

Evaluation Brief: ICPE Maldives



Country context and UNDP programme

Over the last two decades, Maldives has achieved enormous improvements in per-capita gross national income, leading the World Bank to describe it as a 'development success story'. These gains are reflected in changes to Maldives' human development index ranking. In 2018 it was ranked 101 out of the 188 countries on the list, at the bottom of the 'high human development' category and above the average for South Asia. Maldives achieved five of the Millennium Development Goals before 2015 and graduated from being a least-developed country in 2011.

Notwithstanding these positive improvements, Maldives exhibits many of the common vulnerabilities of small-island developing states, including small population, geographic isolation, and limited land mass and resources. As one of the most low-lying countries in the world, Maldives is acutely vulnerable to sea level rises expected to result from climate change.

Reflecting the importance of managing the impacts of climate change for Maldives, and the availability of funds, UNDP's country programme portfolio mostly comprises energy, environment and climate projects. Official development assistance (ODA) to Maldives has declined steeply over the past 10 years. This, combined with donors' reluctance to support work in governance due to the state of crisis that has characterized Maldives' politics in recent years, has constrained UNDP's support for democratic governance, which has been almost entirely dependent on Maldives' small annual core resource allocation (US\$350,000).

Findings and conclusions

UNDP's operating environment in Maldives has been very difficult. The recent extended political crisis, which triggered strong criticism from the United

Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the adoption of a framework for sanctions from the European Union, reflects serious concerns about governance trends in recent years. Declining ODA, partly in response to the improving income status of Maldives and partly reflecting donor concerns about governance standards, has limited UNDP's resources, especially for democratic governance activities. As a result, the space for UNDP to work in a meaningful way with the government in many areas outlined by the country programme document (CPD) has been constrained.

In an important litmus test of the health of the country's fledgling democratic systems, Maldives' third general elections were held in September 2018, resulting in a smooth transition of power, despite fears there would be conflict. In this context, there is currently renewed interest from some donors in supporting Maldives, and UNDP has a good opportunity to re-engage with the new government in some key policy areas. The Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) considers that development of proposals for future work in governance should include more explicit focus on the risks and problems that have been documented in the governance programme in the recent past.

UNDP's work in the environment area has been implemented on a scale that provides opportunities for meaningful influence on the Maldives Government. Unfortunately, the results produced in this area have been modest and below expectation, given the level of resources that have been applied. Mobilization of Green Climate Fund (GCF) resources for a major project to improve water supply and sanitation was a significant achievement and will be an important test of UNDP's capacity to deliver large and complex service delivery projects at scale in Maldives.

The lack of flexible resources within the country office means the scope for the office to achieve significant gender equality outcomes is currently limited. Most

of the country programme's resources are earmarked for environment projects that can be expected to provide general benefits for the Maldives population, but afford relatively limited scope for pursuing significant improvements in gender equality. The prevailing practice of coding programme outputs using the gender marker substantially overstates the degree to which the Maldives programme has focused on promoting gender equality.

There is a mismatch between the scope and reach of the objectives stated in the CPD and what can be realistically achieved with the limited resources UNDP provides, and the fact that those resources are a small fraction of resources available to the Maldives Government. This reflects a failure to consider UNDP's comparative advantage and how it can best position itself to assist the Maldives Government to achieve its objectives.

Recommendations

In the area of governance, the country office should work in the short term with the new government to identify and articulate its policy priorities, and work across government. In the longer term, the country office should ensure that its governance programme: focuses on working with a small number of partners to underpin the achievements of a small number of realistic objectives; is informed by a strong analysis of the Maldives' political economy and focuses on supporting sound reforms that have cross-party support and are likely to be resilient across political cycles; and is flexible enough to allow for adaptive management to respond to likely shifts in the political environment.

The next Maldives CPD should contain a much stronger statement of strategic intent for the programme than the current CPD. Within the framework provided by the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF), the next CPD should include a much stronger articulation of the link between the analysis of context and the statement of priorities, and of causal pathways that explain how UNDP will plausibly contribute to the achievement of the stated objectives. CPD objectives, as well as targets and related indicators, should only be included if there is a realistic prospect of UNDP having a measurable influence over them.

The country office should develop a strategy for addressing gender equality that is founded on a clear-headed assessment of the scope provided by different activities to do so. Gender marker coding should be reviewed annually, with coding updated where necessary to ensure the data provides an accurate picture of the level of focus on gender equality of UNDP programmes.

UNDP should undertake an early review of the risks facing its GCF-funded water supply and sanitation project, including political and institutional risks, and those related to procurement and delivery of required infrastructure in remote locations, with any revisions submitted to the project board for consideration.