

COUNTRY YOUTH

# CALL TO ACTION 2025

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Advancing sustainable, inclusive, science and evidence based solutions for the 2030 agenda and its SDGs for leaving no young person behind in Asia and the Pacific



MALDIVES

## Situational Analysis

The Maldives, a nation celebrated for its turquoise waters and rich cultural history, stands at a crossroads where its pursuit of sustainable development is hindered by deep-rooted systemic challenges. While progress has been achieved in key areas, significant barriers remain, obstructing the realisation of a truly sustainable and equitable society. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive and well-coordinated approach that prioritises the most pressing social, environmental, and economic issues.

The healthcare system in the Maldives, despite advancements, continues to face critical shortcomings. The introduction of universal health insurance through the Aasandha scheme has ensured healthcare access for citizens, but the system remains overwhelmed by the rising burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs). Over 70% of deaths in the country are attributed to conditions such as cardiovascular diseases and diabetes, driven by lifestyle changes, unhealthy dietary habits, and declining physical activity. Furthermore, the nation struggles with an acute shortage of mental health professionals, exacerbating the already significant mental health crisis. Stigma around seeking treatment, coupled with the difficulty of accessing specialized services in remote atolls, has left many individuals without the care they need. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed these gaps, stretching resources to their limits and highlighting the need for stronger healthcare infrastructure and emergency preparedness.

In addition to healthcare concerns, gender inequality continues to limit progress in social and economic

development. While Maldivian women attain higher education levels compared to men, they face systemic barriers in workforce participation, with labor force engagement at only 44.3% compared to 81.6% for men. A lack of affordable childcare, workplace discrimination, and deeply rooted cultural expectations contribute to this disparity. Additionally, gender-based violence (GBV) remains widespread, affecting 41% of women, yet social stigma and inadequate legal protection prevent many survivors from seeking justice. Political representation is unequal, with women holding only 4.6% of parliamentary seats, curbing their ability to influence policy reforms. Furthermore, reproductive healthcare services remain inconsistent in the atolls, limiting women's autonomy over their health and family planning choices. These issues reinforce cycles of economic dependence and social inequality, hampering national development.

Environmental threats pose another urgent challenge for the Maldives. Climate change and marine degradation have severely impacted the country, with coral bleaching events since 2016 destroying over 60% of reefs. This devastation directly threatens the tourism and fisheries industries, which form the backbone of the economy. Rising sea levels endanger the very existence of the Maldives, with projections indicating that much of the country could become uninhabitable by the end of the century. Marine pollution, particularly plastic waste, has worsened these issues, with approximately 860 metric tons of waste generated daily, 12% of which is plastic. Without a sustainable waste management system, plastic pollution continues to threaten marine biodiversity and food security. Large-scale land reclamation projects, while beneficial for economic growth, have further disrupted delicate ecosystems, leading to biodiversity loss and

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increasing vulnerability to natural disasters. While conservation efforts and marine protected areas have been established, enforcement remains weak due to resource constraints and inadequate monitoring mechanisms.

Governance and economic challenges further complicate the nation's ability to address these pressing issues. As a Small Island Developing State (SIDS), the Maldives is highly dependent on international aid and foreign investments, making economic sustainability a significant concern. While foreign assistance has supported infrastructure development and climate adaptation projects, the country remains vulnerable to economic shocks, including fluctuations in global tourism demand. Weak data collection systems hinder accurate tracking of progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), reducing policy effectiveness. Moreover, private sector engagement in sustainable development remains minimal, as businesses lack incentives to adopt environmentally responsible practices. The geographical dispersion of the Maldives also presents logistical difficulties, making it challenging to implement nationwide development programs equitably.

A particularly contentious issue is the proposed reduction of the minimum age of criminal responsibility from 15 to 12 years. This policy shift, aimed at increasing legal accountability for younger offenders, raises serious ethical and practical concerns. The proposal includes the establishment of "Hope Island," a rehabilitation facility for young offenders. However, given the Maldives' existing limitations in juvenile care and mental health services, this initiative risks overwhelming the system. The shortage of trained professionals to manage the psychological and social needs of these children could lead to ineffective rehabilitation and long-term harm. The influx of children into the criminal justice system may result in institutionalization rather than genuine rehabilitation, failing to address the root causes of delinquency, such as poverty, unstable family environments, and lack of educational opportunities. The gendered impact of this policy also cannot be ignored, as young girls within the criminal justice system may face unique vulnerabilities, including risks of exploitation and abuse. A more holistic and preventative approach, focused on addressing underlying socio-economic factors, would be a far more effective solution.

## Recommendations

Our recommendations for Maldives on selected SDGs to achieve optimum target are as follows-

### SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being

- Strengthen national mental health services by increasing funding and training more professionals.
- Expand telemedicine services to improve access to healthcare for remote island communities.
- Implement nationwide awareness programs to combat stigma surrounding mental health.
- Enhance non-communicable disease prevention programs by promoting healthier lifestyles and nutrition awareness.
- Improve emergency response infrastructure to better prepare for future health crises.
- Establish dedicated mental health facilities to ensure specialized care for vulnerable groups.
- Develop rehabilitation alternatives for juvenile offenders rather than criminalizing them.

Increase investment and funding for youth friendly, affordable, high-quality medical facilities and services, including mental health, Sexual and reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) information and services, for young people particularly in rural, and hard to reach areas.

### SDG 5: Gender Equality

- Strengthen legal frameworks to protect women from gender-based violence and ensure proper enforcement.
- Expand childcare services to support women's participation in the workforce.
- Increase female representation in political and leadership roles through affirmative action policies.
- Improve reproductive healthcare services, especially in remote atolls.
- Establish programs to empower young girls through education and mentorship.
- Address workplace discrimination by promoting equal pay policies and anti-discrimination laws.
- Advocate against lowering the minimum age of criminal responsibility, as it disproportionately impacts young girls.
- Implement Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE), for reducing adolescent pregnancy, and VAW that disproportionately impacts the lives of women and girls.



## SDG 14: Life Below Water

- Strengthen enforcement of marine conservation laws to protect biodiversity.
- Expand sustainable fishing initiatives and regulate overfishing.
- Develop comprehensive waste management strategies to combat plastic pollution.
- Increase funding for coral reef restoration projects to counteract climate change effects.
- Promote community-led conservation efforts and educate locals on marine preservation.
- Implement stricter regulations on land reclamation projects to minimize environmental damage.
- Foster international cooperation to secure funding for ocean conservation programs.

## SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals

- Strengthen international advocacy against the reduction of the minimum age of criminal responsibility by engaging global human rights organizations and UN bodies.
- Improve data collection systems to enhance policy effectiveness and accountability.
- Foster stronger public-private partnerships to drive sustainable business practices and social responsibility initiatives.
- Increase regional collaboration with other SIDS to share best practices in climate adaptation, economic resilience, and governance reform.
- Enhance transparency in foreign aid utilization to ensure funds are directed towards meaningful and impactful projects.
- Develop international agreements on sustainable tourism that balance economic growth with environmental preservation.
- Expand diplomatic efforts to secure long-term financial assistance for climate resilience projects.
- Encourage youth participation in governance through international mentorship and leadership exchange programs.
- Establish a national think tank in collaboration with global experts to design evidence-based solutions for pressing national challenges.

- Strengthen bilateral and multilateral relationships to advocate for debt relief and fair trade agreements that benefit the Maldives' economic stability.

## Conclusion

The Maldives stands at a pivotal moment in its development, facing critical challenges across healthcare, gender equality, environmental sustainability, and governance. While notable progress has been made in certain areas, systemic barriers continue to hinder the nation's ability to fully achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The burden of non-communicable diseases, a mental health crisis, and proposed juvenile justice reforms threaten the well-being of citizens. Gender disparities persist, limiting opportunities for women despite advancements in education. Climate change and marine degradation endanger the country's very existence, while economic vulnerabilities and governance challenges further complicate long-term resilience. Addressing these issues requires bold, evidence-based, and inclusive action, with strengthened international cooperation, robust domestic policies, and unwavering commitment to sustainable development.

This Call to Action urges policymakers, civil society, and international partners to act decisively in addressing these pressing challenges. The recommendations presented offer a roadmap for transformative change protecting the nation's youth, ensuring gender equity, strengthening healthcare systems, preserving marine ecosystems, and fostering stronger global partnerships. The Maldives has the potential to be a leader among Small Island Developing States, but only through collective, strategic, and immediate action can a sustainable and equitable future be secured.

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*The APFSD country and sub-regional briefs were developed through collective discussions and engagements between youth advocates at the APFSD Youth Forum in Bangkok on 19-21 February, 2025. The Maldives Youth Call to Action was drafted by Hussain Shairaf Shareef. Overall supervision was provided by the ARROW Call To Action team.*

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