

Policy Note 12

Youth Empowerment



Maldives
Partnership
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Investing in a Resilient & Sustainable Maldives

A country's youth is its driving force for social and economic development. As such, empowering youth to reach their full potential is a cornerstone of the Government's development vision.

With nearly a half of Maldivians under the age of 35, the Government has a unique opportunity to make transformational decisions which will enable the country to reap the best from its young demographic. While international definitions on youth refer to young persons within the age group of 15-24, in the Maldives persons between the ages 18-34 are demographically categorized as youth¹. According to the 2014 Population and Housing Census, young people aged 18 to 34 account for 35 per cent of the population while persons aged 15 to 24 account for 20 per cent.

This paper looks at the key challenges that the Maldivian youth faces and policy interventions of the Government to better the conditions for youth and enhance their contribution to the society and overall economic development of the country.

Challenges / Issues

Lack of employment opportunities

Unemployment in Maldives has become a youth phenomenon². While youth unemployment and under employment are high, the term 'youth voluntary unemployment' has become common, where the unemployed choose not to accept a job at the going wage rate.

Despite a highly successful tourism sector, youth unemployment remains high, as the sector attracts many migrant workers. The South Asia Economic Focus reported that almost a quarter of Maldivian youth are not in employment, education, or training (NEET). The NEET rate is particularly high for female youth because of inactivity mostly due to family reasons while the driver for the high male NEET rate is (involuntary) unemployment.²

Uneven development across various regions of the country, particularly outside the Greater Male' Region has been another challenge in providing equal employment opportunities for youth. This has taken a toll on employment opportunities for youth, particularly in the atolls, resulting in a trend of young people migrating to urban centers, resorts and the capital for better employment prospects. This leaves small islands almost devoid of young people to take up important roles and responsibilities in the community.

Internal Migration

Internal migration is significant and mainly directed from the atolls to the greater Malé region. Migration comprises mainly of young people in search of improved standards of living with better health, education and employment opportunities. Census data shows that lifetime migration continues to increase with successive censuses.

As a result of this, Malé is congested and suffers from overcrowded housing which breeds many social issues. More often than not, it is the youth who become victimised as a result of these inbred social concerns.

General Barriers to Access Due to Geographic Challenges

The geographical nature of Maldives and the distribution of its population is a significant challenge in providing equal access and opportunities across all atolls. These challenges include difficulties in transport, limited resources leading to inadequate social services for youth and community empowerment, higher education as well as for housing and civil participation. All these factors combined make the youth more vulnerable and disenfranchised

Although primary and secondary education are accessible to all islands, opportunities for higher education is still centralised to the capital. While efforts have been made to open college and university branches at regional levels, the range of higher education courses offered at regional level are very limited compared to those in Male'. This has significantly increased the need for young people to travel to the capital to benefit from a wider variety of options in terms of both institutions and fields of study.

Inadequate Access to Housing

Inadequate access to housing is another area of concern especially in urban areas and the capital. With a significant number of migrants coming from the atolls for better education, employment, health and standard of living, providing adequate housing in urban areas has become a challenge for all age groups.

Youth in particular are susceptible to housing challenges as it is difficult to prioritise housing schemes for youth, given the lack of space and land area in Maldives and the huge unmet demand for overall housing. The majority of residents in the capital live in extremely crowded conditions at exorbitant rental prices. These conditions lead to numerous issues - physical and psychological, causing young people to spend a large part of their time outside of their homes. Coupled with the issue of youth unemployment this often leads to anti-social behavior, crime and drug use. There is also the issue of limited information dissemination on housing schemes and youth not being proactive enough when it comes to obtaining required information.

While housing opportunities for young people and the adherence to criteria in issuing housing in the atolls are generally viewed favourably, the general perception in recent years is that housing schemes in the capital have been used as a means to gain political support and flats were issued unjustly to those that did not meet the criteria³.

¹ Maldives National Youth Policy 2003 (edited in 2012)

² South Asia Economic Focus Fall 2017, Growth Out of the Blue (World Bank)

³ Transparency Maldives, Youth, Opportunities and Corruption in the Maldives: A Situation Analysis (2015)

Access to Leadership and Civic Engagement

The relationship between youth civic engagement and a positive development outcome is well established globally. With respect to the Maldives, compared to the demographic youth bulge, there are gaps in youth participation in leadership and civic engagement. Only a handful of youth-focused organizations promote civic engagement in the Maldives. Although registration for civil society organizations is easy, these entities face issues in maintaining sustainability due to weak support mechanisms from the Government, limited capacity, and consistent funding. Current donors for NGOs in the Maldives are mostly local private sector businesses and various local donors, although such opportunities are limited. While informal networking between various NGOs exists, there is limited collaboration on service provision.

Furthermore, the current Maldivian educational curriculum does not offer youth a comprehensive school-based knowledge of civics studies. They are not provided with courses that focus on concepts such as systems of governance – democracy, personal freedoms, human rights, the political and civic responsibilities of individuals, participatory decision-making or non-violent conflict resolution⁴. This could also be a contributing factor for low youth engagement in societal development and active participation in leadership opportunities especially at regional levels.

Policy Initiative

Ensure Justice for Youth

Access to justice is a cross-sectoral concern. In terms of ensuring justice for youth, the Government aims to offer support mechanisms where youth who are victimised by society can seek remedies.

These initiatives include addressing concerns of youth linked to social problems such as overcrowded housing, high divorce rates, child and sexual abuse, violent crime, threats to security, human trafficking, gang warfare and drug use. The Government understands the need for a coherent plan to ensure justice for youth, based on comprehensive research covering the effects of the above-mentioned social issues and their correlation to one another.

Provision of Housing and Land Ownership:

Provision of adequate and affordable housing is a key Government policy.

Initiatives under the policy include ensuring adequate supply of social housing for both the capital region and the atolls, and supporting this supply of housing with mechanisms for housing finance to ensure that housing remains affordable. The government has plans to develop 20,000 housing units across the country over its 5-year term. In addition to the provision of social housing for those earning low-income and first-time home owners, the Government also aims to identify and provide free social housing for financially disadvantaged groups, persons with disabilities and those who require social protection.

Interventions will also be made to introduce mid-level housing schemes given the demand for it particularly from educated and professional youth.

Create Youth Enterprise and Employment Opportunities:

Under this initiative, training and education will be offered for young people who lack socio-emotional and other skills based on the needs of the job market. The school system will also be reviewed to be more accommodative of skill based trainings and more opportunities for civic engagement and active participation.

Measures will be taken to tackle voluntary unemployment by creating societal awareness on the importance of self-earning, and by offering avenues for on-the-job training. The Government has also pledged to establish a mechanism to determine a minimum wage which would help tackle voluntary unemployment, especially within the youth community.

Towards promoting self-employment and entrepreneurship, the existing framework of Business Centers established for SMEs support will be utilised to enhance the range of business advisory support services provided to youth while importance will be given to entrepreneurship education at all levels of the education system from schools to universities and beyond. Similarly, for credit released under the newly established SME Development Finance Corporation, funds will be earmarked for business proposals from youth.

Empower and Strengthen Youth Council

The Government aims to empower the National Youth Council, an advisory body providing support to the Minister of Youth, by inviting them to independently engage on policy issues, advise and actively participate in youth events and conferences. The Council will also work on ways to strengthen and support programs and activities of youth clubs, associations and NGOs, with a focus on youth friendly services. The intended outcome is to connect the youth sector for wider outreach, through creating opportunities and access, both local and overseas.

Increase Young Woman's Participation in Policy Making

In an effort to encourage women's participation in public posts, the Government has pledged to reserve a percentage of posts for women in local councils. This is hoped to contribute to a more active participation of young women in politics and public office. The Government will also take measures to facilitate women to navigate through societal constraints in order to actively participate in socioeconomic, civic and political developments, such as running for office. For instance, the Government's policy to extend paid maternity leave for 6 months and paid paternity leave for 1 month has given women the guarantee of job security and additional support while focusing on family.

⁴ World Bank. 2011. "Higher Education in the Maldives: An Evolving Seascape."