

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ



MINISTRY OF GENDER, FAMILY AND SOCIAL SERVICES

REPUBLIC OF MALDIVES

Event: National Consultation on Readiness to Implement Action Plan to Strengthen Regional Cooperation on Social Protection: Maldives, 03-04 May 2023

Opening Remarks

H.E. Aishath Mohamed Didi

Minister of Gender, Family and Social Services of the Republic of Maldives

03 May 2023

Vice-President of the Maldives, Excellency Faisal Naseem, Special Adviser on Social Policy, Dr. Mustafa Lutfi, Resident Coordinator of the United Nations to the Maldives, Ms. Catherine Haswell, Director of the Social Development Division of UNESCAP, Srinivas Tata, Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Assalaam Alaikum and a very good morning to you all.

In 2020, ESCAP member States endorsed the regional Action Plan to Strengthen Regional Cooperation on Social Protection. I would like to note that our Deputy Minister co-chaired the panel which drafted this action plan. We are immensely grateful for the opportunity created by this collaboration with ESCAP to take stock of the readiness to implement the action plan, and to be amongst those countries in the pilot group for the stocktaking initiative. I'm also grateful to ESCAP for jointly organizing this two-day event: National Consultation on Readiness to Implement Action Plan to Strengthen Regional Cooperation on Social Protection in the Maldives and Workshop on SPOT Social Protection Simulator, with the Ministry. This Action Plan serves as a shared vision, strategy, and platform for promoting partnership and peer learning, and identifies the need for capacity development.

In Maldives the National Social Protection Act came in place in 2014. The concept of social protection as defined in our laws need to be aligned with international definitions such as by the ILO, which states *"Social protection, or social security, is a human right and is defined as the set of policies and programmes designed to reduce and prevent poverty and vulnerability throughout the life cycle"*. Within our existing programs, at this moment there are fragmented understandings and definitions of social protection. We often hear that social protection is a costly expense that consumes a high proportion of our GDP. If we look at social protection as defined internationally, this is a misconception. In fact, the Maldives' expenditure on true social protection is lower compared to global figures. Social protection is an important element in accelerating our development goals and is a crucial ingredient in achieving social cohesion. Social protection can have a positive multiplier effect on national productivity, efficiency, and broader developmental outcomes, and can help us in our efforts to attain the 2030 Sustainable Development agenda. For this to happen it is imperative that we invest in social protection.

It is with this in mind that social protection is identified as a key priority of the government and the need to develop a more cohesive system has been recognized. At present, the Maldives has several social protection programs that are backed by legislature, including programs such as the old-age pension and the disability allowance. The work done in the sector is fragmented and our coverage is unfortunately not extensive. There is a need for a holistic, coherent, and more comprehensive social protection system in the Maldives. As a first step, this past year, we have developed a National Social Protection Framework with the support of the World Bank. This Framework outlines policies to strengthen the social protection mechanism, including establishing a minimum social protection floor, enhancing the sustainability of social protection programs, along with the legal and regulatory framework to ensure greater quality, efficiency, and equity in providing social protection services. We remain committed to build a more robust social protection system for the people of Maldives.

Household Income and Expenditure Surveys and Multidimensional Poverty Index surveys conducted in the country show that poverty levels, both income-wise and multidimensionally, are higher in the atolls than in the capital city. While Maldives has a relatively lower proportion of informally employed population regionally, the numbers are still concerning as there is a large group who are immensely vulnerable and outside of existent social protection coverage such as pensions. Many of those in informal employment are concentrated in the atolls, and majority of them are women. It is this vulnerable population who bore the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has only stressed the need for resilience and a more robust social protection system to ensure ways that they could be included, and social protection made more equitable in the process.

A vital element of a functional social protection system is identifying those who are in poverty or vulnerable to poverty and ensuring that social protection is extended to them.

Decentralization of social protection services is a priority of the government and embodies our vision to ensure that no one is left behind. To maximize social protection coverage across the country, mechanisms that engage stakeholders from different sectors, including local councils, have been established through a special project with UNICEF. This project, which intends to create a multi-sectoral prevention-and-response mechanism and expand the network of social service, was launched in 2021, under the title “Ijthimae Badhahi Madhadhuverin” or IBAMA, in short. The relevant sector-related government authorities work together holistically, as cohesive community social groups at island level. Our vision for these groups is that the most vulnerable and at-risk individuals and families are identified by them, assisted, and provided with necessary services to uplift their living standards.

We must note that the existing social protection system lacks coverage throughout the life cycle. There needs to be more emphasis on social protection for children, adolescents, and youth as they have special vulnerabilities. As the Maldives rapidly approaches to become an ageing population, the existing old

age basic pension scheme that provides social protection to the elderly population may need to be revisited.

While we have made strides and continue to make progress, there is still much work to do. There is a need to establish a unified, holistic social protection system in the country.

To achieve this, it is important that we make a collaborative effort to create a more efficient coherent framework. This national consultation presents us a most useful opportunity to hear from other agencies, to exchange ideas and discuss the multiple facets of the current mechanisms in place, and develop a more comprehensive, inclusive social protection system.

Before I conclude, I would like express gratitude to the Government of Maldives, under the leadership of His Excellency President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih for remaining committed to playing an active role in promoting and protecting the rights of the vulnerable to ensure better social protection for people of the Maldives. I once again extend my deepest gratitude to UNESCAP for organizing this event with our Ministry and for creating this opportunity. I would also like to express my sincere thanks to His Excellency Faisal Naseem, our Vice President, for his presence today and his continued attention, guidance and support in our work pertaining to social protection. Thank you to those joining us today in this consultation process. I am hopeful that the discussions we have throughout the day will be fruitful and guide us in our efforts to enhance the Maldivian social protection system.

Thank you.