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The need to increase access to, and retention, in basic education is widely accepted among policy makers and researchers. It is also a fundamental human right. Not only does education benefit the person learning, but also the community in which they live. Education contributes to the economic stability of any given nation by increasing the income of the poor. In addition to economic stability, education promotes civil and international peace as well as cultural tolerance and understanding. Education provides positive values and skills for personal and national development. It has multiple effects empowering people to bring about informed necessary changes in their lives.

Maldivians including the government attach great importance on education. As such, approximately seven percent of our GDP and 20 percent of our total expenditure is spent on education. In addition, we get international aid from donor agencies and countries. The impact of tsunami had an unexpected effect on our economy and was a massive setback for education in the Maldives. Hundreds of schools in the Maldives have been damaged. School furniture, equipments, and books were completely washed away. However, with the help of donor agencies and countries, the Maldivian government have started to accelerate and minimize the setbacks occurred due to tsunami.

There is no formal legislation for education to date. Nevertheless, a draft education act is underway. It is hoped that the law would be passed this year. Under this act, the aims of education in the Maldives are to develop: physical, mental, and expressive capability; thinking and learning skills; Islamic values and beliefs; skills and attitudes to be a responsible citizen; moral and ethical behaviour; knowledge and understanding of Maldivian culture and history; and the knowledge and skills for employment in the global economy. And under this act, the duties of the Ministry of education include: providing
access to education to the extent that economic development of the country needs and allows, ensuring that the right of children to an inclusive education is observed, ensuring pre-school education for all children in the Maldives by 2015, and ensuring access to ten years of basic schooling for all children in the Maldives by 2010.

The EFA plan of action in the Maldives is congruent with the national development priorities, the millennium development goals, the Sixth National Development Plan, the current education sector master plan, and the vision 2020, articulated by His Excellency Maumoon Abdul Gayyoom, the President of the Maldives, on 26 July 1999 which states that:

Ten years of formal schooling will be the minimum standard throughout the Maldives … a system of provision of technical skills needed for achieving and sustaining social economic development will also be established

We have achieved the EFA goals, universal primary education, adult literacy of 98.8 percent, and gender parity. However, through assessment and monitoring we would be able to further enhance the development and sustainability of these achievements. Thus, the most important EFA objectives for the Maldives are:

- Inclusive education especially for children with special needs;
- Expanding and improving early childhood care and education;
- Access to basic education (10 years of universal basic education);
- Continuing education for all;
- Equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills; and
- Enhancing quality of education.

To help achieve these goals an EFA national committee which includes the stakeholders was established and inaugurated early this month. The purpose of this committee is to provide the necessary advice to the Ministry of Education in achieving the EFA goals, identify what each stakeholder can do to achieve these goals and set targets, and revise EFA national plan of action and endorse the plan nationally both at the cabinet and the parliament.
Primary Education

Primary education in the Maldives begins at the age of 6 starting a seven year cycle. The net enrolment ratio for the primary level stands at over 99 percent. Even though we have achieved the universal primary education goal in the year 2000, and we have at least one primary school in each of the 199 inhabited islands, the main challenge the country faces is providing quality education due to the obstacles and limitations faced due to geographical isolation and the remoteness of most inhabited islands of the Maldives. Nearly 40 percent of the atoll schools have an enrolment of less than 100 students. The other challenge we face is providing inclusive education especially for children with special needs due to lack of expertise and other resources. Currently we have three different special needs programs in three different primary schools in Male’ – the capital. Provision needs to be given for special needs children in atolls.

Gender Parity

Maldives have reached gender parity in both primary and secondary education. Almost as many girls as boys are admitted to both the primary and secondary schools. The Government of Maldives is committed to the principles of gender equality. Government policies to encourage girls’ schooling, mothers’ education, and changes in societal perception have contributed to the Maldives achieving gender parity in education.

Early childhood care and education

A project funded by UNICEF to develop model community-based Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) Centres in Maldives is a part of the Maldives National Early Childhood Care and Education Strategy, which is comprised of the following inter-related components:

- National policy to create and enhance access to opportunities and improve the quality of early childhood care and development in the country.
- Formation of community-based ECCD centres.
- Capacity building for parent and teacher education.
A multi-media national campaign, entitled “First Steps… Maldives,” to mobilize public commitment and interest while providing simple and doable culturally appropriate interactions that can improve the life of infants and young children.

The objective of this project is: to establish demonstration centres of good practice in early childhood care and development. These centres will be based on the principles of developmentally appropriate play-based learning, for improving the quality of early childhood care and development psychosocial experiences and teaching/learning practices.

Another project funded by UNICEF is the under-served schools project. Student achievement in these schools was well below the average performance level in other schools in Maldives, alternative teaching and learning methods were investigated in order to develop a method that is more appropriate for the needs of the children in the selected schools. Hence, child-friendly school environment has been introduced and child-centred teaching techniques and learning strategies have been adopted in these schools. This project, “The 22 School Project” for the schools that are most disadvantaged due to their remoteness and small size have now been expanded to 90 schools. These schools did not have a single trained teacher.

Non-formal education

- Special programs are conducted by the centre for continuing education.
- A second chance is provided to students who have not completed secondary education and want to continue with education. Vocational program is also run by the Centre for Continuous Education. Academic upgrading courses for school drop-outs and technical vocational courses for adults.
- A pilot project will be conducted this year to introduce a vocational stream in selected schools.
- A life skills program is also conducted by the ministry of education with the assistance from UNFPA.
Under this program, trainers have been trained and workshops are being conducted in Male and Atolls. Life skill education programs are also conducted for students of grade 10, grade 6, and school leavers.

Improving Quality in Education
Quality variations can be observed. In Malé, the capital, schools offer instructions by trained teachers, whereas, in the atolls, many of the teachers at the primary level are untrained. The main difficulty in improving the quality of the schools is the remoteness and the small size of a major number of schools in the country. However, it is encouraging to see that the gap is closing and access to quality education in the atolls is expanding steadily. Measures are underway to improve the quality of education. The measures include: training untrained teachers, conducting diagnostic and continuous assessment in schools, constant supervision and monitoring of schools and giving feedback, and conducting literacy and numeracy programs.

Shortage of trained teachers
Currently, Maldives is experiencing a shortage of trained teachers, influencing the quality of education being provided, 40 percent of teachers are untrained and the education system relies heavily on expatriate teachers (73 percent of 2000 - 6th National Development Plan 2001-2005). Most of whom left soon after the Tsunami and never returned back. However, concerted efforts are being made to improve the quantity and quality of local teachers. The Institute for Teacher Education (presently Faculty of Education) began a secondary teacher training program in 1997. The Faculty now offers a Bachelor of Education, which was introduced in 2001.

In addition, UNICEF is establishing Teacher Resource Centres (TRC). In order to increase teacher capacity and availability and enhance active teaching and learning the 20 TRCs will act as centres of excellence in training and material development for both pre-
and primary level. Effective functioning of the TRCs will be ensured through adequate monitoring and evaluation.

**Student teacher ratio**

The student teacher ratio of 21:1 (at the primary level in the year 2000) in other context would be considered extremely favourable. In the context of Maldives this ratio barely meets the need, as due to the nature of the population distribution, resources have to be provided to each island, in spite of the small numbers residing on most islands. There are presently 2221 teachers teaching Grades 1-5 and 914 teaching Grades 6-7. A little over 11 per cent of permanent teachers at both the respective levels are untrained. Most local primary teachers currently in service in the atolls have obtained one year teaching certificate after having reached Grade 7. The high percentage of untrained teachers in service and the logistical difficulties for teachers to travel to Male to seek professional development opportunities has required the institution of innovative strategies such as the on-site training programs conducted by the Educational Development Centre, which take place in the locations where teachers live and work.

**Monitoring mechanism**

There is a monitoring system of the Ministry of Education both for public and private schools. All private schools have to be registered under the Ministry of Education. Fees, in the private schools, are also regulated by the Ministry of Education. All education related issues are monitored from the Ministry of education. Parents can lodge complaints. Regular meetings are held with students, parents and teachers.

Ministry of Education has a section (school supervision and quality improvement section) which deals with supervision, monitoring and quality improvement of schools. Whole school supervision are conducted in a selected number of schools every year. In addition tele supervision (via phone) and school visits are also made to a number of schools every year.
There is no specific legislation providing the opportunity for the child to participate in administrative or judicial proceedings relating to education and affecting him or her, including those relating to the choice of schools, school exclusion. But in the draft Education Act, schools’ boards would encourage student’s participation and whenever there are issues relating to students; students would be provided with full opportunity to be heard.

**Highest educational priorities**

With universal primary education achieved, the highest educational priorities currently for Maldives include the need for the expansion of secondary education, quality enhancement of education at all levels and reduction in the barriers that prevent many children accessing educational services. The 6th National Development Plan (2001-2005) and National Plan of Action towards the Wellbeing of “The Maldivian Child” (2000-2010) provide the framework for achieving these aims.

Secondary level education is also free in government schools and the students only have to pay for examination fees. Those students who can not afford books, uniforms and examination’s fees are provided from the Ministry of Education as well as from the community. The facility of support is also available at the island level.

It has been tried that secondary education are available at all islands but it is not possible in case there are only few students in a particular island. In some schools total enrolment is less than 10 students. However, if lower secondary school is not available at an island government plans to provide assistance to students from that island to go to other islands for their education. Secondary school provision is being expanded at a very fast rate in the atolls. In 2005, 25 new schools introduced grade 8 and in 2006, 24 new schools. As of 2006 secondary school access in the island of residence is not available in 42 islands where the total school enrolment is below 100. In these 42 islands, the total enrolment is just about 200. Our target is to provide access to secondary schools to all children by the year 2010.
Residential learning centres will also be established under the ‘Integrated Human Development’ World Bank project in four islands to cater for students from islands (small schools) without secondary school access.

The Government of Maldives is trying its level best to encourage students to get higher education. Various projects have been started that support students for going abroad for higher education. Paid study leave is also provided to those government employees who are interested in continuing their studies.

**Mitigating the impact of HIV / AIDS in Education**
In the Maldives, there have been very few cases of HIV/AIDS. No child or a teacher has so far been reported to be affected. However, various awareness programmes are being conducted for the secondary and higher secondary students regarding the pandemic which is spreading very fast some of its closest neighbours. In collaboration with the UNFPA, a programme on Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health is being conducted since it was launched three years ago. In addition, with the cooperation of the Ministry of Youth and Sports, there are ongoing counselling programmes for the secondary and higher secondary students, and the youth in general.

**Using Distance learning to overcome barriers**
The Centre for Open Learning is established for providing training in distance learning mode for the untrained teachers and teachers with very basic training who are in service. The main areas are English for Further Studies and a course on Advanced Certificate for Primary Teaching. All the Atoll schools are reached in these trainings.

**Administrative challenges**
The education system faces significant administrative challenges given that a total of 337 schools are dispersed widely over 199 island communities. Supervision, distribution of education materials and professional development opportunities are constrained by the physical geography. An increase in human resource capacity and administrative reform is
essential to bring about the changes required for the increase in access to and quality of education.

In conclusion, by 2015 we are collectively committed to achieve the EFA goals. This is not a matter of numbers. Education is a right. This requires equal access to good quality education for all; a learning process in which girls and boys, and men and women have equal chances of fully developing their talents; and outcomes that bestow social and economic benefits on every citizen without discrimination. These benefits are immense and they are attainable (UNESCO, 2003). Finally, in Robin Cook’s words “education is more than a luxury it is a responsibility that the society owes to itself”.