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Update on the context and situation of children

The current Government of the Maldives under the leadership of HE President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih took office in November 2018 following a peaceful transition of power. Since then, the new Government has launched an ambitious reform process which will have a significant impact on the survival, thriving, learning, and protection of children across Maldives. Important legislations have been passed including two significant Child Rights Protection and Juvenile Justice laws, which were pending for over 10 years. The Government also launched its Strategic Action Plan (SAP) with a clear progressive agenda.

The Decentralization Act has been revised and ratified and includes a 33 percent quota of women's seats in the local Island Councils which will come into effect in April 2020, along with key accountabilities to coordinate local social services. The government's agenda includes the submission of an Education Bill, and a drafting of a Statistics Bill that, once passed, will allow for more accurate and timely collection, analysis, and use of vital statistics for policy making in the Maldives.

The Maldives continues to grow economically with real GDP grew by 6.7 percent in 2018 to strong performances in tourism, construction, and trade, and has made tremendous progress in recent decades to reduce child mortality, improve access to education, and improve the population's well-being overall. In November 2019, Parliament passed the 2020 Budget, which was closely aligned with the SAP and further strides to move towards more results-based budgeting is planned for the 2021 budget preparation process.

The UNICEF-supported multidimensional poverty index (MPI) was finalized in 2019 indicating a national MPI rate of 28.4 percent with 10 percent of the population living in multidimensional poverty in Male' and 40 percent in the Atolls, indicating significant geographical inequalities that negatively impact the development opportunities for children and young people.

The rate of women giving birth with the help of a skilled birth attendant has reached 100 percent in the Maldives. While birth registration in the capital Male' is very high at 91.4 percent, an average of 88.9 percent of children under four in the atolls are registered at birth. The lowest birth registration is found in the north-central region where only 72.6 percent of children are registered at birth.

Maldives has maintained a persistently high child immunization rate in recent decades, which has resulted in the elimination of all key child vaccine-preventable diseases. However the latest DHS shows that the proportion of children age 12-23 months receiving all basic vaccinations decreased from 94 percent in 2009 (DHS, 2009) to 77 percent in 2016-17 (DHS, 2016-17). The percentage of unvaccinated children also increased, from 1 percent in 2009 to 8 percent in 2016-17 indicating a worrying trend.

Anemia is higher among boys than girls with rates of 53 percent and 46 percent respectively, while the prevalence is higher in the capital Male' with 65 percent than in the Atolls at 45 percent (DHS, 2016/17). The nutritional status of children under 5, on the other hand, has improved since 2009, with stunting declining from 19 percent to 15 percent, wasting reduced from 11 percent to 9 percent and underweight declining from 17 percent to 15 percent. However, inequalities in severe stunting between wealth quintiles are significant, with a 6.2 percent severe stunting prevalence among the poorest children under 5 compared to only 1.9 percent severe stunting prevalence among the wealthiest children. On the other hand, only 40 percent of adolescent girls and 50 percent of adolescent boys are in the recommended BMI range. Among the 15-19 age-group 15-19, 38 percent of girls are underweight, with only slightly lower findings for adolescent boys at 35 percent. The Global School-based Student Health Survey (2014) also provides evidence of an emerging problem of high prevalence of overweight among children, showing that 16.2 percent of adolescent girls and 22.4 percent of adolescent boys aged 13-17 years are overweight or obese. The double-burden of under and over nutrition is a growing issue in the Maldives and needs further research to establish causal linkages and root causes.

Obesity/overweight decreases with higher levels of education and also to some extent with increasing wealth, as 70 percent of women in the Maldives with no or minimal education are overweight, while only 41.4 percent of women with secondary education or higher show signs of overweight.

The Maldives has achieved almost universal access to primary education, however rates of access to secondary education are low with only 53 percent of the population accessing it. Only 8 percent of women in the poorest wealth quintile compared to 34 percent of women in the highest wealth quintile have benefited from a secondary education. Overall, only two out of 10 women in the Maldives enjoyed higher secondary education (DHS 2016/17), resulting in negative outcomes on child nutrition, health, wellbeing and social mobility.

Children with disabilities (CwD) make up an estimated 3 percent of the child population and are particularly vulnerable as the services for children with disabilities are extremely poor, especially in the remote islands. Only a third of CwDs

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currently benefit from the disability grant provided by the national social protection agency, and face significant challenges accessing education. The total number of CwDs enrolled in schools in 2019 were 3,762, while only 89 of the total 213 schools (42 percent) cater CwDs. This is a major gap to address.

A tripling in reported cases of sexual abuse and exploitation to the Ministry of Gender, Family, and Social Services (MoGFSS) was seen over the last three years. A total of 1,252 child protection cases were reported to the Maldives Police Service in 2019 alone. The response systems to these reported cases of abuse is slowly improving but many challenges remain. The management and quality of care in state-run homes for children came under public criticism throughout 2019. UNICEF is supporting the MoGFSS on an independent audit of the two homes to strengthen the overall alternative care system in the country.

There are no official records of child trafficking in the Maldives and the situation of children of expatriate workers is unknown. The 2014 census found that there were around 1,300 migrant children residing in the Maldives at that time. Maldives also has a high rate of internal migration mainly to the capital Male' for educational purposes however more research into the situation of internal migration is required.

Authorities have disclosed that the ideologies of some groups living on remote islands has led to serious violations on the rights of children. At least two cases of children under the age of 13 who had been married outside the national legal system were detected through the child protection system and reports of children being deprived of formal education and immunization were received in 2019.

Thirteen per cent of women and girls aged 15-49 in the Maldives have undergone female genital mutilation or cutting (FGM/C) as revealed in the 2016/17 DHS. The prevalence of female FGM/C however significantly decreased over the past decades, as 62 percent of women aged between 40 – 50 years have experienced FGM/C while only 1 percent of girls aged 15 -19 years have been affected by this harmful practice. The public health system in the Maldives has successfully addressed the issue in the past decades and could be a champion for other countries in the region.

According to the 2014 Maldives National Census, 56,885 or 16.8 percent of the Maldivian population were adolescents (10-19 years of age) and 36,440 or 10.8 percent were 20-24 years of age; thus, 93,325 or 27.6 percent of the Maldivian population are young people (10-24 years). Adolescents in the Maldives face a range of issues exacerbated by urbanization, migration and modern-day changes and life-styles as the country has experienced a rapid transition from a developing country to a high middle-income country.

Critical issues that young people face include obesity, bullying and violence, substance abuse, adolescent crime and gang involvement and mental health. Suicide among adolescents is an increasing concern with several highly visible cases having come to the public's attention in 2019. Although reliable data on suicide among young people is limited, according to the Global School Health Survey 2014, 15.2 percent of students aged 13-17 reported to have seriously considered committing suicide in the 12 months before the survey. In 2014, a World Bank survey found that 20 per cent of young people surveyed stated they were bullied in schools and in 2015, a UNICEF-supported study of children who migrated to Male' for education revealed that among 265 children surveyed, 41 percent experienced serious bullying in Male' schools. Drug use among adolescents aged 15-19 years is high and close to 48 percent of drug users in Male' are in this age group, while 72 percent of the substance abusing population nationally is under the age of 24 years. (National Drug Use Survey, 2012).

Major contributions and drivers of results

As the UNICEF Maldives Country Office moved into the fourth and penultimate year of the 2016-2020 Programme of Cooperation with the Government of Maldives, significant progress was made against the programme targets.

Overall, UNICEF Maldives partnered with 20 government departments, six civil society groups, and three private sector entities in 2019 to achieve the joint goals. Several key child-related issues were included in the new Government's 100-day Pledge as well as the Strategic Action Plan for the coming four years.

In Health and Nutrition

While an estimated 11 percent of the Maldives GDP is invested in health services, this is largely skewed towards curative health, with only 12 percent of the health budget invested in public health as of 2020 budget plans (Budget 2020 <https://budget.gov.mv/en/>). A positive step in the right direction is the announcement by the Ministry of Health that 2020 will be the national 'Year of Public Health', and in preparation for this initiative UNICEF and WHO supported the revitalization of public health and brought attention to the need for increased investment in preventive health care, higher

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focus on public health, and mental health of young people through the organization of a high level Public Health Conference which was attended by more than 150 stakeholders from various institutions.

Following the concerning findings from the 2016/17 DHS on the significantly reduced immunization coverage from 93 percent in 2009 to 77 percent in 2016-17, important steps were taken by the UNICEF Maldives office with support from its Regional Office for South Asia (ROSA) towards building the national capacity on Expanded Programme for Immunization (EPI) as well as to assess the current cold chain system. With support of UNICEF ROSA, UNICEF Head Quarters and WHO HQ, a regional cold chain maintenance training and Effective Vaccine Management (EVM) training was conducted in 2019 benefiting eight MoH staff, which was followed by a comprehensive assessment of the vaccine and cold-chain management. In addition, WHO and UNICEF conducted a review of the EPI, which identified gaps in the system, process and cold chain, and made recommendations for further improvement.

In order to assess the demand-side of vaccine hesitancy, UNICEF Maldives also supported an assessment on the current perceptions and acceptance of routine child vaccines, and a comprehensive communication strategy and action plan were drafted for joint rollout in 2020. The findings from the EVM assessment and training are now being used to further enhance the immunization programme in the Maldives. UNICEF will be supporting the MoH with technical assistance on public health in 2020 including communication, supply chain management, and overall EPI programme coordination.

UNICEF Maldives Office and the Health Protection Agency (HPA) launched the Social Behaviour Change Communication (SBCC) strategy on the first 1000 days of life. A new mobile app 'Yagooth' was also launched to raise the profile of and spread accurate information about healthy eating habits on infant and young child feeding practices (IYCF) amongst mothers and fathers, reaching a total of 1,965 caregivers.

The tech for development approach of the information app was complemented with specific training for health workers in various remote islands of knowledge on healthy infant and young child feeding practices. UNICEF and partners were able to reach the caregivers of over 1,500 children aged 0-23 months with counselling in IYCF practices, contributing to improved infant feeding practices in targeted remote islands.

UNICEF also reached a total of 447 girls and 208 boys in schools, in partnership with a local NGO on improving nutrition and oral hygiene in selected schools. The project focused on obesity and overweight prevention, through nutrition literacy and increased awareness especially on the importance of reduced intake of sugary drinks and processed food items.

In Education

Significant progress was made to strengthen the overall environment for evidence-based policy making with the completion of the first-ever Education Sector Plan in 2019 with UNICEF and Global Partnership for Education (GPE) providing technical support. Some progress was made on equity in education this year through UNICEF's support to revise and update the inclusive education policy, which is now available but yet to be implemented. With the UNICEF-supported analysis of the most disadvantaged schools across the country, the MoE was able to determine that 20 percent of all schools (affecting a total of 9,371 students) are not meeting the national minimum Child Friendly Schools Standards, and efforts are now ongoing to identify and mobilize adequate resources to address the shortfalls.

The first ever non-formal education policy was drafted by the Ministry of Education (MoE) and UNICEF to establish learning and skills development systems for young out-of-school children and adolescents which included a pilot alternative education programme initiated by UNICEF and the Maldives Red Crescent.

UNICEF supported MoE in various improvements in the Education Information Management System by creating an alert system at MoE level to ensure schools are regularly entering essential student and school data. MEMIS strengthening also includes monitoring participation of children with disabilities. A WASH in Schools module was included in the MEMIS and while reporting on this indicator is not yet fully functional, schools are currently entering the data into this module to generate reports in 2020. Parents were also given access to MEMIS to view attendance and achievement data for their children, thereby increasing the use of the MEMIS.

In Child Protection

The President ratified the Child Rights Protection Act and the Juvenile Justice Act on the 20th November 2019 - World Children's Day and the 30th Anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). These two Acts represent a major transformation of child rights and justice system for children and young persons in the Maldives and their ratification culminates in the success of over 10 years of UNICEF advocacy and sustained engagement with the Attorney General's Office, Parliament, civil society and the Presidents' Office. Under the new law, a child is defined as any person under the age of 18, and children are not permitted to marry until the age of 18 while vaccination has been made mandatory. The new law also envisions improvements in the overall child protection system, including special provisions for social welfare

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and other service providers.

The Juvenile Justice Act was ratified on the same day and is based on restorative justice principles promoting rehabilitation and diversion, and emphasises juvenile crime prevention and rehabilitation. It also sets the minimum age of criminal responsibility at 15 years, and states that no child is subject to capital punishment.

Both Acts promote and mandate a multi-sectoral approach to all child related issues, and will contribute towards the enhancement of the national Child Protection System. UNICEF will support the Government in putting the new requirements in the child protection and justice system in place to fully implement the new legislation.

UNICEF also continued to collaborate with the Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services (MoGFSS) on the rollout of community child protection mechanisms as an important element of a decentralized child protection mechanism. Community Social Groups (CSG) were established in an additional 16 islands, thereby reaching 33 per cent of the inhabited islands. This was made possible as a result of strong advocacy and technical support combined with leadership from the MoGFSS and the guidance of the multi sectoral Technical Working Group (TWG) at central level who led the roll-out of the CSGs at island level. The CSGs play a complementary role to the formal child protection system in providing a coordinated response as well as in the prevention of violence against children in remote islands involving key community members. UNICEF played a key role in providing technical support and assistance in the continuous rollout of the CSGs. More specifically, 36 focal points from 19 atolls including three women and 33 men, were trained for active participation in the local CSGs. Their role will be further formalized along with the implementation of the decentralization act in 2020.

UNICEF also contributed towards building capacity of the social workers and the Police Investigating Officers to further strengthen their response to cases of violence against children and juvenile offenders. On-the-job training of 55 investigating officers from selected islands benefitted an estimated 200 children thus far. UNICEF is playing a key role in strengthening the alternative care system for children who may need to be removed from their families. UNICEF initiated the audit of the two state run homes and also continued its advocacy to move towards more family centred options as an alternative to the current homes. In light of UN Resolution on Child Rights of December 2019 (A/RES/71/177) on children without parental care, further policy dialogue on how to find real alternatives to institutional care will be required in the coming years.

A national celebration on the occasion of World Children's Day was also held in collaboration with key partners, and UNICEF in partnership with NGOs and others reached over 3,294 students, 3,530 parents and community members, and 30 local guest house operators across Maldives with key messages around the prevention of child abuse, sexual exploitation, and violence against children which this year had a special meaning with the 30th Anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Furthermore, 20 young girls and boys were given the opportunity to discuss with the Speaker of Parliament and the Human Rights Committee on issues related to child rights, and more than 7 buildings across the capital Male put on blue lights in support of child rights.

In Social Policy and Evidence for Development

In 2019 the Government of Maldives achieved a major milestone with the finalization of the first-ever Maldives Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), to be launched in early 2020. The MPI will be used as the new national poverty measure going forward, as announced by the President, and will be an important policy tool to reduce inequalities by investing scarce resources where the needs are greatest and to further strengthen the social protection systems in the Maldives. The MPI for the country stands at 0.142. A comparison of multidimensional poverty between Male' and the Atolls showed that multidimensional poverty was relatively low in Male' compared to the national average. While 13.5 per cent of the population in Male' was multidimensionally poor, 38 per cent of the population in the Atolls was poor as per the MPI. Poverty across the country showed that the highest multidimensional poverty was experienced in Central Region with a MPI value of 0.238, while the lowest MPI is in North Central Region with an MPI of 0.17. The combined dimension of health and education was the largest contributor to the national MPI with a contribution of 41 per cent.

Preliminary estimates suggest that the fiscal deficit widened to 4.7 per cent of GDP in 2018, from 3 per cent in 2017. Public debt was estimated to have reached 59 per cent of GDP in 2018. According to the World Bank-IMF debt sustainability analysis, Maldives remains at high risk of debt distress. (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/maldives/overview>). Hence, combating poverty requires additional efforts and donor support through a comprehensive SDG financing strategy.

In order to build the capacity of key members of Parliament in the Budget Committee, UNICEF also trained 35 MPs in public finance and results-based budgeting, including on their roles and responsibilities as MPs in the budget process. These initiatives on budget preparation and result based budgeting will continue in 2020 in line with the SDG financing strategy.

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UNICEF Maldives completed two evaluations with support from Regional Office including an evaluability assessment of the Country Programme and an evaluation of single parents and foster care allowance. Both evaluations were an important source of data for the development of the country programme document 2021 – 2025. The evaluation of social protection schemes are a major contributor to the ongoing reviewing and revising of the Social Protection Programme and initiation of assistance to social protection schemes.

In Climate Change Adaptation and Disaster Risk Reduction

The changing climate has exacerbated seasonal flooding and tropical storms which continue to damage homes, schools and communities in the Maldives. With climate risks expected to worsen, building resilience of institutions to provide services for children and families as well as strengthening communities' ability to plan and respond to disasters has been UNICEF's objective.

In 2019, UNICEF continued to support the capacity building of the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) to institutionalize climate change resilience into the central and sectoral policies and into the new Government's Strategic Action Plan (SAP, 2019). UNICEF was also instrumental in the development of a section on Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change Adaptation from a child and gender perspective in the SAP.

Rapid development in the outer atolls has increased the vulnerability of island communities to intense storms and flooding and few adaptation measures are being implemented. Together with the Ministry of Environment (MoEnv), UNICEF supported the mobilization and training of 167 children and young people including 99 girls and 68 boys as climate change advocates from the four islands who will disseminate their learnings through schools across the Maldives in 2020. In addition, the training of 42 young people including 26 girls and 16 boys from Addu Atoll were identified by the Ministry of Environment to be part of a new volunteer-warden programme for the Addu Nature Park.

Cross-sectoral

With the objective of engaging the public in addressing issues related to violence against children, UNICEF supported the development of a C4D training course for behaviour change for Community Engagement Officers (CEO) of the Maldives Police Service (MPS). The course has helped to embed child protection elements into the officers' work in communities. Additionally, UNICEF conducted a training course for MPS officers from the Family and Child Protection, Traffic and CEO departments with a focus on using C4D as a strategy to understand and address issues of concern for children and families including child protection.

With the significant reduction in children's immunization coverage in the Maldives, UNICEF worked with the Health Protection Agency (HPA) to re-engage the public on World Immunization Week 2019 (April 24 - 30). Seven videos were developed which targeted the public with key messages about child vaccination delivered by well-known and respected Maldivian professionals. The videos were shared on UNICEF social media channels, TV channels and through hospitals and achieved unprecedented engagements. Overall performance across all social media channels also increased significantly in 2019 compared to 2018. Performance on Facebook increased significantly from 2018 to 2019, with more than 2 million people reached on the platform and almost 800 percent increased engagements. Facebook remains the most popular channel in the Maldives, while Twitter and Instagram are growing channels to engage the public and will be further prioritized in 2020.

The operations team provided critical support to programmes through the recruitment of highly qualified national and international individual and institutional consultants, to contribute to the technical capacity of national partners. The consultants' recruitment was carried out in a timely manner to support the successful implementation of the workplan and programme activities. UNICEF took actions to ensure that the office was compliant with global IT security requirements. The office undertook the migration of office files to the ECM collaboration site to improve the cross-sectorial collaborations and more efficient programming. UNICEF continued to support the MoH with the procurement of vaccines, ensuring that high quality and reliable vaccines are provided to the children of Maldives.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

Lessons Learned

High level advocacy in 2019 demonstrated the positive results attained through consistent and continued engagement with key stakeholders. Key achievements include the passing of new legislation and significant progress on previously passed policies and strategies for the advancement of child rights across the Maldives. This illustrates the importance of building trust and consistent engagement and has further motivated the Maldives team to build internal capacity on strategic advocacy and communication in 2020.

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While social media and online content is growing as a communication strategy, face-to-face sessions with parents to raise awareness around infant and young child feeding practices that promote healthy and well-nourished children remains critical. Feedback from 12 pilot sessions also showed that different approaches are required to increase attendance of fathers in the information sessions, which is something UNICEF Maldives will explore further in 2020.

UNICEF supported the Ministry of Gender, Family, and Social Services with the continued rollout of the Community Social Groups (CSGs) to strengthen community child protection mechanisms. While the CSGs continue to be established in various islands, progress was slower than anticipated due to issues at both national and sub-national levels. With the amended Decentralization Act, the Local Government Authority (LGA) and its Local Councils will play an increasingly important role and have a closer partnership. In 2020 the Councils will have a prioritized role in making the CSGs more effective and impactful and a comprehensive evaluation of the CSG system to assess their reach, functionality, and impact is planned for 2020 in order to learn from the first two years of implementation.

Key gains were made following the UNICEF-supported National Symposium on the Curriculum held in early 2019. Initial feedback on the national curriculum suggested that the content is not age appropriate and overloaded, and assessment systems are weak. Given the varying quality of teaching staff, particularly in remote islands, this will be an important consideration for 2020 to ensure that children and young people acquire the skills and knowledge needed for the future and to ensure that teachers are well-trained and supported by the system to fulfill their duties.

UNICEF encountered significant challenges in identifying out-of-school (OoSC) children and adolescents – particularly the identification of OoSC girls for the alternative learning pilot. There is a lack of reliable official data on this target group, as schools do not record these cases in the Maldives Education Management Information System (MEMIS). This will be an important element to strengthen in the MEMIs which is also supported by UNICEF.

UNICEF and Villa College observed that residential programmes are more effective than vocational training programmes in the young people's community as most at-risk young people are more likely to respond when daily influences and distractions are removed. A comprehensive lesson learnt exercise will be conducted to document the various steps of the programme and assess areas that can be further improved or adjusted for future roll-out.

On the social media and communication side, the UNICEF Regional Office supported the Country Office with a "360" analysis of the public communication and engagements. UNICEF Maldives is in a unique position that with a limited budget the office could potentially reach every person in the country at least once with a message or engaging piece of content. While the analysis showed solid growth in engagements and reach compared to 2018, which is a testimony to more strategic investments in the social media, the analysis also provided specific recommendations which can help the office maximize its efforts, including more personal stories, videos, and more local Maldives related content.

Innovation

UNICEF Maldives Country Office is increasingly taking advantage of high mobile phone and internet coverage across the country to launch tech for development solutions and disseminate advocacy and awareness materials through various social media channels. The launch of the first-ever child nutrition app 'Yagooth' in conjunction with the new Social Behaviour Communication (SBCC) Strategy is one key example. Lessons are being documented for further improving the app in 2020, including how to increase engagement and two-way communication. Initial feedback from the mobile app users indicates that there is demand for more resources and a dynamic interface, as well as information provided in both English and Dhivehi (the local language).=

UNICEF piloted the first ever alternative education programme (ALP) for vulnerable adolescents, which offered a water sports trainee and mentoring programme. The programme was initiated in partnership with Maldives Red Crescent and benefited a total of 25 at-risk children including 23 young boys and two girls who were given a second chance to develop basic literacy skills, acquire core life-skill competencies, and enrol in skills-development programmes such as water sports and electric wiring. By the end of 2019, 13 out of 20 of the water sports students have been able to extend their initial 3-month internship, while three have been successful in securing a long-term contract with a resort. Important lessons have been drawn from the initial pilot project that will further shape a scale-up.

UNICEF supported the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) to strengthen the national statistical information management systems by updating the MaldivInfo database to the latest technological standards and transforming it into a data-for-all platform with an accompanying mobile application. MaldivInfo platform is now aligned with the SDGs and data on children is now easily accessible. The next step will be to update the national SDG indicators to make monitoring appropriate for the country context, and to link MaldivInfo to other data sources such as the education information management system and the health data information system. This will provide real-time data and allow for efficient analysis using key data sources.

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UNICEF Maldives launched three innovative partnerships with the private sector to give young people the opportunity to explore future career options and build critical skills. Six young people including three boys and three girls will benefit from a 3-month internship with Manta Air in the coming year, while around 7 trainees from Noonu Atoll will benefit from a 12-month traineeship programme with the Movenpick resort in Noonu Atoll in 2020. These partnerships are the first of their kind and with many more young people eager to be introduced to the job market, UNICEF will continue to expand these innovative partnerships to promote training and learning opportunities for young girls and boys across the Maldives.