

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?

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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

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | 4

INTRODUCTION | 8

YOUNG MALDIVIANS, A SNAPSHOT | 10

CHALLENGES | 14

15	CORRUPTION
16	EDUCATION
18	DRUGS
20	EMPLOYMENT
22	GANGS
23	EXTREMISM
26	EXTREMIST VIOLENCE
28	OTHER ISSUES
	ISLANDS
29	GENDER
30	MENTAL HEALTH
31	SOCIAL MEDIA
32	SOCIAL ISOLATION
33	DISABILITY

RECOMMENDATIONS | 34

35	POLICYMAKING
36	SOCIAL COHESION
	VOLUNTEERISM
37	EDUCATION
38	MENTAL HEALTH CARE AND DRUG TREATMENT
39	DISABILITY
	GANGS
40	EMPLOYMENT
41	HOUSING
42	CORRUPTION
43	EXTREMISM

CONCLUSION | 46

HOW WE DID THIS RESEARCH | 47

REFERENCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY | 48

WHAT WORD WOULD YOU USE TO | 49

DESCRIBE YOUR COMMUNITY?

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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

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