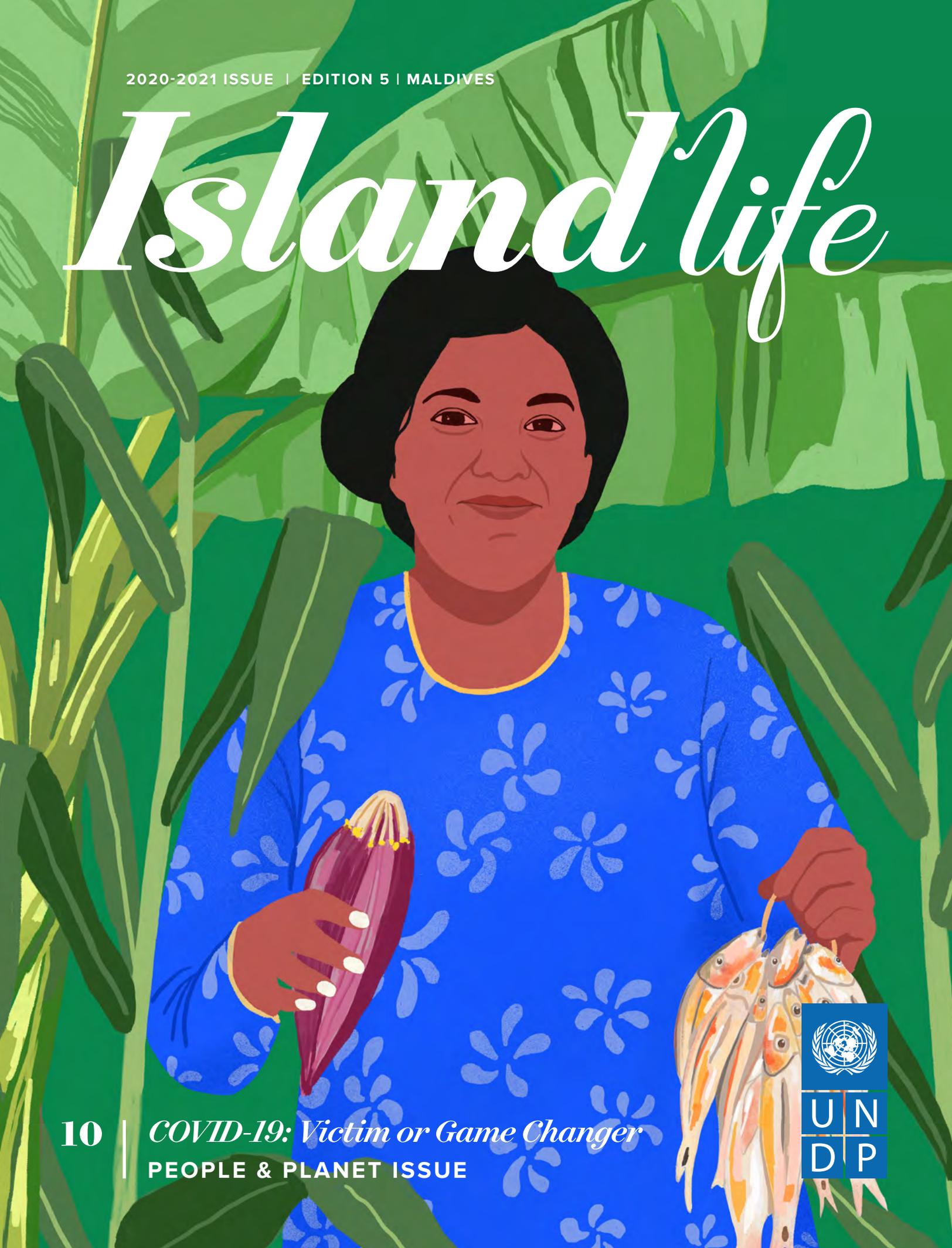


2020-2021 ISSUE | EDITION 5 | MALDIVES

Island life



10

COVID-19: Victim or Game Changer

PEOPLE & PLANET ISSUE



UN
DP

ABOUT UNDP

On the ground in about 170 countries and territories, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) works to eradicate poverty while protecting the planet. We help countries develop strong policies, skills, partnerships and institutions so they can sustain their progress.

UNDP has been in the Maldives for more than 40 years. Over the decades, we have worked on poverty eradication, democratic governance and environment protection, including climate change mitigation and adaptation.

In all our work, we focus on 'leaving no one behind': We make concerted efforts to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged, marginalized and vulnerable groups, particularly women and youth. We remain committed to continue our work in the Maldives, for the people and the environment.

512,038

**MALDIVES POPULATION
(INCLUDING FOREIGN RESIDENT POPULATION)**

APPROXIMATELY

555,399 TOURISTS

**VISITED IN 2020 (COMPARED TO 1.7 MILLION
IN 2019)**

1.97 METRIC TONNE

CARBON EMISSIONS PER CAPITA IN MALDIVES

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MOHAMED IZMAN SUHAIL

CONTRIBUTORS

ISMAIL ASHWAD - LAYOUT AND DESIGN

HAWWA LUBNA - CONTRIBUTING AUTHOR

FATHIMATH MAESA ZAKI - CONTRIBUTING AUTHOR

GENERAL AND MEDIA INQUIRIES:

registry.mv@undp.org

ADDRESS:

UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME IN THE
MALDIVES, 4TH FLOOR, H. AAGE (BANK OF CEYLON
BUILDING), BODUTHAKURUFAANU MAGU, MALE'
20094, MALDIVES,
PHONE: +960 3324501

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CLIMATE CHANGE AND PEOPLE

Climate change is already happening, further magnifying existing inequalities and vulnerabilities. Effects of climate change are being felt by all, but disproportionately more by the most vulnerable in the society. Vulnerable groups will be at the frontline of the climate crisis and will suffer the most and worst in the face of extreme weather events, degradation of ecosystem, and the impacts on food, water and health.¹



YOUTH

Maldives is a young country, with 35% of the total population aged between 18 and 34⁴. Youth are particularly vulnerable due to high unemployment, lack of access to higher education, drug abuse, gang violence, radicalization, chronic diseases and social isolation. In the coming decades, young people will have to deal with the brunt of climate change and face greater insecurity.⁵

WOMEN

Major source of livelihood for women in the Maldives is agriculture and fisheries with 12.2% of the female employed population engaged in these sectors². Both these economic sectors are highly vulnerable to effects of climate change. Women are subjected to structural inequalities resulting in limited rights, mobility and access to resources as compared to men. Consequently, it reduces women's chance to adapt and diversify their livelihood options making them significantly more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.³

CHILDREN AND ELDERLY

Over 100,000 children aged between 0-14 years are living on the islands today as per projections based on Census 2014, while the resident Maldivian elderly population is projected to increase up to 88,963 by the year 2054 as compared to 16,377 in the year 2014 (Maldives Population Projections 2014 – 2054, 2018⁶). Climate change impacts such as sea level rise and flooding places entire islands at the risk of going underwater, raising fears of displacement and forced migration for these vulnerable groups. Ensuring the safety, health and well-being of children and the elderly will prove to be a challenging task with the increased threat from natural and climate-change induced disasters.⁷



WHO ARE MOST VULNERABLE TO CLIMATE CHANGE?

PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

In 2017, a total of 6,869 Persons with Disabilities (PWD) were registered in the Maldives⁸. PWDs are considerably marginalized with limited accessibility to services, education, health and employment opportunities which affects their life under extreme events and adaptability to environmental change.⁹



REMOTE COMMUNITIES

The population of the Maldives is scattered across 187 islands⁸. Huge socio-economic disparities in services and infrastructure are found between the capital and other islands. The communities living on islands farthest away from any urban centres with poor accessibility and higher poverty levels, will likely suffer the most due to climate impacts, including uneven access to water.¹¹



MIGRANT WORKERS

Migrant workers dominate the workforce, mostly providing low-skilled labour, and represent nearly a third of the country's population. For migrant workers and day labourers usually working outdoors and in poor conditions with inadequate housing or other social and economic constraints, these inequities are compounded by climate change impacts.¹⁰



'For additional information on the footnotes, refer to page 32'



FOREWORD

By Akiko Fujii
Resident Representative of UNDP Maldives

Photography by
ASHWA FAHEEM / UNDP MALDIVES

Welcome to the fifth edition of Island Life.

The first sign that we are getting close to our destination is the array of shimmering patches of blue and turquoise, visible through the plane's windows, apparently floating on the surface of the vast ocean over which we have been flying for several hours without sight of land. Amongst these are darker areas of green, separated from the surrounding sea by dazzlingly bright haloes of golden sand. I can feel a surge of excited anticipation ripple around the cabin. Pristine beaches and multi-coloured coral reefs have made Maldives one of the most prestigious tourist destinations in the modern world.

However, as I look forward to taking up my new assignment as Resident Representative of the United Nations Development Programme in Maldives, I am struck not just by the beauty of my home for the next few years but also its fragility. The precariousness of life led on such small islands separated from the supposed security of distant continents, subject to powerful natural forces hidden below the surface of the surrounding ocean.

This is not my first assignment in a nation known in the development field as a Small Island Developing States (SIDS). After beginning my career amongst the deserts and mountains of Pakistan and Sudan, I have spent nearly eight years experiencing the joys and tribulations of island life, first in Jamaica, in the Caribbean, and then in Fiji and other island nations in the Pacific.

This experience has brought home to me just how much SIDS like Maldives are threatened by changes in the natural environment brought about by human industrial activity and modern social and economic development. This is particularly true in Maldives, where the personal and social, cultural and economic dramas of most citizens' lives are carried on within a short walking distance from the beaches and the ocean, which are also the principal economic resource of the whole nation. Rising sea levels and temperatures, together with changing ocean currents and weather patterns, represent the greatest of clear and present dangers to this island nation.

As we look forward to the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) this year, a new level of awareness of the consequences of climate change, a commitment to combat its causes and a determination to mitigate its effects are clearly evident, particularly amongst younger activists whose future relies on climate action now. And it is seeing such action being taken now throughout Maldives, which I have found so inspiring since my arrival her

Working for UNDP has given me incredible opportunities to interact with all kinds of people in a variety of island communities—citizens and civic leaders, women and men, young and old, people with special needs and those with special abilities, volunteers and professionals.

'We are trying to preserve our cultural heritage from the damaging effects of climate change,' a local NGO representative on the island of S. Meedhoo told me. This particular island community is fighting to prevent their ancestors' graves, complete with ornate carvings, from being washed away as the beaches protecting the island slowly disappear into the rising seas.

Photography by
ASHWA FAHEEM / UNDP MALDIVES



Photography by
ABDULLA SHAIMAAN WAHEED

Facing the incalculable calamities of climate change, together and individually, the people of Maldives are rising to the challenge, both by searching for local solutions to immediate problems and by taking a lead in the global movement towards removing the causes of those problems.

The COVID-19 pandemic reminded us that we all live on one planet, breathing the same air, living on shared soil and depending on common natural resources, such as water – which are all under threat in the face of climate change impacts.

In this context, this year's UNDP Maldives annual publication 'Island Life' will focus on the theme, "Climate Action". We hope you will enjoy this brief journey through the islands of Maldives as we meet with people in both urbanized and less populated regions, working on different problems and with a variety of methods, but all united in a determination to develop an island life which will preserve our island environment and provide opportunities for this island people for generations to come. Join us, won't you?

GREETINGS FROM MINISTER OF TOURISM



Dr. Abdulla Mausoom
Minister of Tourism,

Tourism in the Maldives, has grown from strength to strength, since its inception almost five decades ago. It has become the pride of our nation; the driving force of our economy and the heartbeat of our hospitable people.

Over 66% of GDP accrues from the tourism industry, and every home on every inhabited island receives income directly or indirectly from the tourism industry. We have over 50,000 beds across the Maldives in over 850 tourist facilities consisting of resorts, guesthouses hotels and safari vessels. The Ministry of Tourism has ensured guidelines to protect the environment from being over-exploited, pursuing an eco-friendly approach to tourism. The results have been rewarding. We have greeted over 1.6 million tourists in 2019. Several international hotel chains have invested in our tourism industry making it a supreme destination for people who love the sun, sand and sea. We owe much gratitude and appreciation to the entrepreneurs of the tourism industry who have driven the industry to this peak level with sheer passion and determination.

In line with the vision of the government to spread the benefits of the industry evenly across the country, increasing significance is given to participation of local communities in the tourism development process, targeted projects that would firstly expand the outreach of tourism through the promotion of our culture and heritage; and secondly, expand the network of beneficiaries of tourism through

active participation of island communities, and most specifically enabling more women to participate in the tourism sector. We believe that community based eco-tourism, the history, culture and traditions of our country, sports, medical and wellness, along with farming and agriculture, if efficiently incorporated with the tourism industry, can create vast potential in areas of tourism development.

Today, under the Strategic Action Plan launched by His Excellency President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's Administration, the Maldives has embarked on initiatives to diversify the tourism product. This is to sustain our strong position in the international tourism industry and also to spread tourism benefits across the country. We wish to highlight two key aspects of Maldives tourism diversification – one is to enhance the priority placed to pursue eco-tourism for promoting sustainable management of protected areas. The second aspect is to promote sports tourism, making the Maldives an attractive destination for sports events, especially sea sports. This diversification will not only enhance the impression of Destination Maldives, but brings in added value to our vibrant sector. Further, this effort to promote and develop our tourism product, also adheres to the principle of “leave





Photography by
UMAIR BADEEU / UNDP MALDIVES

no one behind” ushered in by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals.

Eco-tourism has been the primary factor that has made the Maldives a popular tourist destination for people from all corners of the world. Visitors love our white pristine sandy beaches, serene island environments and spectacular marine environments. The Maldives has captured the hearts of our visitors by the attention we give to safeguard our environments. The fact a significant number of our visitors are repeat visitors stands witness to this. **Our partnership with UNDP on the ‘Re-imagining Tourism’ initiative - as part of recovery efforts and to build forward much more sustainable, inclusive and robust industries, is reflective of this care for our environment, and all that it encompasses. It is critical that sustainable tourism efforts are amplified to protect people and the planet.**

We welcome the 10th Amendment to the Maldives Tourism Act (Act No. 2/99) that has been ratified by President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih on 27th December 2020 which paves way for increased investments and more opportunities in the tourism industry of the country.

As tourism is a key employer, our focus is on engaging more locals in the tourism industry and support new entrants to the job market to shift across jobs and support future jobs by equipping people with twenty first century skills and qualities - as well as support highly experienced and highly capable locals to move to managerial positions in the tourism sector.

We wish to convey our sincere thanks to UNDP and other international organization for their support in the tourism development and community empowerment of our country. We are very hopeful with the Strategic Action Plan of the Government, support from our international partners and the commitment of tourism industry stakeholders and island communities we will be able to continue our march towards reaching the Sustainable Development Goals and accomplish them. We assure every potential visitor who intends to visit our pristine shores that sustainability is our key guiding principle as we enthusiastically pursue tourism development in the Maldives. Our earnest hope is that we will continue to receive international support in our initiatives to protect our fragile but rich ecosystems for tourism in a sustainable manner.

COVID-19: VICTIM OR GAME CHANGER?

THE PANDEMIC HAS SEVERELY IMPACTED THE MALDIVIAN ECONOMY AND LIVELIHOODS. IS THIS AN OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD FORWARD BETTER?

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent global recession is creating an unparalleled health and socioeconomic impact on the Maldives. The sudden halt of international tourism brought an unprecedented economic shock¹², threatening developmental gains in the Maldives, while increasing food insecurity due to disruptions in supply chain. Social and livelihood costs to people are immense: exposing the most vulnerable groups to further hardships, as people lost incomes and required urgent protection.

As the crisis prolongs, deepening the impact, UNDP, together with the UN system in Maldives and our partners remains at the forefront to support recovery efforts, and ‘Build Forward Better, Bluer & Greener’.

UNDP’S SUPPORT



PROTECTING PEOPLE

COVID-19 TESTING KITS (25,000 CARTRIDGES) FOR HOSPITALS IN 6 ATOLLS

CLOSE TO 50,000 PPE ITEMS TO PROTECT FRONTLINE WORKERS

1 MILLION MASKS TO PROTECT LOCAL TOURISM WORKERS



LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY

DIGITIZED 10 COURT ROOMS

DIGITALLY CONNECTED 500 USERS IN 250 COURT ROOMS ACROSS THE COUNTRY

UP TO 122 ONLINE COURT HEARINGS FROM SEPT TO DEC

DIGITIZATION SUPPORT TO JUDICIAL SERVICES COMMISSION, ATTORNEY GENERAL'S OFFICE AND THE EMPLOYMENT TRIBUNAL



DECENT WORK AND INCLUSIVE GROWTH

RAPID LIVELIHOODS ASSESSMENT OF COVID-19 ON EMPLOYMENT AND MSMEs'

SUPPORTING 250 SMALL-HOLDER FARMERS IN LAAMU ATOLL - 40% WOMEN, 20% YOUTH

URBAN AGRICULTURE INITIATIVE FOR NEW GENERATION FARMERS IN GREATER MALÉ REGION

SUPPORT TO MSMEs IN THE ATOLLS REACHING OUT TO 2000 BENEFICIARIES - 40% WOMEN



EQUAL RIGHTS FOR ALL

HELPED ESTABLISH GOVERNMENT'S CARE PORTAL - UP TO 15,289 CALLS

MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES ACCESS FOR VICTIMS OF SEXUAL AND OTHER FORMS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ACROSS THE COUNTRY

LAUNCHED 3RD 'RIGHTS SIDE OF LIFE' HUMAN RIGHTS SURVEY

PRO-BONO LEGAL AID TO 55 GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SURVIVORS - 37 FEMALES

PRO-BONO LEGAL AID TO 34 WORKERS (16 MIGRANTS) ON EMPLOYMENT MATTERS



CLIMATE ACTION

INSTALLED 4550 TONS OF ADDITIONAL WATER STORAGE IN 29 ISLANDS, DOUBLING EXISTING WATER STORAGE CAPACITY

WATER TEST KITS FOR 50 COMMUNITIES HANDED OVER TO MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT



INVESTING IN YOUNG PEOPLE

4 YOUTH GROUPS ENGAGED TO INNOVATE FOR SOCIAL GOOD AMIDST COVID-19

60 YOUTH PARTICIPATED IN THE MALDIVES YOUTH CAMP AND MADE 14 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

50 YOUNG PEOPLE ENGAGED AT ART WORKSHOP FOR YOUTH

¹² Tourism is a pillar for Small Islands Developing States (SIDS) such as Maldives. UNDP's 'Human Development Dashboards on Vulnerability to Pandemics' released in May 2020 revealed Maldives as one of the highest vulnerable during the pandemic, as a country heavily dependent on tourism, while our Rapid COVID-19 Livelihoods Assessment in the Maldives revealed deep, widespread and cross-cutting impact on Maldives' tourism sector.

BUILD FORWARD BETTER

COVID-19 offers every country to rethink development and Build Forward Better. As the Maldives rebuilds its health, education and socioeconomic systems, we stand ready to assist.

*Photography by
ASHWA FAHEEM / UNDP MALDIVES*

COVID-19 REINFORCES THE IMPORTANCE OF WATER SECURITY. HOW WE ARE HELPING.

The islands of the Maldives may face acute water scarcity as a result of a number of issues related to COVID-19. For example, some islands have a single potable water source provided by Seawater desalination plants. These are highly technical installations that require precision operation by trained staff and are critically dependent on an energy supply based on petroleum fuel. The pandemic situation can lead to disruptions in these systems due to human resource and supply chain (fuel, important spare-parts). The challenges arising from COVID-19 such as reduced mobility and potential disruption to supply chains such as fuel may compound the water shortage situation and make it a much more severe problem.

The main challenge to water security in the Maldives has been identified as the dry season water shortage, which is overlapping with the the present COVID-19 situation. During the dry season of 2020, 73 inhabited islands requested for emergency water and were supplied a total of 3.4 million litres of water costing 9.2 million (about US \$600,000). The pandemic situation and the resulting essential health and safety measures has made such operations much more difficult. Another challenge with emergency water supply is that it is much harder to ensure the quality of the water due to complicated transport.

UNDP, working with partners such as the Green Climate Fund, is supporting the Ministry of Environment to address and improve water security. Short-term responses being considered include facilitating close-to-the-consumption-point (community level) water quality testing with easy to use field test kits, providing personal protective equipment for the water supply staff and exploring alternative regional water sources. In order to address the emergencies, portable desalination plants that can be transported to affected islands are being considered. Use of sustainable energy sources to support these initiatives are also being explored.

As long-term solutions, UNDP is supporting the Ministry of Environment on looking at how to improve the economics as well as reliability of water supply by augmenting desalination with harvested rainwater. The groundwater system – the freshwater lens – the thin layer of fresh water in the islands – is also an important resource in this mix. Steps are being taken to improve the recharge of groundwater from rainfall, improve its quality by preventing contamination from human waste, and to sustainably use it as a resource to ease the burden on the water supply.

INTERVIEW

The Government of Maldives launched the 5-year Strategic Action Plan (SAP) in 2019, an ambitious plan to realize the vision of “Jazeera Raajje” (Island Nation). How does it help to achieve the country’s climate ambition? We talked to Policy Secretary at the President’s Office, Aishath Shauna about how the vision of “Jazeera Raajje” will improve people’s lives in islands, address the growing threat of climate change and the need for increased action to building resilient communities by implementing the newly amended Decentralization Act.

“Jazeera Raajje” is the defining vision of the Government’s future development plans. What does it mean to you? What would it look like to people in the islands?

Our manifesto is called “Jazeera Raajje” - the closest phrase you can get in English is “Island Nation”. The reason why we did that was to truly represent the island life. Also, to show that development does not mean that we have to compromise our environment. It is based on the understanding that we want to develop as an island nation and that we do not have to replicate what has been done in other larger countries. We don’t have to destroy what we have. We can develop by protecting and preserving our ecosystems, our island features and our island life.

The world is struggling to cut back emissions to keep global warming well below 2°C. For island nations like the Maldives, rising emissions and temperature would have devastating consequences, especially due to sea level rise that can possibly result in many low-lying islands going underwater. What does SAP offer towards climate action?

Firstly, there will be no Maldives if we aim to keep it below 2°C. We need to aim for 1.5°C. Government policy is to increase our commitment towards Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) to reflect this as well. Although the Maldives emission is negligible compared to the rest of the world, we do want to be leaders in limiting our emissions. Climate Action in the Maldives takes many forms



which require investment in coastal protection, transition to renewable energy, innovative water filtration and purification systems, and enhancing local human capacity to respond to emergencies.

SAP highlights strengthening adaptation actions and opportunities and building climate resilient infrastructure to address climate vulnerabilities.

This involves improving the legislative framework on Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) to ensure vulnerable ecosystems are preserved and protected and that climate resilience is enhanced. Strengthening institutional framework such as enhancing institutional capacity to better coordinate climate adaptation action and build climate resilience. Additionally, the SAP highlights integrating DRR and climate change risk management into the local planning process.

This also includes enhancing and implementing the Maldives NDCs to reduce vulnerability and increase adaptation efforts by developing low emission development plans for sectors, enhancing ambition of national climate action and communication, developing and implementing NDC implementation plan, establishing monitoring mechanisms of NDC progress. Moreover, as part of promoting environmentally sound technologies and practices towards building



Photography by
ASHWA FAHEEM / UNDP MALDIVES

sustainable climate resilient island communities, the country will be scaling up integrated water resource management to increase water security and enhancing food security by promoting resilient fisheries and agricultural practices.

The parliament has recently passed the new amendments to the Decentralization Act. Why decentralization now? How will it help realize people's expectations for climate action?

Reforming the governance system is one of the flagship pledges of our government. One of the key reforms we are bringing is administrative decentralization. We did start that about ten years ago, but our journey was cut-short after the 2012 coup. We have now resumed the work that we started back in 2008, and this time we have focused on securing resources and powers for the councils to make decisions and to be able to bring about meaningful change. In the new amendments, we have focused very much on fiscal decentralization. I'd like to note the support we have received from UNDP during this entire process.

Over the past years what we have achieved is political decentralization. We have elected Councillors but have not given them enough resources or focused on how we can equitably distribute the resources that we have to the local councils.

With this we have come up with a fiscal formula. After extensive consultations with councillors, NGOs, civil society and government agencies, we have been able to bring about changes that would hopefully lead to meaningful implementation of the Decentralization Act. With the increased autonomy and ownership by councils and communities, people can take more effective climate actions suitable to the local context.

Congratulations on having the first ever legislation to reserve 33 percent quota for women in local councils. How can women contribute to making Maldives more climate-proof, blue and resilient?

Women represent nearly half of the Maldives population and have been an integral part of our country's development. However, the percentage of women represented at the decision-making level and in elected positions remain quite low. This is partly because of injustices and discriminatory policies in the past. I believe such issues can only be corrected by introducing policies like this. In the upcoming local council elections, we will have at least two women in each council and more in city councils. Women play an important role in development planning. Building a climate-proof and blue community means a resilient community, where women are a part of the decision-making process.

If you can pick one island in the Maldives to spend the rest of your life in, which one would it be and why? Or what is your favourite spot or location to visit in the Maldives and why?

It is very difficult to pick one island. I have been to every inhabited island in the Maldives. If I am to choose, I would like to choose Addu, where I was born. The reason is because Addu has so much potential for development, has a rich history, beautiful and unique environment. My favourite spot in the Maldives would always be somewhere under the water.

AMPLIFIED VOICES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

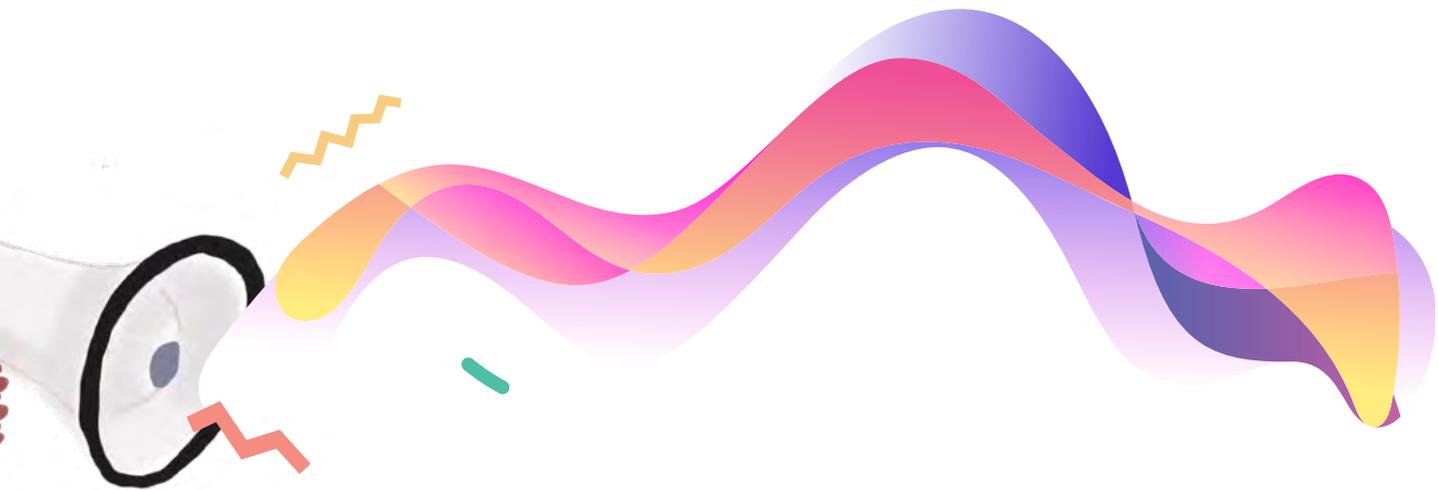
Home to approximately 1,200 low-lying coral islands scattered across the Indian Ocean, Maldives is one of the many Small Island Developing States (SIDS) that is questioning the long-term costs of unsustainable development. With a population of approximately 512,038 (2018) dispersed across 187 islands, the nation is faced with the need to empower local communities through strengthened local governance which would contribute to sustainable and inclusive development. When adding in the nation's vulnerability to effects of climate change, the situation only becomes more critical. Local governance institutions such as island and city councils can play a crucial role in amplifying the voice of local communities and bringing forth relevant local solutions. These local solutions can play a significant role in addressing the growing threat of climate change.

Nonetheless, for a long time the limited responsibility and budget assigned to island councils was a major challenge in reaching their full potential as shared by Asma Hussain, the President of Noonu Atoll Velidhoo Island Council.

Over the past few years, Velidhoo has witnessed several positive changes such as digitalization of the school, upgrades in the health facility, establishment of a children's park and an outdoor gym. For Asma, this is just a fraction of what could have been achieved with better resources. Such a view is not unique to just the Velidhoo Community. Instead, similar concerns about restricted mandate and resources can be witnessed across all local councils.

In this regard, the 2019 Amendments to the Decentralization Act represents a momentous milestone which has paved the way for councils to be more autonomous, financially empowered, and inclusive. With the renewed commitment towards strengthening local governance, UNDP Maldives had supported the President's Office and the Attorney General's Office (AGO) with finalizing these amendments to the Decentralization Act.





Asma believes that “these changes will help speed up development activities in the islands.” For instance, Velidhoo Council was supposed to see an increase in their 2020 budget that would have kick-started the work on previously stalled projects including the development of the island’s ferry terminal, fish market and a dockyard for repairing boats which would strengthen inter-atoll connectivity and foster diverse livelihood opportunities for the people of the island. However due to the Covid-19 pandemic they had to push that for the following year, though they have already started work on some of the projects. Moving forward, the enhanced autonomy can pave way for increased participation of local governments and communities in the nation’s race against climate change.

The amendments to the Decentralization Act also marked a historic win towards gender equality with the introduction of a 33% quota for women in all the councils – the first of its kind in Maldives aimed to tackle systematic barriers that limit women’s political participation.

While Asma’s experience of leading the Velidhoo community is inspiring, it is also uncommon. It has not always been an easy journey for Asma who represents one of the few women representing local councils. “When I first ran for the elections in 2014, I heard people say I can’t be a councillor because I am a woman,” she explained.

The new reform is a source of renewed motivation for women aspiring to be councillors, with over 300 women expected to join local decision-making in the next round of elections to be held in the year 2021. Asma described introduction of quota “as a positive

step towards bringing more women to decision-making.” It is a necessary change to better address issues faced by women in the society which are further exacerbated by the effects of climate change.

As experienced by various countries, the involvement of women often leads to better execution of programmes aimed at addressing the effects of climate change. Hence, introduction of gender quota is not only promising for achievement of gender equality but can also be seen as positively contributing to increased ambition for climate action.

As the new local councils are elected in the next election cycle, they are faced with the challenge of boosting the local economy amidst a global pandemic and economic recession, without destroying the already fragile island environment threatened by climate change. To what extent the new mandate and resources will be used effectively to pursue sustainable local development, will depend heavily on the capacities of Councillors.

“All new local council, including the men and women will need training in budgeting, land use planning, formulation of island development plans, and technical support on better environmental impact assessment and adaptation, especially during infrastructure projects.” Asma noted.

Though the story began with a rocky start it ends on a hopeful note and there are helpful takeaways for the future. With hard work and determination Asma has managed to change the views of people in her favour and rise against prejudice and discrimination to excel in the responsibilities assigned to her. Asma is a ray of hope for all who aspires to become leaders.

BUILDING A BUFFER AGAINST CLIMATE CHANGE TO PROTECT MALDIVES' ISLAND COMMUNITIES

Photography by
LIQUID SALT DIVERS

For Mohammed Ahmed - better known as Sidey - water has been an economic lifeline. Since he lives in the Maldives that may not seem surprising. But the abundance and scarcity of water has marked the ebb and flow of his fortunes, affected both by the seas and the monsoons.

While still in his twenties, Sidey (pronounced See-day) purchased a liveaboard boat, to take tourists diving. His favourite location has always been Baa Atoll, teeming with manta rays and whale sharks. It was on one such journey that his boat, The Black Pearl, ran into trouble. Sidey recalls going into the engine room to check the problem, when an explosion occurred. The blast set the boat on fire and injured him. He managed to escape along with all on board, by jumping onto the dive boat that was following.

The accident would mark a turning point in his life. With the boat lost, Sidey decided to change his career track, and opened up the Aveyla Manta Village, the first guesthouse on Dharavandhoo island, in Baa Atoll. It is a distance of about two kilometres as the crow

flies, from the Aveyla guesthouse to Hanifaru Bay – the feeding and mating grounds of the manta rays and whale sharks. On a sun-drenched day the view is spectacular, as the waters run from turquoise, to sapphire, to royal blue.

“It is one of those bucket list things, swimming with mantas in Hanifaru Bay, like whale watching in Tonga, and the sardine run in South Africa,” says Sidey. “It’s a crazy feeling, it’s one of the best experiences.”

While Hanifaru Bay is a tourist draw, the lack of rainfall is causing a shortage of freshwater on the island, and that is proving to be a challenge for Sidey. It is a double-edged sword. More sunshine and less rain is great for business, as it makes for excellent snorkelling weather – diving is no longer permitted in Hanifaru Bay, since it was declared a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. Yet, rainfall is crucial for businesses and island residents, as it is a vital source of freshwater, especially during the dry season.

“It is one of those bucket list things, swimming with mantas in Hanifaru Bay, like whale watching in Tonga, and the sardine run in South Africa,” says Sidey. “It’s a crazy feeling, it’s one of the best experiences.”

Traditionally, access to freshwater was less of a concern for Maldivian island communities. More regular monsoons ensured a steady supply for drinking and other purposes. But in recent years, climate change has led to irregular rainfall and more sustained dry periods. Annually, across the Maldives, dozens of island communities face water shortages. In the past decade alone, more than 80 communities have declared emergencies, resulting in water being shipped in from the capital Malé.

In Dharavandhoo, as summers sear and monsoons falter, and as more guesthouses spring up to meet the rise in tourism, the need for freshwater has become even more critical. The municipality and residents have storage tanks that harvest rainwater, but in recent years supplies have run short. For several years now, the community has been forced to declare a state of emergency, urging the government to ship in water from the capital Malé.

In his five years as Dharavandhoo’s Local Council Member, Ali Shafeeg says he has had to request emergency water supplies every single year.

“The first time the island’s groundwater became contaminated was during the 2004 tsunami. At that time, we managed to provide every household in Dharavandhoo with water storage tanks, to properly collect and store rainwater. These tanks are rarely used now. You need rainfall to harvest rainwater,” he says.

Last year was particularly difficult for residents of Dharavandhoo. Rainfall was so scarce and unpredictable that Shafeeq had to request emergency water supplies twice, within the first few months of the year.

In the last few years it has not rained as much as it used to in the past, he says. “This is very unusual. The groundwater quality is now so bad I don’t even risk my children brushing their teeth with it. We use store bought water.”

At his resort, Sidey says, guests complain about the putrid odour of the aquifer’s water. “Even if we oxygenate it, to try to reduce the smell, it does not





Photography by
ASHWA FAHEEM / UNDP MALDIVES

make much of a difference.” He serves bottled water for drinking and admits it is not ideal because it increases costs and the use of plastic but he has no other options.

Now to help communities adapt to the changing situation, the Government of the Maldives, supported by UNDP, is building an integrated water management system that will provide freshwater year-round to numerous islands.

The project, financed by the Green Climate Fund (GCF), includes four desalination plants, connected to large rainwater storage tanks, on four separate islands.

An additional 25 islands will be fitted with large capacity rainwater tanks that will provide water security for up to 90 days, a buffer against droughts. A water audit system will track water supplies and weather patterns, triggering early warnings of dry periods. It will allow officials to facilitate the gathering of more rainwater, institute conservation measures, and track how much water is available for emergencies.

The Government also plans to improve groundwater quality. Mismanagement, along with the use of sewage pits and heavy use of groundwater, has led to the contamination of aquifers, adding to health risks. The plan is to rejuvenate the aquifers by pumping water into them and establishing stronger protection protocols.

These efforts are part of the Government’s goal to ensure nationwide access to safe drinking water. Dharavandhoo island is one of four islands that will have a desalination plant connected to a large rainwater storage tank.

It gives Sidey hope for a brighter and more secure future. “The water system we are building, and the sewerage system, is very important,” he says. “Not just for the business but also to meet the basic necessities for the people of Dharavandhoo.”

RIPPLES OF CHANGE

“There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about.”

~Margaret J. Wheatley

Islands across the Maldives seem to be coming back to the same question – what will become of our home when we are gone? Will it exist? Will it be habitable? It’s a common fear in this tiny archipelago of islands, formed atop underwater volcanoes.

We were not made to sit back and watch helplessly as our homes fade away into the ocean. A few islands have decided to cast a stone to water, hoping that it would make many ripples, spreading across the nation. These three short stories serve as proof that together, we can win this fight.

Photography by
LECRED/UNDP MALDIVES



ONE ISLAND, ONE CHANCE

The island of Vaadhoo, Raa Atoll – Population: 600.



Photography by
VAFD

When solving issues faced in society, determination and unity can go a long way, as was proved by the small yet strong island community of Vaadhoo in Raa Atoll.

Every year, electricity demand in Vaadhoo increased by seven percent, putting a major strain on the FENAKA powerhouse and increasing the burning of fossil fuels in an island already severely sensitive to the changes in our environment.

Finally, in 2015, the Vaadhoo Association for Future Development, or VAFD, decided it was time to take the next step. Bringing in experts, VAFD conducted research on the island to find the possibility of installing solar panels.

Not only did they find it to be viable in Vaadhoo, and perhaps the entire country, they found it to be the

perfect candidate for clean energy. With the help of VAFD, local communities were eager to learn about and adopt clean energy across the small island – who wouldn't want free and clean energy from the best possible source? VAFD carried out numerous activities to help people understand the beauty of solar energy, and to work together as one, on their journey to reduce greenhouse gases by forming eco-friendly habits.

The ambitious project was completed following exemplary collaboration between the Vaadhoo island community, VAFD, and FENAKA has brought down its carbon emission and reduced expenses on diesel. Burning 74% less fuel, Vaadhoo saw an average reduction of 33.3 kg of carbon dioxide on an average day, reducing an estimated 9 tonnes of the gas every year.

GREEN SOLAR HEALING

It is ironic how hospitals, an institution of healing, can be considered one of the greatest threats to our planet. Some things that we don't usually think about when it comes to hospitals include the massive carbon footprint they leave behind globally, the unimaginable amounts of energy and water they consume, as well as the colossal amount of waste that they generate.

Such was the case with Alif Dhaal Atoll Hospital located on a tiny island called Mahibadhoo in Southern Ari Atoll. The hospital's reliance on the STELCO powerhouse for electricity, made it powerless to the brute impacts of our ever-changing climate. For instance, not only is the powerhouse defenceless against bad weather but heavy storms tend to interrupt the delivery of fuel, transported by sea.

This very issue is what came under the radar of Volunteers for Environment, Social Harmony and Improvement (VESHI) and the Mahibadhoo Zuvaanunge Jamiyya (MZJ), both of which are organizations working towards the protection of our environment and community engagement amongst other causes. Together, VESHI, MZJ and the Alif Dhaal Atoll Hospital instinctively decided that it was time to flip the switch. The switch to solar, that is.

This community of like-minded individuals got to work with the goal to establish and demonstrate a 'green healing hospital' in the Maldives that can bear-up against climate change and reduce the release of greenhouse gases.

After a year of unfathomable hard work and determination had passed, the day had finally arrived. They stood outside the hospital and gazed up to the newly installed solar panels upon the roof with relief and one thought in their head – this is just the beginning.

Yes, hospitals are for healing. But it's important to promote healing without harming our planet. Clean energy will benefit both the climate and the people's health. This hospital in this resilient island will serve as a stepping stone in the right direction.



Photography by
VESHI/MZJ

LESS RUST, MORE ECO

As we move further down south to Laamu Atoll, the island of Maamendhoo had been facing troubles of their own.

For quite some time, there was only one old garbage truck for the whole island. People would cover their noses and close their eyes as the old truck, powered by diesel, passed them by. Thick smoke would spatter out from behind as it drove around, helping to clear out the day's garbage. Once in a while, on those unlucky days when the truck would break down, you'd get the faint smell of rotting food through the streets of Maamendhoo as garbage piles up.

High levels of particulates, nitrogen oxides, sulphur dioxide, and noise among other pollutants are a threat to human health. On top of that, all vehicles powered by fossil fuels emit carbon dioxide. During most of its working day, a garbage truck stands still while it loads and compresses waste. This generates noise, atmospheric emissions and consumes fuel. A garbage truck travels short distances, and the highest fuel consumption occurs when it starts to drive and reaches 20 kilometres per hour.

Maamendhoo United (MU), an NGO that works to build social cohesion within the community through various activities and sporting events, together with the people of Maamendhoo were determined to solve this issue.

United, they came to the best possible conclusion – they decided to work to acquire an eco-friendly garbage truck. Hybrid, eco-friendly garbage trucks offer several advantages by using an electric motor during the above operations, reducing fuel consumption by about 30 percent compared to a conventional truck.

Their minds set on achieving an environmentally friendly Maamendhoo, MU and the community worked hard until they achieved their goal. With the new eco-friendly garbage trucks, the fear of uncertain or cough-inducing collection times are a thing of the past.



Photography by
MU



Photography by
MU

These are the kinds of projects UNDP's GEF Small Grants Programme (SGP) helps to fund projects that protect the environment from harm while enhancing people's lives. VAFD, VESHI and MU, all received a grant from the GEF SGP to bring about a positive change. Taking small steps might seem like a slow process, but taking that step together as one can have a mighty impact. Let's hope that the stones they have cast create many ripples across the waters, showing the way for other communities to follow.

TREES OF HOPE

Photography by
ASHWA FAHEEM / UNDP MALDIVES

Since the very first women's rights movements took place in the 19th century, milestones have been achieved and progress still continues – though at a slow pace. There is still a very low percentage of women at decision-making levels. In spite of the growing recognition of the distinctive vulnerabilities as well as the unique experiences and skills women and men bring to development and environmental sustainability efforts, women still have less economic, political and legal influence. Hence, they are more exposed to the adverse effects of our changing climate. However, there are some women who are breaking these barriers.

Amidst the diverse mixture of ancient cultural heritage and natural beauty of Hulhumeedhoo, the oldest populated island in Addu Atoll, one can hear a few tales of inspiration and hope. One such story, is that of Shaffaf Rizwan. Shaffaf is the founder of Meedhoo Ekuveringe Cheyenu (MEC), an NGO with

the main objective of enhancing the community of Hulhumeedhoo. The all-women organisation has 197 members with 11 board members from a variety of backgrounds; from housewives to teachers, and sportswomen to those who work in the government. "It is more than vital that women also have a say in what goes on in the community, allowing their concerns to be heard and coming up with fair solutions," says Shaffaf, who has high hopes for her island and its people, dreaming of a blossoming community where citizens, especially women, have equal access to means of making a living.

Meedhoo has always been big on agriculture, but with more and more unpredictable weather patterns, crops could be destroyed on any given day. "There were times when one tonne of watermelons got ruined because of heavy rainfall," recounts Shaffaf. For some time, Shaffaf and the MEC team had been wanting to find a solution to this pressing issue.



Photography by
ASHWA FAHEEM / UNDP MALDIVES

The MEC decided to embark on a mission to change the face of the agricultural scene in the island. Having heard from a friend about UNDP's GEF SGP, Shaffaf decided to secure the funds to conduct workshops on agroforestry, teaching the people of Hulhumeedhoo how to properly plant and grow different kinds of fruit trees in the best conditions.

A thousand trees in different varieties were shipped in to the island from India. Workshops were hosted across the entire community, teaching people how to grow and nurture these trees in their own gardens and make a living from the fruits that they bear. They were skilled on how to provide the best possible conditions for the trees to thrive, as well as how to turn their own food waste into fertilizer.

A special focus was given to school kids, teaching them about the innovative and climate-safe methods in obtaining these natural resources. Children who completed the workshop got to travel to Fuvahmulah where they spread the word to other school-goers with the aim of overturning negative stereotypes regarding agriculture. "When it comes to young children, they love listening to people their own age, so we thought of utilising this aspect in the best way possible" says Shaffaf.

“We were able to distribute trees to every single household on the island. Those trees are still growing. We also used some of the banana trees to start a pilot banana farm,” she added.



Photography by
ASHWA FAHEEM / UNDP MALDIVES

Due to the project's major success, Shaffaf and the team decided to scale-up their efforts through a new grant by upgrading the nurseries and introducing an AutoPot system to the island. The auto pot system is an all-in-one cultivation system that uses gravity pressure to fill plant tubs with water and fertilizer solution. "If you come to Hulhumeedhoo, you'd see many families with their own greenhouses as well as AutoPot systems nowadays," described Shaffaf as she spoke about how the greenhouses have tremendously helped people in times of bad weather conditions.



Photography by
ASHWA FAHEEM / UNDP MALDIVES

Thanks to women who step forward like Shaffaf and her team, Hulhumeedhoo continues to become a strong, self-sustaining and resilient agricultural island. In a similar way to how the first women's rights movements endeavoured to enhance women's livelihoods around the world, this group of inspiring women are changing standards and breaking barriers with the ultimate goal of enhancing the livelihood of their community. With their innovative methods and resilient disposition, Shaffaf and the MEC will continue their mission of safeguarding their community from the looming threats of climate change by paying close attention to those most vulnerable within their community.



Photography by
ASHWA FAHEEM / UNDP MALDIVES

YOUTH: CLIMATE HEROES

“My generation has failed to respond properly to the dramatic challenge of climate change. This is deeply felt by young people. No wonder they are angry.”

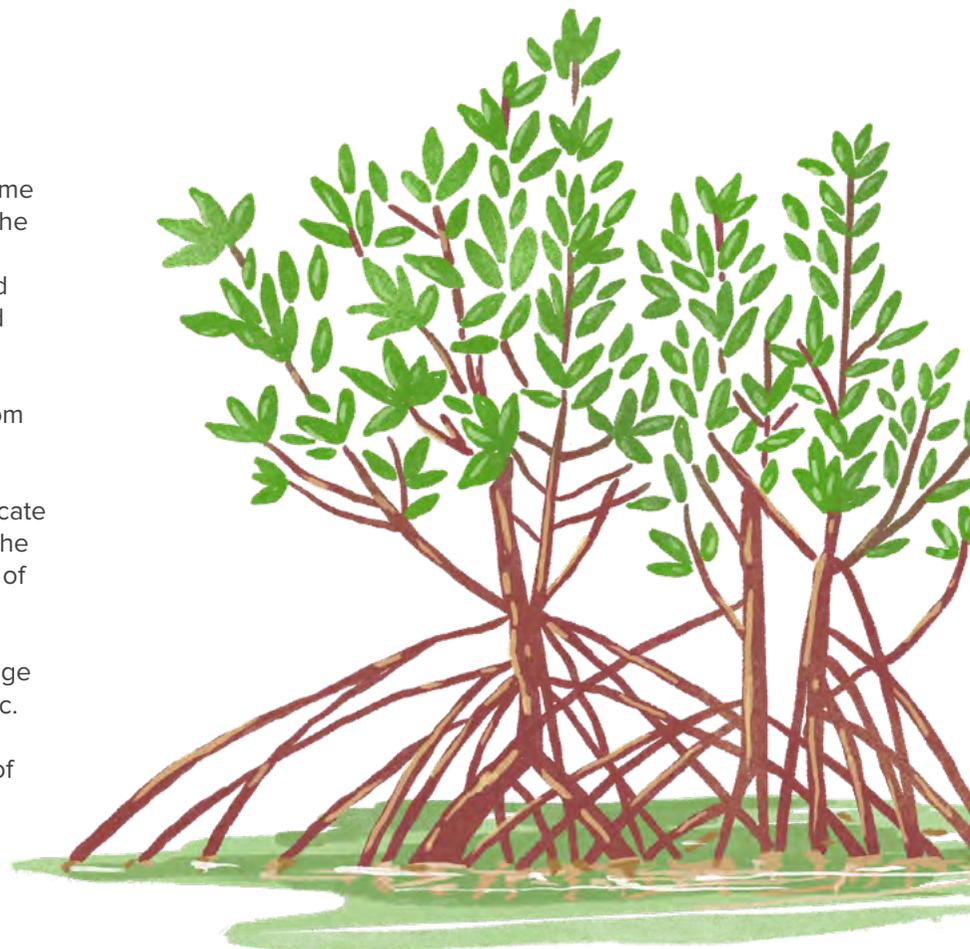
Around the globe, young people are sounding the alarm on climate change and environmental issues, but the excessive social, economic and political barriers they face prevent them from taking the wheel.

In support of youth-focused and youth-led development, UNDP conducts a variety of programmes that provide young people with a platform to gain the skills and knowledge they need to shine bright.

Designed to create a community of young leaders through information sessions, knowledge sharing, activities and fieldtrips, a platform called the Youth Leadership Programme (YLP) guides young people towards becoming agents of change.

“A component that was very interesting to me was our field trip to the mangrove forest. The people were growing fruits and veggies in the nutrient-rich land of the mangroves and exporting it. It really helped me understand the sustainable ways in which mangroves could be utilised to enhance people’s livelihoods.” said Aishath Shuba Minhaj, from the island of Feydhoo in Addu City. “One of the many things I took away from the programme was how to properly communicate with people about topics like littering into the ocean and cutting down trees in the name of development.”

Shuba is currently in the initial planning stage of a personal project to tackle ocean plastic. “We get one-third of our oxygen from the ocean. We need to respect it for the sake of our future.”



The Urban Innovation Challenge (UIC) is another youth-focused platform that provides the opportunity for young Maldivians to co-create solutions for urban challenges. At the UIC, the youth worked together with service providers to strengthen technological and innovative mechanisms, leading to increased urban resilience.

“It was great to be able to experience all the stages of co-creating solutions,” says Hawwa Nashfa referring to the UIC’s pre-incubation phase, challenge phase, and the incubation phase. Nashfa was a part of Team Rahdhu, a group of young, energetic individuals who came up with a solution to tackle plastic bottles and won second prize. “PET bottles are the most easily recognizable and widely littered single use, recyclable plastic item.”

“Mass-producers of plastic bottles don’t take responsibility for the end of life of the product. So once it is used, it just becomes waste. Waste management has always been a state responsibility, but we want to shift that responsibility to the producer.” The team partnered with local cafés and ships in Hulhumalé as part of the incubation phase where they had to test their idea. “We decided to experiment with 12,000 bottles which we stuck a special logo on. More than 10,000 bottles were returned to WAMCO in order for customers to get back their deposit. People are willing to return it if there is an incentive,” said Nashfa.



Film For Change on the other hand, is an initiative that empowers young people to explore and form narratives on issues which has societal significance through the medium of film. From story-boarding to production, young, passionate people are given the chance to learn the skills of filmmaking, while waking society up to the harsh realities of social and environmental issues.

“Film For Change not only opened my eyes to exactly how much work goes into filmmaking, but it made me very aware of plastic pollution. I started seeing it littered everywhere after our short film project,” said Ali Shamran (Ammu), thinking back to his experience with Film for Change. “Videography had always been something I wanted to learn more about. It’s a great way to reach the public about social and environmental issues.” His team’s short film, Iloshi, portrayed the vicious cycle of how the plastic waste we allow into our oceans, come right back to us as microplastics.

Though the approach is varied, each and every one of these individuals are working towards one goal – protecting their future and their planet. The thing about young people is that they think about the climate crisis in a way that the older generation did not. For them, it is their future and existence on the line. UNDP’s aim is to help make way for young climate heroes like Shuba, Nashfa, and Ammu to be on the forefront, leading the race against climate change.



MEET THE TEAM

“ I grew up in a large, boisterous home that never slept. It was the epicentre of a constant stream of relatives, visitors and workers who made up our family. My parents used to own and manage a ‘hotaa’ (tea house). One thing that always stood out is how my parents, despite being the owners of their small business, never made their workers do everything on their own. They were always there, physically doing the work with them. They believed that, “no job is too small, or too menial, when you do what you love.”

~ Mariyam Nazra (ARR, Operations)

The UNDP Maldives’ family is made up of unique individuals - each with an inspiring story to tell and an integral part of the organization’s success.

Now, let’s meet the team that makes the magic happen!





MORE INFORMATION ON ‘ ‘CLIMATE CHANGE AND PEOPLE, PAGE 04’

¹ UNDP’s Human Development Report 2019 underlines inequalities surrounding climate change: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/2019-report>

² HIES 2016: <http://statisticsmaldives.gov.mv/household-income-expenditure-survey-2016/>

³ UNDP and partners like Global Environment Facility with local civil society partners are helping women adapt and diversify their livelihood options: <https://web.facebook.com/watch/?v=723468648111030>

⁴ Census 2014: <http://statisticsmaldives.gov.mv/census-2014/>

⁵ Youth Vulnerability Assessment conducted by National Counter Terrorism Centre and UNDP with support from the Government of Japan, aimed to find the root causes and vulnerabilities that could make Maldivian youth susceptible to radicalization and violent extremism: <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/youth-vulnerability-in-the-maldives.html>

⁶ Maldives Population Projections 2014 – 2054, 2018: <https://maldives.unfpa.org/en/publications/maldives-population-projections-2014-2054>

⁷ Supported by the Government of Japan, UNDP is working in collaboration with Ministry of Education, National Disaster Management Authority, Maldives National Defense Force, Maldivian Red Crescent, Maldives Police Service and other local authorities to strengthen disaster risk reduction measures such as preparedness levels of schools to Tsunamis: <https://www.asia-pacific.undp.org/content/rbap/en/home/programmes-and-initiatives/SchoolTsunamiPreparedness/maldives/>

⁸ Statistical Pocketbook of Maldives, 2018: <http://statisticsmaldives.gov.mv/spb-2018/>

⁹ 2019 Social Innovation Camp ‘Miyaheli’ focused on eliminating barriers faced by PWDs. The camp was a collaborative effort by UNDP, Government of Australia, Ooredoo Maldives, Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services, Ministry of Youth and Community Empowerment, Youth Co:Lab, Maldives Association of Persons with Disabilities, Maldives Deaf Association, Blind and Visually Impaired Society of Maldives and Wellness Association of Maldives: <https://www.mv.undp.org/content/maldives/en/home/presscenter/articles/2019/Miyaheli2019.html>

¹⁰ UNDP’s Migrant Film Series supported by the Government of Japan aimed at empowering young people towards exploring social issues through innovative approaches, and spotlighted challenges faced by migrant workers including the prejudice and forms of discrimination faced by migrants, and how society can build a more cohesive community: <https://edition.mv/news/14099>

¹¹ Supported by the Green Climate Fund, UNDP with Ministry of Environment and Energy is working to manage climate-induced water shortages for Maldivian communities: <https://www.mv.undp.org/content/maldives/en/home/projects/GCF.html>

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