

## Millennium Development Goals and the Republic of Maldives

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### Abstract

*The present millennium is marked by several countries world over including Maldives, drawing road map to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). In the realm of education, primary and secondary data portray that the Republic is close to achieving the MDG. Educational indicators such as high literacy rate and enrolment of all children in schools at the primary level are indicative of this. However, in-depth field works undertaken in different schools in Male and few islands in 2007, reveal that in terms of quality in education the Republic faces certain challenges that need to be addressed for achieving quality education. A detailed account of issues concerning quality education in the Republic is highlighted in the present paper.*

### INTRODUCTION

The new millennium has witnessed a major declaration signed by 147 countries of the world popularly known as the 'Millennium Development Goals' (MDG). Some of the parameters of the goals are – eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, achievement of universal primary education, promotion of equality and empowerment of women, reduction of

child mortality, improvement of maternal health, combating HIV/AIDs, malaria and other diseases, ensuring environmental sustainability and developing global partnership for development. These goals have been given top priority by all member countries to ensure a human face of development.

World over, member countries have adopted a variety of strategies for

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### **Millennium Development Goals**

- Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- Achieve universal primary education
- Promote gender equality and empower women
- Reduce child mortality
- Improve maternal health
- Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- Ensure environment sustainability
- Develop a global partnership for development

*Source: Seventh National Development Plan 2006-2010, Maldives – Leaping Ahead, Vol 1, Policies and Strategies, Government of Maldives, Ministry of Planning and National Development.*

achieving these goals by 2015. The Republic of Maldives, a small island nation consisting of 1 192 coral islands, is also on the move like many other nations of the world. It has meticulously designed strategies to meet the set targets in the stipulated time span. This paper presents a study conducted in the Maldives in 2007.

### **The Study**

The study was undertaken with the following objectives to—

- assess whether two of the MDG goals namely achievement of Universal Primary Education (UPE) and promotion of Gender Equality (GE) can be met by 2015;

- identify the major challenges facing the Republic in attaining the two MDG goals vis-à-vis quality education.

### **Design of Study**

The study uses both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data has largely been collected from intensive field work that was carried out in all government, ward and one private school in Male and in seven island schools, in four Atolls namely Noonu, Baa, Lhaviyani and Gaafu Alifu.

A total number of 24 schools formed the sample for the study. These schools were visited, in which 87 classes were observed, in the teaching of History, Geography, Social Studies, English and Environmental Studies. A questionnaire was also administered to 96 randomly selected teachers from the 24 schools. It was canvassed to four teachers per school. In all there were 41 male and 55 female respondents. Group discussions were held with six to eight teachers and the same number of boys and girls studying in each of the schools that were visited.

### **Major Findings**

Based on secondary sources of data, the educational scenario in terms of quantitative indicators seem to be favourable. In 2000, the literacy rate for 15–24 year age group was 99% for both sexes. In 2005, the net enrolment ratio for the first seven years of basic education was 100%. These indicators are supported by positive social and

cultural milieu that encourages education of children of both sexes. Besides this, the Maldives has succeeded in forming a unified national system of education with a common curriculum. Textbooks prepared by the Educational Development Centre (EDC) are uniformly used in all schools in the Republic.

While it is very heartening to see that all children go to school in the Republic, a major area of concern during field visits was related to the quality of education being imparted in schools.

The findings of the study reveal that the Maldives face certain challenges in the realm of quality education which highlights the paradoxical situation in the Republic. This phenomenon relates to access and quality related parameters such as children's retention and their achievement. Given below are the five major challenges that emerged during the fieldwork in 2007.

The challenges that are discussed in the next section clearly show the systemic crisis that the Republic is currently engaged in. Even though road

maps have been drawn for addressing these hurdles a more focused and concerted effort is needed for achieving the MDG goals by 2015.

## Challenges

### I. Teacher Availability and Capacity Building

In the Republic of Maldives the educational sector has made considerable progress. As mentioned earlier, this is visible in terms of quantitative expansion of schools and provision of required infrastructural facilities available in government schools. This is also perceptible in connection with availability of teachers in different disciplines such as Science, Social Science, Maths, English, Dhivehi, and Physical Education at the Elementary stage. The existing scenario of students and teachers in Educational Institutions by Locality in 2005 is highlighted in Table – 1.

The table reveals that the total number of trained teachers in Male and Atoll are more than the untrained teachers. The visits revealed that in

**Table – 1**

#### **Students and Teachers in Educational Institutions by Locality, 2005**

Locality	No. of Schools	Students Enrolment	Teachers			Students/ teachers/ Parents
			Trained	Untrained	Total	
Male	22	30,036	1,015	286	1,301	29.59
Atoll	312	72,037	2,317	1,998	4,315	31.09
Republic	334	102,073	3,332	2,284	5,616	30.63

most of the cases local teachers possessed, G.C.E O' Level and, A' Level certification with few teachers having primary, middle and secondary certification in teaching.

Lack of trained local teachers necessitated the Republic to employ a large number of expatriate teachers in the lower secondary schools. In 2005, about 1% of the teachers employed in the pre-primary, 16% of the teachers employed in the primary, 72% of the teachers in the lower secondary and 77% in the higher secondary were expatriates. The recruited teachers were mainly from India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Very few were from European countries. During discussions with teachers some of them reported that they had teaching experience in their respective countries, but did not have a certification from a teacher training institute. This was mainly true of teachers from Pakistan and Bangladesh.

During classroom observations especially in Environmental Studies, Social Science and English it was found that all the teachers had prepared

lesson plans. These plans were meticulously carried by them to schools and were placed in the classroom at a convenient place.

Teaching in Male and Island schools was teacher centred. Nearly ten minutes of classroom teaching was focused on lecture method followed by the adoption of different participatory techniques. They were quiz, riddles and the adoption of different types of innovative games. However, during participatory sessions, in all classroom observations, very few children could communicate and express themselves. Some of the students who participated were not very confident in speaking English. In some schools such as Madhrasathul Aliya, Maafaannu Madharusa and Madhrasathul Ahmadhiya children were very confident in expressing themselves in their mother tongue i.e., *Dhivehi*. In 50% cases the lessons that were taught were repeated. Before the beginning of any lesson, it was observed that the teachers would normally state "you should know this, it was explained to you earlier, I have done it with you earlier, please try and recall."

**Table - 2**  
**Professional Status of Teachers in the Republic**

	Male			Female		
	Trained	Untrained	Total	Trained	Untrained	Total
Expatriate	17	11	28	20	13	33
Local	5	8	13	15	7	22
Total	22	18	41	35	20	55

**Source:** Information from questionnaire administered to teachers

This indicated that rote memorisation was encouraged by teachers.

### **Teaching-Learning Processes**

Content delivery of the above mentioned subjects, it was observed that even though the teacher of expatriate and local origins were knowledgeable and were aware of the latest development in their subject areas the approach adopted in teaching and evaluation was traditional. In most of the cases, it was textbook oriented and teacher centred. In a discussion held with the teachers they stated that they were compelled to adopt this pedagogical technique as students were not able to understand concepts related to the above mentioned subjects. They also reported that schools in Male and in the Islands lacked crucial facilities such as reference materials in Social Science, Science, Maths, and English. This had an impact on the teaching and learning processes and hindered them from adopting participatory approaches. It was strongly suggested by them that the schools in the Republic needed well equipped libraries with textbooks published by different publishers, related to the disciplines of Social Studies, Sciences, Maths and English language for better understanding and concept clarification. In this regard, the suggestions given by teachers and principals were procurement of textual materials prepared by publishers from India and other countries of the world.

Science teachers were of the view that absence of science labs in few Male and Island schools affected the development of experimental methods in science teaching. Thus, application of textual knowledge in sciences and environmental studies to understand natural phenomena could not be practically carried out by teachers.

What emerged as the actual issue in connection with content updating was the lack of in-service training. Teachers reported that the training they had received was mainly provided by the Educational Development Centre (EDC). However, the training given was not sufficient. There was a consensus among teachers that in-service training should be given more frequently (at least 2 to 3 times a year) both before the beginning and at the end of the academic session.

### **Issues and Problems Faced by Teachers**

The expatriate teachers mentioned certain common concerns that needed short-term and long-term redressal. They relate to the following aspects—

- Salaries of the teachers need to be revised in accordance with the cost of living index.
- Setting up of a committee to address problems of expatriate teachers.
- Ensuring safety and security of expatriate women teachers.
- Organisation of training programmes for expatriate teachers in *Dhivehi* language and Maldivian culture.

## II. English as a Medium of Instruction

The other factor impacting the quality of education in the Republic relates to the use of English as a medium of education at all levels of education. During field work and classroom observations, it was found that all subjects in general and Environment Studies, Social Studies, Sciences and Maths in particular, were taught in this medium. English was taught as a core subject at all levels. All prescribed textual material were available to children in this medium. At the primary level, textual materials used were published by the EDC.

During classroom observations and discussions held with teachers in Male and Island schools they mentioned that children could not communicate in this medium very easily, as they were not confident in English. In primary grades, girls were not communicating in English. In lower secondary grades, 40 per cent students were not very fluent in English language. Very often local teachers and very few expatriate teachers used the Dhivehi language for clearing the concept of pupils. Translation of terms in Science and Social Science were frequently done in Dhivehi by the teachers. In one of the Island schools located at Noonu Atoll the Social Studies teacher was teaching the subject in Dhivehi. During the discussion with him he stated that children understood the subject better in their mother tongue. In Male', the Almadharasathul Arabiyathul Islamiyya School taught

Social Studies, Environmental Studies to students in English, Dhivehi and in the Arabic mediums. The principal mentioned that the performance of children was good in all the three mediums. Further, he elaborated that children were free to choose any of the mediums of instruction.

In most of the activities outside the classrooms, students spoke in Dhivehi language. This was especially witnessed during games, physical education, and music and in dance classes.

In connection with difficulties encountered with the English language some of the teachers were of the view that it related to the home environment. The skills of speaking, listening and communicating in English could not be practised at home as parents and peers hardly used this language in their daily lives. In fact, the use of English remained confined to the teaching-learning processes in the classrooms.

It is interesting to note that while the children found English difficult yet they were keen to learn it. Some of the reasons that were cited by them are mentioned below—

- Knowing English language was the need of the hour as it helped them understand concepts in Sciences and Maths;
- It was a global language and would help them to connect with children from different countries. It would also help them to have a better understanding about places, cultures, traditions, lives and conditions of other people;

- The audio-video media generally used this language, so they would be able to understand this;
- It would help them pursue their interest in English music, serials and cartoon shows;
- The language had immense economic value as it would enable them to get employment in tourist resorts and other service sectors.

For improving their skills in the English language, students adopted multiple strategies. Few of them got their doubts cleared from their peers and teachers and some attended tuition classes. In discussions held with students some of them were of the view that schools should arrange extra classes for all children in English. Two students in one of the Island schools—Kudafaree Madrasa were of the view that the holy *Koran* should be translated into English.

### III. *Expansion of Vocational Education*

A crucial area of learning that emerged as a future need was that of introducing vocational education in the secondary levels. The high cost of living, coupled with poverty of households compelled parents to force their sons and daughters to earn while they were studying. This affected their academic performance. In Maafannu *Madharus*, the principal and teachers mentioned that children who were not performing well in academics were those who were involved in domestic work or other income generating activities.

Steps to address these issues have already been taken by the government. There is a move to diversify secondary education, by including vocational subjects. Training was gradually being introduced in the secondary schools and trained technical trainees were being provided. Further, the Ministry of Education had launched vocational subjects in Male, and then gradually expanded to selected secondary schools in the Atolls. The Government had also established Vocational Educational Centres in three Focus Islands as part of the Tsunami recovery and reconstruction effort.

Despite these efforts, discussions with teachers and students revealed that the measures taken were not substantial as most of the students were not sure nor aware about the courses they should opt for in the context of the professions they desired to take up in future.

### IV. *Societal Problems Impacting Children's Education*

#### 1. *Child Abuse*

One of the significant phenomena that overtly and covertly impacts gender equality in a substantial manner is the existence of child abuse. This social malaise also adversely affects quality education. During fieldwork undertaken in Male schools and in the island and discussions held with all stakeholders it was reported that child abuse was more Male centric than an island issue. Among several reasons that were reported the most important

one was related to the growing urbanisation of Male. Compared to other inhabited Islands, Male offers educational and employment opportunity in a big way for its people. Many government offices, business establishments are located in Male. Thus, greater job opportunities are available which leads to migration of people from Islands to this capital city. Migration to Male has also increased many folds after Tsunami. Continuation of migration of people has led to over-crowding of living spaces in Male. Most of the houses (mainly flats) have two to three families residing together. Large families living in limited spaces have thrown up major social issues such as child abuse. Parents reported that very often the perpetrator of this crime was a close family member. Teachers and the Principal were of the opinion that most of the conflicting situations and tensions in the schools were due to children who were victims of this ghastly practice. A victimised child often becomes problematic case because of behavioural problems and use of abusive language which often affects healthy peer group interactions. Mechanism for tackling children with behavioural problems has been very meticulously devised by the school as well as the Gender Ministry. However, this problem continues to plague the Republic.

## **2. Increasing Divorces**

A major social problem confronting the Maldives is related to the increasing

rate of divorces. It is interesting to note that Maldives has the highest rate of divorce in the world. The extent of divorces according to different age groups is given in Table 3.

**Table 3**

**Number of Persons Married and Divorced in Male by Age Group of Bride and Groom-2005 (in %)**

<i>Age Group</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>Divorced</i>
15-19	7.4	1.8
20-24	40.7	18.7
25-29	27.2	24.8
30-34	11.3	20.4
35-39	6.0	13.4
40-44	3.4	8.0
45-49	1.8	6.1
50 & Over	6.1	6.7

**Source:** Statistical Yearbook of Maldives, 2006, p. 50

From the above table, it appears that the maximum number of marriages take place in the age group of 20-24 and a large number of divorces are reported in the age group of 25-29. Further, in the age group of 25-29, the percentage of persons marrying and divorcing is nearly equal.

Even though divorce is not considered a stigma for woman, its existence affects the children emotionally. During discussions with children in some of the schools in Male, they mentioned poignantly that they were either living with their step father or mother. Few mentioned that they stayed with their grandparents while



the children were not very vocal about how the separation of their parents affected them but the manner in which they reported about the family, showed the pathos and emotional trauma that they were undergoing. When asked about their educational and occupational aspirations they appeared not to be interested nor enthusiastic.

### **3. Drug Abuse**

Drug abuse was another social problem affecting the Republic. Children prone to taking drugs adversely affected the atmosphere of the family and school. All the stakeholders reported that children prone to drugs indulged in criminal activities. Even though steps for addressing drug trafficking and usage were taken by the government, schools and few NGOs. This problem continues to exist and has recently emerged as a major societal concern.

### **Conclusion**

The study clearly highlights that the quantitative indicators seem to be very

favourable and indicate that the Republic is poised for achieving the MDG. What will however require the urgent attention of policy makers and practitioners is the realisation of quality in education which is an agenda that has yet to be fulfilled. Some of the issues that have to be addressed on a priority basis relate to capacity building of teachers in terms of their training, content updating and exposure to different child centred, need based pedagogical approaches. In addition, there is a need for improving the children's skills in reading, writing and speaking in English. Linked to these quality dimensions are the social issues that are emerging as a major challenge impacting education and the society in a big way. They are the existing phenomenon of child and drug abuse and divorces. As stated earlier, even though conscious efforts are being made, a more focused and concerted effort is needed to bridge the gap between quantity and quality issues in education in the Maldives.

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