On 9 March 2020, schools across the Maldives closed due to COVID-19, disrupting the education of more than 86,000 learners. In response, the Government, with support from UNICEF, developed the Maldives Education Response Plan, outlining that all teaching and learning will be conducted through televised lessons (Telikilaas) and Google Classroom, including G Suite applications. To further support the transition to online classes, a training initiative to build teachers’ capacity and confidence in providing effective online lessons was initiated in June 2020.

RESULTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

With the financial support of UNICEF, a total of 3,885 teachers in government schools (2,641 female) in pre-primary to higher secondary grades were trained on the use of Google’s G Suite from July to November 2020. This represents 42.5 per cent of the teaching workforce in government schools. This training equipped teachers with the skills and knowledge to conduct quality digital classes and has supported the continued learning of 54,218 children.

Key lessons and features from the initiative include:

- **Continuing online classes once schools reopened** – Since July 2020, schools in the Maldives began reopening in a phased manner and implemented a blended approach to learning. In 2020, most students continued their online classes for three hours a day and attended school for four hours of face-to-face learning, while primary schools in the Greater Male’ area continued online learning until the end of 2020. In 2021, even after all schools across the country resumed in-person learning, a blended approach is used by most schools in the Greater Male’ area. Continuing online lessons through this blended approach has allowed the schools to manage traffic,
minimize risk of transmission and supplement reduced learning time in school.

- **Sustained advocacy to reach every child with remote learning** – As Maldives faced a second wave of COVID-19, the Country Office prioritised advocating for equitable provision of quality distance learning while continuing to amplify COVID-19 messages on prevention in communities. In preparation for future school closures and potential emergencies, advocacy around ensuring equitable access to quality remote learning should remain a top priority. In addition, UNICEF supported the Ministry of Education to monitor reach and effectiveness of online and distance learning through the Maldives Education Information Management System and by conducting a monitoring survey, which found that approximately 25 per cent of children lack access to remote learning. In response, the Ministry of Education provided free mobile data to children and teachers in need.

- **Embracing digital technologies** – Prior to COVID-19, the Maldives had already begun investing time and resources into online education. This allowed the education system to kickstart online lessons quickly once the pandemic hit. Connectivity coverage and mobile phone use in the Maldives is high, enabling greater accessibility to digital learning solutions.

- **Supporting and connecting teachers is key** – Investments in teacher capacity building around online learning have supported the willingness of teachers to embrace remote learning modalities despite several challenges. In addition, online classes have allowed teachers and children to remain in their home islands and teach/learn remotely, which was not a possibility prior. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the Ministry of Education has demonstrated that more teachers can be connected through online learning.

- **Challenges of large virtual classrooms** – Online learning has increased digital literacy among parents, students and teachers. It has also empowered teachers with new pedagogies and built their resilience. However, large virtual classroom sizes create challenges in engaging students, especially younger learners. This challenge could be mitigated by conducting online classes in smaller groups and by ensuring all teachers providing online education are competent in using digital pedagogies.

- **Administrative considerations for future G Suite trainings** – In the future, UNICEF Maldives and the Ministry of Education will explore alternative administrative modalities for training payments so that teachers are not required to cover up-front costs and receive reimbursements.

**NEXT STEPS**

In 2021, UNICEF and the Ministry of Education plan to extend training on G Suite to another 4,000 teachers, equipping 86 per cent of all teachers in government schools with online teaching skills, thereby building the resilience of the education system to weather future shocks. Recognizing the important role of technology for learning, the Government of Maldives, with support from UNESCO, is finalizing an Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in Education Masterplan which will provide guidance on how to further integrate ICT into the education sector.

Cost effectiveness: UNICEF’s investment of US $80,000 will train 75 per cent of the Maldives teaching workforce. They teach 78,368 students.