

OHCHR Report to the High-Level Political Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals and the right of the child – Human Rights Council resolution 37/20 “Rights of the Child”

Response from Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services:

1. How the rights of the child are being upheld as a priority in your country in the face of the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children’s rights and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

The Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services is mandated to provide protection and to promote the rights of vulnerable groups in the Maldives. During this ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the Government ensured that the children, including children with disabilities, had unhindered access to their medical as well as social needs.

As such, the Ministry contacted parents and care takers of children with disabilities to check their current status as well as unmet needs. Most of the unmet needs which were identified during the calls, such as difficulty in accessing medication, basic essential care items (nappies, sanitizer, masks, Dettol, wet wipes, hand wash, towels etc), and health care services, were addressed.

The Ministry sent referrals to a total of 186 islands in the atolls to reduce communication gaps and to increase proper assistance. The referrals provided by relevant stakeholders included contact information of all the essential authorities which cater to children with disabilities. In addition, referrals and assistance via online therapeutic services were provided to parents of children undergoing therapeutic services, which came to a halt due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the lock down period, children with disabilities faced additional challenges as their normal routine was unexpectedly hindered. To surmount this, technical assistance was provided to parents and in certain cases special permits were granted to such children from relevant authorities.

Furthermore, subsidization of utility bills was given to the families, including those with children with disabilities. In addition, Disability Sensitive Action Plan was developed during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

To address the social and mental well-being of children, the Health Protection Agency as well as Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) working for the advancement of social and mental health continuously provided crucial information and activities via different media platforms. In addition, free online sessions were conducted by Government authorities and NGOs on topics such as anxiety in children during the COVID-19 pandemic, coping strategies and ways to help children during the pandemic.

Furthermore, the psychosocial support provided by the Ministry continued and home visits were also conducted in cases involving children, when the need arose. The social engagement team established at the Ministry provided psychosocial support as well as psychological first aid to adults and children admitted in COVID-19 care facilities.

In addition, with the increase in reported cases during this COVID-19 pandemic, addressing the social issues related to COVID-19 became crucial. Therefore to increase public access to the Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Service, a hotline (1421) was established through a collaborative effort with relevant institutions, to facilitate reporting of health issues, social issues and protection issues by vulnerable groups including children.

As for provision of emergency relief to families and individuals socially impacted by COVID -19 pandemic, with the assistance of UNICEF, 600 dry food baskets as Care Packs were provided to families of single parents who had 2-5 children below the age of 18, as well as to families registered at the National Social Protection Agency, who had children with disabilities living in the Greater Male' Region. In addition, 44,400 packs of cooked food were also provided to the families with children and were in need, living in the Greater Male' Region. Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services continue to provide care packs to families living in the islands which are under monitoring condition.

During the lockdown period, a lot of families including children who had travelled from islands to the Greater Male' Region for various reasons got stranded. During this period,

families and children were provided food, accommodation and their medical needs were catered to until they were able to return back to their respective islands. The National Taskforce convened for recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic encompasses a focused Working Group on Social Sector. The Working Group is collaborating to formulate a plan to ensure the resilience of communities, vulnerable groups and enhance provision of social protection services.

2. Particularly noteworthy examples of good practice towards realizing the rights of the child in your country, in relation to sustainable and resilient recovery from COVID-19 pandemic and the goals under review – including specific laws, policies and actions to advance the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Enactment of the Child Rights Protection Act in November 2019, signifies a paradigm shift in the area of child rights protection. The new Act came into force in February 2020, superseding the 1991 Act which was formulated almost 28 years ago.

This Convention compliant legislation, is extremely comprehensive and truly builds on the stipulation in Article 35 of the Maldivian Constitution regarding protection of children. The Act explicitly recognizes the rights of children to be protected from discrimination, exploitation, all forms of abuse in all settings, and the right to be protected from all traditional and cultural practices affecting their wellbeing. The Act reinforces every child's right to be registered at birth, right to necessary vaccinations and adequate healthcare. To accelerate the rolling out of the Act, the establishment of an Act Implementation Unit in is progress with the assistance of UNICEF.

In addition, under the National Resilience and Recovery Plan, strategies have been laid out to fully implement the Child Rights Protection Act taking into account the experiences and lessons learnt in the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, special focus is given to the prioritized strategies in the National Resilience and Recovery Plan to decentralize social service provision as well as capacity building. A special emphasis is also given to provide a safe, homely and conducive environment to foster children taken under State care.

Apart from these, a special focus is also being given on setting and establishing a well-coordinated multi-stakeholder mechanism to engage key stakeholders in advocating and protecting the rights of children.

Furthermore, in July 2020, a nation-wide campaign against domestic violence was launched, with the objective of raising awareness amongst men particularly, to mobilize their participation in disseminating this message.

Investing in the construction of shelter homes across the Maldives, strengthening the helpline and establishing emergency funds for victims and survivors are few other initiatives underway. Also efforts are underway to develop the training manuals and reference materials for judges to sensitize the judiciary on gender-based violence.

The COVID-19 pandemic and consequent quarantine measures rendered women even more vulnerable to domestic violence, and we realized the need for amplified efforts in this area. During the pandemic Maldives adopted a pre-emptive approach to counter the drastic increase in reported cases. All stakeholders collaborated in devising contingency and emergency response plans to establish an efficient response mechanism.

In addition to the above, the Juvenile Justice Act passed in November 2019, came into force on 20th November 2020. The Act completely overhauls the juvenile justice system in Maldives, by setting forth the rights of a child accused of an offence through all stages of the criminal justice system. The Act introduces Diversion Mechanisms, to emphasize rehabilitation and meaningful reintegration of children in conflict with the law. It is particularly important to note that with the Act coming into force, all trials concerning children in conflict with the law will now be heard in child friendly settings, completely separate from the court setup for adult offenders, and will be presided by specially trained judges. The Juvenile Justice Act has also established the Department of Juvenile Justice, to steer, monitor enforcement and implement the Act to ensure that objectives set forth are achieved.