



# ISSUE BRIEF

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**Cohort 4: Climate-related security risks and sustaining peace**

## Assessing potential climate-related security risks in the Maldives: Exploring the future climate-induced migration

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### Introduction

Climate change poses an existential threat to Small Island Developing States (SIDS), which are on the front line of its impacts through the loss of land, beach erosion, impacts on livelihoods and water scarcity. Without immediate action, climate change threatens the development and stability of SIDS and poses a regional security threat.

The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) recognizes the unique vulnerability of SIDS to the impacts of climate change and highlights the importance of addressing their particular needs and concerns. One of the key emerging challenges faced by SIDS, particularly the low-lying atoll island nations, is the potential for involuntary migration and displacement that its populations may face as a result of sudden shocks or slow onset disasters and environmental degradation that may result from the impacts of climate change. Globally, the discourse around the linkage between climate change and migration is starting to emerge, although the literature around security risks related to climate-induced migration—especially from a SIDS perspective—is limited.

Migration linked to climate change will be a slow process for SIDS. Climate Change impacts exacerbate

some of the conditions that drives people in SIDS to migrate. A growing number of migrants point to reduced livelihood opportunities, loss of land and risks to their right to life from climate change-induced changes to the natural habitat as reasons for moving. Increasing out-migration from communities may not necessarily become a security issue in itself, but unplanned migration, lack of policies and strategies to integrate different communities, lack of effective decentralization measures, and lack of effort to build social cohesion may become drivers, exacerbating existing social tensions that could trigger conflicts in the future.

This issue brief seeks to contribute to the discourse on climate-induced migration and its related security risks from the SIDS perspective, using the Maldives as a case study.

### The Maldives at a glance

The Maldives is a low-lying atoll nation, composed of over 1,190 islands, clustered into 26 ring-like atolls spread across 90,000 km in the Indian Ocean. Just over 187 of those islands are inhabited. The resident population totals around 533,941, dispersed across these islands. In addition to the inhabited islands, more

than 400 are used as resorts and for non-administrative purposes.<sup>1</sup>

The geography of the Maldives, with its highly dispersed population, presents many challenges for inclusive development. These include the difficulties of providing basic public and social services equitably. This has led to a sharp divide in terms of quality of healthcare, education and employment opportunities between urban residents in the capital city, Male', and rural populations in the outer atolls and islands. The country's latest Household Income and Expenditure Survey<sup>2</sup> shows that household income in the capital is twice that of other islands. Similar patterns are seen in education and healthcare.

Over the past decade, the country has made strides towards democratic consolidation. A new constitution, ratified in 2008, paved the way for separation of state powers, introduced multiparty elections, established independent institutions and brought a comprehensive bill of rights and freedoms. While the country's democratization journey has not always been smooth, the Maldives is enjoying a period of relative calm.

One of the significant shifts that the 2008 Constitution brought was a focus on a decentralized form of governance, giving more power and authority to local leaders, who were to be elected for the first time in the country's recorded history. Unfortunately, the decentralized, community-led and effective local governance that the Constitution envisioned did not follow, due primarily to a power struggle within the central government. However, the current government came into office on a platform of empowering communities and devolving power to the local councils. Substantive steps have been taken to give local governments greater autonomy and financial independence. For dispersed and scattered populations like those of the Maldives, decentralization is the natural approach to development and gives all Maldivians a say in local development.

## The Maldives and the impact of climate change

The Maldives has been an active and visible player globally in climate conferences and negotiations. It spearheaded the formation of the Alliance for Small Island States (AOSIS) at the first Small States Conference

on Sea Level Rise, held in the Maldives in November 1989, and has been highly vocal on the disproportionate burden that these SIDS bear due to climate change.

Most recently, at the Security Council Open Debate addressing the impacts of climate-related disasters on international peace and security, the Maldives Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid queried "What is a bigger security threat to us than this?"<sup>3</sup> Explaining further, he continued, "climate change has been destroying Maldives for years; eroding the beaches, killing coral reefs protecting the islands, contaminating fresh water with sea water, and reducing the fish stock." Most importantly, he added, "climate change is going to take our homes away from us."<sup>4</sup>

The foreign minister's statement presents a highly realistic possibility. Over 80 percent of the land area of the Maldives is less than one metre above mean sea level. Sea level rise of even one metre would thus result in the loss of its entire land area. Soil salinization and contamination of the water supply could render some of the islands uninhabitable even before the islands become permanently inundated. Furthermore, increasing number of sea swells, rising tides, flooding, water shortages and unpredictable extreme weather events are already overwhelming the existing infrastructure and disrupting local economies.

During the 2016 El Niño, more than 60 percent of Maldivian coral reefs, which contain around 3 percent of the world's coral reefs, were bleached.<sup>5</sup> Many local experts linked the subsequent decline in bait fisheries to the damage to the coral reefs, thus impacting the traditional livelihood of the country's fishers.

In the future, rising sea levels and coastal erosion, coupled with increasingly frequent storms, could lead to displacement and forced migration. This may have security implications, contributing to tensions and conflict over limited resources and land.

In 2020, the Maldivian Parliament declared a climate emergency, calling for worldwide recognition of the imminent and undeniable threat of climate change.

1 National Bureau of Statistics (2019). Population and Development in Maldives, ICPD 25+, accessed from: <http://statisticsmaldives.gov.mv/nbs/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/ICPD-25FINAL-1.pdf>.

2 National Bureau of Statistics (2017). Household Income and Expenditure Survey, accessed from: <http://statisticsmaldives.gov.mv/household-income-expenditure-survey-2016/>.

3 Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2019). Statement by Minister of Foreign Affairs, accessed from: <https://www.foreign.gov.mv/index.php/en/mediacentre/speeches/4796-statement-by-his-excellency-abdulla-shahid-minister-of-foreign-affairs-of-the-republic-of-maldives-at-the-security-council-open-debate-addressing-the-impacts-of-climate-related-disasters-on-international-peace-and-security%E2%80%9D>

4 Ibid

5 Press Association (2016). More than 60 percent of Maldives' coral reefs hit by bleaching, accessed from: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/aug/08/more-than-60-of-maldives-coral-reefs-hit-by-bleaching>.

## Climate-related migration and the Maldives

The country has been experiencing internal migration from the atolls to the capital and other major urban locations. Currently, over one-third of its population lives in the capital city of Male.<sup>6</sup> High population density has led to huge demand for property, but with scarce land, rents in locations such as Male' often exceed the average household income. This shift involves almost entirely people seeking better health, education, employment and overall better access to necessary services.

The impact of climate change is not immediately evident among the factors that motivate communities and people to migrate in the Maldives. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) study of some 360 households in various geographic locations in Maldives<sup>7</sup> found that many households agree that climate change will impact their livelihoods, including from fishing and tourism, which will restrict the communities' day-to-day activities. However, none of them cited these factors as a reason for migration. A study published in *Climatic Change on climate change and migration* finds that, at present, climate change does not influence individuals' decision to migrate.<sup>8</sup> On the question of being forced to leave the country, studies show that locals view external migration to be the "last option," after all other measures and strategies have failed.<sup>9</sup>

The discourse around climate-induced migration, whether internal or external, is limited in the Maldives. This may be because it is seen as too far out in the future. It may also be that for the island communities, the idea of losing their homes can be unsettling and hard to comprehend. Migration may be viewed, in general, as voluntary, as it is today, and people may not consider forced migration that may occur in the future.

Despite several effective climate change policies and measures implemented under different governments, existing policy frameworks remain silent on the issue of migration. Most climate change policies do not highlight the issue of migration, while most migration policies do not focus on the impact of climate change or environmental degradation. It will be expensive and infeasible for the Maldivian government to develop

adaptation measures on every island. According to the 2014 census, the population of 66 percent of the islands in the Maldives is less than 1,000 each, while internal migration trends show that 55 percent of people residing in the capital migrated from the other islands.<sup>10</sup> While climate-induced migration is not a priority policy concern, the impacts of climate change on traditional livelihood activities will, in the future, force people to move in search of better economic opportunities. This is the risk facing the Maldives.

## Resettlement and lesson [un]learned

The 2004 tsunami was a large-scale natural disaster that forced communities to be resettled in different islands as island habitats were completely washed out. Thirteen islands were evacuated, nearly 12,000 people were displaced and 8,500 people were put into temporary shelters. Across the country, some 4,000 buildings, including critical infrastructure, were damaged and the drinking water systems on 79 islands were destroyed or contaminated.<sup>11</sup> Though the tsunami was not a climate change-induced disaster, it demonstrated both the impact of an extreme disaster on the whole country and the social and economic costs of unplanned migration.

In 2007, Hathifushi, a northern Maldives island with a population of approximately 300, experienced a storm surge. The entire island was flooded for two days, with water reaching nearly one metre. Everyone was hastily evacuated and resettled on a close-by island.<sup>12</sup>

Although no official policy exists, the government has encouraged small communities to move to larger islands, while communities themselves can take the initiative to move by submitting a request to the government. In these circumstances, the government usually relocates the entire community so as not to leave small pockets of people behind. In many instances, this causes tensions among members of a community who wish to remain and those who seek to move.

Relocation and resettlement also often generate tension between host and migrant communities. Only a limited number of evaluations are available publicly on the success of relocation and resettlement in the

6 National Bureau of Statistics (2015), Census 2014, accessed from: <http://statisticsmaldives.gov.mv/nbs/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Census-Summary-Tables1.pdf>.

7 IOM (2017). Assessing the Climate Change Environmental Degradation and Migration Nexus in South Asia, accessed from: <https://publications.iom.int/books/assessing-climate-change-environmental-degradation-and-migration-nexus-south-asia>.

8 Kelman, I., Orłowska, J., Upadhyay, H. et al. Does climate change influence people's migration decisions in Maldives? *Climatic Change* 153, 285–299 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-019-02376-y>.

9 Stojanov, Robert & Duží, Barbora & Nemeč, Daniel & Procházka, David. (2017). Slow Onset Climate Change Impacts in Maldives and Population Movement from Islanders' Perspective.

10 National Bureau of Statistics (2015), Census 2014, accessed from: <http://statisticsmaldives.gov.mv/nbs/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Statistical-Release-II-Migration-new2.pdf>

11 Tsunami Impact Summary: Maldives (2005). Accessed from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/maldives/tsunami-impact-summary-maldives>.

12 Filho, W.L. (2017). *Climate Change Adaptation in Pacific Countries: Fostering Resilience and Improving the Quality of Life*, Springer International Publishing.

Maldives. However, that information suggests major cause for concern. Most of the resettlements caused tension, conflicts and, sometimes, violence between the incoming and host communities.<sup>13,14</sup> Furthermore, resettlement interventions have not taken into account traditional livelihood activities, which have an impact particularly on women.<sup>15</sup> A recent UNICEF study<sup>16</sup> showed that even years after relocation, the second generation of migrant children and adolescents living in resettled islands still face hostility from host communities, and migrant populations were viewed as “expiatory victims” of the community who must atone for or are blamed for all evil on the island. At community focus group discussions conducted by development organizations on separate atolls, host communities expressed these same perceptions towards migrant communities in the islands. As every island in the Maldives has its own cultural uniqueness and characteristics, relocation often leads to the loss of a sense of belonging, culture and identity, particularly if the population is relocated to an urban centre. The most recent relocation and resettlement in the Maldives occurred in 2017, involving residents of Gaadhoo Island, in the southern atoll. Similar issues arose at that time.<sup>17</sup>

## Climate change, migration and security nexus

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As discussed in this paper, in the Maldives, climate change is not seen as a direct factor contributing to a person’s decision to migrate from his or her island. However, in the long run, environmental degradation due to climate change may push people to move in search of better opportunities. Unplanned migration and resettlement have had a negative impact in communities, leading to social tension.

From a security perspective, the lessons from past resettlements show that intra-community-related social tensions can flare up and create community-level conflicts that continue for generations. The state’s failure to properly manage orderly migrations and integrate migrants in host communities can undermine social cohesion and produce poor socio-economic outcomes

for migrants, which in turn limits their contributions to society

Migrant communities in these situations are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Certain groups in the community can take advantage of them.

The Maldives enjoys a strategic location and is situated along key shipping routes. The country has significant maritime commerce and traffic. Growing evidences suggests that local criminal gangs, in collaboration with international drug trafficking networks, are using the Maldives as a transshipment port from which to route drugs across the world.

Beyond the drug trade, some observers claim that the Maldives had the highest number of foreign fighters per capita joining armed groups, primarily in Syria. Government officials report that over 400 Maldivians attempted to travel to Syria and Iraq; 173 succeeded. The government has also identified nearly 1,400 Maldivians as having been radicalized to the extent that they would be willing to commit acts of violence.<sup>18</sup>

An overlap often exists between criminal groups and extremists. UNDP conducted a study<sup>19</sup> recently to identify the root causes and vulnerabilities that could make Maldivian youth susceptible to radicalization and violent extremism. The vulnerabilities identified—linked to social exclusion, disenchantment and identity—are strikingly similar to the social issues highlighted by migrant communities. An earlier Asia Foundation study of gangs in the country revealed similar patterns regarding why people join criminal organizations.<sup>20</sup> While conclusions cannot be drawn from those findings, it would be useful, from a prevention perspective, to analyse the issue further and understand how unplanned migration and resettlement could create risks in the country and to develop mitigating strategies that include interventions to build social cohesion in such communities.

## Planning for a the last-resort

Maldivians and their communities will, inevitably, experience the negative impacts of climate change, leading to population movements in the future among the

13 Ministry of Finance (2009). Maldives Four Years After the Tsunami, accessed from: <https://maldivesindependent.com/files/2015/03/Maldives-Four-Years-After-the-Tsunami.pdf>.

14 Croshaw, H.R. (2017). In the Wake of the 2004 Great Indian Ocean Tsunami: Internally Displaced Persons and the Natural Disaster Response in the Maldives, accessed from: <http://www.macrothink.org/journal/index.php/jad/article/view/10755>

15 IFRC (2012). Returning to Dhuvaaafaru, eight years on from the Indian Ocean Tsunami, accessed from: <https://www.ifrc.org/en/news-and-media/news-stories/asia-pacific/maldives/returning-to-dhuvaaafaru--eight-years-on-from-the-indian-ocean-tsunami--60490/>.

16 UNICEF (2019). Climate Change and its Effect on Children, accessed from: <https://www.unicef.org/maldives/reports/climate-change-and-its-effect-children>.

17 Azfa et al (2019) Rising seas and small island states, accessed from: <https://www.arcgis.com/apps/Cascade/index.html?appid=d9f95e5c0f5c42ef9644d-418c0f58959>

18 Hussain, F.A. (2019). Commissioner of Police: Maldives has nearly 1,400 extremists, accessed from: <https://en.sun.mv/57176>.

19 UNDP (2019). Youth Vulnerability in the Maldives, accessed from: <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/youth-vulnerability-in-the-maldives.html>.

20 Asia Foundation (2012). Rapid Assessment of Gangs in Male’, accessed from: <https://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/GangViolenceReportFINAL.pdf>.

different islands. From the perspective of security and conflict prevention, a national dialogue should begin to plan for the future. The current government's commitment to decentralization provides the opportunity to initiate this dialogue at a local level.

Having a national strategy on planned relocation in place can ensure that communities have a last-resort option to avoid their displacement. Planned relocation in response to disasters and climate change-related, slow-onset events is not a new concept. It refers to the process by which persons or groups move or are assisted to move from their homes or places of temporary residence, are settled in a new location, and are provided with the conditions for rebuilding their lives.<sup>21</sup> Both the Sendai Framework and the Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration refer to it.

The Maldives is developing both a long-term development plan and a spatial development plan. Through this process, it could use the lesson that other SIDS have learned: to take proactive and progressive steps to deal with potential relocation. The country does not need to reinvent the wheel. Fiji's Planned Relocation Guidelines provide a framework for climate change-related relocation. The Maldives could use Jamaica's Resettlement Policy Framework, aligned with its National Development Plan and based on vulnerability assessments of communities at risk, as guidance to develop its own policy framework in this area. The UNHCR planned relocation guide identifies a series of important factors to be considered when designing planned relocation processes, which the government could use.

Given efforts to achieve a decentralized form of governance in the Maldives, the potential exists to establish structures and mechanisms at the local level to plan and implement planned relocation. This would ensure that communities likely to be affected are engaged early in discussions, so that they are not left in a worse position in the event of relocation.

## Conclusion

Disaster-related migration and relocation are not new phenomena in the Maldives. However, given the scale of the potential impact, the literature addressing climate-induced migration remains limited. The country needs to better understand the extent to which environmental change influences migration patterns of local communities. Furthermore, only a small number of studies have been conducted on the social issues facing communities that have been relocated. Further

studies in this area can inform evidence-based policy-making.

The Hathifushi case highlighted here is the only documented recent case in which relocation was required as a result of sudden shocks related to a weather event. However, this may become common in the future. The country must give greater consideration to an internal migration policy as an adaptation strategy. Specifically, policymakers should examine the use of planned relocation to help communities move away from high-risk islands, where people are trapped by poverty and loss of livelihoods due to environmental degradation.

It is important for the government to begin a dialogue with communities and local councils on the existential crisis the country faces. This includes the need to engage with individuals who would likely be affected on options and development policies that limit the impact of the detrimental consequences of relocation, such as loss of home and identity.

The Maldives does not currently face security risks linked to climate-induced migration. However, certain factors can be addressed today to build national capacity to prevent conflicts and reduce security risks in the future.

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[www.undp.org/oslocentre](http://www.undp.org/oslocentre)

#### Joint UNDP-DPPA Programme on Building National Capacities for Conflict Prevention

Since 2004, the United Nations Development Programme and the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) have partnered to strengthen support to the UN's work in building national capacities for conflict prevention. Often times, such support is extended through the deployment of Peace and Development Advisors (or PDAs), a growing cadre of UN staff who support Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams adapt and respond to complex political situations and to develop and implement strategic conflict prevention initiatives and programmes.

<https://peaceinfrastructures.org/>

#### Folke Bernadotte Academy

The Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) is the Swedish government agency for peace, security and development. As part of Sweden's international development aid, FBA promotes peace in conflict-affected countries by offering training, advice and conducts research in order to strengthen peacebuilding and statebuilding; as well as grant funds to civil society organizations working with peace and security. The agency is named after Count Folke Bernadotte, UN's first peace mediator.

<https://fba.se/en/>