

Agents for Development: The Booming Youth Population in the Maldives

Aminath Afrah Rasheed (ENDEVOR), Mizna Mohamed (ENDEVOR),
and Mohamed Inaz (VESHI)

Abstract

The Maldives is in the midst of a demographic window of opportunity, with a large share of the population comprised of children and young adults. Youth account for about 40 per cent of the Maldivian population, and the dependency ratio has shown declines in the most recent national census. The country's success in reaping the demographic dividends of this 'youth boom', in terms of social and economic development, is arguably reflected in the level of positive youth engagement in the community. However, there is a growing concern that Maldivian youth feel, and are perceived to be, socially and economically disenfranchised and idle. Based on an ongoing qualitative research study on everyday changes and everyday lives in Maldivian communities, this paper discusses the high level of youth engagement in community development and livelihood activities in a small island community. Various qualitative research methods including interviews and observations were used in the research. The significance of factors such as parenting, role models in the community, community size, schooling, mentors, family structure and responsibilities, level of development of the island and types of economic opportunities available, which may contribute to higher levels of youth engagement, are explored.

Identifiers / Key words: : Youth, Demographic dividend, Community development, Maldives

The Authors

Aminath Afrah Rasheed (ENDEVOR), Mizna Mohamed (ENDEVOR) and Mohamed Inaz (VESHI) are three researchers from two NGOs in the Maldives. Afrah has a Master of Science in Environmental Sciences, Policy and Management and a Bachelor of Science in Environmental Management. She has been working as an educator for the past five years. Mizna has a PhD in Environmental Science and a Bachelor of Science in Oceanography and Meteorology. Mizna's main research interests concern the environment, particularly human-nature interactions. Inaz holds an MSc in Geographic Information Systems, specialising in climate change impacts on small island states development. He has been working in the field of sustainable development at research, implementation and policy levels. Aminath Afrah Rasheed, ENDEVOR, Maldives. am.afrah.r@gmail.com
Mizna Mohamed, ENDEVOR, Maldives. mizna.mohamed@gmail.com
Mohamed Inaz, VESHI, Maldives. mohamed.inaz@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Youth generally refers to the period of transition from the dependence of childhood, moving through adolescence to the independence of adulthood, and is often taken to be the ages between 18 and 24 (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2017). Defining youth in terms of an age group is difficult and context-specific, with regard to different cultures and sectors. The United Nations (UN) categorises people of ages between 15 and 24 as youth for statistical purposes. However, the age interval varies between different UN bodies and the different countries in which they operate, depending on the sector and cultural context (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2017).

In the Maldives, people of ages between 15 and 35 were initially included in the youth category (Hussain, 1984). The Children's Act of 2002 afforded legal protection to children under the age of 18, leading to the revision of the definition of youth to people between the age of 18 and 35, in the Maldives National Youth Policy 2003 (World Bank, 2014). It is nevertheless recognised in the national policy framework that adolescents undergo several important life events by the time they reach 18 years of age. For instance, the minimum age of entering paid employment in the Maldives, according to the Employment Act 2/08 is 16 years. Similarly, 15 years is the minimum age of criminal responsibility (World Bank, 2014). For these reasons, in this study, 15 years is used as the lower age limit for the youth population and 35 years as the upper limit.

According to the Maldives Population and Housing Census of 2014, 40% of the resident population of the Maldives is aged between 15 and 34 years. This means that in the total resident population of 402,071, the youth population is 179,814 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2015). Twenty percent of the population is aged between 15 and 24. Significant life events associated with this transition period for Maldivian youth often include the end of formal education, beginning of paid employment, adoption of legal responsibilities, engagement in civic life, and marriage (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2017; World Bank, 2014). Youth in the Maldives mostly move away from parental homes only after marriage and often after the birth of the first child. Thus, it is by the early 30s that most of the young people would have established their independence.

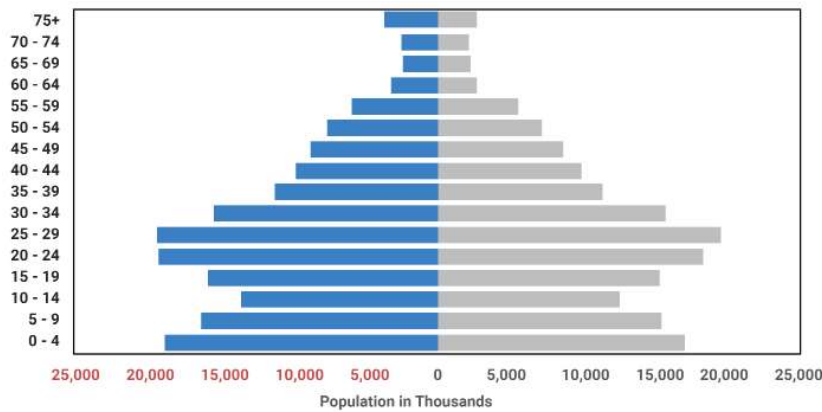


Figure 1. Population pyramid of Maldives by age group and sex
(National Bureau of Statistics, 2015)

The population pyramid in Figure 1 illustrates the significance of the large youth population as a potential window of opportunity for the country to benefit economically. Theoretically, having a large youth population means a larger population with the potential to contribute to economic growth. This is referred to as a demographic dividend, where the potential for economic growth is high due to the higher share of the working-age population (aged 15 to 64 years) compared to the non-working or dependent age population (aged 14 years and younger, and 65 years and older) (Demmke, 2017). Countries like the Republic of Korea have seen the positive benefits of this demographic dividend (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015). At the same time, research done in some countries show that a large youth group does not necessarily equate to a higher economic growth. Growing youth populations can be a particular burden for countries with low literacy rates such as Niger and countries with high youth unemployment, such as Jordan, Iraq and Saudi Arabia (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015).

Using a case study approach, this paper looks at levels of youth engagement in the economic development of an island community in the Maldives. Several studies on Maldivian youth show youth unemployment, drug use, gang violence and other social issues are common among the Maldivians in this age group (The Asia Foundation, 2012; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2014; World Bank, 2014). However, our initial visits to island communities showed a contrasting picture of youth being productively engaged in livelihood activities. Youth were also observed to take the initiative in social and economic activities within the islands. In this paper, through a qualitative inquiry, we sought to understand the key characteristics of the society that could explain the high level of positive youth engagement observed in the community, by focusing on one island in the central region of the Maldives.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Youth and the Demographic Dividend

The demographic dividend is “the economic growth potential that can result from shifts in a population’s age structure, mainly when the share of the working-age population (15 to 64) is larger than the nonworking-age share of the population (14 and younger, and 65 and older)” (Demmke, 2017, p. 115). This is a window of opportunity which opens when fertility rates decline and the child dependency ratio decreases. There are relatively fewer people to support and more resources to invest in the smaller child population (Eloundou-Enyegue, 2013). However, a sustained decrease in fertility rates can eventually lead to a decrease in the working population and an increase in the old age-dependency ratio. This signals the end of this demographic window of opportunity (Eloundou-Enyegue, 2013).

The overall trends in fertility and dependency ratios indicate that the Maldives is currently in the demographic window of opportunity for rapid economic growth (Demmke, 2017). Population projections for the Maldives under three different fertility scenarios (high, medium, low) indicate that the proportion of dependent population will remain below the threshold defined by the United Nations as ‘low dependency’ until 2050. While the proportion of children is expected to decrease over that period, the proportion of aged population is expected to increase steadily and exceed the threshold of 15% by the year 2050 (Demmke, 2017).

Though the demographic characteristics of the Maldivian population suggest that the country has entered a demographic window of opportunity, the realisation of this opportunity is not guaranteed. A wide range of social, economic and governance policies, along with sustained political commitment to implementing these policies, is necessary in order to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the demographic dividend (Eloundou-Enyegue, 2013). According to Eloundou-Enyegue (2013), active involvement of the youth population in livelihood activities is important for harnessing the opportunities. Other key requirements include sustaining low fertility rates and the way earnings are utilised both at individual and national level (Demmke, 2017).

2.2 Youth and Employment

One of the major obstacles to harnessing the demographic dividend offered by a low age-dependency ratio is unemployment (Eloundou-Enyegue, 2013). The Maldives age-dependency levels show a clear period of low age-dependency and projections indicate that the levels will remain below UN thresholds until 2050. However, this does not translate to low economic dependency, if unemployment remains high. Young people between the age of 18 and 34

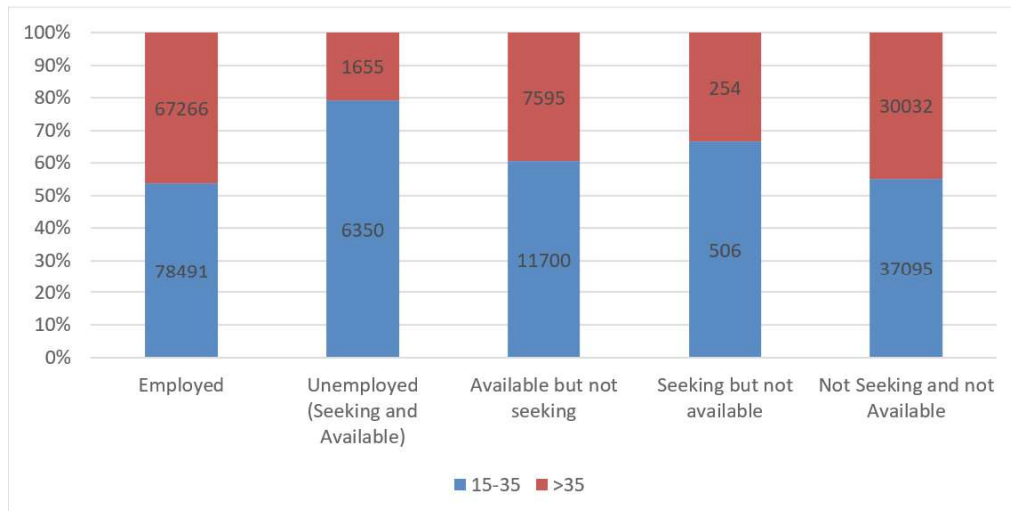


Figure 2. Percentage of resident Maldivian population 15 years and over, by economic activity status and age cohort

make up over half of the employed people in the country (Figure 2). There is a sharp increase in the labour force participation rate in the 20-24 age cohort, which is when most young people enter the labour force (National Bureau of Statistics, n.d.).

On the other hand, the Maldives National Census 2014 and several recent studies done on youth employment show that unemployment among youth is a significant issue (Demmke, 2017; Ministry of Planning and National Development, 2008; World Bank, 2014). While the overall unemployment rate for the resident Maldivian population was 5.2%, youth populations make up over 75% of the unemployed (Figure 2). The unemployment rate is highest among the teenaged population, while the rate is above the overall rate of 5.2% for the age group 15 to 24. This trend is consistent amongst genders and across localities (National Bureau of Statistics, n.d.). The 2014 census results show that unemployment rates among youth in Male' is greater than that for youth in the other islands.

There are about 34,000 people between the ages of 18 and 34 outside the labour force. Of this, 2,550 people do not work because of ill health or disability. Most people between 15 and 19 years of age are outside the labour force as they are students. This was more prevalent in Male' compared to the other islands. Higher education is not widely available in the islands and many young people leave school after Grade 10. Lack of job opportunities was more commonly given as a reason for unemployment in the islands. For those between 20 and 34 years of age, household chores and/or caring for children was the main reason for not working given by females. Different reasons such as lack of job opportunities in their locality, inability to find a suitable job matching their educational level and ill health or disability were cited by males in

that age group (Demmke, 2017; Ministry of Planning and National Development, 2008).

Unemployment is arguably the central issue pertaining to youth in the country at present. Several causal factors to explain high unemployment among the youth, as well as several negative consequences stemming to some degree from unemployment, have been identified in the literature on youth in the Maldives. The causes and effects are interlinked and amount to significant challenges for the youth population.

One of the main recommendations of The Maldives National Human Development Report 2014 (NHDR; 2014) was to improve employment opportunities in line with youth aspirations. It highlighted the rapid increase in youth population as one of the major social changes over the past decade, and the link between the increasing (largely unemployed) youth population and increased drug use, crime and violence (UNDP, 2014).

The increase in drug abuse among Maldivian youth over the past two decades, and the increasing exposure of younger school children to drugs, was identified as a major problem in the NHDR. The majority of drug users are unemployed. Widespread drug use has increased drug-related crime such as theft and gang violence, leading to unrest in the society (The Asia Foundation, 2012; UNDP, 2014).

Unemployment, together with family issues, among other factors, results in many youth joining gangs in order to obtain the material lifestyle they desire, as well as a feeling of belonging, brotherhood and protection that broken families cannot provide (The Asia Foundation, 2012; UNDP, 2014). A police record, common among gang members, is often a significant barrier to subsequent employment (The Asia Foundation, 2012; UNDP, 2014).

The main reasons given for unemployment include unavailability of suitable work and lack of opportunities in their current location (National Bureau of Statistics, n.d.). Suitable work is a subjective term, often depending on perceptions related to the kind of work and compensation that is socially acceptable (UNDP, 2014). Administrative and managerial professions are usually viewed by Maldivians as suitable work. However, the share of Maldivians is low in professional and technical fields compared to expatriate workers (UNDP, 2014). This indicates a lack of required skills (skills mismatch), including socioemotional skills (World Bank, 2014). The education system appears to have failed in providing students with the skills and guidance required to pursue a career after leaving school (World Bank, 2014). On the other hand, the demand for vocational subjects offered in schools is also low compared to academic subjects (World Bank, 2014). The lack of ambition, commitment and reliability among Maldivian employees, who often hold unrealistic job expectations, was highlighted by employers in the

NHDR (2014), leading to the preference of expatriate workers over Maldivians. This leads to such jobs being associated with the abused migrant workers, further making them unattractive or unsuitable for Maldivians (UNDP, 2014).

The high, unrealistic job expectations of young people are often reinforced by families and communities, who are more accepting of unemployment than of manual or semi-skilled work. Since such unemployed youth are provided with basic necessities by families, the necessity to work for a living does not become a sufficient motivating factor (UNDP, 2014). The result is a national phenomenon of “youth voluntary unemployment” (World Bank, 2014).

In addition to exclusion from economic activities, youth are further disenfranchised and disconnected from society due to exclusion from the decision-making process and lack of status / role in the society (World Bank, 2014). The lack of youth participation in planning for development and designing policies (UNDP, 2014) may have led to policies and programmes that largely ignore their situation and needs.

This paper explores the contrary picture of youth engagement observed in island communities visited for an ongoing research project. While the image of Maldivian youth in the literature and public perception appears to be generally pessimistic, lively youth populations that were largely active in economic activity were observed in the islands visited. The key characteristics of a community that may contribute to the high level of positive youth engagement in its economic development are examined.

3. Method

This paper is based on an on-going qualitative research project to understand everyday lives and livelihood changes in island communities of the Maldives. This is a collaborative research project funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ERSC) and Department for International Development (DFID). The research uses an ethnographic case study approach. One of the most notable observations from the first field visits was the high level of youth engagement in livelihood and economic activities, and in island development. This observation contrasts with the general literature which paints a picture of unemployed youth in the Maldives. Hence, our aim in the study presented here was to explore what factors contributed to this positive engagement. Thus, further qualitative investigations were conducted in the first island to understand this contrast. As the current research is on-going, the identity of the island is pseudonymised as Island A, in this paper. Names of participants have also been anonymised in the narrations in this paper. In Island A, school children often start earning an

income around the age of 15; sometimes leaving school after Grade 9 or Grade 10. Therefore, the youth age group used in this study is between 15 and 35. In addition to youth, others of different age groups from the community were also included in this study. Though the study is about the youth population, in a holistic view, it is unimaginable to study them in isolation from the community in which they live. The family circle, teachers, friends, employers, colleagues, community leaders, elders and other members of the community all help to shape the individual: the self as well as who they are within the community. Therefore, we have included a wide group from the community for gathering information in our study.

A short questionnaire was used to survey the general level of youth engagement in economic activity. Information was obtained from a total of 223 young people aged between 18 to 29 years. This included 130 females (58.3%) and 93 males (41.7%). Following this, further qualitative inquiry methods such as interviews and observations were used to collect information. In addition to the more formal data collection methods, the ethnographic experience allowed information to be collected through informal meetings, get-togethers for teas and coffees, and daily encounters. These experiences added to the richness of our immersion in the data collection.

4. Findings and Discussion

Initial observations in the community showed there is high engagement of youth in the community, especially in economic activities. The quantitative data also confirmed the high level of engagement of youth in livelihood activities (Figure 3). We found that 71.3% of the participants were actively engaged in income earning, 11.7% were studying and only 17% were not earning an income (unemployed). Those not earning an income were females involved in household responsibilities. More females were undertaking further studies, as opposed to males.

According to the survey results, most employment in island A is in the guesthouse industry. A large number is also engaged in fishing, in government offices (including utilities, the council office, and the health post) and in schools and colleges. Fishing is very much dominated by males while those working in schools are generally women. Home crafts which include activities like sewing and pastry-making are also done by women.

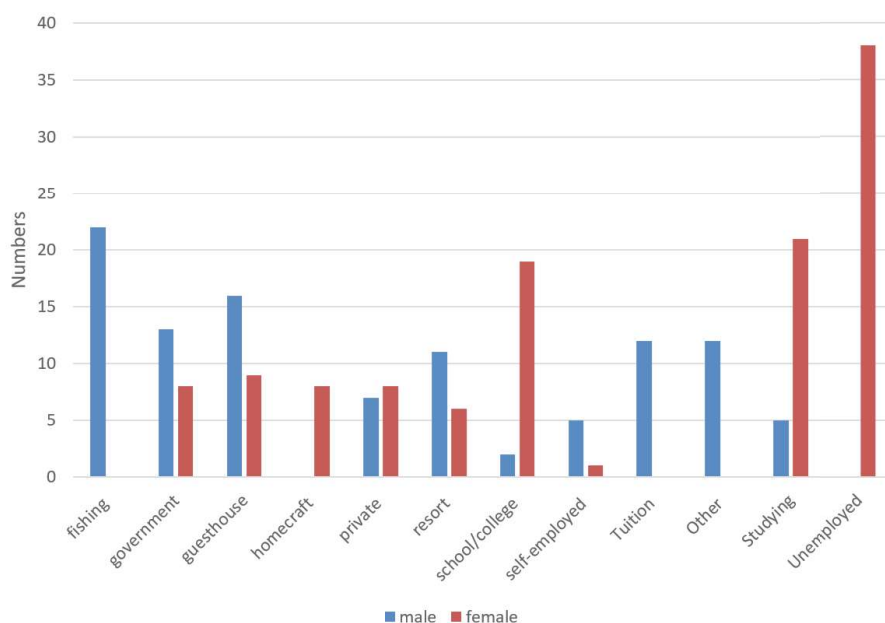


Figure 3. Employment status and areas among youth in Island A (n=223)

The ethnographic inquiry approach helped us engage in-depth with various community members and better understand their perceptions. Living in the community has also been a unique experience in that we were able to be a part of the community's everyday life and be accepted into the community as semi-insiders, as we are Maldivians and share a common culture and language with the research participants. The researchers were able to see the youth engaged in their day-to-day lives and observe the whole community that has nurtured them. The immersion in the community as semi-insiders enabled the researchers to observe the many social interactions and relationships that exist within the community that help shape the lives of the youth.

From the observations and conversations with community members, it stood out that there were four main factors that influenced the positive youth engagement in livelihood. These four factors (community characteristics, family life, employment opportunities and education) are shown in Figure 4. These four factors are not independent, closed systems but are fluid and overlap to create a synergistic, positive effect on youth development.

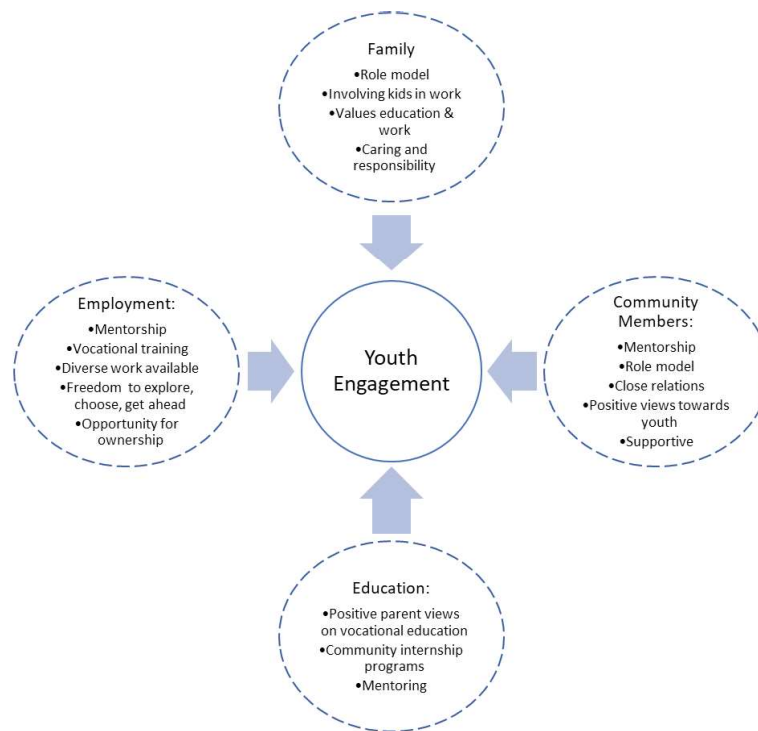


Figure 4. Factors contributing to youth engagement in livelihood activities

4.1 Community Characteristics

The characteristics of the community as well as the perceptions of the community towards youth both play a significant role in encouraging youth engagement in society. From a young age, children in the community grow up in a very nurturing environment where the neighbours and community act like a second home. Mohamed (2012) describes small island communities in the Maldives as a family unit having strong interpersonal relationships, as members are often related by kin or marriage. Island A is one such small community with strong social and personal ties. Aminath, a woman in her forties, described how she depended on her neighbours and family to look after her children and home when she had to go to the capital city and abroad for medical treatment. As children grow up, these various people in the community help to keep an eye on their behaviour and well-being. Similar behaviour of community members cautioning and advising youngsters when they do not follow island rules are reported by Mohamed (2012).

Community role models

While the elders look out for the young children, the children also observe and learn the behaviours of the community members. It is of interest to know that there is a culture of valuing productive hard work throughout the community, irrespective of age and gender. This

is most notable in the elders and retirees who continue to be active and are engaged in some kind of income-generating activity. A retired fisherman, who owns a small boat, described with enthusiasm how he spends his day fishing from the lagoon or reef, in his small dhoni (boat), earning money to supplement the household income. A young woman described how her grandfather liked to fish along the shore early in the morning and sell the fish to expatriate workers because he does not like to stay idle.

These elders would have been the leading and most active people of the community when the older youth were children. The adult members definitely provide excellent role models for the young children as they grow up and become youth.

Waheedbe, a man in his 60's, is one such man who has many skills, known in the Maldives as a "Fasmeeru kuri rukeh", a multipotentialite. The researchers first met him one early morning as he finished his nightshift duty as the guard at the health centre of the island. They continued to meet him and speak with him as he was engaged in many of the income-generating activities that he still does. When Waheedbe was young he had been an educator for the literacy classes run in the island; he has been a carpenter, a fisherman and even now goes reef fishing regularly. In addition, he is a skilled ironsmith, making various kitchen utensils including pots, pans, and coconut scrapers among other things, and supplies them to two shops in the capital, Male'. His wife supports him, by making ekel (the midrib of the coconut leaf) brooms, fried moringha leaves and other preserved food items for selling to shops in Male'. Waheedbe also owns and drives a trailer buggy for hire when people need to transfer heavy goods. This is some of the work he does to earn a living. In the conversations with the researchers, Waheedbe constantly emphasized that there are always opportunities to earn an income but one has to be ready to work hard. This is a work ethic echoed by many of the adults and elders in the community.

Hussainbe is a 'retired' fisherman, now in his 70s. The researchers met him around nine in the evening and he was still cutting the small fish he had caught in the lagoon. In addition to taking them home for food, he also sells these to the expatriate workers. He said he had been up since early morning for the dawn prayer. To start his daily routine, he has coffee with his friends in the harbour cafe and goes reef fishing. During low tide, he also goes to catch venbolhu (a sea worm which live in small holes in the lagoon that people catch during low tide). Hussainbe showed us his freezer, which was almost filled with bottled venbolhu which people buy to use as bait for fishing. Hussainbe does not have a need to earn an income for his family as all his children are grown up and working. He lives in the family home with his children and grandchildren. His children and some of the people in the community say that what he does is more of a hobby and a way to be active than to earn an income. Hussainbe says he still earns sufficient money to pay his bills and buy food for his family. Additionally, he is one of the well-known benefactors of the island school. Hussainbe told us that when he was a full-time tuna fisherman, all of

the fishermen worked and contributed to build the first powerhouse of the island. They have always found it important to contribute to building the community. Growing up with such role models is an important factor influencing the work ethics of the youth.

Similar role models were found among the women of the island. Almost every youth spoke admirably of Fathimath and recommended that the researchers meet her. Fathimath is in her forties and she seems to work constantly. The researchers did a go-along with her as she went about her daily work, did some interviews and saw her going about her numerous responsibilities in the harbour area of the island. Fathimath is a skilled mason and had built her parent's house as well as hers, by doing all the work starting from collecting sand all by herself. She said that as a child, she and her siblings had helped her parents with their work. Her mother was actively involved with her father in mining coral and making slaked lime for construction. In addition to building houses, her father also collected toddy from coconut palms and continues this work today. Her sister has also learned how to climb coconut trees- an increasingly rare skill, especially among women. Fathimath currently manages the waste management centre (WMC), the ice plant for fishermen and the harbour area of the island. These are jobs she has won from the Island Council through a bidding process. She employs others to help her manage the WMC. Fathimath drives a buggy trailer around the island and on some days, she was seen carrying bags of soil in the trailer. She said this was nutrient-rich soil from the WMC which she packs and sells as potting mix. In addition, she also makes ekel brooms for sale. She also helps look after her grandchildren and they were seen travelling with her on the buggy as she went about doing her work.

Fathimath is one of many women who engaged in income earning activities in the island. Another woman, Nusra, owns a souvenir shop and also works with an entertainment group which does local cultural shows and dances at nearby resorts. A similar entertainment group is managed by Azra, who earns her income from providing meals and laundry service to the staff of a dive centre. She also plays a key role in organizing social activities carried out in the island and maintains relations with the nearby resort, facilitating income-generating opportunities for people in the community. Aneesa is in her 60s; she weaves thatch and makes coconut oil to sell to tourists. Wafira supports her family by making coconut oil and selling petrol on the island. She sells sea-shells, bottles of coconut oil and local souvenirs from a table she keeps on the street outside her home. She said this allows her to get extra income.

Such role models in the community might encourage young school leavers to also find employment rather than staying out of work. The community members also play a significant role as mentors for the secondary school vocational education programme. They will be discussed later in the paper.

Community perceptions of youth

Societal attitudes are important in shaping the expectations of young people, as highlighted in the case of job expectations of Maldivian youth in general (UNDP, 2014). Most of the literature on youth in the Maldives portrayed them as more of a burden to society than useful citizens. Unemployment, drug use and involvement in crimes are described as persistent issues among youth. However, in Island A, we found that the community has very positive perceptions regarding the youth of the island.

When talking with community members about their children and youth in general, there was always a sense of pride in the way they spoke of their youth. 'Hard working' was a constant description used by community members. Many would say that their youth neither are idle, work-shy nor roam around needlessly. 'Everyone works hard' and are 'useful members of the community' is often echoed by community members.

The community also imparts a sense of pride in the youth since they are taking leadership roles in the community. The Island Council is one such example, where the leading island development roles are undertaken by young adults. Although there are no formal non-government organisations (NGOs) specific for youth in the island yet, young people take the lead in organizing social events like Eid festivals. The experience of youth who have gone away from the island for education or employment was seen to be very valuable in adopting innovative methods for fundraising and managing such events. Ahmed is one such young man, who had worked as a board member of a national sports association in Male', and had returned to the island to work in a guesthouse. He has organized island-wide beach clean-up activities led by the guesthouse he works at and is currently using his experience to form an NGO in the island, to work towards island development. Ahmed values the work done by the two existing community organisations in the island, which have achieved a lot for island development in the past. Ahmed hopes to introduce new ideas and modern methods for organizing community work in the future.

The washing up of debris and garbage onto the island's beach is a significant issue in the island. It is the youth who are taking the leadership in organising clean-up activities in the island. Waste management is the most challenging issue in island communities in the Maldives. During our visits, the young Island Council members were in the process of conducting a household and business/industrial area survey of waste produced in order to develop their island waste management plan. It is our belief that the positive attitudes by community members and the confidence they place in the youth provide a supportive environment for the youth to flourish and take up these responsibilities.

Another significant difference we found in the community is its attitude towards drug users. Drug users are mostly excluded and stigmatised in Maldivian society, and their use of drugs becomes the foremost feature of their identity (The Asia Foundation, 2012). Members of the island acknowledge that like every other community in the Maldives, they too have youth who use drugs. However, drug users are not seen as a burden or agents of chaos or fear, in the community. It was common to hear that everyone on the island works, and even drug users work and earn money to support their habit.

Many community members reiterated that Island A is one of the safest islands in the Maldives. They highlighted the sense of security they felt in the island, compared with some islands they had been to or had heard of, where stories of crime were reported. Theft is almost unheard of and people say that nobody would touch another's belongings even if they were left in a public place. One respondent narrated how a worker from another island was surprised at how his belongings were so safe in Island A, and that he has not been to such a safe island. The community members say that unlike other places, drug users in this island would not rob to continue their habit. High employment among drug users is probably one reason why drug-related crime such as theft is rare on the island.

Even the people who use [drugs] - if they borrow money from someone, they work and pay it off. They don't rob and loot people. There are large guesthouses and shops in the island; people do not rob from these places (Afiya, 40's, woman)

The sense of belonging in a community where everyone knows each other may also be one reason why youth do not resort to gang activity. No instances of gang behaviour or related violence were observed in the community during the field visits. On the other hand, cooperation among youth and the population in general was commonly observed. Since a lot of work like engine repair, making coconut ekel brooms and even domestic work was conducted in public spaces, people with free time were observed to be pitching in to help the people engaged in such work without expecting monetary compensation. The spirit of cooperation was also apparent in how guesthouse managers described their relationship with each other.

4.2 Family Values and Responsibilities

The community, in a sense, is an extended family for the young children of the community. However, it is the immediate family and home life that is the first school for children. It is in this environment that children learn from observation of behaviour and copying it. It is here that children develop their values and ethics, and learn to develop relationships with other individuals. Parents in the community value education, especially vocational education, for their children. The role of education will be discussed in detail as a separate section.

Learning from parents

As discussed earlier, members of the community have a strong work ethic and as such, working parents are the first role models for the young children. Many adults and even youth narrated stories of how they took part in the work of their parents when they were children. Fathimath recounted how she and her siblings learnt masonry by being involved when their father built houses. Nusra, who owns a souvenir shop, said when she was little, she used to help her father in his shop. When her father retired she took over the shop, but later she converted the shop into a souvenir shop. Many young children learn to make local products such as ekel brooms and thatch by helping their parents when they work.

It was not unusual to observe children accompanying their parents at work during weekends and school holidays. Ahmed is a young man trying to develop his own guesthouse in the island. When we spoke with him, it was a school holiday and his young son was with him helping with small jobs at the guesthouse. Similarly, going fishing with their fathers was quite common in the past when most men were engaged in fishing. Young fishermen we spoke with described how going fishing with their fathers or relatives during holidays at ages as young as nine years had got them interested in the work. A young woman working at a guesthouse described how accompanying her father at his souvenir shop when she was young had made her familiar with tourism-related activities, and contributed to her decision to work at a guesthouse after completing her A Levels.

Family responsibility

According to the literature, one factor for the widespread phenomenon of “youth voluntary unemployment” is that youth do not have the financial necessity to earn an income, as their families are willing to support them while they look for “suitable work” (UNDP, 2014; World Bank, 2014). On the contrary, young people in this island community seemed to have a greater necessity to earn a living. This include earning to support and care for parents, siblings and other family members as well as for own spending.

The average income of people living in islands other than Male’ is about one and a half times less than that of someone living in Male’ (UNDP, 2014). Hence, young people living in other islands are less likely to be supported by their families and probably have a greater necessity to work for a living. We spoke with a 16-year-old female who had recently finished school and was working at a hospitality-related business. She lived with her grandparents, her divorced mother and two younger siblings. Her elder sister was studying in Male’, her mother and grandmother were housewives, and her grandfather was a fisherman. He looked after the household expenses, but had been unable to earn much at the time. Her salary and her father’s contribution to childcare were the main source of income for the household.

Young people in the island showed a sense of responsibility for their parents and siblings once they leave school. One young man, who was the youngest of seven children, explained that his reason for wanting to work, despite the fact that his elder siblings were all employed, was that his mother was ill and he wanted to earn money to help take her abroad for treatment. He preferred to work in a resort, but started going fishing in order to earn an income, rather than wait for an opportunity to work at a resort. Similarly, Hameed, another young man, explained that he had wanted to be a school teacher but when his father got sick he did not continue his education further and instead went lobster fishing, and eight years later he is still in that line of work as he has now started a family of his own.

Many members of the community talked about how their children always looked after them when needed. Waheedbe's wife talked about how happy they were with the way the children had looked after their father when he was sick for a long time. They attribute his recovery to the care shown by their children. Such feelings of care towards family may arise from the high expectations of the community for caring and from the close family environment in which the children grow up, where a high level of care was observed.

4.3 Education

As stated earlier, parents in the community placed a high value on education. Almost all believed that education was an important factor for a better future for their children. Shareefatha, an elderly woman who is in her 80's, narrated how, when she was young, she and her husband had started the first makthab (a traditional class for basic schooling) in the island before government schools were established. Quran, Dhivehi language and Arithmetic were taught at the time. Many of the adults to whom we spoke, fondly stated that they were students of Shareefatha. Even before schools had been established at a national level, people in this community found it important to educate the young. Today, Shareefatha's grandchildren continue the tradition and teach the children of the island.

Many of those in their 40's stated that when they were young, the island school provided education up to the middle school years (Grade 7) and those wanting to study further had to go to Male', the capital. However, schooling is now available up to lower secondary level (Grade 10). The school also offers the Dhasvaaru programme, a vocational training programme. According to our data, almost 50% of young people between the ages of 18-20 are studying, although there are no institutions offering education beyond secondary level (Grade 10) on the island. Most of the participants we spoke with mentioned young people studying in Male' after finishing school, and some mentioned sending their children to nearby islands for post-secondary education. We met people who were studying on the island through distance / online education programmes as well.

Community support

We found that community members other than parents also enjoyed supporting the local school either through financial donations or volunteering their time. Husseinbe said that though he does not donate so much to activities of the island now, he definitely contributes if it was for a school activity. The level of support given to children by the community and the pride of the community in their young children was very visible to the researchers on the day when the students left to take part in the atoll level Quran competition. The harbour area was full of people who had come to see the children off. The school principal said that there was immense support from the community for all school needs. The principal further stated that even if there is an issue like a broken air conditioner at the school, community members will help to repair or even replace it if needed. Gestwicki (2016) emphasises the importance of the cooperation between home, community and school in the development of children. The community and the school appear to understand and adopt a 'we're all in this together' approach to parenting and educating a child (Gestwicki, 2016; p. xiv).

The community, especially local businesses, are also very supportive in providing internship opportunities for students who are undertaking the vocational education programme, *Dhasvaaru*. One youth informed the researchers that there were many students doing internships at guesthouses. Students undertaking hospitality studies learn about attending to rooms, cooking and serving at the restaurant in these internships. Often those finishing these internships are subsequently employed in the guesthouses.

Community and parent involvement in schooling is an important factor for successful education programmes (Gestwicki, 2016). Traditionally, in the Maldives, parents and the community have played a significant role in learning and the transmission of knowledge (Saeed, 2003). Saeed (2003, p. 223) argues that while modern schooling helps develop literacy and numeracy skills, it also 'has been an agent in marginalization of life skills, social skills as well as the values on which the community is built'. Saeed (2003) in her work imagined a culturally rich Maldivian education where the community and home play an integral role in creating citizens with local worldviews.

The importance given to education in the community has borne fruit, as in the case of Ahmed. As a young boy, he had gone to Male' to study after completing primary school in the island. Ahmed was able to join the most prestigious boys' secondary school in the country straight away, whereas most boys from other islands had been unable to do so due to the poor quality of English language instruction they had received in their home islands. Ahmed explained that giving back to the school and community that had given him a head start in life was his main motivation for returning to the island. The island is benefiting greatly from Ahmed's education

and experience, which he is using for the development of the community, as was highlighted in the previous section of this paper.

Vocational Education

The failure of schools to equip young people with the skills necessary for the kinds of jobs available was one of the main reasons identified for high youth unemployment (World Bank, 2014). While more opportunities are available in technical and vocational fields in the islands compared to professional or administrative fields, demand for vocational education is generally low due to the negative perceptions of the community (UNDP, 2014).

Vocational and technical education programmes have now been introduced in secondary schools across the country. The *Dhasvaaru* programme is an option available for students in Grade 10 to obtain a Level 3 National Certificate through an internship programme with industry partners (Ministry of Education, 2016). Government schools also have started offering a vocational stream in secondary schools in addition to the existing streams for Arts, Business and Science subjects (Ministry of Education, 2015). However, there is still a general lack of awareness and acceptance of vocational education, which is often viewed as inferior to traditional academic subjects, especially for girls, although this has improved since the programme was first introduced (Mohamed, 2017).

In general, the *Dhasvaaru* programme is seen as an option for those who fail in the normal academic curriculum. However, in Island A, there is a positive attitude towards the *Dhasvaaru* programme. There is a willingness by parents to enrol children in the vocational programme. Most parents in the community believe that the vocational programme is better at developing skills that the youth will need in the work environment. Afiya, a woman in her 40's, spoke with pride about the achievements of her youngest son, who had recently completed the *Dhasvaaru* programme. She looks forward to her son joining the island's power station. School programmes that make use of the skills of community businesses and craftsmen were part of the new model of learning envisioned by Saeed (2003).

Mentoring

Youth need to be adequately supported in the period between leaving school and entering employment, as it is a risky time for youth, especially in countries with high unemployment (Eloundou-Enyegue, 2013). It was interesting to observe in the community that the youth had the guidance and support of their former school principal even after they had left school. Sattar had previously worked as the principal at the school and still continued to be a key figure

in the lives of the students he encountered. He was also well-known by all members of the community and helped us to get in touch with participants.

Interactions with Sattar showed the genuine caring he had for his students. He guided and advised them like a father and a friend, and played the role of mentor to many of the youth in the community. Many youths who were interviewed mentioned that they went to seek advice from Sattar before making a big life decision, especially in their careers. While we were with Sattar, he would often get phone calls from his former students giving him updates on their achievements.

The trust that the youth have in Sattar was developed over time through their interactions in the school environment. The school environment is often seen as a second home for children, where teachers are their secondary caregivers. The possibility for students to develop such a relationship with their teachers is part of the support structure in the community that perhaps has helped in developing these responsible and productive youth. The importance given in school to develop socio-emotional skills (“life skills”), in addition to fostering academic achievement, might explain the apparent success of young people in entering society as productive citizens after leaving school.

4.4 Employment

The island economy and employment environment also seem to noticeably influence the positive engagement of youth in employment. The community being near the capital, resorts and availability of other diverse industries can be seen as a strong influencing factor for youth to seek employment. These employment areas are an ideal arena for youth to explore their interest, develop skills and take time to settle on an area that they can focus on.

Diverse employment opportunities

The island economy provides diverse opportunities ranging from fishing to tourism. Traditionally, the island economy was based on tuna fishery, and fishing remains a major livelihood activity in the island. Yellowfin tuna fishery, reef fishing, lobster and sea cucumber fisheries remain important economic activities. Many of the youth are also employed in nearby tourist resorts. With the growth of local guesthouse tourism, there is a return of those working in resorts to the island. Local guesthouse tourism has allowed the growth of other sectors such as diving, water sports, recreation fishing and excursions, launch services, restaurants, cleaning services and many other emerging businesses, contributing to the socio-economic development of the community. An elder, who provided domestic garbage collection and disposal services, said he

now has some guesthouses as clients. We also met some young women who supplement their household income by making local food, doing laundry and also sweeping the courtyards of guesthouses.

According to the National Bureau of Statistics (n.d.), lack of job opportunities in their locality is the main reason for unemployment given by young people in islands. However, as can be seen, this is not the case in this community. We believe the economic opportunities available in the island are important contributing factors to the level of youth employment observed in the island. Perhaps it can also explain in part, the high level of engagement in society in general that was observed among youth in the island. Afiya's son, who just finished the electrician internship in the Dhasvaaru programme, is sixteen years old and has to wait till he is eighteen to get employment in the local power station. He has now started work as a launch crew member in one of the speedboat ferry companies of the island. He said he did not want to stay idle and wanted to make use of the opportunities available to earn income and support his parents. Similarly, many youths told the researchers they did not want to stay idle and so had started out by going fishing in one of the boats in the island.

The diversity of opportunities for employment in the island is a reason why many youths stay on the island. Fathuhulla, a young man managing a guesthouse, says the development of guesthouse tourism in the island is a reason why many like him who used to work on resorts are coming back home. He explained that he never thought he would come back to his home island and when the first guesthouse was opened, Fathuhulla used to come and help out on his days off from the resort. Now he is living in his home island working full-time as a manager of a guesthouse and he hopes to one day have his own business. Young men were seen managing guesthouses of different standards, from large establishments with several staff to small two-person operations.

The guesthouse development is seen as a positive development for women as well. We saw several young women working in guesthouses. Negative perceptions usually associated with working in resorts often barred young women from entering the hospitality industry (UNDP, 2014). Such negative perceptions were not seen towards working in guesthouses on the island. Parents of young women stated they were comfortable with them working in guesthouses and were especially happy for them to be able to live on the island and work. Employment is available in other related occupations as well. One young woman, who had previously worked in a resort, works at the laundry section of one of the larger guesthouses, as she prefers to work in the island now that she has a family to care for. The guesthouses also provide women with the opportunity to work from home through making local food and providing laundry services at home for smaller guesthouses.

Employment as a vocational college

From our conversations with many youths in the community, the diverse economic opportunities are more like a vocational college for them to explore their skills, interests and learn from the community members, whether it be family or employers. Starting out by going fishing is a common path that school leavers seem to follow. A fishing vessel requires different types of skills ranging from catching bait, throwing bait, navigating, finding schools of fish to catching fish. A fishing vessel has a hierarchy with the maa keyolhu as the chief or captain of the vessel. Young school leavers would start in the role of an ordinary crew (falhuverieh) and move upwards as his skills develop. Shiham, who is in his early twenties, goes tuna fishing on the same boat as his father. He said that when he started he did not know anything about fishing and that he is learning and improving every day. He hopes to be as skilled a fisherman as his father. Young people get trained and mentored by the skilled people of the community through employment.

Many youths use the available opportunities to try out different jobs and see if they like the type of work involved. Starting out young in the work force, aged around sixteen, gives ample time for youth to explore and learn what career interests them. Therefore, these changes in jobs are very similar to going to college for further studies. The youth also have the additional benefit of earning an income while they learn by trialling the different career paths. Many of the youth had similar stories of trialling different work, like Hassan and Fathuhulla. Hassan had finished school and gone fishing straight away. He told us that he has done every kind of fishing done in the Maldives. Similar to Hassan, Fathuhulla also has done all types of fishing, including tuna, reef fish, lobster and sea cucumber fishing. Fathuhulla said he initially went fishing because he did not want to stay idle but later he went to work in the resort industry. Both Fathuhulla and Hassan were now each managing their own guesthouse on the island.

The positive perceptions in the general community regarding employment in vocational work and the demonstrated success of older people in the field might be a factor encouraging young people to pursue such occupations themselves.

Freedom and independence

The opportunity to try out different types of work was seen by youth as a positive step in their development. Many preferred outdoor work and felt that an office type job was too mundane and restrictive. For example, those who went fishing talked positively while talking about the difficulties of going away for weeks or even a month to catch fish. They live in the boat and come back to the island after selling the fish in the capital. Some young fishermen described

the joy of working in teams to find and catch fish, and the relative freedom they enjoyed compared to going to an office every day. They described how after a good fishing trip they get a break where they can enjoy a relaxing time on the island. Working in guesthouses, though time consuming, also provides a degree of flexibility due to the seasonality of the business, and it does not become very rote. For example, front desk staff also can do multiple tasks and they were sometimes seen driving tourists around the island in buggies or going to receive them on arrival. During their free time, the youth were often seen spending time with their friends. In addition to the feeling of flexibility and freedom, youth found that there were opportunities to go ahead and achieve more through hard work. This is in contrast to a job in a civil service post or a private company where staff may have to wait and go through a set process and period for promotions. For example, starting through the lower ranks of a fishing boat, youth have room to go to higher levels by hard work and skill. Fishing was seen by youth as a vocation where they can earn an attractive income. In terms of monetary gain, if they have several good fishing days, the income will be higher compared to most fixed waged salaries available in the Maldives.

Often, youth saw these early engagements as stepping stones to build their own career. Zahir is now a keyolhu (a captain of a fishing vessel) and he narrated how he started going fishing with his uncle when he was 12 years old. His uncle would let him hold the rudder and show him many aspects of navigating a vessel. Zahir explained that these early lessons helped him reach the level of keyolhu at a young age. Though he is now keyolhu of someone else's fishing boat, he wants to own his own vessel. Niyaz is another youth who started tuna fishing and later started going lobster fishing in one of the largest lobster vessels on the island. At the time of this research, he owned a small boat for lobster fishing. Niyaz said that he is saving to eventually buy a larger boat. Ahmed and Hassan, who earlier went fishing, changed to resort work and at the time of this research, were managing their own guesthouses. Hassan said he had thought of many ways to use his own land and eventually started a guesthouse as it seemed the most profitable.

5. Conclusion

This case study in an island community in the Maldives reveals very encouraging observations of youth engagement in the community. The latest population census showed that the Maldives has a high percent of youth, providing the country with the opportunity to benefit economically if the large youth population contributes to the workforce of the country. However, generalized studies done on the youth in the Maldives tells a story of high unemployment, drug use, crime and violence. Contrary to this, the research presented in this paper is a case study of an island

community where a high level of youth engagement in economic activities was observed. Most youth were engaged in the fisheries and tourism sectors and related sub-sectors.

The ethnographic inquiry approach allowed us to be part of the everyday lives of the community and thus see many levels of the community which may not be as visible at the surface level. The high engagement of youth in livelihood activities was exceptionally notable during the time the researchers spent in the community. Various factors that may be contributing to this high engagement of youth were observed. In this case the Chinese proverb, “it takes a village to raise a child”, can be translated to say it takes a whole island (community) to raise a child. Community members, in their often multiple roles as family, educators, and employers, play a significant role in the lives of the youth. We found the community members to be very active and hard-working, thus providing good role models, mentors and educators for the young people. The positive views of youth that community members had were also highly noticeable in the community. They perceived the youth to be capable, responsible and leaders who can contribute to the development of the island. The positive attitude of the community towards drug users and vocational education were also two distinct features of the community which contributed positively to youth engagement in employment and to their active role in community development. In addition to this positive environment, the youth of the island had access to diverse economic opportunities provided by older family members and others in the community, from which they learned and earned income, leading most importantly to satisfying careers of their choice, whilst living in their home community.

As a case study, these findings are not generalizable but perhaps they offer a glimpse of positivity that there may be other similarly thriving communities in the Maldives. Perhaps the current view of youth as a burden to society is from studies done in larger communities, in Male’, and in other islands where traditional community structures were not strong or have broken down. Further in-depth research in different communities of varying community characteristics is recommended. Further research is also needed to find quantitative linkages to the factors that contribute to youth engagement in livelihood activities which are presented in this paper.

References

- Demmke, A. (2017). *Thematic analysis of youth in the Maldives based on 2014 population and housing census data*. Male': UNFPA.
- Eloundou-Enyegue, P. M. (2013). *Harnessing a demographic dividend: Challenges and opportunities in high and intermediate fertility countries*. New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.
- Gestwicki, C. (2016). *Home, school and community relations*. Boston: Cengage Learning.
- Hussain, M.S. (1984). *National youth policy (RP/1981-1983/6.c/03)*. Maldives: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.
- Ministry of Education. (2015). *Policy on establishing vocational education stream in school (22-E/CIR/2016/13)*. Retrieved from http://www.moe.gov.mv/assets/upload/22_E.CIR.2015.131.pdf
- Ministry of Education. (2016). *Policy on conducting Dhasvaaru programme in schools*. Retrieved from http://www.moe.gov.mv/assets/upload/22_E.CIR.2016.1_Dhasvaaru_Policy.pdf
- Ministry of Planning and National Development. (2008). *Analytical report 2006 - population and housing census 2006*. Male': Ministry of Planning and National Development.
- Mohamed, M. (2012). *Changing reef values: An inquiry into the use, management and governance of reef resources in island communities of the Maldives* (Unpublished doctoral thesis). University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand.
- Mohamed, N. (2017). *Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) for the development of a nation: systematic review of the TVET system in the Maldives* (Unpublished Masters thesis). University of the West of England, Bristol, United Kingdom.
- National Bureau of Statistics. (n.d.). *Maldives population and housing census 2014 statistical release IV employment*. Male': Ministry of Finance and Treasury.
- National Bureau of Statistics. (2015). *Maldives population and housing census 2014 statistical release I Population & Households*. Male': Ministry of Finance and Treasury. Retrieved from <http://statisticsmaldives.gov.mv/nbs/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Census-Summary-Tables1.pdf>
- National Bureau of Statistics. (2018). *Statistical Yearbook of Maldives 2018*. Male': Ministry of Finance and Treasury. Retrieved from <http://statisticsmaldives.gov.mv/yearbook/2018/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2018/05/5.2.pdf>
- Saeed, S. (2003). *Maldivian ways of knowing: An inquiry into cultural knowledge traditions and implications for schooling* (Unpublished doctoral thesis). University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada.
- The Asia Foundation. (2012). *Rapid situation assessment of gangs in Male', Maldives*. Colombo: The Asia Foundation.
- United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2015). *Youth population trends and sustainable development*. New York: United Nations. Retrieved from http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/popfacts/PopFacts_2015-1.pdf.

United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2017). *World population prospects the 2017 revision: Key findings and advance tables. Working Paper No. ESA/P/WP/248*. New York: United Nations.

Retrieved from https://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/publications/files/wpp2017_keyfindings.pdf.

United Nations Development Programme. (2014). *Maldives human development report 2014*. Male': The Ministry of Finance and Treasury and United Nations Development Programme in the Maldives.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (2017). *Youth - Definition*. Retrieved from <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/youth/youth-definition/>

World Bank. (2014). *Youth in the Maldives: Shaping a new future for young women and men through engagement and empowerment*. Washington D.C.: World Bank. Retrieved from <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/21516>.
