



## **Asian Forum on Information and Communication Technology Policies and e-Strategies**

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### **Maldives – Country Report**



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## INTRODUCTION

The Maldives is an archipelago of about 1,192 low lying coral islands, spread over an area of 900,000 square kilometres in the Indian Ocean. A total population of about 270,000 resides in about 200 islands, with another 87 islands exclusively developed as tourist resort hotels. Population density across the country varies considerably, with only 6 islands of more than 3,000 inhabitants and nearly 70 islands with fewer than 500. A quarter of the population live on the island capital Male', which concentrates most of the facilities, services and opportunities. The de-centralisation away from Male' is hampered by lack of basic infrastructure and poorly developed inter island transportation system.

Given these challenges, government views the e-government initiative, along with its other initiatives to develop an ICT enabled community, as a cornerstone of its strategy to narrow the digital divide, delivering a better quality of life to the people of the Maldives and to bring the facilities, services and opportunities to its people. With this regard, the government has initiated a number of projects including the e-government initiative called the Information Technology Development Project (ITDP) and the Information Communication Technology (ICT) Policy Formulation Project.

## CURRENT ICT STATUS

### **National Centre for Information Technology (NCIT)**

NCIT was established on the 23 March 2003 and forms the central body for implementing ICT related policies and practices of the government. NCIT would cooperate and coordinate with appropriate bodies and agencies of government and the private sector, to ensure that information technology strategies and programs are consistent with national development priorities and requirements. The NCIT is seen as fulfilling a dual role. First, it would serve as a coordinating body for the development of information technology standards, guidelines and frameworks. Second, it would be responsible for the development and administration of the Government Network of Maldives, established under the IT Development Project (ITDP).



## **Information Technology Development Project (ITDP)**

ITDP will establish the Government Network of Maldives (GNM). GNM will connect government and parastatal agencies, in the capital Male', including its satellite islands and 20 atoll capitals. It will also setup government portals for the public (G2C), businesses (G2B) and for the government (G2G). This project will also install public service kiosks in Male' as well as on the atolls to provide the public with better access to the government information and services.

ITDP seeks to improve the efficiency, transparency, and accountability of public sector management by networking government agencies and electronically providing information and services for the public. The Project includes

1. development of the Male' Metropolitan Network (Male' MAN), a Gigabit Fibre network connecting government agencies in Male', and the development of a broadband satellite access network, connecting 20 atoll capitals, enabling government agencies to share their information and services electronically;
2. development of applications and portals, enabling electronic delivery of information and public services including the provision of applications for national citizen identification; public health services; and registration for vehicles;
3. building of public service kiosks, which will provide the public with better access to government information and services; and
4. implementation of telecommunications sector reform, which will eventually enable the public to get access to the Internet at an affordable price.

To date, the designing of the Male' MAN, the Access and Distribution networks are complete. The tendering documents for this part of the project are currently been prepared. Identification of an initial set of applications to be developed and deployed under this project has also been completed and functional specifications are currently being drawn up for these applications. Installation and Commissioning of the network and selected applications is estimated to be completed in 2006.



## **ICT Policy Formulation Project**

The formulation of the National ICT policy is currently underway. The national ICT policy is to ensure the maximisation of the potentials of ICT by providing over-arching policies, incentives and legislative to advance throughout the country, so that people in the Maldives can have better access to various opportunities in all aspects of life such as health, education, administration, business, etc. The development of a national ICT Policy and Strategies will have significant influence over all aspects of ICT projects in the Maldives. ICT Policy will be the basis for e-government and e-commerce with supporting legal framework.

An initial draft of the National ICT Policy has been drafted. At present, work is continuing towards finalising this draft, formulating strategies and activity alternatives required to achieve these policies.

Formulation of business models for Multipurpose Community Telecentres (MCTs), including the digitisation of information from key sectors such as health, fisheries, agriculture, etc. is also part of the National ICT Policy Formulation Project.

## **Multipurpose Community Telecentres (MCT)**

The geographical size and distribution of the islands coupled with the displacement of the population makes provision of any basic service prohibitively expensive. In the light of the diseconomies of scale and the severe logistical constraints that exist in the provision of services, MCTs are envisaged to facilitate the provision and expansion of important services using ICT to the island communities at a sustainable and affordable cost. The MCT concept involves the creation of an island location, where a variety of ICT services such as telephones, fax, voice mail, Internet, TV and radio for information and recreation will be provided to the island communities at an affordable cost.

In addition to the provision of the services stated above, MCTs would also provide in-service training in word-processing and in the use of the Internet and other information technology applications. In the longer term (when higher bandwidth becomes available nationwide), as teleconferencing becomes increasingly available, it would become a key part of the successful operation of an MCT. It can be used by the government for good governance.



Services like teleconferencing can be used in different sectors to enhance the services delivered.

As part of the National ICT Policy Formulation project, RFPs are being developed for the formulation of the business models for the MCTs and the digitisation of the information from various sectors.

## **Digitally Empowered Development in the Island Communities**

The purpose of the Digitally Empowered Development in Island Communities project is to empower island communities of the Maldives by sharing knowledge and information across distances and islands through a community portal. It will provide information about products and services of islands to a much wider audience via establishment of a community portal and websites in the local language Dhivehi as well as English. The project will give national and international exposure to local businesses, enhance access to markets, and create awareness on ICT to improve their social and economical life.

The project document for the development of the atoll portals, under this project, has been formulated and published. The documents required for the capacity building part of this project are being formulated presently.

## **CURRENT TELECOMMUNICATION STATUS**

At present Dhiraagu Pte. Ltd., a privatised joint venture between the Government of Maldives (55%) and Cable & Wireless (45%) provides all telecommunications services, including the Internet. Prior to 1995 telephone service was available only to a few islands. However, by the year 2000, all inhabited islands had access to communication by telephone. In addition, GSM mobile services are available in the capital and to a large part of the population. Internet access is available throughout the country, mainly in the form of dialup. Leased lines, ISDN and ADSL access is also available.

There are currently (to June 2003) some 29,316 fixed telephone lines making the country's teledensity 10.85 telephone lines per 100 inhabitants. The availability of telephone service is, however, concentrated in Male', where 73 percent of the total phone lines are installed.



There are also 881 public and private payphones most of which are installed in the islands. The lack of basic telephone infrastructure has popularised the subscriptions of mobile communications, which number 51,722, increasing the overall teledensity to 30.

Currently, there are 1,112 registered Internet subscribers in the country of which 61 are connected via leased lines, 185 via ISDN and 220 via ADSL.

## **Telecommunications Policy 2001 - 2005**

The “Maldives Telecommunications Policy 2001 - 2005” is aimed at the development of Maldives telecom sector towards achieving the targets of 6th National Development Plan and ultimately the economic and social developmental objectives envisaged in the Maldives Vision 2020. It would also guide the sector to develop the info-communication services so that it would link the dispersed communities and reduce the impact of the geographical isolation and physical separation that exists between the island communities.

The most prominent aspect of the policy, in relation to the digital divide issues is opening up of the telecommunication market. Other related features include:

1. Making Maldives an extensive user of info-communication technology and to improve accessibility to the ICT;
2. Reducing telecommunication charges;
3. Expanding telecommunication services and to improve the equitability of service; provision between Male’ and the other islands;
4. Strengthening the Regulator and improving the necessary legislative framework;
5. Making Government revenue from the telecom sector less dependent on the profit of the sector;

The Policy encourages private sector participation in narrowing the existing gap in the provision and availability of services between Male’ and the atolls. The policy also encourages competition especially in Internet service provision.



## **Liberalisation of the markets**

As highlighted in the Maldives Telecommunications Policy, government has recently licensed a second, private, party to provide Internet access services to the country. By introducing another Internet Service Provider (ISP), Internet access is expected to become more affordable and accessible to the public. Work is currently underway for the liberalisation of the mobile telecommunication market.

## **Strengthening the Regulatory Structure**

Under the guidance of the Telecom Policy, the Government has now established an independent entity, Telecommunications Authority of Maldives which is empowered by a Regulation with a view to strengthening the regulatory framework and enhancing services through private sector participation and competition.

## **WTO AND GLOBALISATION**

With the introduction of competition in the telecommunications sector, the Maldives is geared towards the step-by-step implementation of the WTO recommendations on liberalisation of service sectors. A national committee is constituted which will essentially focus on these issues.

## **CONCLUSION**

ICT development is given very high priority and its potential for the country highly regarded by the government. Through the formulation of policies and activities, government actively seeks to encourage and develop an ICT enabled community. ICT is also seen as one of the key resources to aid in the narrowing of the gap between the capital and the rest of the islands in the nation as well as between the nation and other nations. ICT's important role in bridging the digital divide and its ability for good governance and electronic service delivery (e-government) is recognised and realised in the ITDP and National ICT Policy formulation project.