a far lower incidence of violent crime.

<sup>12</sup> United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime. National Drug Use Survey Maldives 2011/2012. Malé: United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime; 2012.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.drugcourt.gov.mv/documents/laws/17-2011-Drug%20Act-Translation.pdf> "This Act makes provision for the prevention of the use, peddling and trafficking of drugs; and provides for measures to motivate drug dependent persons to treatment and rehabilitation programmes with a view to reducing or eliminating their dependency on drugs and to facilitate their reintegration into the community as responsible citizens; stipulates offences and punishments relating to the misuse of drugs; and matters related thereto."

<sup>14</sup> World Prison Brief at [prisonstudies.org](http://www.prisonstudies.org) <http://www.prisonstudies.org/country/maldives>

Prison overcrowding and a lack of resources for rehabilitation are producing a generation of recidivists. Prison capacity is about 650 but the prison population is now between 900-1100.<sup>15</sup> The country has seven facilities for prison and drug rehabilitation and they are believed to be at around 130 percent of capacity.<sup>16</sup> Overcrowding means that prisons are not fully segregated into dangerous groups and non-violent prisoners. The prison population is made up mostly of a rotating cast of the same characters: there are normally only around 100 “first timers” each year. Officials say prisons offer training and rehabilitation for drug offenders, and enable inmates to take O level exams and other courses. Those who have been jailed say that little is offered to them and that most of the time the only reading material allowed is the Koran. Some 450 prisoners are employed as cleaners, cooks, and gardeners in penitentiaries, earning up to MVR85 (US\$5.50) a day. Demographic details about prisoners were not available publicly, but prison officials said most were aged under 30. Eighty percent were serving sentences for drugs.<sup>17</sup> Most of those were believed to be non-violent offenders.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that prison has been one of the routes to extremism and engagement with armed groups in the Middle East. This has been part of a pattern in many countries, and offers no surprises: many who go to prison are there for minor drug offences, and the process of incarceration is shocking and traumatic. One former prisoner spoke of extreme brutality and isolation during the first nine months of term. Sexual violence, torture, self-harm, and drug use are all commonplace.<sup>18</sup> Concerns about prison conditions have been extensively reported on for decades but very little has been done to change the system.

A series of reports going back to 2003<sup>19</sup> has examined issues of justice, imprisonment, and drugs, and has made a similar set of recommendations: reform the drug laws; reduce custodial sentences for drug offences and remand; provide rehabilitation and educational

programmes in prison; segregate prison populations; improve overall conditions; and provide better training for correctional staff. Some of these issues have been addressed. Drug laws were reformed in 2011, and the prison population did decline briefly but rose again during 2013-2018. None of these reports provided a detailed analysis of the political economy of drugs, gangs, business, justice, politics, and incarceration. Linkages among these groups hamper any serious efforts at reform. Additionally a prison audit commission was established on 18 December 2018 and has begun an assessment into the conditions of the prisons and the report is yet to be published.

Those who had been through rehab or prison described harsh conditions and a system rife with corruption and drugs.<sup>20</sup> They are often caught in a trap whereby it takes so long to get a place in rehab or for a court case to be scheduled that they have sometimes stopped using and moved on with their lives, only to find themselves back where they started. Many find themselves stuck in Malé on probation but unable to find work or housing. “If you have a prison record you can only find work in Malé on the construction sites with the undocumented immigrants. On the islands, you can go fishing or work in a guesthouse, but it is much more difficult in the city.”

The persistent failure of prisons and rehab comes at a high cost. Almost all of those who have gone to Syria and Iraq are believed to have had some encounters with the justice sector or prison services. Drugs are now haunting too many families while obstacles are put in the way of what are known to be effective policies.

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with officials from the Department of Corrections. <sup>16</sup> World Prison Brief.

<sup>17</sup> A UNDP report on prisons in 2011 reported that 66 percent of prisoners were incarcerated for relatively minor drug offences. More than half had been imprisoned before.

<sup>18</sup> Interviews with former inmates. Malé. December 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Alder C.M. and Polk K. (2004) Strategic Plan for the Reform of the Juvenile Justice System. UNDP Maldives. Alder C.M. and Polk K. (2004) Gender Issues in the Criminal Justice System of the Maldives. UNDP. Macdonald D (2004) Review and Revision of the Current Legal Framework for Drug Abuse Prevention and Intervention in the Maldives: Issues Paper. UNDP/Narcotics Control Board. Robinson P (2004) Report on the Criminal Justice System of the Republic of the Maldives. UNDP. Rapid Situation Assessment of Drug Abuse in the Maldives (2003). Harding R. and Morgan N. Strengthening Custodial Services in the Maldives. (2004) UNDP.

<sup>20</sup> Interviews with former prisoners, Malé. December 2018.

# EMPLOYMENT

**There is no trust for locals in the tourism industry.**

**When the government wants to do something for young people they just think of sports. Nobody asks us if we want more than sports.**

A quarter of young Maldivians are out of work. At the same time, more than 100,000 foreigners are working on the islands legally and perhaps another 30,000 illegally.<sup>21</sup> Few adults are in training, and many have just given up looking for work. Employment is one of the major concerns for young people, and much resentment was expressed about the extent to which politics now dominates the job market. With a median age of 28, the Maldives has a young population compared with the rest of South Asia. It has something of a demographic dividend in terms of having a large workforce in relation to the entire population. Those aged between 20 and 35 are the largest group.<sup>22</sup> However, too few people in this age group are working, particularly young women.

Some of the problems mentioned by participants are familiar to young people the world over: employers demand experience, but without an entry-level position it is impossible to get experience; education offerings do not always match the changing needs of employers, and there is high pressure from parents to be employed.

## **Some problems are grounded in local issues:**

**People complained about an almost total lack of career guidance at schools and colleges. Some Island Councils had brought in advisors for short consultations, but there was no systematic effort to provide support to those moving out of secondary or higher education into work.**

**There was a sense of alienation from much of the tourism industry, which is viewed as favoring foreign workers at the expense of locals.**

**Women across the country complained about being asked about their marital status, their children, and their clothing in interviews, saying this was routine. Many said that workplace harassment was prevalent: it was hard to get ahead because of sexual demands made by men. Even if women did advance on their merits, colleagues often suggested they had only moved up by offering sexual favors.**

**Few people had any sense of their rights at work and little sense of protection from harassment and other workplace abuses.**

Many of those interviewed complained about the difficulty of starting a new business. Bank loans were challenging to get without being able to put up a house as collateral, and most people were still living at home with their extended family. Advice on such issues as writing business plans is lacking, and it is impossible to find an affordable office, manufacturing, or retail space, even on some of the less densely inhabited islands. The lack of support for entrepreneurship has been noted in several economic studies, but governments have done little to widen the economic base by boosting small businesses.<sup>23</sup>

Very little has been done to inculcate an entrepreneurial mindset in people: government jobs are still favored by many despite the political challenges they present. Many young men out in the islands work on fishing boats or collect valuable products like sea cucumbers, but only work for a few months at a time. Too little is done in schools to build confidence among teenagers through career advice, internships, engagement by different industries, or volunteering.

<sup>21</sup> Transparency Maldives. Maldives Migrant Worker System Assessment Report 2015 at <http://transparency.mv/v16/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Maldives-Migrant-Worker-System-Assessment.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> See for example: The World Bank Group Country Survey 2014 in which local respondents in a poll of experts put improving entrepreneurial opportunities, education and training and better employment opportunities for young people as their top three economic priorities.

International tourism has always been to a certain extent segregated from most of the population. Resorts can serve alcohol and pork, which are banned on inhabited islands, and guests can dress as they wish. This has created a view among many—particularly conservative Maldivians—that resorts are unsuitable environments for employment for women, and sometimes men. Resorts have tended to employ workers from abroad, for both construction and as well as hotel staff. This has led to a situation in which 100,000 foreign workers now make up nearly a third of the total population while youth unemployment remains stubbornly around 25 percent. The education system and job markets are not well-matched: all resorts need engineers and technicians for their water desalination and air conditioning plants, but training in these areas has been insufficient to meet demand.

The economic success of an island can depend significantly on any nearby resorts. Some companies have policies of hiring locally and providing training opportunities to those without experience. They also engage nearby inhabited islands by purchasing goods, organizing tours, protecting the environment, and establishing corporate social responsibility programmes. However, this all depends on the resort management. On one island in Raa Atoll, residents complained that a neighboring resort brought tourists to its reef without any compensation and discharged its garbage in a way that fouled their beaches. Near Addu City, islanders complained that fewer than 10 percent of those employed at a neighboring resort were locals and that the company did not make any effort to purchase food from their island or send visitors there.

While tourism has brought significant development, the benefits have not been spread in a way that makes the industry socially responsible or truly sustainable. While many of those who had worked in resorts had positive experiences, others said it was not a sustainable way of life for them as it took them away from families for too long. Many men said that once they started a family, they were no longer willing to be away from home for such long periods.

Integrating island life with resorts will require the government to enforce regulations on local employment as well as labor standards. Inevitably salaries will rise if employers are not able to exploit a global market for cheap workers, but this will improve opportunities for locals. There are steps the industry could take that would improve their engagement with local society while also improving staff retention and working conditions and they are:

**Improve options for resort workers to live at home, either by providing daily or weekend transport. Increasing flexibility in shifts will ensure people can return home.**

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**Put measures in place to end restrictions on unionization in resorts.**

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**Improve worker housing in resorts, particularly for women, so that people feel secure. Address complaints of sexual harassment seriously and allow women to dress in a way they feel is appropriate.**

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**Engage with communities to dispel notions about the risks to women in resorts.**

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**Engage more fully with local producers of food and other goods. Engage with local solid waste management efforts to help communities reduce environmental impact.**

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**Work with local communities to foster activities on inhabited islands for tourists. These can include handicrafts and cooking classes, fishing trips, and community activities. Resorts should also encourage their guests to wear appropriate clothing when on inhabited islands. Many guesthouse islands have a “bikini beach” where foreigners can wear what they want, but some local residents feel perturbed when guests dress inappropriately elsewhere.**

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**Expand training opportunities for local staff to allow movement up the managerial ladder. Pledge to ensure that a certain share of senior staff be locals and women by a target date, and put in place the necessary mechanisms and training to reach those targets.**

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**Establish measures to ensure all resorts report on the extent to which they are meeting sustainability targets in all areas to ensure they contribute to the broader welfare of the islands and do not put their business or others at risk.**

# GANGS

People have lost all trust in the police

During Ramazan, the people who managed the army housing sent around a letter saying we should avoid areas where gangs were robbing people. The police know where they are but do not do anything to stop them

Victims are always criticized while the criminals boast that they will be out of prison by midnight. And they always are.

You cannot avoid gangs. They are everywhere. Once you are in, you cannot pull yourself out.

The effects of gangs vary significantly depending on the island but are most strongly felt in the urban areas of Malé and Addu City.<sup>24</sup> Almost all respondents from these islands felt that gangs were a problem, indeed that they were ubiquitous and encountered almost daily. Most violence is within or between gangs rather than against the general public, but several respondents in Malé reported being robbed of cash or phones in daylight. Many women complained of street harassment by gang members.

An almost universal complaint was the involvement of politicians and business figures with gangs. There are allegations that gangs were used during elections to organize rallies, round up voters, and plaster walls with posters and that their links to politicians gave them almost complete impunity as they were routinely released from police custody if arrested. There is a common perception that their connections to politicians and the police allow them the freedom to do whatever they please, at the expense of the public.

Gangs provide identity, protection, income, and support for young men, and are therefore appealing to those whose education has done little to prepare them for a challenging job market. Gangs are a symptom of a wider social malaise in that they meet needs that are not being met by the community. They flourish in environments where young people are fleeing difficult family environments and lack other mechanisms of support that enable them to find work and a stable community. Family

breakdowns, poverty, poor housing, crime, violence, and unemployment create gangs; other factors such as early academic failure and inflexible education systems can worsen the problems and encourage young people to join. When other opportunities are constrained, people are willing to take risks to earn money through drugs or other illegal activities even though in many cases gang life is only lucrative for a handful of leaders, not the rank and file.

Global studies have shown that most adolescent boys do not join gangs, even in environments where crime is ubiquitous. What makes a difference is close family ties or links to supportive adults such as teachers or sports coaches with whom young people have secure, trusting relations. There is a need in the Maldives to provide more support for young people in ways that might help them avoid gang recruitment.

Gangs are having a serious impact on lives in urban areas: many people said they were reluctant to go out at night, that they had been victims of crime or intimidation, and that they did not feel protected by the police.

On the outer islands, many felt nobody reported crimes to police nowadays because they feared retribution from gangs. Breaches of confidentiality happen often, and gangs would know who reported the information and would harass informers, or burn their motorbikes in revenge.—Given the small communities on many islands, where everyone is from the few same families residing there, it is hardly surprising that a culture of impunity has arisen.



# EXTREMISM

There are no reliable sources. We have several questions, but there is nobody out there to answer them.

Teachers feel frightened and threatened talking about these subjects, but withholding information does not help.

Extremism is defined in many ways. One of the most useful definitions is the notion that it exists when an in-group sees violence as the only way to protect itself from being undermined by an out-group. The in-group must be tightly defined and feel itself to be under threat. That threat comes to justify the use of violence. Extremism has occurred in almost every country, across all periods of history, and in all religions. It requires the propagation of the notions that the selected in-group identity is superior to other identities and that it is under threat. It rejects the idea of pluralism, i.e., that diversity of ideas and behaviors might better encourage human potential than enforced conformity. Extremists must continuously reinforce the idea that their group is under threat: often this draws on real-life examples in which their group may face persecution. However, sometimes the mere existence of others is presented as a danger.<sup>25</sup>

When some Maldivian men joined armed groups in the Middle East after 2012, they set off a series of reports in

the media about extremism on the islands.<sup>26</sup> As is often the case, a wide range of views and behaviors were thrown together under the undefined label of extremism. A perception emerged that the Maldives was not just suffering from a rise in extremism but that its population of 350,000 people represented a global threat. Most of these assertions came from an uncritical acceptance of radicalization as a simple process of exposure to certain views. The fact that many Maldivians speak English and have access to the internet has been used to suggest that they are all at risk of radicalization even though there is little evidence to support this.

The lack of nuance in the analysis of these issues in the Maldives has created a distorted perception of threats and an overstatement of support for violence. It only takes a few people to carry out an attack, and the possibility is there—but there are very few signs of radicalization taking place on a widespread scale in the country.

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<sup>25</sup> See Extremism. MIT Press 2018.

<sup>26</sup> There are many definitions of extremism, radicalization and terrorism, almost all of them unsatisfactory in some way. In this paper, terrorism is defined as an act of violence against civilians aimed at spreading fear in support of a religious or political ideology. Radicalization is defined as the process whereby people come to accept violence or coercion as an acceptable tactic in the enforcement of a religious or political ideology. Extremism is defined as the use of violence or coercion in support of an ideology or religion in order to protect the interests of an in-group. People who support violence in some way may not actually be willing to use it themselves.

## There are several factors that counter the escalation of extremism in the Maldives:

There is no violent conflict underway, nor is there a history of organized violent conflict in past decades.<sup>27</sup> Some 84 percent of terrorist deaths take place in 10 countries, all of which are engaged in at least one conflict. Indeed, far from being a global problem, most terrorist attacks take place in just five countries: Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria, Iraq, and Nigeria.<sup>28</sup>

In most countries that are deeply afflicted by radicalization, government actions have directly promoted violent groups either by being extremely violent themselves or by encouraging groups as proxies. This has not happened to any significant degree in the Maldives, although some actions such as prison abuse may have contributed to radicalization.

There is no public acknowledgement of a religious minorities that could be scapegoat and target. There is no long history of tit-for-tat attacks on religious buildings or accusations of blasphemy against minorities. The only actions reported in this area are the distribution of some pamphlets attacking Alawites and other religious minorities, none of whom are known to live in the country. Although the stigmatization of out-groups can take place even when they are entirely absent, there have been relatively few cases of this in the Maldives.

Although Salafi views have gained a foothold, supporters are still in the minority and Salafism is never monolithic, with different branches opposing and supporting political engagement and only a small minority backing violence. There is no genuinely ungoverned space in the Maldives. The state has a presence on or close to almost all inhabited islands. Government systems of security, healthcare, education, and governance all function across the atolls, albeit poorly in some areas.

Most of those who have gone to Syria joined Jabhat al-Nusra, an organization that was aligned to Al Qaeda but that now says those links have ended. The focus of Al Nusra has been on fighting the dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad, and those who have joined have done so because they felt they were defending Muslims, particularly women and children, from the predation of the Syrian state. They are quick to distinguish themselves from both Al Qaeda, and ISIS and those Maldivians who have joined Al Nusra tend to refer only to fighting to protect Muslims.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> See for example UNDP Journey to Extremism. Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment. UNDP 2017. At <https://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/content/downloads/UNDP-JourneyToExtremism-report-2017-english.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> Global Terrorism Index 2018. Released 7 December 2018. <http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2018/12/Global-Terrorism-Index-2018-1.pdf> It says something about the extent to which international observers consider the Maldives a threat in that it is not mentioned once in the 88-page report.

<sup>29</sup> Media reports, social media activity and interviews in Male suggest that many Maldivians who traveled to the Middle East to fight have joined Jabhat al-Nusra (later known as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham) Statements by those who joined the Islamist group said they did so because of the violence directed against civilians, particularly Sunni Muslims, by the Syrian government. We do not know exact numbers who have joined JN or the Islamic State nor do we know how many have been killed. See Animesh Roul. The Syria Maldives Connection. Jihad in Paradise? The Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor. 21 November 2014. Admen Al-Tamimi. al-Qaida Uncoupling: Jabhat al-Nusra's Rebranding as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. CTC Sentinel. August 2016. <https://ctc.usma.edu/al-qaida-uncoupling-jabhat-al-nusras-rebranding-as-jabhat-fateh-al-sham/>

## There are, however, some reasons for concern:

The deployment of religion as a political weapon has been significant over the past decade, with many more liberal politicians and activists falsely accused of being opposed to Islam. These accusations, most of them based on no evidence, have led to a deeply polarized political environment.<sup>30</sup>

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The increased influence of Salafism and religious leaders who reject pluralism creates an environment in which polarization increases and the capacity for compromise diminishes. Salafism by no means creates a direct link to radicalization but can lead to it down the road. The religious authorities have scholars from different schools of thought including Salafists working in these organizations and have taken a more conservative turn than before 2004. Political activists on the more secular end of the spectrum believe that some organizations have endeavored to shrink the political space and punish those who do not accept their view of religion.

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The hardening of ideas of the “in-group” of Maldivians who are “100 percent Muslim,” and an “out-group” of those who are either outside the faith or are seen as having distorted it, is a step on the path to radicalization. There is also a widespread belief that Islam is under threat, an idea pushed on the Internet and linked to genuine state violence against Sunni Muslim communities in Syria, Myanmar, Russia, and China. There is no threat to Islam within the Maldives, yet religion is often portrayed as being vulnerable.

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As in many countries, there has been an expansion of behavior that involves withdrawing from aspects of society and education: no longer attending mosques but praying in separate groups; refusing vaccines for children; pulling children from art and music classes; and women declining to engage with male health workers. While these do not mean an embrace of violence, they are signs of a hardening of differences between “in” and “out” groups.

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Recruitment is linked to preachers mostly brought in from other countries. There is a widespread belief that these sheikhs offer more considered and authentic guidance than local religious leaders, who all come under government control.

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<sup>30</sup> Dhivenee Quami Party pamphlet see: <https://www.memri.org/reports/pamphlet-maldivian-islamist-party-triggered-coup-against-reformist-president-nasheed-no-law> The party existed between 2008 and 2013 but has now been disbanded.

<sup>31</sup> On the Ground News. Three part series on Maldivian fighters in Syria. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hEHCuIXNf7Q>

Too little has been done to reintegrate former drug users or prisoners into society. Around the world, drug users, petty criminals, and those coming from prison have often sought a new life with extremist groups. Those on the far margins of society have been drawn to the idea of redemptive jihad, as well as adventure and recognition. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many who left the Maldives to fight in the Middle East came out of these backgrounds and tended to join Al Nusra in part because of the sense of redemption that came from protecting Sunni women and children.<sup>31</sup>

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Radicalization is often associated with human rights abuses: there is a more explicit correlation here than for most other factors.<sup>32</sup> The Maldives has a poor record on this front, with enforced disappearances, abuses of anti-terror legislation, torture, and wrongful imprisonment on political grounds (especially human rights defenders).<sup>33</sup>

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Those who return from the Middle East might represent a threat, given their new skills and battle experience. However, they are just as likely to want to leave behind that life with all its violence and trauma. This issue can only be dealt with on a case-by-case basis through a coordinated response by police, judiciary, and social services.

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The political economy of the Maldives has resulted in a very narrow, corrupt, and out-of-touch elite that has shown little concern for young people or their opportunities. The links between politicians, gangs, drugs, and businesses have created a knot of interests, making it extremely difficult to tackle social problems coherently and effectively.

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Although there is little data to prove it, anecdotal information suggests a rise in violence in the Maldives, particularly in domestic and child abuse. Torture has also been widespread in institutions. While the links to extremism are far from clear, violence often begets violence.

<sup>32</sup> Statement on Human Rights and Counter-Terrorism from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Submitted to the Human Rights Council. 2 October 2015 See: <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/RuleOfLaw/PCVE/CTED.pdf> SOURCE and <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/RuleOfLaw/Pages/PCVE.aspx> for documents.

<sup>33</sup> FIDH Statement. Cease harassment of human rights defenders, establish accountability for abuses, and free all political prisoners. 30 May 2016. Paris. <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/asia/maldives/cease-harassment-of-human-rights-defenders-establis-accountability>

## EXTREMIST VIOLENCE

Past events do not necessarily tell us much about what to expect in the future, but it is worth reviewing incidents of extremist violence in the Maldives as they give some perspective on the problem. A locally organized attack on a resort could have a devastating effect on the economy. Serious efforts are needed to expand police and intelligence capacity to maintain security. The risks of such an attack happening are not significant, but low-risk, high-impact events are often the most difficult to plan for.

2007

A bomb exploded in Sultan Park in Malé on 29 September 2007, slightly injuring 12 foreign tourists. Three men were convicted after confessing, but two served only short prison terms and were released in 2010. Shortly after the bombing, there was a standoff between police and people on the island of Himandhoo that resulted in some serious injuries.

2012

Journalist Ismail Khilath Rasheed was stabbed in the neck by an assailant almost certainly motivated by the author's calls for religious freedom. A year earlier, Rasheed had been arrested after organizing a rally for religious freedom during which he was attacked and his skull fractured. The government censored his blog for containing "anti-Islamic matter."

Six men attacked the National Museum, destroying coral and sandstone Buddhist sculptures that dated from the period before Islam came to the islands. The incident took place on the same day that President Mohamed Nasheed was forced to step down.

2014

Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla, a journalist for The Maldives Independent, was abducted and disappeared on 8 August.

Minivan News reported that a vigilante gang made up of extremists and criminals kidnapped people associated with a Facebook page that supported secularism. They were later released after being threatened with death.

2017

Yameen Rasheed, a writer, known for his critical blog and posts on Twitter, was murdered at his home in Malé.

Two men were arrested for planning a bombing in the capital, apparently inspired by Islamic State (IS). A court later freed the men.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Fathmath Shaahunaz, Local Arrested for Allegedly Planning Terrorist Attack in the Maldives. <https://edition.mv/news/4270> 17 September 2017. Suicide Bombing Suspects Freed. Maldives Independent 4 November 2018.

Several other cases of violence by Maldivians have been reported, including one case in which a suicide bomber from the islands blew himself up in Islamabad in an attack.

From the very few violent events in the Maldives, it is hard to see any pattern. No organized armed jihadi group has appeared, and what violence has taken place seems to be linked more to criminal gangs than to those with extremist views. In some cases, there is also the suspected involvement of politicians using religion to divert the attention from their own behavior and to undermine opponents.

The process of radicalization is complex and little understood, whether viewed at the level of the individual or the community. Structural factors have not been shown to lead to extremism either in the West or in predominantly Islamic countries. Neither poverty nor inequality can be shown to be proximate causes: the Maldives is a case in point here given that it has the highest per capita GDP in South Asia and a low measure of inequality compared to its neighbors.<sup>35</sup> Two factors have however been shown to lead to radicalization: 1) the cognitive bias that comes with the strengthening of distinctions between in-group and out-group; and 2) the problems that come with increased uncertainty and changes to the status quo.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> World Bank Overview at <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/maldives/overview>.

<sup>36</sup> J.M. Berger. Extremism. MIT Press. 2018.

# OTHER ISSUES

## ISLANDS

**Social issues are never prioritized. They focus on the harbor, the football stadium, fixing the cemetery wall. But the “soft” issues are all ignored**

The geography of the Maldives is an immense challenge when it comes to providing services. The country spends more per capita on health and education than others in the region, but it gets less per dollars spent because of the difficulties of a dispersed population. The United Nations Human Development Report in 2014 examined many issues of geographical inequality in detail. In almost all cases, the situation may be worse today due to the continuing concentration of population and resources in the capital.<sup>37</sup>

The gaps are stark: incomes are lower on outer islands; few islands have easy access to education beyond the age of 16; while most islands have some medical care, it is usually restricted to the basics; and service provision has by all accounts declined between 2013 and 2018 as the powers and budgets of Island Councils have been reduced.

Island life raises problems in many ways. Not only are services difficult to access, but it is extremely hard to maintain any privacy in such small communities. Those with resources can seek help either in Malé or abroad when faced with still-taboo issues such as mental illness or unwanted pregnancy, but those who cannot afford foreign travel are left with little access to such services. There needs to be a greater effort to ensure that support for mental health and other issues is more widely available in the outer islands and that these services respect privacy and are designed in ways to ensure more comprehensive access.

Remote consultations, cheaper transport services, accommodation attached to medical facilities, and traveling clinics should all be considered as ways to broaden access. With Malé becoming more expensive each year, it will be more cost effective to provide more in the way of services to those in the outer islands, but an assessment must include a greater effort to consider access issues. Although the country has made significant strides in areas of health and education, rising

expectations mean that people are increasingly unhappy with the way services are managed.

Schooling and medical care present the most significant problems for the people. Many have moved to Malé for jobs, education, or medical reasons, incurring significant costs and this has led to overcrowding in the capital. This population shift has also emptied out some islands, reducing the amount of money available for services and therefore creating a vicious circle in which life on the outer atolls becomes more difficult.

The inequality between the outer islands and Malé is stark. As with all countries, the Maldives is seeing rapid urbanization, but that brings with it various problems, particularly given the lack of land in the capital and the difficulties in providing housing and other services. Development on the islands around Malé has focused on lucrative foreign investment projects that do little to help the social issues faced by the local people.

There are also marked differences between islands, even those right next to one another. Community spirit varies, as does economic success. This sometimes depends on issues of governance. It can also be due to the location: e.g., those islands next to resorts that employ many people, buy locally, engage with communities, and have corporate social responsibility programmes do better than those next to resorts that remain aloof from their neighbors.

Climate change will dominate the future of the islands. Rising sea levels mean there will inevitably be consolidation of the population into fewer places that can be protected and adapted. That process will be fraught with difficulties, requiring a sense of community and a shared vision that is lacking in the Maldives at present. Building strong resilient communities need to start on the islands now by enhancing prospects for young people and ensuring they are well-placed to take the difficult steps that will be needed in the future.

## GENDER

Men do not want to see women who are younger than them in senior jobs. They do not want to see you as capable. They do not want to let you climb up the ladder.

A police car followed me for 15 minutes when I was out walking so I called 119 to complain. They just asked me: "What did you do to make him harass you?"

I am afraid to go out alone nowadays. It is a type of terror we do not talk about.

If you get a job, you are asked: "How did you get the job?" Men have this idea that women are favored, that it is always easier for a woman to get a job.

You constantly face criticism if you work. Where are your children? Who is looking after your children? Men do not get asked that. They should ask men how they are coping with their kids.

Women in the Maldives have seen many aspects of their lives improve significantly in the past 40 years. They are better educated and healthier than ever before and have more access to jobs and economic power than at any other time. For example, maternal deaths have declined 90 percent since 1990.<sup>38</sup>

However, many problems remain and young women feel that the country remains deeply patriarchal in ways that diminish their prospects. Women play a significant role in the job market but find it difficult to reach the highest levels of institutions, in both the public and private sector. They also complain about harassment, on the street, and in the workplace, with little awareness of the problem among men and few attempts to implement existing laws.<sup>39</sup> The more conservative religious environment of the past decade has run counter to the demand from younger women for greater access to education, jobs, and positions of authority.

Almost all women complained of the same problems: they face a double burden when it comes to employment, as they must have political connections and meet higher standards than men. They complain that men with fewer qualifications are often hired ahead of them. It is common in job interviews to be asked about their marital status, whether they have children or plan to get pregnant, or about their clothes. Several people said that they had been asked if they would remove their hijab at work in a resort.

Although almost all respondents believed women should be allowed to work and that they were deserving of a

greater political role, in practice reaching the top in any organization is a major challenge. Less than five percent of the elected parliamentarians are women, a figure that has been diminishing over the past decades and is one of the lowest in the region. In a country rife with money politics, it has proved hard for women to develop the corporate— or criminal—interests that help many MPs get elected.

Women face some vulnerabilities in the Maldives. The very high divorce rate can often leave them disadvantaged, having to raise children on their own with little financial support. Concerns about women working away from home, particularly in resorts, have often restricted job opportunities. Likewise, having to leave home to continue education restricts women: young men are much freer to move around the islands for education and employment. However, women have emerged as leaders in education: more women than men now attend university, but they are often constrained in the subjects they are pushed into. There is still a bias towards careers such as nursing and teaching.

Gender issues have not been sufficiently considered in policymaking. This is noticeable in the tourism sector, which has not been adequately addressed to improve engagement with women or create the necessary working conditions that would make them feel safer and more welcome. With so few women in higher positions in government, they are often disadvantaged when it comes to jobs and promotions, many of which are driven by personal connections. Women also complained about the insecurity brought about by both inadequate policing and the gang culture that has pervaded Malé.

<sup>38</sup> UNFPA. Stunning Plunge in Maternal Deaths Recorded in the Maldives. 12 October 2016 <https://www.unfpa.org/news/stunning-plunge-maternal-deaths-recorded-maldives>

<sup>39</sup> Maldives Independent. Workplace Sexual Harassment: The Struggle for Justice. 6 November 2017 <https://maldivesindependent.com/society/workplace-sexual-harassment-in-the-maldives-the-struggle-for-justice-133995>

## MENTAL HEALTH

Emotion is seen as a weakness here. We bottle up our feelings.

It all starts with the family. Unstable marriages are causing problems.

Children are neglected. Everything for parents is about paying the rent, paying the bills.

Men are suppressed as well. They are told they have to be strong and masculine. "Boys do not cry." They get that message from when they are small.

Many of those taking part in the discussions raised the issue of mental health care. Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital, the main hospital in Malé has only four mental health beds, and there is no provision for care on other islands. The issue is also surrounded with much stigma, as it is everywhere, with the added belief that the answer is deeper religious faith. This response has led to neglect and in some cases abuse of the mentally ill.

NGOs have begun offering at least some counseling for people in areas of mental health, drug rehabilitation, and life skills, but they operate with few resources. Those on outer islands have fewer options even than those in the capital, particularly given the lack of privacy. "Everything you say at the medical center becomes public knowledge," said one islander. Likewise, prescriptions, if they can be filled from the small stocks available on many islands, also became a subject of gossip. Many people complained about the expense of private mental health care, which is only available in Malé.

In 2017, the government published a strategy paper to guide mental health policy up until 2025.<sup>40</sup> As has often been the case, the aims laid out in the paper have not been followed up with significant action. The difficulties of moving forward with the issue are illustrated in the fact that work on the strategy paper began 13 years before it was published. Although spending on medical

care in the Maldives is quite high for its level of development, spending on mental health has not kept up. There has been no recent study on the prevalence of mental health issues across the atolls.

A more holistic approach to mental health is needed that brings together a treatment for illness and drug addiction while also providing adolescents and young adults with tools to cope with the many problems that affect the young. Some NGOs, both religious and more secular, do hold programmes on youth issues and parenting but their funding and reach are limited. Some Island Councils also hold sessions on life skills, but these are intermittent and ad hoc.

The Maldives falls into a difficult place: government budgets are stretched and insufficient in this area, but at the same time the country is too prosperous and too small to receive much foreign assistance. This has left many NGOs that deal with mental health, drug users, prisoners, and Persons with Disability struggling to survive.



## SOCIAL MEDIA

We keep religion in a closed box. Kids get kicked out of class for asking questions. Yet they have questions so they go online and they can find anything there.

The Maldives has one of the highest Internet use rates in the world, along with very high use of both Twitter and Facebook.<sup>41</sup> In the five years from 2012, social media became the most contested political space, with both sides making ample use of it to denigrate their opponents. Although it is hard to prove, it seems there can be little doubt that social media has deepened the polarization afflicting the country.<sup>42</sup>

Social media always has a double edge. While used by extremists to propagate their views, it is also used by more progressive forces to promote human rights and accountability.<sup>43</sup> Controls are easily evaded and programmes to develop counter-narratives are expensive and of little use if seen as lacking credibility.

No country is free of the influence of social media and its capacity to up-end conventions of news reporting and information. In the Maldives, its effects have been amplified by what many describe as the poor quality of religious education. Those with a more complete and thorough religious education, i.e., one that includes discussion and debate, are more likely to resist the misinformation put out on social media. Providing a more critical education—and specific training on reading social media with a critical eye—can provide people with the tools to sift through the ever-expanding volume of misinformation on the Internet.

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<sup>41</sup> ITU Statistics at <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>

<sup>42</sup> UNESCO. Youth and Violent Extremism on Social Media: Mapping the Research. 2017 Paris. At <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000260382>

<sup>43</sup> Hilary Yerbury and Ahmed Yashid. Social media activism in Maldives; information practices and civil society. June 2016. Available at <http://www.informationr.net/ir/22-1/colis/colis1614.html>

## SOCIAL ISOLATION

There used to be celebrations during Eid, like block parties along the streets but these seem to be fewer and fewer. Politics has divided us all. It is like Game of Thrones out there now.

It is a jungle out there. We used to have a more positive view, but now it is about the survival of the fittest. Politics is a huge part of this.

Young people do not feel well connected to their communities. Nearly 80 percent of those interviewed said they felt social isolation was a problem for young people. About half felt the community spirit on their island was not strong, and two-thirds felt excluded from decision making. Family breakdown, crime, political polarization, and drugs have all contributed to this feeling of isolation. The findings from the Youth Vision Report by UNDP carried out among young people on other islands confirmed that a sense of isolation and a loss of control pervaded people's lives, particularly on some of the more remote atolls. High levels of unemployment and few opportunities for education or entertainment have taken their toll. Some of those interviewed complained that almost all activities had become too associated with political parties, which meant that participation divided along partisan lines and part of the community felt excluded. A more conservative religious view of many ceremonies and festivals has reduced the occasions on which people come together.

There is an urgent need to repair the damage done to the social fabric over the past decade and to try to restore the links of trust and community. Corrupt politics probably does more damage than anything else; undoubtedly it was the subject about which young people expressed the greatest sense of disillusionment. However, the lack of group activities on some islands

and the lack of a sense of community is troubling. A more active approach is needed to fund various activities beyond sports on islands. Several people complained that sports are the sole response to complaints by the young. They instead wanted a host of other services including classes on setting up a business, as well as career and life guidance and more arts education.

Over the past five years, many of the local government institutions including island councils and women's development committees barely functioned due to lack of resources, resulting in fewer locally-based activities. The rapid expansion of the population in Malé and the strains caused by high costs have likewise undermined community spirit in the capital. There are a whole host of responses to this, most of which should be designed and implemented at the most local level. The reduction of powers of local governments has gone against these aims.

Social media may well have had an impact on the degree of isolation felt by young Maldivians, who are among the most Internet-connected people in South Asia.<sup>44</sup> Evidence is emerging that social media can make people feel depressed and lonely; rather than being a venue for real connections, it tends to be a location for competition and antagonism.<sup>45</sup> What is needed are real-world venues in which people establish real links to each other.

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.Internetworldstats.com/asia.htm>

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/modern-mentality/201810/is-social-media-making-you-lonely>  
[http://www.searo.who.int/entity/ncd\\_tobacco\\_surveillance/documents/mav\\_gshs\\_report\\_2014.pdf?ua=1](http://www.searo.who.int/entity/ncd_tobacco_surveillance/documents/mav_gshs_report_2014.pdf?ua=1)

# DISABILITY

**My priority for the visually impaired is education, education, education.**

Among those interviewed were several people with physical and sensory disabilities. Life with any disability in the Maldives is a profound struggle, starting with the stigma that is unfortunately still attached to any disability. “On the outer islands they do not know how to handle Persons with Disability, and they are often hidden away at home,” said one of those interviewed. There is also an inadequate approach to education: effective specialized teaching is mostly unavailable, and the few opportunities are in Malé, which is expensive and a challenging place for many people with disabilities. Those with hearing impairments complained about being beaten by teachers at school and being thought of as incapable because they could not hear instructions.

While some teachers have been trained in special education, this is often inadequate for the needs of those with sensory disabilities. Young people are often left out of classes or drop out of school early. There are no specialized establishments for teaching outside of Malé, and inadequate provision to study in specialist schools abroad. University access is difficult, particularly

for those with sensory deprivations who might require assistance or sign language interpreters.

Some effort has been made to find jobs for Persons with Disabilities, particularly in state-owned businesses, but several interlocutors complained about the limits of this. “Although there are jobs, the perception is that you are not able to advance and therefore it is easy to get stuck in the same job on the same salary forever with no prospects.”

The Disability Council, a body formed under the 2010 Disability Act to ensure the implementation of laws and regulations concerning Persons with Disabilities, has been in abeyance for the past five years, rarely meeting and unable to get access to top officials according to those that were interviewed. Likewise, many complaints seem to have gone unanswered. One person with visual impairment training to be an imam said that three attempts had been made to get people in wheelchairs access to mosques rather than being forced to pray outside (due to physical barriers at entry), but they had never received a response.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Young people in the Maldives face a host of problems that are preventing them from reaching their potential. Its scattered geography makes doing business expensive, as does rent-seeking by state firms and the import of almost all goods. There has been limited policies over the past years have focused either on helping young people advance or developing the next generation of businesses. Young people feel that politicians have undermined faith in government by ignoring the law and feathering their own nests and that many institutions are weak, while most of the laws and procedures on social protection and assistance to young people are either in abeyance or underfunded. While there is a system to tackle drug addiction, there are too few openings in rehab and insufficient support to help recovering addicts find jobs or housing. There is a widely held belief that education has not kept up with the times, while the tourism industry has been allowed to keep wages low and profits high by bringing in almost infinite numbers of workers from overseas.

Extremism, gangs, drugs, and other forms of social malaise are linked more to issues of exclusion than economic achievements or education. People need three things to feel successful and happy: a degree of autonomy to determine their own future, a sense that they have the skills to achieve what they want to do, and connections to others. One of the findings of this research is that many Maldivian young people feel all three—autonomy, skills, and connections—are absent from their lives.<sup>46</sup> Policies to address these issues should enhance at least one of these aspects of people's lives.

All these issues have different effects on men and women. Conversations within focus groups point to the fact that gender awareness in policymaking is insufficient in the Maldives. Young people feel that too many areas of the economy, education, and policymaking are skewed against women, while too often they face insufficient or poorly-managed programmes. Most women interviewed for this report expressed a deep dissatisfaction at the burdens they face: the daily humiliations of harassment and inequality in the workplace, the challenges of family life, the difficulties of finding work, and the lack of support from a wider society. These issues should be front and center in policymaking, not sidelined into one ministry. They have a dramatic impact on the quality of life for all young people.

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<sup>46</sup> For more on Self-Determination Theory see O'Hare, D. The Intrinsic Motivation of Richard Ryan and Edward Deci. American Psychological Association, 18 December 2017. <https://www.apa.org/members/content/intrinsic-motivation.aspx> See also [https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/SDT/documents/1971\\_Deci.pdf](https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/SDT/documents/1971_Deci.pdf)

# POLICYMAKING

The country needs a set of pro-youth policies and more engagement of young people— and especially young women—included in the processes of policy making. Their exclusion over the past few decades has led to the current situation in which many feel the interests of the young have not been reflected in government actions.

The traditional institutions of democracy typically include independent entities that report on government performance and offer ideas for policy. The media does some of this and universities play a role, but think tanks are a useful means to develop new ideas and monitor the performance of government schemes.

An independent policy research institute is crucial because of what is regarded by many as the failure to implement so many existing laws and the lack of accountability therein. Part of the mandate for any think tank should be to examine the implementation of policies and address ways to ensure the government does not fall short. The Maldives has most of the laws and institutions it needs. What it lacks are mechanisms to ensure they are followed.

The government has said it will create a government-funded policy institute. The Maldives has many people outside of government who would be eager to contribute to an open, reputable body not just to develop new policies but to monitor performance. The country needs new thinking that can reduce the gap between Malé and the outer islands, as well as other issues from climate adaptation to the challenges of developing affordable transport. From decentralization to educational reform, tax policy to drug treatment, there should be domestic mechanisms to develop policies, to explore solutions from around the world, and to

encourage public engagement and discussion.

The deep polarization that has afflicted Maldivian politics since 2004 is a serious problem. Young people identify a winner-takes-all view of elections in which the losers are likely to find themselves under investigation or in prison, this in turn encourages abuses and vote-buying. Political ties to gangs have created a culture of impunity that seriously undermines the rule of law. Polarization deters citizens from any involvement in the issues that shape their lives. The government needs to find ways to bring people together around issues without turning such events into bitterly partisan battles. Many of the problems that affect people in Malé for example—traffic, parking, housing, flooding, litter, potholes, the water supply, and education—need public engagement. Town hall meetings, public events, volunteering, entertainment, and community gatherings should be a priority to weave together a societal fabric that is getting much frayed. It is vital to engage more young people in these initiatives. On many outer islands, working groups such as Women’s Development Committees and Water Management Committees should be formed outside of party structures.

# SOCIAL COHESION

More than academic and economic achievements, issues of exclusion and isolation have stronger links to issues of extremism, gangs, drugs, and other forms of social malaise. Individuals need three things to feel happy and successful in life, that is independence, skills and social connections. Policies should enhance at least one of these aspects of people's lives.

The Maldives will be among the first countries to face an existential threat from climate change. Building strong communities must be part of any adaptation to climate threats, and the country has a strong claim to international funding to prepare it for a challenging future.

## VOLUNTEERISM

Island communities have lengthy traditions of mutual support which continue in many places to this day. Projects such as maintaining harbors or rebuilding damaged buildings after storms have been taken up by the community. On some islands, men will go fishing to raise money for local NGOs. However, on many islands, the community spirit behind volunteering has diminished, and expectations are now that the government will do the work that used to be run by the community. In this area, much depends on the vitality of the Island Council and its willingness to support community projects.

Voluntary work offers tangible benefits for young people: it improves the welfare and self-confidence of those who volunteer. It creates social connections and can provide work experience at a critical phase of life when it is difficult to get paid work without it. The benefits to individual and community spirit are considerable, which is why almost all cultures have deep traditions of volunteerism.

Nonetheless, volunteering needs to be organized. That requires not only people, but some financing. Volunteerism is not necessarily a means to mobilize cheap labor: it often requires an NGO or branch of government to organize and sustain. Volunteer work that offers training and other non-remunerated benefits will engage more people.

A national volunteering association should provide training and financial support to those establishing volunteer groups. It could also act as a liaison with companies wishing to establish corporate social responsibility programmes.

## Among the many possibilities for volunteering are:

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**A National Disaster Readiness Corps.** The government could provide funding and training to non-governmental organization for disaster preparedness across all islands, bringing local communities together to work with the security forces and others to develop possible responses to storms, flooding, water shortages, and other increasingly common challenges brought about by climate change. Social resilience is a crucial aspect of climate adaptation.

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**Environmental Issues.** The Maldives will face a considerable burden of adaptation to climate change. Volunteering to clean up the environment and protect reefs and mangroves could serve to bring communities together. It could also provide a focus for corporate social responsibility activities by resorts. Community management of water and agriculture projects would be useful in promoting social cohesion.

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**Oral History Project.** A volunteer group of Maldivians could record oral history and develop a cultural archive, drawing on older people across the atolls to ensure the preservation of memories, language, and traditions. Those involved could also provide tours and lectures for tourists interested in the culture.

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**Business Mentoring.** Business leaders from the capital could develop a programme to engage young people, particularly those from outer islands, as mentors. There is a particular need for successful women in the corporate world to guide young women in setting up businesses or thriving in their jobs.

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**Career Guidance.** Combined with trained career guidance counselors, professionals could volunteer their time to help students from outer atolls think through job ideas as well as helping with applications.

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**A National Youth Media Center.** Young people in the Maldives need more of a voice in all aspects of policy, and they need outlets on television, radio, and elsewhere to express their views. A national training and media center could provide a focus for youth-centered media and education.

# EDUCATION

Education is one of the most essential state functions. Any nation that gets it wrong will face long-term problems. The Maldives has a severe mismatch between education and the needs of individuals and wider society. Resources have been concentrated in Malé, but costs in the city have risen to the point when citizens are excluded from those opportunities. The cost of housing alone is enough of a deterrent for many. Education in the outer islands is not meeting needs, with too few options available and too many leaving school at 16. The development of STEM subjects is lacking. While the country has made remarkable progress at the lower levels, it must now focus on secondary, tertiary, and vocational education.

**A National Dialogue: Maldivians need to come together to discuss education. The current situation is not working and needs extensive reform, but this should only happen if backed by the support of communities. Dialogue sessions should take place on all inhabited islands, while there should be consultations with employers, teachers and parents.**

**Education needs to be both more local, to inculcate values suitable in the culture, and more global, in that employers are looking for skills in STEM subjects and languages. The education system could be strengthened to cater to these areas.**

**Widening educational choices: many young people complained about a lack of education in areas such as the humanities, arts, and music. These subjects were not seen as leading to career opportunities and were therefore neglected. Boosting creative and critical thinking is essential in the changing global economy.**

**Career Guidance: combined with trained career guidance counsellors, professionals could volunteer their time to help students from outer atolls think through job ideas as well as helping with job applications.**

**Centers of Excellence: the Maldives could lead the world in two areas where it has natural advantages: tourism and the environment. The government should consider the development of high-end international training in sustainable tourism and in environmental management. Working with international partners, these centers of excellence should aim for world-leading status, attracting international students and faculty and providing opportunities for local students to move up in the world.**

**The country relies on educators from overseas, mostly India and Sri Lanka, and many of these teachers work on the outer islands. The government should consider schemes to reduce turnover and improve performance, including more training opportunities, rotations to schools in Malé, improved housing and conditions, and better teaching resources.**

**A regional approach that allows for more opportunities in a few educational hubs would ease pressures on Malé while still providing a full range of subjects and better teaching. Any approach needs to address all the obstacles that people face: housing is a problem, as is the sense of insecurity some feel being away from home. Transport costs should be considered.**

## MENTAL HEALTH CARE AND DRUG TREATMENT

The government has recognized the need for improved mental health care.<sup>47</sup> Many respondents raised this issue unprompted during the discussions and felt it had been neglected for too long. Archaic attitudes towards mental illness persisted and deep stigma was attached to the issue. In small island communities, it was impossible to seek help without that becoming widely known because neither medical staff nor pharmacists followed patient confidentiality.

Addressing this issue first requires a survey of the problems, which are beyond the scope of this project. Mental health is also linked to a variety of other issues that affect young people including drugs, gangs, family- and gender-based violence, social isolation, and family breakdown. What is clear is that there is a need for treatment options that are not presently available due to the lack of inpatient options and trained professionals. According to the discussions that took place for the study, the religious establishment has suggested that all that is needed is greater piety, but this is clearly not sufficient in addressing problems that many young people confront.

The drug treatment programme operating under the 2011 Drug Law has not worked as planned: the rehab system lacks capacity and trained personnel, it has only one treatment approach for all drugs, and it fails to provide the follow-up support necessary to get people off drugs permanently. A more holistic approach is needed that addresses treatment, therapy, medical care, community building, and better public awareness, as well as jobs and housing for former users. Demand reduction also requires improved and more comprehensive education in schools. It also requires early interventions with children at risk. Some NGOs such as 'Journey' follow an approach that addresses drugs as part of programmes for both adolescents and parents focusing on life-skills, community activities, and exploring drug issues. These programmes are important and should be expanded. The reasons people use drugs are complex and individual, but they are grounded in social and economic strains that have not been effectively addressed in the Maldives.

**Support should be provided to mental health NGOs to address an array of issues leading to drug use and imprisonment. There is an urgent need for greater awareness, more treatment options, efforts to reduce stigma, and more support for those on outer islands. NGOs are often better able to reach vulnerable groups than government programmes.**

**The government should re-invigorate institutions in the Ministry of Youth, the Ministry of Gender and Family, and the Ministry of Education to come up with a coordinated response to mental health and drug education. Such a response must include addressing the different needs of young men and women, and engaging with issues as early as possible to ensure young people at risk can access help.**

**There is a need to implement the 2016 Mental Healthcare Strategic Plan.<sup>48</sup>**

**The last national survey on mental health was carried out in 2003 and should be updated to reflect the changed situation in the past 15 years, including the impact of political polarization, social media, drugs, and a changing economy.**

<sup>47</sup> Maldives Times. Campaign Trail: Coverage for Mental Health. 11 September 2018. <https://maldivestimes.com/campaign-trail-coverage-for-mental-health/>

<sup>48</sup> [http://www.health.gov.mv/Uploads/Downloads/Informations/Informations\(44\).pdf](http://www.health.gov.mv/Uploads/Downloads/Informations/Informations(44).pdf) "The NMHSP also aligns itself with the Health Master Plan (which is currently in the process of development) and other related national action plans which include; the Child Health Strategy, the School Health Program, the Maldives Domestic Violence Prevention National Strategy 2014, and the Child Protection Policy and Disability Policy. Furthermore, the NMHSP is in line with the related Maldivian Legislations such as the Human Rights Act, Child Protection Act, Domestic Violence Prevention Act, Disability Act, Social Protection Act, and Drug Act." Very few aspects of any of these government plans or laws are implemented, nor do the implementing agencies have sufficient funds to carry out their responsibilities.



## DISABILITY

The 2010 Disability Act was a starting point to improve the lives of those with disabilities but, as is so often the case, the law has not been implemented and the Disability Council has not functioned as expected. A top priority of the government in protecting the rights of Persons with Disability should be to ensure full implementation of the law.

Not only are the Persons with Disabilities among the most vulnerable, but how they are treated sends a signal to wider society. A lack of awareness surrounds the needs of the Persons with disabilities and in too many cases they are vulnerable to various abuses. As with many young Maldivians, they suffer from a lack of educational and job opportunities but are more often excluded without reason. Universities should establish programmes to support students with disabilities, and the government should expand training for sign language interpreters and assistants for Persons with disability to allow them to study and work.

**The government should consider the provision of more specialized education for Persons with disabilities, particularly those with sensory issues. It should establish schools in Malé or elsewhere or provide support for Persons with disability to pursue opportunities overseas.**

**Universities should ensure the necessary support to students with disabilities to give them access to higher education. It is vital to ensure that Persons with disabilities are empowered to live up to their full potential and engage fully in the public sphere.**

**There is an urgent need to revive the Disability Council and ensure it has access to decision makers. Persons with disability must be guaranteed access to all public places, including mosques.<sup>49</sup>**

**There is a need for public education on disability and greater roles for Persons with disabilities in public life.**

<sup>49</sup> Several of those interviewed for this study complained that many mosques refused to let in people in wheelchairs, often saying that their wheelchairs might damage or dirty carpets. No mosques provided interpretation for the deaf.

<sup>50</sup> Early Intervention Foundation. Robin O'Connor and Stephanie Waddell. What Works to Prevent Gang Membership, Youth Violence and Crime. 2015. <https://www.eif.org.uk/files/pdf/preventing-gang-and-youth-violence-rapid-review.pdf>

## GANGS

Once gangs are embedded in a society, reducing their presence is an immense challenge. There is a need to weaken gang recruitment using education in schools, and by taking steps to ensure that vulnerable young boys are not signing up. There is also a need for exit strategies for gang members to enable them to return to normal life and disassociate themselves from former gang colleagues.<sup>50</sup> The crowding of Malé and other islands makes it extremely challenging to put a physical gap between gangs and former members.

**Start with a programme of harm reduction through engagement with gangs. Hosted by an intermediary, meetings between rival gangs or between gangs and the authorities can reduce territorial rivalries and thus lessen the risk of violence.**

**Likewise, start a programme offering vocational training away from Malé and transitions to jobs for gang members who wish to leave the life.**

**The strongest evidence for success in reducing gang membership and crime is for family-centered interventions: this involves targeting vulnerable families to improve parenting, teaching both children and adults the skills to address emotional and mental health issues and to resolve other problems.**

**Link programmes to address gangs, drugs, employment, and mental health issues.**

**Address allegations of political involvement in gangs: as long as this persists, there is no prospect of reducing the role of gangs in everyday life.**

# EMPLOYMENT

The Maldives has seen massive growth over the last few decades, yet the range of opportunities has not grown in the same way. The inequalities are visible in the growth of Male' and the outer islands. The torpor and unemployment on many outer islands show this side of the economy: Employment topped the concerns of young people we interviewed, the two most common issues being political obstacles to getting jobs and problems in starting businesses.<sup>51</sup>

**Lending in the Maldives has concentrated on larger businesses and the politically connected. There is a need for more capital to be made available to smaller businesses, and to young individuals to enable them to start more businesses.**

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**Young people feel that resorts are not following guidelines on employing locals. While many people are reluctant to take on tourism work, that might change if resorts provided better salaries, more training, career paths, and either improved housing or the opportunity for workers to live at home. Future resort development should be conditional on creating more jobs for locals. All resorts should increase focus on supporting local economies: purchasing more from nearby communities, hiring more people, subcontracting work, and relying less on imported labor.**

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**Resorts must also be more engaged in ensuring the sustainability of their businesses in both social and environmental terms. They should engage more closely with local communities in a range of ways, not least to reassure people about job opportunities.**

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**Improve transparency in the advertising and allocation of jobs for all civil service and state enterprise jobs.**

**A share of the green tax paid by tourists should go to creating environmental protection work involving young people on outer islands. A comprehensive plan to protect mangroves and reefs, both essential for biodiversity and tourism, should focus on job creation and training for young people.**

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**Limited education in the arts has stifled the development of a creative economy that would mesh well with the tourism sector. The walling off of tourism on isolated resorts results in little engagement with local communities. Expanding creative education could create opportunities for small businesses and widen the appeal of the guest house islands.**

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**Mentoring and support for young people who want to start businesses should be encouraged through a national enterprise programme. This should specifically include women who want to establish new businesses.**

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**Examine access to credit and training for women and ensure that they have opportunities to open businesses and advance in other careers.**

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**Expand STEM education and greater efforts to link such education to job markets through internships and job placements. There is already demand for engineers, while expertise in fisheries, aquaculture, biodiversity preservation, and environmental management should be national priorities.**

<sup>51</sup> Research by Transparency Maldives published as Youth, Opportunities and Corruption: A Situational Analysis in 2015 found almost universal complaints about the unfair processes involved in getting jobs. See report at: <http://transparency.mv/files/media/f82d894fa49e31e239eb9f9d904d601e.pdf>

# HOUSING

Housing shortages are a problem in a country with so little available land. Malé has become all but unaffordable for many people, while jobs, education, and healthcare provision are increasingly concentrated in the capital. While some social housing is being developed, most of our respondents expressed skepticism that this would ease the problems since there is a widely held belief housing was being allocated through political connections rather than by need.

The problem is acute for young people, many of whom want to leave home for work or education but struggle to find housing. Most of those interviewed still lived with their families, with ever-larger groups crowding into island compounds. Conversely, many outer islands have abandoned plots or empty houses as families have moved to Malé, but these have not been redistributed.

Housing in Malé is now 70 percent more expensive than in Colombo and rents are still rising.<sup>52</sup> Any solution to this issue will take time. Expanded student housing would allow for more people from the outer islands to attend university, either in Malé or elsewhere. Secure student dormitories for women might also reduce concerns about women living outside the home. Improved transport links would enable people to live further from their work.

**Social housing is needed in the Maldives but provision has been inadequate. Consider tying development of high-end housing to the provision of affordable housing.**

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**Consider expanding student housing in Malé to ensure those who must come to the capital for education can find affordable places to live.**

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**Reform the process whereby land is allocated to families on islands to ensure that abandoned homes are used and that younger people can access land.**

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**Encourage lending for new higher-density housing on islands facing critical shortages of homes by offering loan guarantees or subsidized financing for apartment buildings.**

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**Consider providing subsidized temporary housing to those receiving medical care in the capital.**

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<sup>52</sup> See comparisons of prices at [https://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/compare\\_cities.jsp?country1=Maldives&country2=Sri+Lanka&city1=Male&city2=Colombo&tracking=getDispatchComparison](https://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/compare_cities.jsp?country1=Maldives&country2=Sri+Lanka&city1=Male&city2=Colombo&tracking=getDispatchComparison)

# CORRUPTION

Most of our respondents thought corruption was the greatest problem facing the country. It affects young people in many ways from reducing growth and raising prices to undermining any sense of fairness.<sup>53</sup> Exclusion from opportunities was a substantial concern for many.

Tackling corruption is an immense problem that requires a profound change in societal attitudes. If the state and justice system is perceived to be unreliable, people will inevitably turn to family and other institutions for support and protection. The concentration of power in few hands inevitably breeds corruption. Judicial reform and an end to impunity for corruption are essential to improve trust.

The Maldives already has many of the formal structures and procedures recommended to address corruption: an independent anti-corruption commission with investigative powers; the declaration of assets by political leaders; public tenders; auditors; and a press that is supposed to be able to report freely. But as various events have shown over the past decade, none of these systems has prevented corruption on a grand scale.

**Corruption will persist in the country unless significant reforms are brought to the justice sector to regain public trust. There is a widespread perception among young people that the powerful enjoy complete impunity.**

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**Politicized anti-corruption efforts undermine public support for the legal and administrative processes necessary to address the problem. Fairness and transparency in all processes is essential.**

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**Specific analysis of the potential for corruption should be considered in all planning and project development.**

# EXTREMISM

Extremism is not an existential threat in the Maldives, although it is a concern and must be contained to protect people and the economy. Responses to the issue should be grounded in law, the protection of human rights, and equal treatment. Stigmatizing groups for their appearance or religious practices will not address the problem but will in fact worsen it. Those who carry out violent acts often do not conform to any stereotypes or have learned to dissemble. Overreaction and repression only play into the hands of extremists, deepening their world view that they are a persecuted group that must use violence to defend themselves. It is more important to focus on the prevention of violence and the reduction of underlying grievances that cause it.

Across the islands, young people point to a wide gap between the public and private messages put out by some religious leaders. In public, they follow the state line on most issues. Privately, however, they take a tougher position on the threat to Islam from outsiders while criticizing ideas such as democracy or human rights as incompatible with their faith. It is extremely difficult to develop counter-narratives to this because of what the public sees as a gap between government behavior and reality.

If a government is corrupt or abusive, if it fuels divisions, widens inequality, or promotes the interests of an elite over others, it will never have the credibility to launch an effective counter-narrative programme. To counter extremism, it is crucial for a government to perform well: by reducing exclusion; by ensuring equal treatment

before the law; by protecting human rights; and by promoting fairness and access to opportunity.

Many young people and others interviewed for this report said problems of radicalization began with a religious system that refused to tolerate questions, and in which teachers had only a limited understanding of many of the religious subjects they were teaching. There was an almost universal sense from both the more religious and the more secular that education in this area lacked aspects of self-criticism and thoughtfulness. This had created uncritical audiences for those sheikhs who preached radical messages, often grounding their views in the idea that local people had strayed from true Islamic practice.

# PRISONS

Many people interviewed for this study pointed to prisons as key locations for radicalization. Those who go to prison are frequently traumatized by the experience, with violence and brutality inside likely to see them turning to gangs or others for protection.<sup>54</sup> Broken down by solitary confinement and intense restrictions, some turn to religion and guidance from revered figures in the prison system who act as preachers.

The Corrections Department says that it segregates prisoners depending on the length of their sentence. In fact, overcrowding means that both violent and non-violent offenders are often jailed together. Former prisoners report that they had few opportunities for education or drug rehabilitation. The Maldives Correctional Services counters that they do, but are underfunded. Given the failure of successive governments to reform the prison system, it is time to consider the political economy of the system itself and ask who benefits from the Maldives having one of the highest rates of incarceration in the world. Corruption within the prison system and the justice system are likely to mean that prisons will resist reform. But if reform is possible, there is an urgent need to consider the following:

**Tackle overcrowding by reducing numbers before trial and commuting sentences for non-violent drug offenders. Jailing those charged with minor drug sales or drug use does not help them on a road to recovery. Reduce incarceration numbers by using home or island detention and electronic monitoring, which is both cheaper and fairer for those remand prisoners who do not represent a danger.**

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**Ensure segregation of violent and non-violent prisoners. Those convicted of crimes related to extremism should not mix with the general prison population, nor should they maintain communications with those outside the prison except for contacts with lawyers and family.**

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**Ensure a strengthened and independent Human Rights Commission (HRC) has full access at any time to prisons. In cases of death in custody, the HRC must be able to investigate before bodies are removed from the scene. Any violations of the HRC's right to inspect prisons should lead to disciplinary action against prison officials.**

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**Investigate ways in which radical preachers have accessed prisoners and ensure that religious practice and education in jails conform to government guidelines.**

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**Establish a timetable for prison reform and the improvement of education, rehabilitation, and facilities for those jailed. These reforms must be in tandem with reforms of the judiciary and police if the country is to improve its human rights record and reduce extremism risks.**

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**Urgently address shortfalls in prison medical care.**

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**Establish an effective mental health treatment programme in prisons.**

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<sup>54</sup> Interview with former prisoner, Malé.

## LEGAL REFORMS

The government has already initiated efforts to strengthen the legislative framework and reform the justice system including the Judiciary. Judicial reform is a long, slow process, but in relation to extremism it is crucial that anyone who uses or plans to use violence against civilians ends up being tried in a credible and transparent manner. Only then will extremism be fully discredited and its appeal diminished.

## DE-RADICALISATION AND RE-INTEGRATION

There may be a near-term problem of Maldivians returning from the Middle East. Returnees should be judged case-by-case. Some may require heightened levels of monitoring, but all will eventually need to be re-integrated into Maldivian society. Few have ever carried out violent acts in the Maldives, so there may be little resistance from communities to their re-integration. Nevertheless, it is essential to include communities at all stages. Likewise, health workers, social workers, and the security forces all need to be involved in helping these Maldivians return to normal lives.

**Establish an ad-hoc body to manage re-integration processes and to coordinate among those ministries involved.**

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**Ensure that families that come back can return to their homes in a way that helps them integrate back into communities. Isolation and punishment are likely to be counter-productive.**

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**As recruitment has dwindled, there is little need to punish those who left to deter others. Instead, authorities should consider using returnees to talk about the actual conditions in Syria and Iraq.**

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## COUNTER NARRATIVES

There is little evidence that counter-narrative programmes work well.<sup>55</sup> More beneficial is actual progress in delivering fair, transparent, inclusive government. People will not embrace narratives that are not matched by government behavior. But there are areas in which the government and legal system can act:

**Politicians should not enjoy impunity in cases of weaponizing religion and inciting hatred and must be called out by the media and civil society.**

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**Anyone inciting violence in public spaces or online should be brought before a court of law. Freedom of speech does not extend to promoting physical harm of others.**

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<sup>55</sup> Alex Schmid. Al Qaeda's Single Narrative and Attempts to Develop Counter Narratives. ICCT Research Paper. January 2014. <https://www.icct.nl/download/file/Schmid-Al-Qaeda's-Single-Narrative-and-Attempts-to-Develop-Counter-Narratives-January-2014.pdf>

# CONCLUSION

**“We will not be successful unless we can harness the idealism, creativity and energy of young people and others who feel disenfranchised. Young people, who constitute the majority of the population of an increasing number of countries today, must be viewed as an asset and must be empowered to make a constructive contribution to the political and economic development of their societies and nations. They represent an untapped resource. We must offer them a positive vision of their future together with a genuine chance to realize their aspirations and potential.”**

**Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism.  
UN Secretary General’s Report December 2015.**

Disillusionment was evident in all the interviews done for this report. Unemployment is far too high. It corrodes hope for the future and risks wasting the Maldives’ demographic opportunity with a young population. A political economy controlled by a few has blocked the development of a broader-based economy in which people feel they can start a business. The state sector—which provides most employment—has become a source of bitterness due to widely held beliefs of unfairness of hiring practices.

There are profound anxieties about political polarization and the failure of democracy to bring about either stability or true representation. Young people believe that there is barely any sense of greater inclusion in decisions about policy even with an elected government, and too many of the institutions of democracy—the courts, the media, the civil service, civil society—do not function with the necessary levels of independence. What is needed is political will for reform: no amount of

foreign-supported training programmes or aid is likely to effect change without serious political commitments to change the way the judicial system operates. A truly independent judiciary would then be better placed to tackle corruption, vote-buying, nepotism, and other scourges that reduce trust in the system.

A fairer system would be a start towards addressing the problems that have caused so much disillusionment among the young. A new focus on young people would help diversify the economy, make the best use of the demographic advantages of the Maldives, and diminish the costs of crime and drug use. It should start with a fuller engagement with the young and their needs.



# HOW WE DID THIS RESEARCH

For this report, we gathered 180 people in focus groups to discuss problems faced by young people. The 174 people who fully completed the questionnaires came from 28 islands. Some 95 were women, 82 were men. They ranged from 16 to 35 years old with a median age of 26. Of those who answered, 84 were employed, 49 were unemployed, and 44 were students.

A list of seven issues—corruption, violent jihad, education, jobs, housing, drugs, and gangs—was drawn up after initial consultations with experts. Participants were asked to rank them in order of concern. They were also asked to state their level of agreement or disagreement with 19 statements covering a range of issues from political participation to extremism. We then engaged in an open discussion of these and other issues raised by participants.

There are more than 100,000 people aged between 16 and 35 in the Maldives, around a third of the population. With a median age of 28, the country is younger than the Asian average of 30.7, as are most of the foreign workers that number around 100,000. Those between 20 and 35 represent the largest block of population.

This sample is not sufficient to make solid statistical assertions across the whole population, but it does give insights into the views of the diverse set of young people consulted for this study. We tried to widen the net as far as possible, meeting people on nine islands across four atolls in the north, south, and center of the country. We met groups organized by religious NGOs, women's organizations, and island councils of various political backgrounds. We met with vulnerable groups such as Persons with disability and those in drug rehabilitation. We interviewed some groups separated by gender while others were mixed. We collected only limited

demographic data because many islands have tiny populations and we did not want to risk any identification of respondents.

If anything, the sample may have been biased towards more educated people and the more socially and politically engaged, as they are more willing to meet researchers. It was less easy to reach some communities such as fishermen and those working away in resorts, although these groups were represented in those we interviewed. Some who attended sessions were followers of Salafi Islam; for example, some women came wearing full niqab. However, those who are extremists tend not to be accessible for interviews unless in prison, so most research on the subject is inevitably skewed.

We also spoke with more than 50 government officials in Malé and across the islands as well as members of the police and the security forces. We met with NGO leaders and representatives of the private sector. This report also draws on a great many studies done over the past decade by the government, the United Nations, and non-governmental groups in the Maldives and elsewhere.

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## WHAT WORD WOULD YOU USE TO DESCRIBE YOUR COMMUNITY?

Kindness	Beautiful	Political mess	Discriminatory
Friendship	Beautiful	Isolation	Judgmental
Peaceful	Skills	No friendship	Corrupt
Common Goals	Teamwork	Slavery	Over-religious
Shared values	Democracy	Politics	Backbiting
Families	Development	Ignorance	Black magic
Belonging	Clean	Hypocrisy	Corrupt
Harmony	Family	Stereotype	Corrupt
Developing	Unity	Ignorance	Backbiting
Cool	Teamwork	Nosy	Disconnected
Peaceful	Proud	Selfish	Crippled
Brotherhood	My people	Politics	Corrupt
Togetherness	Unity	Backwards	Corrupt
Kindness	Peace	Dispersed	Division
Peaceful	Family	Corruption	Isolated
Friendship	Peace	No future	No opportunity
Togetherness	Proud	Unequal	Disaster
Friendship	Proud	No social relations	Corrupt
Friendship	Home	Prideful	Divided
Happiness	Strong Values	Problems	Jobless
Friendship	Proud	Competitive	Drugs
Friendship	***	Conservative	No respect
Friendship		Nationalist	Gangs
Peaceful		Rough	Division
Kindness	No unity	Corrupt	Division
Friendship	No vision	Discriminatory	Corrupt
Peaceful	Politics	Judgmental	Hatred
Employment	Corruption	Jihadi	Division
Kindness	No development	Ignorant	Corrupt
Developed	Uncivilized	Closed-minded	
Hospitable	No friendship	Hypocritical	
Clean	No unity	Corrupt	

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