

# Strengthening Local Governance in Maldives

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The Government of Maldives has grouped together every two or more atolls of the 19 existing atolls into seven administrative regions (provinces) and appointed a State Minister to each Province in order to accelerate the development of local government, empower citizens and promote democracy at local levels. The Government envisions the establishment of a three-tier governance structure, with the sector ministries at the national level, Province Offices and Atoll Offices at regional level and Island Office at island level and decentralized functions under elected councils.

## **Background**

Today the Maldives stands at the cross roads of democracy, where Maldivians are taking their first steps to establish a liberal democracy. Many challenges lie ahead for the newly elected Government in fulfilling this promise. Good governance remains the core of the Government's policies for democratization. Based on the principles of decentralized administration laid out in Chapter Eight of the 2008 Constitution, and under the spirit of good governance, the Government has embarked on establishing a local governance system with the aim of strengthening local democracy and addressing the economic and social development issues arising from a highly centralized government. The Government aims to achieve this through the implementation of a two-fold Programme of Regionalization and Decentralization.

The process of establishing elected Island and Atoll councils and a functioning local governance system, collectively referred to as regionalization and decentralization, is largely on track with the law on decentralized administration expected to be enacted by mid July 2009. The Government has taken the initiative to implement the constitutional provisions by submitting draft bill on "decentralization of administration units of the Maldives" to the

People's Majlis. The bill has been drafted to include the concepts of regionalization and decentralization pursuant to the ruling Maldivian Democratic Party's (MDP's) Alliance Manifesto.

MDP's Alliance Manifesto highlights the policies and pledges to cater for people's needs and wants. It emphasizes administrative and management reform for speedy service delivery to realize their needs and wants. With the aim of achieving efficient and effective service delivery at local levels, the country has been divided into seven regions, referred to as Provinces. The rationale for clustering two or more atolls to form a region or province is to achieve effective and efficient planning, co-ordination and management as a means to facilitate effective administrative decentralization and accelerate development in the islands. This would in turn, reduce the social, economic and developmental disparities between the capital island Male' and the rest of the country.

## **Regionalization and Decentralization**

The objective of the Regionalization and Decentralization Programme is to facilitate people-oriented development by empowering citizens and promoting democracy at local levels. The strategies identified to achieve this objective are as follows:

1. Developing representative local institutions at island/atoll level, whereby the people living in the islands and atolls will take part in deciding their own affairs.
2. Bringing the Government closer to the people by delegating and devolving centrally controlled functions including service delivery functions to the island, atoll/ province levels through elected Island Councils and Atoll Councils in each province, and an elected City Council in the capital island Male'.
3. Creating an enabling environment and a vibrant civil society to strengthen governance at local level.
4. Introducing new strategies for financing and sustaining development at all levels through community empowerment.
5. Developing local administrations and strengthening links between local functionaries and national authorities as a way to seek coordinated national development throughout the seven regions.
6. Developing an operational framework and a process for planning and managing local development, based on the inspirations of the people in the localities.
7. Bringing economies of scale which would facilitate market decentralization.

The Government needs to mobilize immediate financial and technical support to implement the programme. As such, a project document has been formulated for the first phase of the project.

## Regionalization and decentralization process

The Government aims to achieve regionalization and decentralization in two phases. The first phase focuses on establishing provincial offices, local councils, initiating programmes to address immediate capacity building and advocacy, and development of operational frameworks for coastal zone management and climate change adaptation. As such, the purposes of the first phase of the programme include:

- Bringing services closer to the people by establishing the Province Offices
- Drafting and enacting the law on local Governance
- Supporting local elections and establishment of local councils to bring administrative decentralization
- Developing regional and local level institutions through capacity building
- Establishing and strengthening local government public administration, local level planning, monitoring and reporting systems.
- Engaging in stakeholder consultations and advocacy on coastal zone management integrating climate change adaptation through civil society networks.

The second phase, to be developed after the completion of phase 1, will focus on ensuring the smooth implementation of the decentralization process.

## Management of Regionalization and Decentralization

The seven Provinces are demarcated as below:

	Name of Region	Atolls included in Region	Total Population
1	Upper North Province	Haa Alifu, Haa Dhaalu and Shaviyani	58, 268
2	North Province	Noonu, Raa, Baa, Lhaviyani	58, 109
3	North Central Province	Kaafu, Alifu Alif, Alif Dhaalu, Vaavu	28, 149
4	Central Province	Meemu, Faafu, Dhaalu	18, 642

5	South Central Province	Thaa, Laamu	29, 050
6	Upper South Province	Gaaf Alif, Gaaf Dhaalu	31, 547
7	South Province	Gnaviyani, Seenu	39, 862

*Data Source: Estimated population based on MoHA Statistics, March 2008*

The approach of the Government has been to fully launch the Regionalization Programme and to counter challenges and difficulties as they arise. In this respect, two Province Offices have become operational Upper North Province and South Province. In the remaining five provinces, Province offices will be set up in selected islands shortly. The President has already appointed State Ministers to all seven regions. Community consultation workshops to familiarize the public with the concept of regionalization and decentralization have been conducted in all seven provinces.

With concurrent implementation of regionalization and administrative decentralization, the Government envisions the establishment of a three-tier sub-national governance structure, with the sector ministries at the national level, the Province Office and Atoll Office at the regional level and the Island Office at the Island level. Each province will have an administrative island and a commercial hub which will facilitate market decentralization. The draft bill on local governance outlines the functions of the offices at each level.

The Province Offices will be responsible for formulating and coordinating regional development programmes in accordance with the laws and national level regulatory policies and establishing a mechanism for efficient delivery of services at regional, atoll and island levels in co-ordination with sector ministries at the national level. The Province Office will be headed by a State Minister in consolidation with the Home Minister and supported by the appointed deputies to the State Minister. The functionaries of line Ministries will be carried out by Civil Servants.

The Regionalization and Decentralization Programme has been planned with the vision that people will migrate by choice to regions where more prosperity and better services are available. The Government is also developing a national transportation system as a means to overcome the transportation barrier throughout the nation. Thus, instead of measures for resettlement in other localities through incentive benefits, measures assisting voluntary migration will, in time, facilitate the achievement of the policy of population consolidation pursued thus far.