# Country Office Annual Report 2021

## Maldives



## Update on the context and situation of children

In 2021, Maldives continued to be confronted by the unprecedented challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic. As of 15 December 2021, around 93,370 people were affected with 258 deaths. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF)[1], Maldives Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is expected to rise to 13.2 per cent in 2022. This is due to a partial recovery of revenue from the tourism industry however according to the same source the external debt is a concern. As per World Bank's updated poverty estimations, the pandemic increased socioeconomic vulnerabilities and gaps based on the 2019 household survey, poverty increased temporarily from 3.8 per cent in 2019 to 14.3 per cent in 2020.[2]

Despite these challenges, Maldives has effectively managed the response to the COVID vaccination drive as well as promoting wearing of masks and hand hygiene. Vaccines were sought and administered, with 81 per cent of the population (12+) now fully vaccinated. Furthermore, the government was swift to acknowledge and address mental health challenges affecting children and their families because of the pandemic and lockdowns by drafting a mental health act and making support services available. Thanks to cash transfers that kept small and medium size enterprises afloat and efforts to continue the flow of tourists and the tourism sector bouncing back, GDP (Gross Domestic Product) projections have improved in 2021. Also, around 75 per cent of students were able to access distance modalities of learning (online and televised lessons), reducing the impact of full or partial school closures. All schools around the country reopened in August 2021.

COVID-19 highlighted the vulnerabilities of the country, partly as a result of its geography and partly its economic model with growth and development limited by a narrow economic basis and exposed to external shocks through overreliance on tourism (65 per cent of economic activities), substantial reliance on imported food, medicines and health equipment, high cost of service delivery because of geographical dispersion, human resource capacity in social services with heavy reliance on migrant workers (e.g. challenges around high staff turnover), and climate vulnerability being exposed to impacts of climate change (sea-level rise and erosion) and natural disasters.

A recent multidimensional poverty survey shows poverty rate is higher in the atolls (40 per cent) than in Malé (10 per cent) and is 34 per cent nationwide in households with children. This creates an impetus for migration to Malé, sometimes including children and adolescents who may travel without their parents, often to access education and training. This increases vulnerability of children to violence and abuse.

Furthermore, the child malnutrition rate and the recent drop in immunization remain a concern. According to Demographic Health Survey (DHS 2016/17), 15 percent of children under five years are stunted, while 5 percent are overweight. The DHS also revealed that nearly 23% of children (under two years) did not receive the routine vaccines or did not complete all doses necessary. Vaccine hesitancy has been observed and is a possible contributing factor. ECD (Early Childhood Development) services remain fragmented, lacking multi-sectoral coordination as well as limited technical capacity and resources to deliver comprehensive, quality ECD services.

In education, while net enrolment rate is practically universal at pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education, this drops to 37 per cent at upper secondary level and 25 per cent of males and 30 per cent of females (15–24 years) are not in employment, education, or training. These rates increase to

33 per cent of males and 35 per cent of females in the atolls. Also, adolescent-led climate action is undermined by limited knowledge of climate change and disaster risk reduction and insufficient

recognition of the impact of climate change on their lives. A recent survey[1] showed that although 92 per cent of young people are keen to address climate change if given the necessary support, only 47 per cent of respondents in Maldives reported that they could explain climate change.

In 2021, in the areas of child protection and child rights, the Ombudsperson for Child Rights actively monitored the child rights situation in Maldives, conducted audits and provided recommendations for improvement, including for children in alternative care institutions. In September, Maldives submitted its report and update on progress related to its obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC (Convention on the Rights of the Child)) to the committee. Progress was also made in drafting regulations under the Child Rights Protection Act and the Juvenile Justice Act. Despite such good efforts, there are still limited data on mental health. Psychosocial support services, especially for children, including those using drugs, remain limited and inadequately funded and lack intersectoral coordination.

In addition, social protection programmes designed to benefit children and adolescents are fragmented. Bottlenecks include poor data and inadequate systems to support effective social protection for the most vulnerable, and poor targeting resulting in low coverage rates, with existing schemes benefiting less than 4 per cent of children. The pandemic has exposed vulnerabilities in existing social protection systems, which were not designed to respond to shocks. A real-time, comprehensive register of the atrisk population is needed, as are adequate and accessible data and robust online data management systems.

This year, Government of Maldives continued its efforts in devolving power to the decentralized level with local council elections held in April. The decentralization process provides an opportunity to enhance systems and community mechanisms at the island and atoll levels for improved access to services and opportunities.

In 2021, the new United Nations Sustainable Development Framework (UNSDCF) 2022–2026 and UNICEF Country Programme of Cooperation (CP) for the same period were developed. UNICEF also contributed to the SDG MAPS mission to Maldives.

### Major contributions and drivers of results

#### **Multisectoral COVID response**

UNICEF supported strengthening of national capacities to respond to the pandemic, playing an active role in vaccine procurement and roll-out through the COVAX facility. As of December 2021, 81 per cent of the population (12+) were fully vaccinated, while 87 per cent had received a first dose.

One important aspect of the COVID response was close engagement with Health Protection Agency (HPA) and other partners in the Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE). When the country experienced the third and worst surge during May/June 2021, UNICEF worked with stakeholders, including the President's Office, the UN family and CSOs including the Maldivian Red Crescent Society (MRC) to prepare the RCCE plan, to include fact-based messaging using social media, high level advocacy as well as community engagement including with young people and the migrant population.

Support was extended to development of the National Vaccine Communication Strategy, including key audio-visual content. To address vaccine hesitancy and curb the pandemic, UNICEF supported production of 400 communication assets, reaching more than 200,000 people. In addition, more than 550 people from the health department, media and medical associations were trained to engage the public around COVID-19 prevention and vaccination.

UNICEF facilitated inclusion of key messaging relevant to children and parents around distance learning and safe reopening of schools ensuring that all the 214 schools implemented safe school protocols, focusing on COVID prevention and control, continued vaccination/health services and online safety while learning. More than 6,400 primary caregivers of children aged 0–23 months received COVID-19 sensitive infant young child feeding counselling. In response to the surge, health facilities were supplied with oxygen and 5,000 health workers were provided with personal protection equipment (PPE). Thanks to USAID funding, hygiene and cleaning kits were also provided to health facilities, schools, and mosques. Thanks to a grant from the Government of Japan, UNICEF continued to procure critical cold chain equipment and related materials to boost central and local capacity for vaccination as well as technical support in cooperation with the World Health Organization (WHO).

UNICEF accelerated its efforts in prevention of sexual violence against children and women with its messages receiving more than 350,000 impressions on social media.

UNICEF continued to monitor the socio-economic impact of COVID on children noting the continued investment of the Government in social sectors through sustained budget allocation with a noteworthy 16 per cent allocation to social protection. A study on the impact of COVID on children is underway in first half of 2022 to supplement the overall monitoring of COVID impact on the population.

COVID pandemic also required the office to take duty of care measures for staff by adopting remote work modality, safe return to office where possible, online team building and counselling sessions as well as improved internet access.

#### **Child protection**

UNICEF reinforced the capacities of government and other stakeholders to address issues of violence against children, including gender-based violence, alternative care, children in conflict with the law, mental health, and psychosocial support. As such technical and financial assistance was provided to roll-out the Child Rights Protection and Juvenile Justice Acts, enacted in 2019. This included development of regulations and SOPs, capacity-building of police officers on the new legislation and establishment of child-friendly interview rooms in three different regions of the country.

Furthermore, UNICEF supported the Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services (MoGSS) to design and launch a National Campaign on Prevention of Sexual Violence against Children and Women, aiming at addressing negative social norms and values, breaking the silence and empowering survivors. Mental health and psychosocial awareness (MHPSS) sessions reached 1,386 children (835 girls and 551 boys) and 43 parents. UNICEF is working with the judiciary to develop and provide training for judges on the rights of children, the juvenile justice system and adjudication of juvenile cases.

With the leadership of MoGSS, UNICEF played a key role in establishment and capacity-building of island-level multisectoral community social groups (CSGs), locally called IBAMA, reaching 107 islands (around 50 per cent of the population). This community network is a significant step towards prevention of violence and provision of referral to services for all vulnerable groups. UNICEF is further supporting its roll-out at island level.

UNICEF provided technical support and shared global good practices, including monitoring tools and guides, to the newly established Office of Children's Ombudsperson (OCO) to increase its capacity in monitoring implementation of the CRC and national laws.

UNICEF actively engaged in a UN wide exercise on advocacy with the Government towards repatriation of children and women from conflict zones in a legal environment conducive to

reintegration. To that effect a virtual multi-sectoral exchange with Uzbekistan was organized by UNICEF to hear their good practices and lessons learned in the process.

#### Health and nutrition

UNICEF strongly advocated and provided support to ensure continuation of essential health and nutrition services during the pandemic response. Support was given in a range of areas, from vaccination roll-out, to cold chain equipment procurement and related capacity-building, to technical assistance for continuation of health and nutrition services. UNICEF provided technical support to the National Health Information Bill, along with other UN agencies. National Maternal and Child Health Programme received technical assistance to continue remote monitoring of high-risk pregnant women, ensuring that they had access to health services, benefitting 80 high-risk pregnancy cases on islands without hospitals. The boosted monitoring system ensured that over 500 pregnant women in 2021 received uninterrupted obstetric care despite the pandemic.

In addition, to standardize and improve quality of Ante-Natal and Pre-Natal Care (ANC/PNC), the national ANC/PNC package for pregnant women was updated and is ready for pretesting in 2022. The updated package, among other things, emphasizes the role of the partner, and includes messages on early nutrition and care of the child.

In view of the high preterm birth rate, the health sector received technical support to develop a tool for early screening of growth and development of preterm babies, which is being used in all tertiary hospitals, and six regional hospitals at the subnational level, covering more than 80% of birth facilities. This ensures timely interventions and counselling of parents. Further, 60 health-care providers have increased capacity to deliver quality services in facilities aiming to increase survival rate of preterm high-risk babies.

The Health Protection Agency (HPA), with UNICEF support, gradually resumed implementation of the Social and Behaviour Change Communication (SBCC) strategy, focusing on early nutrition during the first 1,000 days of life. The strategy was developed based on the rapid assessment on Infant Young Child Feeding (2018/19), indicating a key factor of malnutrition in children aged under five is low levels of responsive feeding among parents. Several communication messages and information education resources addressing key issues on nutrition and infant feeding, such as optimal food, responsive feeding, and related skills, were developed in 2021.

As a result of overwhelming demand, since 2020, UNICEF has ventured into the new programme area of mental health collaborating with five agencies to provide quality MHPSS services for women, children, adolescent girls and boys and their families, at various levels. The Maldivian Red Crescent (MRC), with its niche to provide community-based psychosocial support (PSS) set up a PSS helpline and provided psychological first aid (PFA) virtual training sessions for teachers.

Finally, to accelerate progress towards universal health coverage comprising accessible, efficient, and quality health services in the country and to boost prevention, UNICEF supported the Ministry of Health (MoH) to undertake a primary health care (PHC) costing exercise in 2021. The investment case will be finalized in early 2022 to inform reallocation of funds for preventive health.

#### **Education**

UNICEF contributed to continuity of distance learning during the school closures in 2021, supporting safe reopening of schools and remediation of learning loss caused by school closures. The pandemic severely affected pre-primary and primary grades across the country, (50,000 students in 70 schools out of a total of 212 Government schools) prompting provision of distance learning until

the end of July 2021. COVID-19 vaccination programme for all students aged over 12 years (32,000), 9,000 teachers and all school staff and parents enabled safe reopening of schools in August 2021.

In collaboration with the UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, the Ministry of Education (MoE) was able to monitor distance learning, access, and engagement through a second school survey in February. The findings suggested that close to 75 per cent of students had access to online learning; however, internet connectivity and affordability required attention, teacher capacity for online learning required improvement and there was need to monitor more closely access of children from vulnerable families. These data were used for policy and advocacy purposes at the national and regional levels. UNICEF country office and the regional office further provided technical contribution to the draft Master Plan on ICT in Education in the Maldives, which was supported by UNESCO.

Teachers who were trained in Google-Suite for Learning in 2020 continued online learning for a total of 50,000 students. An additional batch of 1,354 teachers (357 males and 997 females) will be trained and certified by end of 2021. UNICEF supported the National Institute of Education (NIE) to build institutional capacity of curriculum developers and teacher educators in blended learning and online pedagogy and assessment. Support was provided to develop a training programme and a trainers' guide on blended and flipped learning that can be cascaded to all government schools. Under this initiative, a parent awareness package on the role of parents in home-based online learning was developed, keeping children safe on the internet.

UNICEF supported the MoE to assess the learning levels of students at primary level when students returned to school. The results showed that student performance in Math, English and Dhivehi (mother tongue) is low, and students are not acquiring grade-appropriate learning. There is an overall trend of declining performance as students move to higher grades. Girls were significantly better than boys in the three subjects. To address the gaps, a remediation plan was developed, and the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy was revised to incorporate remediation through differentiated instructions. The strategy will be implemented in January 2022.

The Disability Inclusive Education Policy was revised with support from UNICEF and launched in 2021. ICT equipment was provided to two hub-schools for disability inclusive education and to the Department of Inclusive Education (DOIE) for provision of online training, podcasts, and webinars on disability inclusion to teachers. In addition, UNICEF supported revision of the disability modules offered at teacher training institutes to align the modules with the revised Disability Inclusive Education Policy.

Maldives participated in the regional study on the impacts of and responses to climate change across education systems in South Asia. This highlighted opportunities for climate action and the climate risks faced by schools.

In collaboration with Maldives National University (MNU), the NIE's capacity was strengthened to develop teacher training resources on climate change and environmental sustainability as part of the 'Green School' initiative. In the first batch, 171 teachers have improved skills to integrate climate change knowledge and competencies across a range of subjects.

UNICEF supported revision of the existing Emergency Preparedness and Response Plan (EPRP) for Education and related SOPs for schools, thus contributing to boost the capacity of the education sector in crisis-sensitive planning and response enabling continuity of learning during emergencies.

In 2021, a skills programme designed to promote social innovation and entrepreneurial initiative among young people, called UPSHIFT, was introduced in Maldives. A multi-stakeholder steering committee was established to guide the roll-out and a study is under way to map Adolescent Skills and Employability in Maldives. Importantly, adolescent girls and boys have been consulted in the local

adaptation process.

#### Water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH)

**UNICEF continued advocacy and improvement of hand hygiene as a way of preventing epidemics and other diseases**. The most urgently needed infection prevention and control (IPC) supplies were provided to schools and health-care facilities, benefitting a total of 70,000 students and teachers and 1,000 health workers and patients. Thanks to USAID financial support and UNICEF interventions on WASH and IPC, 100 per cent of the schools in the country were able to reopen safely and continue learning without an outbreak in any of the schools. IPC supplies were also provided for distribution in 36 mosques in the Greater Malé area, which was the epicentre of both waves of COVID-19.

A social media campaign on hand hygiene was held from October to November 2021 and a Global Hand Washing Day was marked in all 212 government schools in partnership with the MoE. In collaboration with International Organization for Migration (IOM) and MRC, hand hygiene was promoted among migrant workers in the Greater Malé area.

#### Social policy and social protection

UNICEF contributed to strengthening the evidence-based policy and decision-making process of the government affecting access to and quality of services for children. The Multidimensional Poverty Index was taken forward in 2021, from which a Multidimensional Vulnerability Index (MVI) was generated and institutionalized. The situation analysis of children was also updated in consultation with stakeholders using latest available data.

UNICEF was successful in advocating for inclusion of six core disability questions in the upcoming census 2022 that will be conducted by Maldives Bureau of Statistics (MBS). This will be the first ever national database on disability information in the country, enabling planning and targeting of national and regional interventions for people with disabilities.

Technical assistance was extended to the Civil Vital Registration System (CVRS), working with the local government authority (LGA), the Department of National Registration, the MoH and MBS to set up a reporting portal for online application.

Working with the MOGFSS (Ministry of Gender Family and Social Services), an analysis for development of a long-term plan for the social service sector was undertaken in 2021 and is scheduled for completion in early 2022. The primary objective is to allow the MOGFSS and other relevant partners to better plan, budget and implement a more holistic and rights-based social service system. UNICEF organized a series of capacity-building sessions for 17 government and CSO (Civil Society Organizations) staff as well as for a group of Parliamentarians on budget analysis and public finance for children.

#### **Programme effectiveness and operations**

During the year, the country office systematically monitored programme indicators through regular programme coordination and management meetings, programmatic visits, and spot checks, achieving overall programme delivery above 90 per cent.

The above results required 4.96 million USD, including COVID emergency funding of 2.4 million USD. The COVID-19 situation limited the ability to meet in person; however, the UNICEF team seized online opportunities to maintain dialogue and engagement with partners, including a consultative process for the design of the new country programme document and for the situation

analysis of children as well as mid-year and annual reviews with partners. Training was held in November 2021 for partners, government and CSOs on prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA). Specific measures were taken to ensure staff well-being and care during COVID pandemic.

## **UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships**

The design of the 2022–2026 UNSDCF and the UNICEF CPD as well as continued joint efforts in response to the COVID-19 pandemic provided more opportunities for partnership engagement in 2021. The RCCE cluster for COVID response, in addition to HPA, played a key role in strategizing communication and engagement around COVID prevention measures and vaccine roll-out. Partners included the President's Office, the MRC, student groups, associations serving people with disabilities and others serving migrants. From UN agencies: WHO as a key partner but also UNFPA, the UN Resident Coordinator Office and IOM contributed.

CSOs remained important partners for UNICEF in delivering results for children at the national and island levels on a range of interventions from mental health to protection to education and hygiene.

As a small island developing state (SIDS) that is on the forefront of climate change, climate agenda is paramount for Maldives. In its role as President of the United Nations General Assembly since September 2021, Maldives is advocating strongly for climate action at the global level. UNICEF used the momentum created by COP26 to co-convene with the Ministry of Environment, Climate Change and Technology (MoECCT) and in collaboration with the MoE, UNDP and the UN family a pre-COP buzz event with 150 young people from Maldives and other SIDS. This event, that also included the United Kingdom (UK) High Commissioner among keynote speakers and JICA among panellists, was well-received and provided a platform for young people's voices on climate to be heard by policy makers and the private sector.

The private sector, notably the thriving tourism industry, can play a vital role in climate action, innovation and employability agenda in the blue and green economy benefiting children and their communities. UNICEF reached out to active private sector partners in the process of consultation for developing its business engagement strategy. This paves the way for establishing multi-stakeholder partnerships in 2022 to benefit children and young people in the Maldives. A round of consultation meetings were also held with NGOs working on the climate agenda.

UNICEF provided global platforms for Maldives to raise awareness on the impact of climate change and advocate for action and financing to offset the impact on SIDS. This included 'Children and Climate Change are Everyone's Business,' a COP26 event co-hosted by UNICEF and the International Chambers of Commerce, which was joined by the Minister of Environment, Climate Change and Technology from Maldives as well as her participation in the Children and Youth Forum (CY21) - Climate Change spotlight session titled 'COP26 – What Now?'. Maldives Climate Envoy participated on a panel on the impact of climate on children co-hosted by UNICEF during the COP26 event.

UNICEF reached out to academia actively in 2021 to engage more systematically in the areas of research and learning, partnership was renewed with the Maldives National University (MNU), exploratory consultations were held with the Islamic University of Maldives (IUM), the Polytechnic institute of Maldives as well as with the Villa College to be further pursued in 2022.

The power of convening and partnerships: UNICEF worked well with a diverse range of partners proactively and strategically to mobilize around thematic areas of common interest. This once again highlighted the importance of partnerships in prevention and response efforts at scale. Some examples where this worked out well include the multiple stakeholder engagement around the National Campaign on Prevention of Sexual Abuse, a sensitive and important issue discussed at this scale for the first time.

The COVID response efforts is another example notably how the urgency of addressing mental health prompted government, UNICEF, CSOs and UN agencies, notably WHO, to work in tandem to address gaps and boost awareness at community level.

**Building back better:** There were several opportunities to use online platforms to improve access to services or coordination efforts in a context affected by COVID. This is particularly noteworthy in the context of Maldives as an island nation where such platforms can make a difference to bridge geographical challenges for remote islands or during periods of lockdowns, or when access to services for children and their families is challenged by severe weather or storms. These platforms are also useful for advocacy and capacity-building services for improvement of quality of services. Examples of such initiatives are:

- Support to Maldives Police Service to establish virtual classrooms for training to strengthen the capacity of officers dealing with child protection issues across the country.
- A 'one stop shop' website is under development incorporating all relevant information for survivors of violence, as part of the National Campaign on Prevention of Sexual Abuse.
- A club entitled 'Rakkaatheri Mujthamau' (translates as Safe Community Club), was created on Clubhouse with all IBAMA stakeholders as administrators, to share information regarding child and social protection with the public.
- Clubhouses were also used to raise awareness on COVID prevention, addressing vaccine hesitancy and promoting nutrition and positive feeding practices for children during lockdowns.
- Use of innovative technology was critical for continuity of learning. Although online learning through Google Classroom provided almost 54 per cent of the teachers in government schools with online teaching/learning pedagogies and assessment skills, it is equally important to pay attention to the quality of online learning. As such, more open-source digital tools and resources should be made available to teachers to ensure ethical use of copyrighted digital materials. More engagement with the private sector, notably mobile network companies, would go a long way to improving not only online access and affordability but also online safety initiatives.
- UNICEF supported development of a digital portal (FILAA portal) with user-friendly features consisting of teaching learning resources developed by schools for all grades and subjects. The portal provides online resources for teachers to share materials with teachers across the country and for students to access learning and reference materials. A student can access the recording of a missed online class or a presentation catch-up at his/her own pace. With Women in Tech NGO, a series of engaging and fun audio-visual materials were created to address online safety for children and parents.

Engagement with Adolescent girls and boys: In 2021, with most of the population vaccinated and some in-person meetings and physical convening becoming possible, UNICEF used a few opportunities to engage young people as advocates and informants for programmes and policies that are important to their present and future, notably climate action and the employability agenda. Recent data and analysis available in 2021, such as a U-Report study with young people on climate and others around education and climate fed into the design of interventions. Two concrete opportunities were presented and seized:

• The pre-COP26 buzz event as mentioned above was one such opportunity. UNICEF also

supported participation of young people at COY (Conference of Youth) and COP26 and worked with young people to create messages and videos for broadcasting on different local and global platforms, including on the occasion of Children and Youth Forum 2021. This is the beginning of establishing a platform for ongoing dialogue and exchange on climate action. A programme to this effect will be rolled out in 2022.

Adolescent girls and boys were also consulted as co-creators on the new skills programme,
UPSHIFT. Based on insights received from adolescents, a measure was taken to include three
young interns in the country office UPSHIFT team to plan and implement UPSHIFT in such a
way that it is inspiring to other young people.