

**Opening Remarks**  
**Mr. Srinivas Tata, Director, SDD, ESCAP**

**National Consultation on**  
**Readiness to Implement Action Plan to Strengthen Regional Cooperation on**  
**Social Protection: Maldives**

**Date: Wednesday, 3 May 2023 from 09:30am to 15:30 pm**  
**Venue: JEN Maldives, Malé by Shangri-La**

*Excellency Mr. Faisal Naseem, Vice-President of the Maldives,*

*Excellencies, distinguished delegates, dear colleagues,*

It is my honour to welcome you to the National Consultation on the Readiness to Implement the Action Plan to Strengthen Regional Cooperation on Social Protection in the Maldives.

I wish to express my deep appreciation to **His Excellency, Mr. Faisal Naseem, Vice-President of the Maldives**, and **Her Excellency, Mrs. Aishath Mohamed Didi, Minister, Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services**, for our excellent collaboration to forge stronger social protection systems in Asia and the Pacific. I extend our gratitude to the Maldives National University, in particular, **Ms. Raheema Abdul Raheem and Ms. Sheena Moser**, for our valuable partnership in preparing the national report and consultation today. I also wish to thank our UN colleagues led by **Ms. Catherine Haswell** from the Resident Coordinator's Office and UN Country Team of the Maldives, **particularly UNICEF**, for their cooperation and inputs to this initiative.

The Maldives has been a leader in supporting one of the first Asia-Pacific-wide intergovernmental agreements on social protection. The Action Plan to Strengthen Regional Cooperation on Social Protection is the outcome of strong collaboration between governments and the UN system, to forge a common vision and platform on social protection for the region. Since its adoption in 2020, Governments have continued to stress the instrumental role of social protection in the development agenda. As Co-Chair of the Group of Experts to draft the Action Plan, the Maldives has ensured that social protection remains an enduring regional priority. So, it is with great pleasure that we hold the national consultation here in Malé today.

The Maldives has demonstrated a strong commitment to social protection, in particular through the establishment of a universal cash transfer for persons with disabilities, a universal basic pension, as

well as universal health insurance, the “Aasandha” scheme. As the Government looks to further develop its social protection system, we believe the Maldives has valuable practices and knowledge to share with the region.

Further to the adoption of the Action Plan, ESCAP has been working with the Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services and the Maldives National University to take stock of the readiness of the Maldives to implement the 12 national Actions identified in the Action Plan that serve as building blocks to stronger social protection systems. This initiative is one of a series of collaborations that has so far engaged six countries, including Cambodia, Georgia, Maldives, Mongolia, Philippines and Türkiye.

***Excellencies, distinguished delegates, dear colleagues,***

Though the pathways to more inclusive and comprehensive social protection are varied across countries, there remain key elements that underpin strong social protection systems.

Firstly, there is a need to define **a clear vision for social protection** that outlines medium- and longer-term ambitions and that upholds the right to social protection for all. With a shared understanding of the impacts of social protection and what is to be achieved, governments can better assess the measures in place and agree on a way forward.

**Resources and sufficient public funds** are required to ensure investments in schemes can ensure access to adequate living standards and are fiscally sustainable. These can be within reach. The ESCAP Social Protection Simulator has demonstrated that introducing universal old-age, child and disability benefits would achieve a substantial impact on reducing poverty and inequality as well as boosting consumption, all at an investment of around 2 to 6 per cent of GDP.

**Efficient and effective registration, payment and monitoring systems** are critical. Clear communications, accessible and transparent registration processes, regular and predictable payments, as well as formal and independent appeals and complaints mechanisms ensure that benefits are distributed to the right person when they need it, thereby also enhancing trust in governments.

**Finally, governance of social protection schemes** should be streamlined under one lead coordinating entity to avoid fragmentation and duplication of schemes. Social protection systems benefit from simplified institutional arrangements with clear lines of administrative responsibility, as well as from engagement with different stakeholder groups. Digital management information systems are equally critical to automate enrollment, payment and monitoring processes, as well as to build linkages across the social protection system and with national databases.

We also recognize the progress of the Government of the Maldives to implement such steps, as we will hear during this consultation.

*Excellencies, distinguished delegates, dear colleagues,*

In our consultation today, we would like to hear your thoughts and feedback on the report, but most importantly on the recommendations in Chapter 5.

This consultation serves as an opportunity to share your initiatives and commitments to achieve a more inclusive and comprehensive social protection for all. The recommendations from this consultation will feed into our stocktaking, to help identify progress and remaining gaps in countries across the region.

Through our discussions, we hope this consultation can move towards building a shared understanding of the impacts of social protection and of your ambitions in charting a future where all Maldivians are protected.

We look forward to a constructive dialogue and hope that this report and today's consultation can complement and support other ongoing work to strengthen social protection in the Maldives.

Thank you.