

REVIEWING THE NATIONAL STATISTICAL SYSTEM OF THE MALDIVES

Documentation of process and results

This is a study of how the Maldives National Statistical System (NSS) was reviewed as part of the Regional Programme on Economic Statistics in Asia and the Pacific run by United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) supported by Department for International Development (DFID). This study was developed by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) of the Maldives and ESCAP. It documents the context and process followed to support

other countries thinking of conducting a national review. Such reviews are a valuable way to engage stakeholders and develop evidence-based inputs to strategic planning processes and regular monitoring. This study is one of the five studies of successful projects that aims to advance statistics and is prepared for other countries who may wish to replicate the project for the review of their existing NSS.

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Acronyms

DFID	United Kingdom Department for International Development
ESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission of Asia and the Pacific
NBS	National Bureau of Statistics
NSCC	National Statistical Coordination Committee
NSDS	National Strategy for the Development of Statistics
NSS	National Statistical System
PARIS21	Partnerships for Statistics in the 21 st Century
RPES	Asia-Pacific Regional Programme on Economic Statistics
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SRM	Statistics Regulation of the Maldives
UNECE	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
UNSD	Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2015, ESCAP and UNSD undertook a review of the Maldives National Statistical System (NSS). Requested by the Government of the Maldives, it was to inform development of the next National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS) for 2020-2029. The review was made possible through the Asia-Pacific Regional Programme on Economic Statistics (RPES).

National context and drivers for a review

The Maldives statistical system comprises a central statistical office – the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) – and at least 15 government agencies contributing to the production of official statistics in a decentralized way. The system is governed by the 2013 Statistics Regulation of the Maldives. Data users include government agencies, development partners, civil society, academia and the public sector.

The first NSDS, covering the period 2010-2019, was proving challenging to implement and its mid-term point provided a good opportunity to review progress. The Sustainable Development Goals – relatively new at the time of the review – also provided an important context from which to consider national statistical capacity. The NSS had seen much change since the early 1990s

with increasing capacity and less reliance on donor support. The NSS review, also referred to as ‘the review’ in this document, would provide a comprehensive and timely analysis to plan for the next decade.

Review process

The review involved six stages:

1. Developing the assessment questionnaire
2. Stakeholder consultation and information gathering
3. First mission of review team and meetings with stakeholders
4. Drafting the review report
5. Second mission for validation of findings
6. Finalizing and launching the report

Stakeholder engagement was key with initial meetings to encourage buy-in, information gathering through a questionnaire, and a range of consultation and validation meetings. Draft versions of the report and recommendations were circulated for discussion and feedback.

The final report was launched at a seminar for Small Island Developing States in Nadi, Fiji from 1 to 3 August 2017.¹

¹ More information on the launch of the final report is available from: <https://www.unescap.org/events/inter-regional-seminar-national-statistical-systems-reviews-small-island-developing-states>

Outcomes of the review

The review delivered a template for an effective NSS in the Maldives. It highlighted strengths and weaknesses along with practical suggestions to strengthen official statistics. Main findings and recommendations were:

- The Statistical Regulation of the Maldives needs improvement with a new law recommended to increase independence and effectiveness of the NSS.²
- There were significant gaps in administrative data. The review found the NBS is not able to exercise its authority over administrative data as an important source of official statistics.
- Establishment of a National Indicator Set was recommended to clarify data priorities, responsibilities and where to direct resources. Once agreed, a data gap analysis will reveal where action is most needed.
- Coordination was an issue. The review found that NBS lacks the identity and visibility needed to ensure professional independence and allow it to exercise its authority to coordinate the NSS. Several national coordination mechanisms were recommended.
- Although an NSDS was in place, in practice, it was not having the intended impact. A comprehensive multi-year or annual programming for official statistics production is lacking. A Statistical Council at national level was recommended to oversee development of an annual programme.

- Economic statistics was reviewed in detail and findings and recommendations relating to national accounts, government finance statistics, external trade statistics, balance of payments, prices, and business statistics were provided.

Lessons learned:

- Reviews should be conducted regularly to identify strengths and weaknesses in the NSS and enhance the system to meet current needs
- Engagement of all key stakeholders across multiple levels is required for an NSS review to be successful
- Strong political and policy level support throughout the process are required for review recommendations to be implemented
- The review needs to cover all aspects, including economic, social and environment statistics along with the institutional and legal environment of the whole NSS

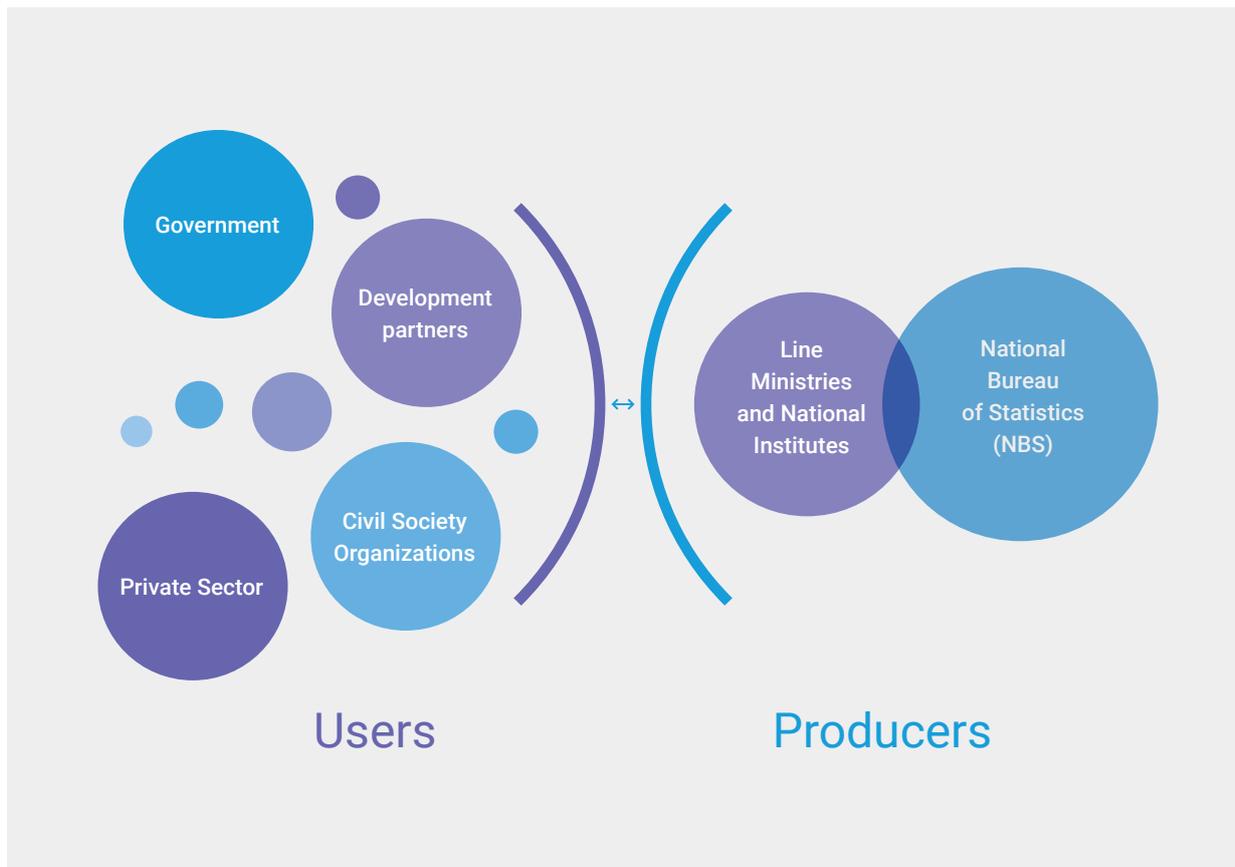
2 Since the review was published a new law has been drafted and is likely to be before parliament in 2020 for adoption.

II. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The National Statistical System (NSS) of Maldives is decentralized and complex. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) is the lead agency for official statistics, under the Ministry of National Planning and Infrastructure. They work closely with line ministries and agencies to provide a hub for quality assurance and coordination of national data production. They also work on the collection,

compilation and dissemination of statistics from censuses, surveys, and through administrative sources and registers. Driving the demand for, and eventually using official statistics, are various data users from government, private sector, civil society and academia (Figure 1). Both data producers and users form the national statistical system.

Figure 1. Users and producers of official statistics in the Maldives



With around 45 staff, NBS is responsible for national accounts, price data, population and housing censuses (every 10 years), household income and expenditure surveys (every 5 years), and for basic economic surveys. At the sub-national level, statistical officers are based in five of the 20 atolls that form the first level administrative division of the Maldives to manage data collection. Outside of NBS, statistical activities are carried out in more than 15 government agencies. Some of these agencies have their own statistical unit (with varying capacity) with one or two staff assigned to compiling administrative data and transmitting summary statistics to NBS on an annual and/or monthly basis.

A **review of the National Statistical System of the Maldives** was requested by the Government of the Maldives and conducted by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). Maldives had reached the mid-term point for its current NSDS implementation (2010-2019) and the review was to inform the revision of the upcoming NSDS for the next ten years. A scoping mission was undertaken by ESCAP in October 2015, resulting in agreements on the focus, process and expected results of the review.

Enabling environment for official statistics

The Statistics Regulation of the Maldives (SRM), passed by the Parliament of Maldives in 2013, is the main legislation for official statistics.³

This latest revision came into force in January 2013 with the original SRM in effect since 1999. The SRM covers the most important principles for official statistics and includes direct reference to the United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.⁴

The National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS) 2010-2019 – the 10-year plan for statistical activities in the Maldives – was endorsed by the former National Planning Council in 2010. It aimed to ensure regular availability of indicators and data needed for monitoring and evaluation of national progress. The six NSDS components include:

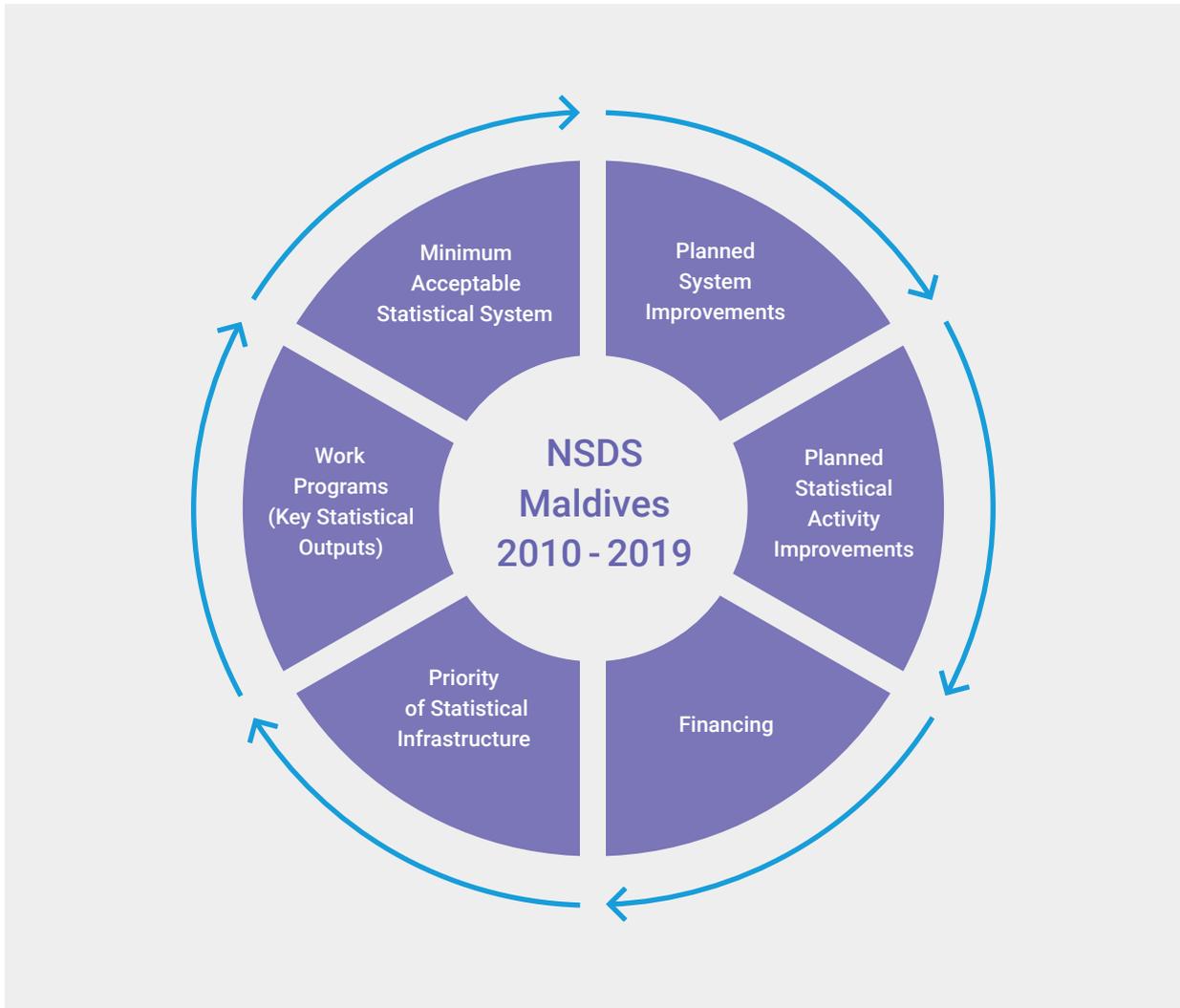
- Financing Arrangements
- Priority of Statistical Infrastructure
- Key statistical Outputs
- Minimum Acceptable Statistical System
- Planned System Improvements
- Planned Statistical Activity Improvements (Figure 2).

Implementation of the NSDS had been sporadic and a lack of monitoring and evaluation framework meant that progress was not being systematically tracked. The mid-term point was a good catalyst for initiating a review.

3 National Bureau of Statistics. Statistics Regulation of the Maldives. <http://statisticsmaldives.gov.mv/statistics-regulation/>

4 United Nations. 2014. Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics (A/RES/68/261). <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/dnss/gp/fundprinciples.aspx>

Figure 2. Components of the National Strategy for the Development of Statistics 2010-2019, the Maldives, 2010



Drivers for a review of the national statistical system

The statistical system of the Maldives has seen major developments since the early 1990s. From being heavily dependent on donors for key activities such as household surveys in the past, the reliance on donors has reduced over time as the Maldives' statistical capacity increased.

Government commitment and ownership has been also gradually improving. However, a strong legal basis for statistics, and funding for key statistical operations, were still lacking.

The review was to provide a comprehensive analysis of the institutional, organizational and technical capacity of the country to produce and disseminate official statistics that comply with international standards and recommendations despite resource constraints.

III. HOW WAS THE REVIEW CONDUCTED?

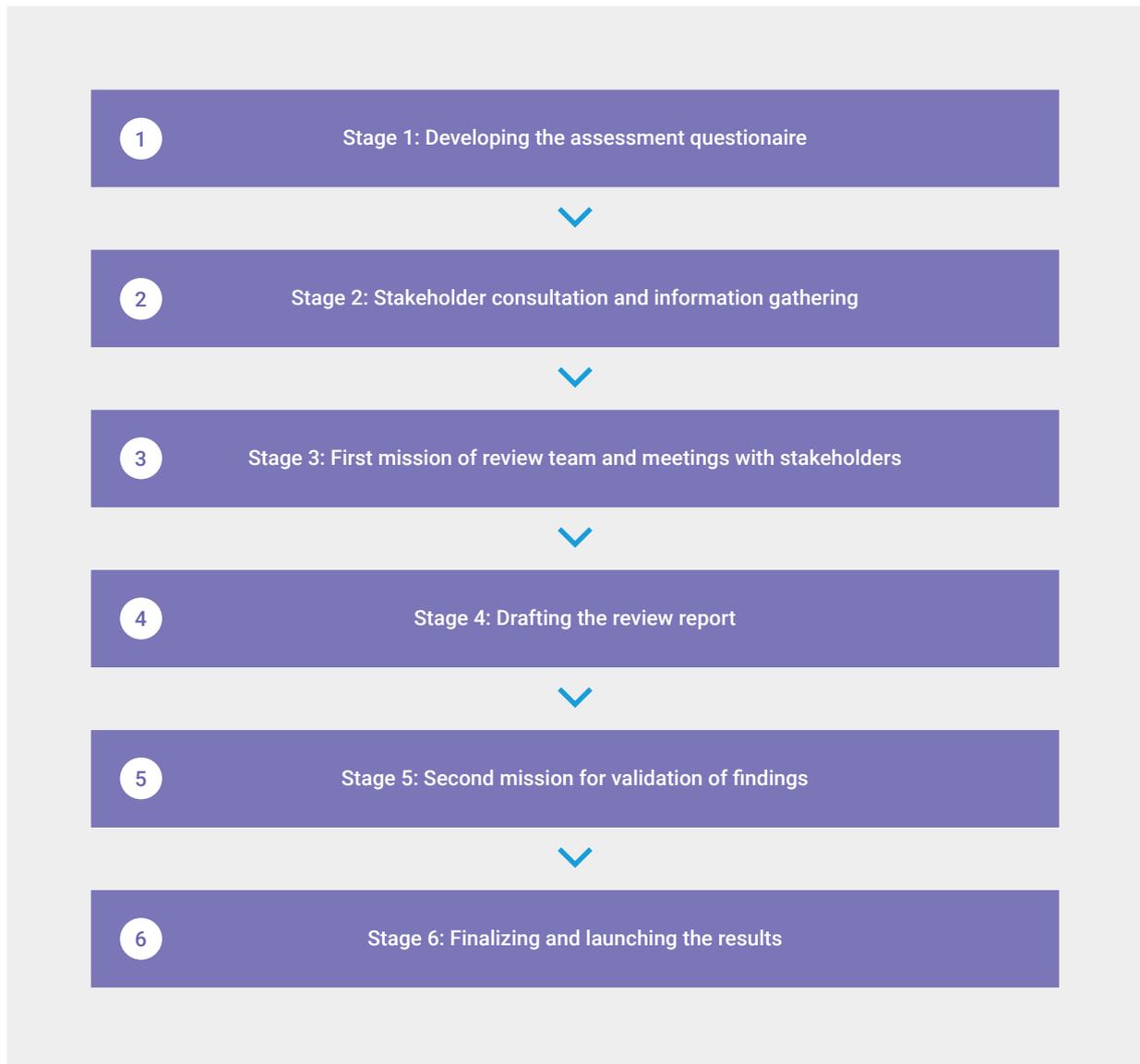
The review was jointly undertaken by ESCAP and UNSD within the framework of the Asia-Pacific Regional Programme on Economic Statistics (RPES). It took place over two years and was conducted through remote communications and two missions to allow face-to-face consultations between the international review team, NBS, stakeholder agencies, and users.

An extensive assessment was performed prior to, after and during visits by the review team using a questionnaire (the review tool) that was tailored to focus areas. These included legal provisions, institutional setting, coordination within the national statistical system, and the production and dissemination of economic statistics, and its underlying data sources and registers. Institutional and organizational aspects explored the structure and functions of the NBS, as the lead agency for statistics, as well as other major producers and users of official statistics.

This review assessed the capacity of the NSS to meet data demands and provided a set of recommendations for strengthening the production and dissemination of official statistics. It also explored opportunities to strengthen the functioning and resourcing of the NSS considering the Government of the Maldives and the international community commitment to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The review comprised six stages: develop and distribute a questionnaire to stakeholders; gather responses and analyse the findings; first mission to conduct consultations; draft report; second mission for validation; and then finalize and launch the report (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Stages of the Review of the Maldives NSS



The review team included Ms. Badamtsetseg Batjargal, Director, Administrative Department, General Authority for Intellectual Property and State Registration (and former Director, Integrated Policy and Foreign Relation Department, National Statistical Office) Mongolia; Mr. Gabriel Gamez, Interregional Adviser on Statistics, UNSD; Ms. Rikke Munk Hansen and Mr. Christopher Ryan, respectively Chief of the Economic and

Environment Statistics Section and Regional Adviser at the Statistics Division of ESCAP. Management and staff from NBS were actively involved in substantive discussions during the two assessment missions and provided valuable knowledge and insights about the NSS of the Maldives.

Stage 1. Developing the assessment questionnaire

A qualitative questionnaire on the legal framework, institutional coordination across the NSS, economic statistics production, dissemination and on key data sources and registers was the tool used to gather information. It was based on that used for global assessments conducted by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and partner organizations in countries in Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia.

The questionnaire was developed by the ESCAP team and aligned to the United Nations Fundamental Principles for Official Statistics, international statistical standards and classifications, and relevant quality assurance frameworks. It was also linked to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, considering the increasing demands this has placed on system coordination and for economic statistics. An image of the cover and table of contents is below in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Cover and table of contents of the questionnaire for the Maldives NSS review



- Review of the National Statistical System of the Maldives -

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<http://statisticsmaldives.gov.mv/review-of-the-national-statistical-system-of-maldives-july-2017/>

Stage 2. Stakeholder consultation and information gathering

Early in the process, NBS held a meeting with the National Statistical Coordinating Committee to encourage buy-in and ownership of the review. The committee was briefed on the components of the questionnaire and it was circulated for more detailed review and feedback.

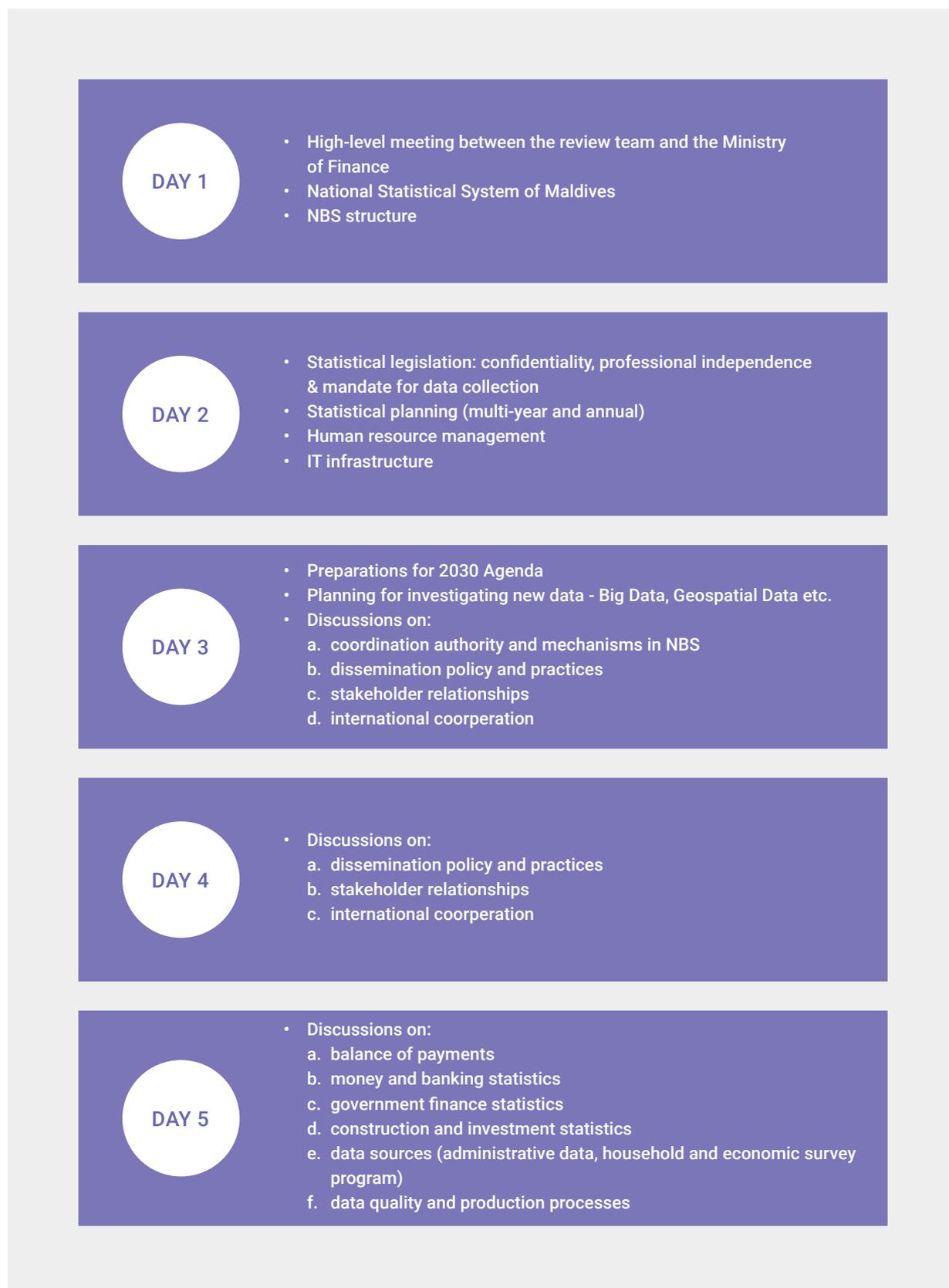
NBS completed most of the questionnaire prior to the visits by the review team, in coordination with other institutions of the NSS as relevant. It was sent to those agencies that regularly produce and transmit data to NBS. Responses were not easily forthcoming, but with persistent follow-up by NBS, agencies responded with valuable feedback that the review team used to prepare for sectoral meetings held during the validation stage.

The review also drew on materials available at ESCAP, UNSD and other international organizations, such as statistical standards and capacity development frameworks, and the NBS provided supporting materials as requested by the review team.

Stage 3. First mission of review team and meetings with stakeholders

After gathering all the relevant information, the review team conducted the first mission to Maldives from 22 to 26 May 2016 to have consultative meetings with the stakeholders to obtain additional details and verify the information provided to the review questionnaire. Detailed activities of the review team with various stakeholders are presented in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Programme of meetings by the review team, Maldives, May 22-26, 2016



Stage 4. Drafting the review report

After the mission, a draft report prepared by ESCAP and UNSD was circulated for review and feedback. It was checked closely by those involved, validating the accuracy of information and ensuring the recommendations were achievable and relevant from a national perspective.

Parts of the draft report relevant to respective sectors were sent for comments/feedback. Figure 6 lists the agencies to which the draft report was sent, being those directly linked to the details in the review.

Figure 6. Stakeholder agencies asked to validate the draft report

National Bureau of Statistics
Maldives Monetary Authority
Department of National Registration
National Center for Information Technology
Maldives Customs Services
Ministry of Tourism
Ministry of Finance
Ministry of Environment

Stage 5. Second mission for validation of findings

After gathering all the relevant information, the review team finalized the report and then fielded the second mission in 2017 to verify the information provided and to gather any additional needed to support the review. Their visit included meetings with NBS, as well as with experts from relevant ministries and other national and international stakeholders including those listed in Figure 6.

Stage 6. Finalizing and launching the results

Once an advanced draft of the review report was available, it was circulated to all relevant stakeholders for comments by a given deadline. Stakeholders validated their respective areas and the feedback was consolidated by NBS into one document using track changes and comment boxes. The review team used this to produce the final report ready for publication.

Figure 7. Cover of the final report on the Review of the National Statistical System of the Maldives



<http://statisticsmaldives.gov.mv/review-of-the-national-statistical-system-of-maldives-july-2017/>

The final review report was launched on 1st August 2017 at the inter-regional seminar on national statistical systems reviews in Small Island Developing States (SIDS), hosted by the Fiji Government and jointly organised by ESCAP, ECLAC and UNSD, Nadi, Fiji.

Initially, an “International seminar on national statistical systems reviews in Small Island Developing States” was to be hosted by the Government of the Maldives on 1-3 August 2017, co-organized with ESCAP and UNSD. The plan was to launch the review report at this seminar and to present and discuss the outcomes. However, due to a changing political situation in the Maldives, the seminar was moved to Nadi, Fiji.

The objective of the seminar was for Small Island Developing States to share experiences with reviews of national statistical systems and generate lessons learned for other countries that may wish to undertake a review of their system in the future. Specific focus was on common institutional and organizational challenges, such as professional independence, NSS coordination, NSO leadership, and the legal basis for official statistics.

The seminar planned to explore these challenges in the context of global, regional and national commitments, and the demands to produce and disseminate data for monitoring progress towards the SDGs. During the seminar, the Maldives Chief Statistician presented the key findings of the review along with the recommendations provided by the review team to strengthen the NSS.

IV. RESULTS AND OUTCOMES OF THE REVIEW

The review delivered a template for an effective NSS with recommendations to further develop statistics in the Maldives. It highlighted the strengths and weaknesses in specific areas of concern along with practical recommendations to strengthen official statistics.

Regulatory framework for official statistics

The review examined the regulatory framework, its clarity, appropriateness and incorporation of internationally agreed principles and practices for the production and dissemination of official statistics. It found the SRM had a confusing structure with redundant information and inconsistencies. The description of the NSS was unclear and the regulation did not outline criteria for distinguishing between producers of official statistics and providers of administrative data.

The review recommended for:

- a. A new statistical regulatory framework be developed and passed based on the model of a professional independent statistical agency under the authority of the government. The framework should comply with the United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and could be based on the generic

law on official statistics developed by United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)⁵, adapted to the specific context of the Maldives.

- b. Future census operations be regulated by a distinct regulation or act.
- c. Existing legal acts and regulations relevant to the production of official statistics be adapted as necessary for consistency and compliance with the new statistical regulatory framework.

PROGRESS SINCE THE REVIEW

The draft statistical act has been produced, revisited by the Attorney General's Office and officially requested for adoption as part of the government's legislative agenda.

5 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/ramon/statmanuals/files/UNECE_Generic_Law_2016_EN.pdf

Data sources, registers, processes and quality

Of great national concern is that the review identified that NBS is unable to exercise its authority to gain access to administrative data at a sufficient level of disaggregation. Hence, it cannot fully make use of these data for statistical purposes and cannot assure the quality of the resulting statistics.

Major surveys are conducted by the NBS and several other surveys are conducted by other agencies. The review observed that survey plans and schedules are unclear or not communicated widely, change frequently, do not include survey activities of the whole NSS and do not necessarily respond to priority needs for statistics, partly because such priorities are not clearly established.

The review recommended to:

- a. Establish a National Indicator Set. This would clarify data needs and allow subsequent planning of statistical activities, including survey activities.
- b. Conduct a data gap analysis based on the National Indicator Set. This would expand of the preliminary data assessment on the Sustainable Development Goals, which was undertaken in 2016.

PROGRESS SINCE THE REVIEW

The Ministry of National Planning and Infrastructure is working on a National Development Plan/Strategic Action plan that will enable the NBS/NSS to identify data requirements that will serve as the National Indicator Set. NBS/NSS will then conduct a gap analysis to develop a national statistical programme, including a survey plan.

Structure and functioning of the National Statistical System

The decentralized structure of the NSS calls for an effective coordination mechanism. Limitations to legal authority have made this a challenge. NBS lacks the identity and visibility needed to ensure professional independence and allow it to exercise its authority to coordinate the NSS.

Absence of comprehensive multi-year or annual programming for official statistics production in the Maldives weakens coordination. Although an NSDS is in place, in practice, it is not having the intended impact. The review found that practical engagement with users of statistics is lacking.

The review recommended to:

- a. Establish the lead agency for statistics as an organizational unit within the responsible ministry with the Chief Statistician formally assigned as the head of the unit.
- b. Establish a Statistical Council at the policy level. The purpose of this new mechanism is to provide policy level oversight and support to the development and implementation of annual and multi-year statistical programmes in the Maldives.
- c. Introduce an Annual Forum for Statistics to engage the larger user community and build support for and trust in the products and services of the NSS.
- d. Revitalize the National Statistical Coordination Committee (NSCC): as an immediate measure, it is recommended that the NSCC revisits the earlier developed list of designated agencies for the statistics outlined in the SRM, and that the lead agency uses this exercise to increase awareness among NSCC members on principles governing the production of official statistics.

PROGRESS SINCE THE REVIEW

NBS has revitalized the NSCC with the inclusion of new members and adding other relevant agencies to be more representative (e.g. National Disaster Management Authority and National Social Protection Agency). NBS has been involving users from different agencies, researchers and civil society in data dissemination processes combined with user's feedback sessions.

Economic Statistics

The review examined key economic areas in depth and provided the following recommendations (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Findings and key recommendations for economic statistics

NATIONAL ACCOUNTS:

The national accounts of the Maldives are compiled by NBS for Statistics and broadly follow the 1993 manual of the System of National Accounts (SNA93) with some significant conceptual discrepancies.



- The production of national accounts should be further integrated.
- Access to unit-level data from administrative records and registers should be granted to NBS.
- As part of a system-wide survey plan, a comprehensive and integrated system of economic surveys need to be developed.

GOVERNMENT FINANCE STATISTICS (GFS)

There are no specific provisions on the compilation of the GFS in the Public Finance Act (PFA) of the Maldives



- To invest in strengthening the capacity of the Ministry of Finance and Treasury for improved GFS.
- To update the Public Finance Act of the Maldives with provisions governing the production of the GFS and a direct reference to SRM.
- To establish a working group comprising statisticians from key stakeholders, tasked with addressing issues of coherence and timeliness between these 3 inter-related macro-economic statistics.

EXTERNAL TRADE STATISTICS

Maldives Customs Service (MCS) is responsible for collection of export and import statistics in accordance with Customs Act and Customs General Regulation of Maldives.



- Finalization and implementation of the roadmap that is under development for migrating to the guidelines on International Merchandise Trade Statistics of 2010 (IMTS 2010) - the latest version of the IMTS.

BALANCE OF PAYMENTS STATISTICS

BOP is compiled and disseminated by the Maldives Monetary Authority (MMA) and are broadly compliant with the methodological principles and classification system specified in balance of payments manual 6 (BPM6).



- The coverage of external sector statistics could be further improved for important economic sectors such as construction, insurance and business services.
- To make long time series of the external sector statistics according to the BPM6 available on their website.
- To enhance trust in their products and services, MMA should establish a data quality and revision policy and post it on their website.

PRICE STATISTICS-CONSUMER PRICE INDEX (CPI)

NBS as the Lead Agency for Statistics is responsible for the compilation of price indices in the Maldives.



- NBS takes the opportunity of re-basing to thoroughly review the CPI basket, and simplify it where necessary to enable pricing of items to run more smoothly in the future. Simplification should result in a smaller basket of goods outside of Male where pricing of consistent items is more problematic, causing problems for price collectors.

SHORT-TERM AND STRUCTURAL BUSINESS STATISTICS

Economic statistics in the Maldives are produced by various agencies with each agency having exclusive ownership over the production process of one or more specific statistical products, from data collection to the dissemination of the final deliverables.



- To improve the coverage and accuracy of economic statistics through a better estimation of the informal economy, remittances and other non-observed transactions.
- The Lead Agency should, in conjunction with planned future economic survey and census activities, prioritize the establishment of a statistical business register.
- Considering very low response rates for past economic surveys, a strategy to address this should be developed.

V. LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Reviews should be conducted regularly to identify strengths and weaknesses in the NSS and enhance the system to meet current needs
- Engagement of all key stakeholders across multiple levels will be a success factor

Statistics is a rapidly changing field and the National Statistical System needs to be regularly assessed and diagnosed to ensure it can supply national information needs. An assessment helps identify and transform the capacity of NSS to produce quality statistics aligned with the latest standards, the most efficient production processes and the best institutional environment.

The NSDS is the strategic plan for the whole NSS and ownership and commitment by stakeholders is essential. During the review, several stakeholder agencies did not make it a priority to provide their feedback and were not engaged in the process. After several reminders, some finally contributed while others never did.

Figure 9. Elements involved in getting stakeholders to engage and participate

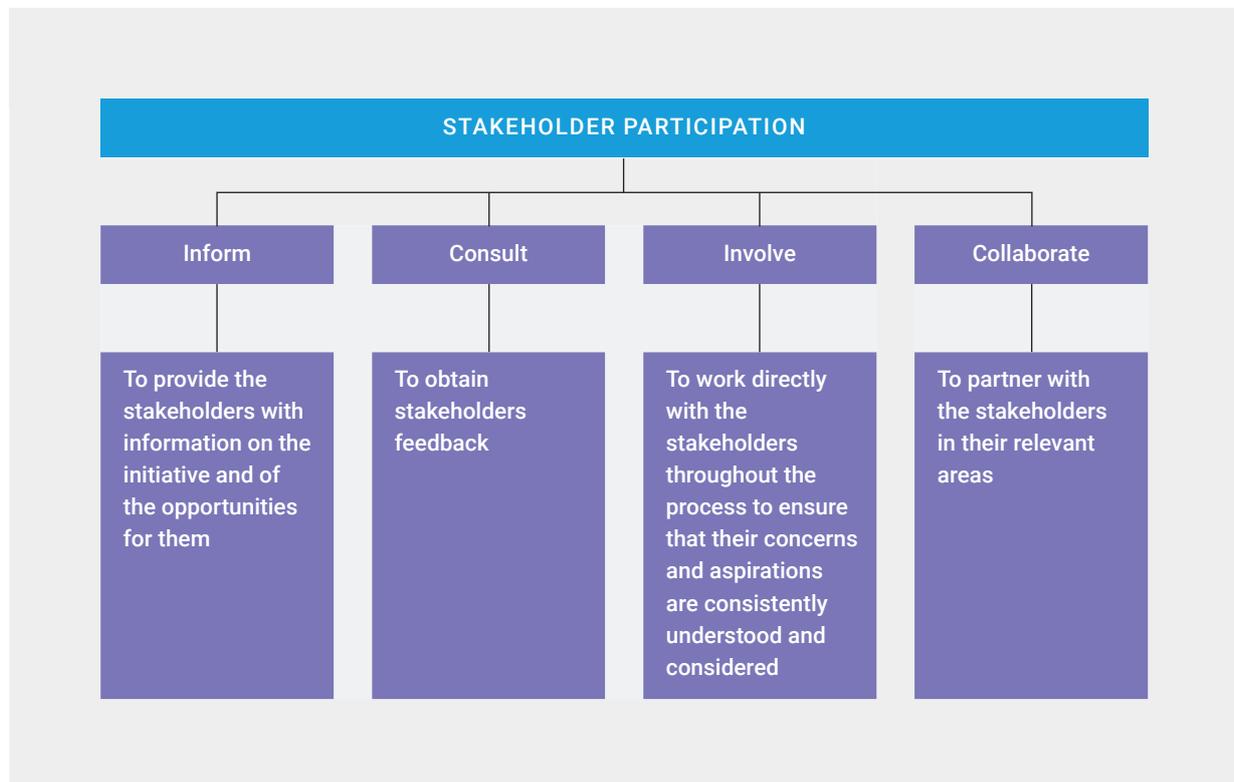
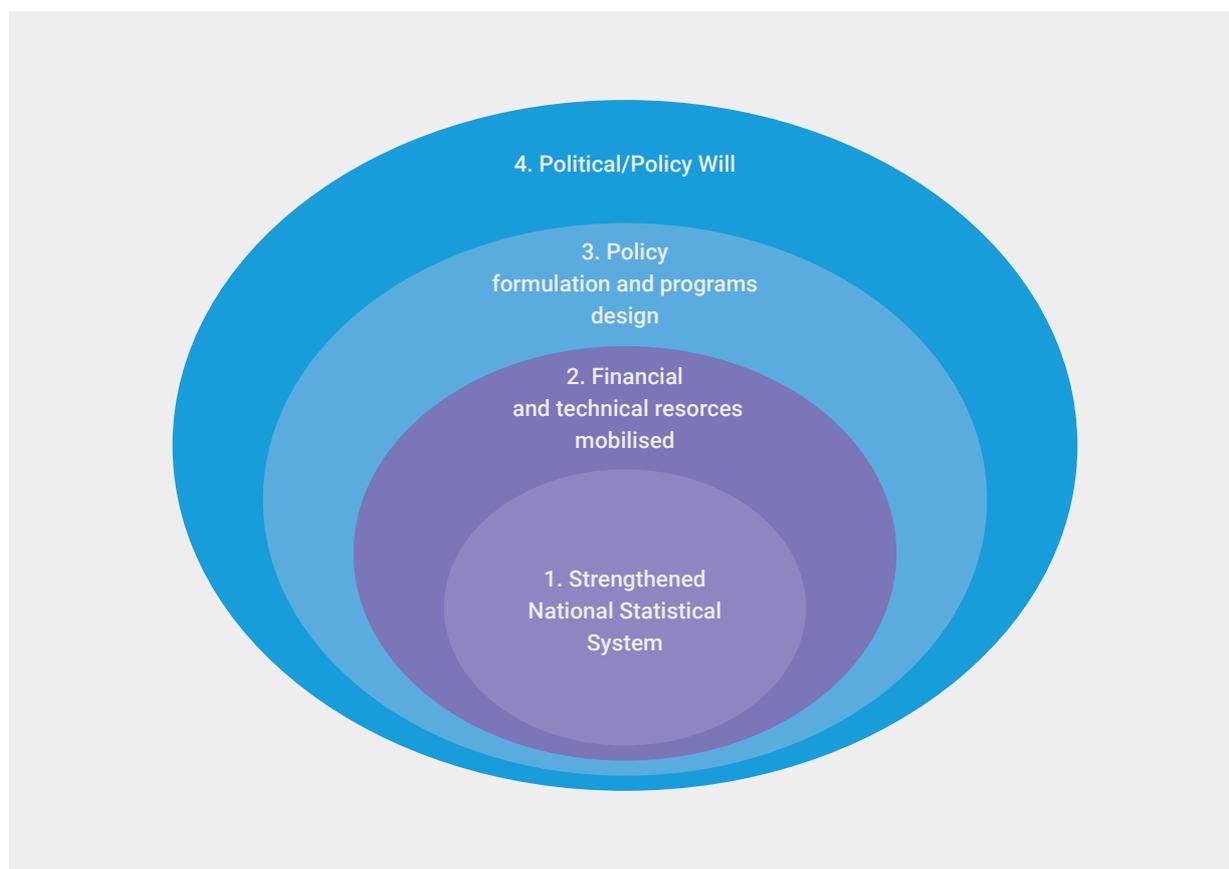


Figure 10. Political will and policy provide the basis for a strong National Statistical System



To get full engagement, it is important to ensure line ministries and agencies are aware of the importance of such exercises and how this will eventually benefit their organizations. High level political will helps immensely. National Statistical Offices should work to inform, consult, involve and collaborate with members of the NSS so they participate (Figure 9).

- **Strong political and policy level support throughout the process are required for review recommendations to be implemented**

Political will is critical for the success of any exercise related to developing an enabling policy framework. It facilitates accountability, mobilization of financial and technical resources

from government budgets, and consequently enables increased resource allocations from multilateral and bilateral development partners.

At the time of the review, the political situation in the Maldives was in a critical situation with presidential elections looming and a chance of transition to a new government. NBS faced many challenges in getting political/policy level support and commitment during this time.

Given low support at the policy level, the technical team at NBS, stakeholders and the ESCAP team worked through the review process without strong political commitment. The major challenge was faced at the stage of launching the final review report. The launch event, which was initially planned to be hosted in Maldives, had to be redirected to the Pacific region. It was fortunate that Maldives was able to participate in the "International Seminar on reviews of National Statistical Systems in Small Island States" and launch the report successfully at a technical level.

Based on this review, together with PARIS21, NBS is currently undertaking the process of formulation of the NSDS for the next 10 years 2020-2030, which will help establish political support for statistics in the future.

- **The review needs to cover all aspects, including economic, social and environment statistics along with the institutional and legal environment of the whole NSS**

A review of the NSS should cover the all aspects of the system including economic, social and environmental statistics together with the institutional and legal areas. As the recommendations of the reviews usually serve for the strengthening of the NSS, covering only a specific area will lead to an imbalance in priorities and allocation of resources. With limited financial support available, key actions need to be prioritized across all sectors as well as for cross cutting areas such as gender statistics, analysis and dissemination.

The mainstreaming of gender and other perspectives is critical for statistics produced under different statistical standards. Given that the SDGs call for disaggregated data, and that economic, social and environmental statistics contribute to the successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, the collection and reporting of statistics must address these essential cross-cutting issues.