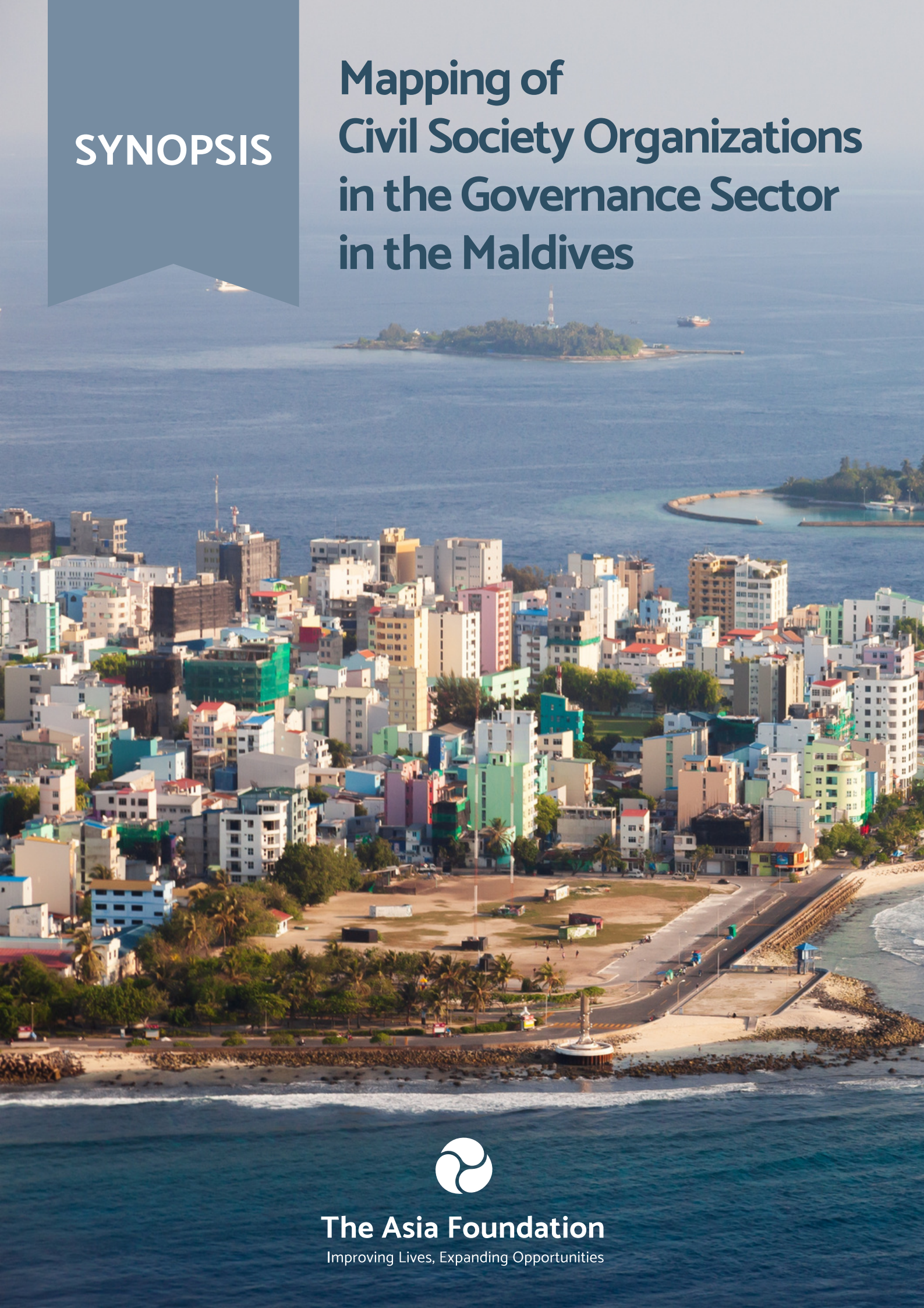


SYNOPSIS

Mapping of Civil Society Organizations in the Governance Sector in the Maldives



The Asia Foundation
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A report prepared for The Asia Foundation by

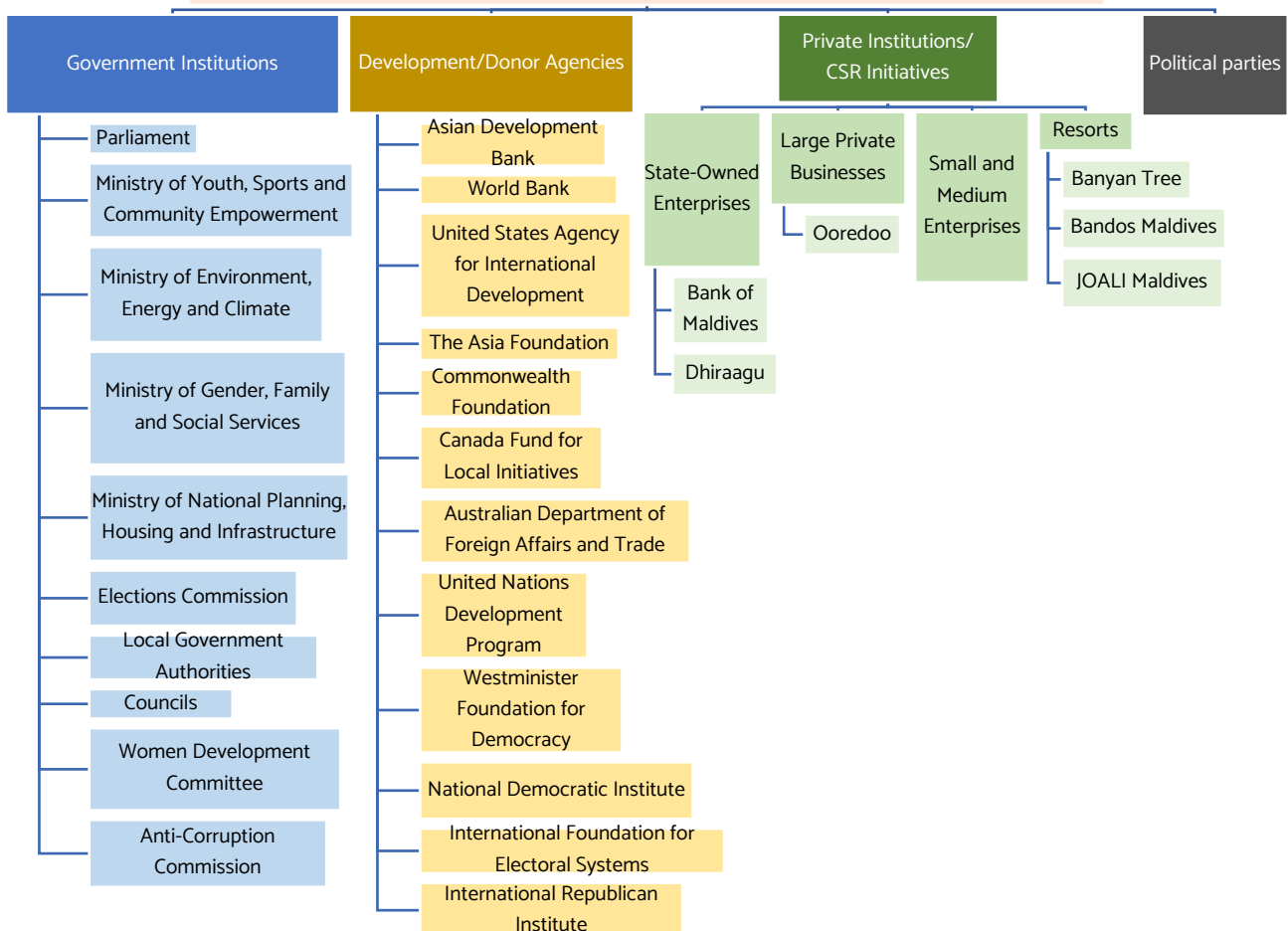
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Introduction

“Mapping of Civil Society Organizations in the Governance Sector in the Maldives” was commissioned by The Asia Foundation’s South Asia Grants Program, funded by the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau for South and Central Asian Affairs. Riyan Pvt. Ltd. conducted the research, which examines the operational landscape of civil society organizations (CSOs) working in the governance sector in the Maldives. There are 1,204 CSOs registered in the Maldives, with around 6 percent classified as working in the governance sector. The research utilized mixed methods: a desk review of existing literature and regulatory instruments; qualitative analysis of focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs) with key stakeholders and 20 governance CSOs; and quantitative surveys. Stakeholder consultations were held with government institutions at the national and local levels, including with donor agencies and community members.

Mapping of CSO stakeholders in the governance sector in the Maldives



This study examines the regulatory environment for CSOs and evaluates aspects of CSO operations to better understand the scope of their activities, capacities, funding, financial practices, and internal governance. It also explores the challenges they face and the opportunities available to strengthen governance.

Regulatory and Legislative Documents Related to CSO Operations in the Maldives

- Associations Act (Act Number 3/2022) – ensures the legal personality of registered CSOs. Sets forth the expectations of CSOs, such as being nonprofit and adhering to Islamic principles, governance policies, and reporting requirements. Specifies state and private sector contribution toward CSO activities.
- Act on the Decentralization of the Administrative Divisions of the Maldives (Act Number 7/2010) – sets forth a decentralized system of governance that allows for higher citizen participation. CSOs become key catalysts in fostering dialogue between the state and the people.
- Right to Information Act (Law Number 1/2014) – governs public access to information from state institutions.
- National Strategic Action Plan (SAP) 2019-2023 – proposes mechanisms to strengthen the CSO space (including the CSO Act, National Grant Fund, training and development opportunities, monitoring systems, and an online database of CSOs).

Findings, Analysis, and Recommendations

Findings from the study are compiled in two main sections. Information from secondary sources and data from the study were first analyzed in terms of classification, registration, geographical and thematic scope of work, and primary funding sources to present the overall landscape of CSOs operating in the sector. Secondly, data gathered from surveys and KIIs with governance sector CSOs was analyzed to evaluate stakeholder engagement, capacities, and challenges to highlight the current state of governance sector CSOs. Recommendations were then produced based on the observations made.

The Operational Landscape of Governance Sector CSOs in the Maldives

Classification

As identified in UNDP's Comprehensive Mapping of the Maldivian Civil Society,¹ terminology used to categorize CSOs in the Maldives does not always correspond to the scope of work. Organizations registered as 'sports clubs' were often involved in various island development activities, while registered NGOs were also involved in sports activities. Of the selected 20 CSOs, 85 percent identified themselves as an NGO, with 5 percent identifying as an 'association', 'club', or 'union' despite being actively involved in governance work.

Registration

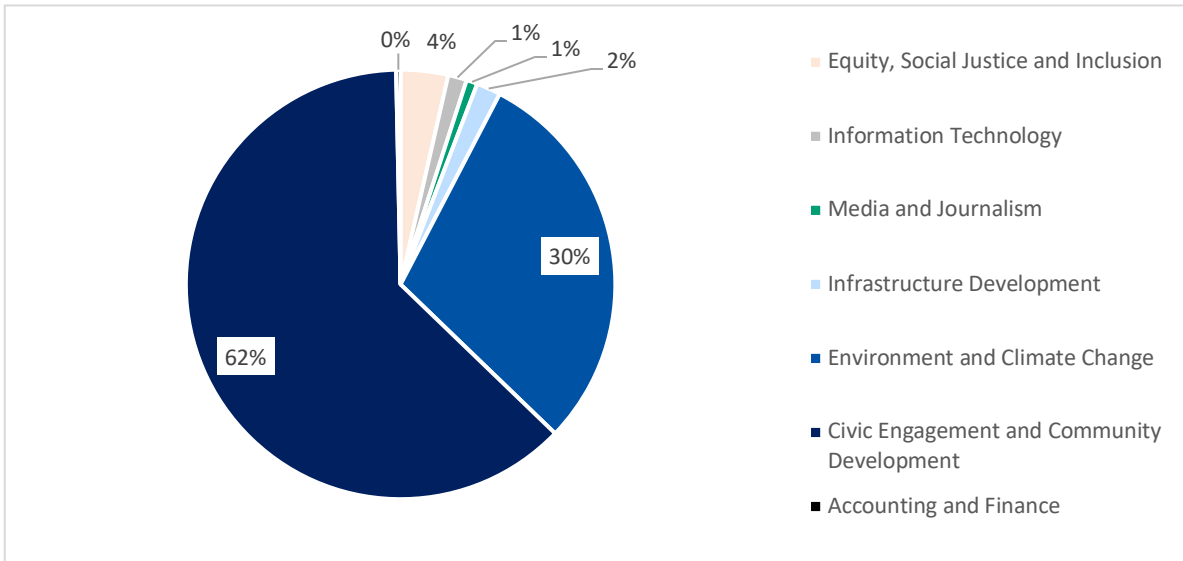
The Amended Associations Act mandates the registration of CSOs and was under the purview of the Ministry of Youth, Sports, and Community Empowerment (MoYSCE) at the time of the study. It is now known as the Ministry of Sports, Fitness, and Recreation. Registration periods for CSOs ranged from 2 months to 52 years. Spikes in registration were noted in 2009 and 2021/2022 due to regulatory environment changes. However, stakeholder consultations revealed that many registered CSOs that started as passion projects or hobbies were no longer in operation. The study showed a need to reconcile figures of registered CSOs with their activity status.

Scope of work

CSOs in the Maldives are spread across 183 islands; however, 27.4 percent are concentrated in Malé. Forty-two islands have fewer than 10 CSOs each. Of the 20 governance sector CSOs studied, 50 percent engage at the national level, and 25 percent have an international reach. Twenty percent focus on community/island-level work, and 5 percent are involved in regional work. The centralization of governance activities in Malé meant that 75 percent of the CSOs involved in work beyond their own communities are based in the capital. This disparity showcased the limitations placed on the CSO space by the geography of the Maldives.

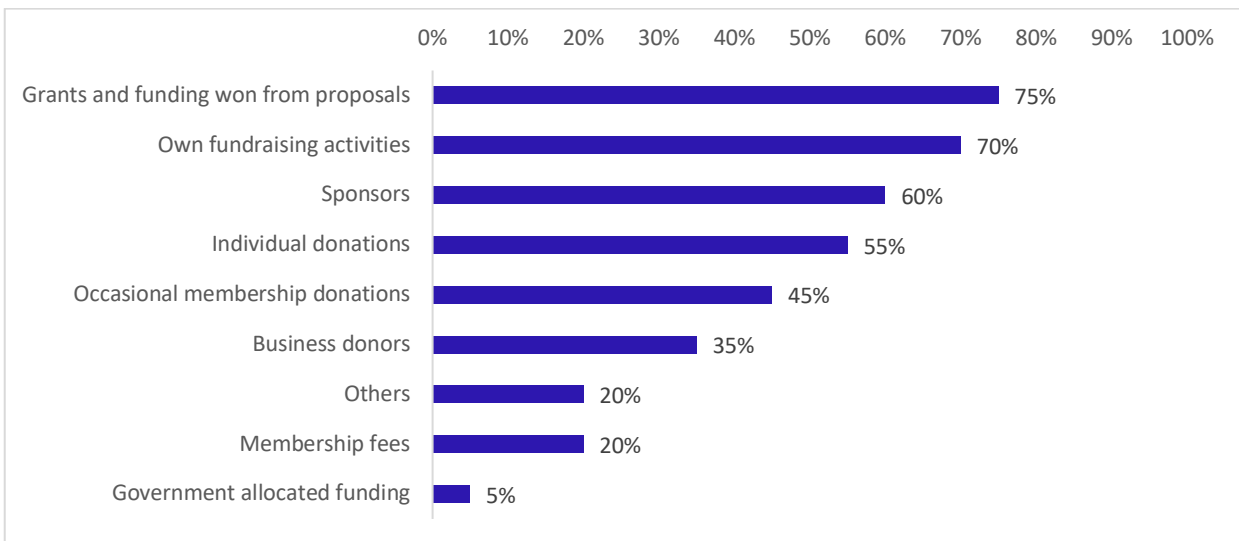
¹ <https://www.gov.mv/dv/files/summary-comprehensive-study-of-the-maldivian-civil-society.pdf>

CSOs by Key Sector/Themes



Pictured above are the primary areas targeted by governance sector CSOs as per information recorded by the MoYSCE. Over 70 percent of the organizations surveyed focused on three or more of these areas, with 10 percent working on up to eight different areas. This generalist approach among CSOs in the country has advantages and disadvantages. While it helps them to support initiatives that reflect communities' changing needs, it also restricts their ability to accumulate subject-specific knowledge in a substantive way and partake in governance related decision-making. This also impacted stakeholder confidence in collaborating with CSOs. Women were the primary target beneficiary group for CSOs. However, the generalist trend also continued, with 70 percent working on initiatives that targeted the general population.

Sources of Funding



CSOs mostly sourced funding from grants and fundraising activities. Despite an allocation from the government toward CSO activities, this made up only 5 percent, and many organizations expressed difficulty in obtaining funding and accessing information regarding funding opportunities. Moreover, local councils with a budget allocated for CSO activities also expressed that despite their eagerness to help, funds were insufficient to cover their expenses and CSO activities. Finding sustainable sources of funding was a challenge faced by many CSOs. The lack of allocated funding within grants toward administrative and operative costs was also a notable challenge.

The state of governance sector CSOs

Internal governance

Due the Associations Act, all surveyed organizations indicated that they had a concrete organizational structure, vision, and mission. Memorandums of Association and codes of conduct were also common, indicating fairly strong internal governance. The regulatory requirements of the Associations Act seem to also influenced the level of annual reporting (90 percent). The study, however, notes that some island/community-level CSOs struggle to meet this requirement, suggesting the need for more support from the authorities to ensure that these requirements are met.

The primary downfalls were visible in the lack of a strategic plan (50 percent) and annual audits (65 percent). The lack of a strategic plan coincides with concerns brought up by key stakeholders regarding the sustainability and longevity of many Maldivian CSOs. Annual auditing for CSOs in the Maldives is only required if an organization has an annual income of over 500,001 MVR, a threshold many CSOs do not meet, leading to an overall lack of auditing in the sector. While at least 85 percent of the organizations surveyed had some code of conduct, fewer than 60 percent had specific policies around discrimination, sexual harassment, and environmental sustainability. Transparency was also a high priority among the surveyed organizations, with 95 percent using social media, the internet, and publicly available annual reports to increase their visibility.

Resources and capacity

One of the most common trends in the CSO sector was the high level of volunteerism. Only 35 percent of organizations surveyed had full-time employees. Organizations pointed out that space constraints and high overhead costs severely impacted their

ability to recruit full-time staff. This largely contributed to the general public's opinion that such volunteer-based organizations would not be sustainable and lack longevity. Additionally, the lack of human resources affected the capacity of organizations to take on projects, a concern pointed out by stakeholders as well. It was evident that sustainability plans for organizations were vital and may need to consider building capacity to retain and recruit qualified personnel. Some CSOs requested more training on volunteer management. Meanwhile, the percentage of women in decision-making positions was quite high among the surveyed CSOs (70 percent).

Although it was evident that building capacity was important, training opportunities seemed to be severely lacking in certain areas. CSOs indicated that 94 percent of the training they had attended were conducted by government agencies, followed by training from other CSOs, donor agencies, and private institutions. The most popular topics were NGO and institutional development (70 percent), subject-specific training (65 percent), and project material development (including proposal writing), which was attended by 65 percent. While these findings indicated some level of training, more training in these and other areas is required. For example, over 50 percent of the surveyed organizations requested strategy-related and financial training. Centralizing training opportunities to Malé, as appears to be the trend, may also inhibit regional CSOs' participation.

Collaborations and partnerships

Ninety percent of the surveyed organizations indicated that they had collaborated or partnered with government institutions at some point. CSO stakeholder consultations revealed that partnering with government also came with challenges, primarily in coordination and the capacity of CSOs to engage in local government consultations. State sector respondents noted that CSOs operating in their constituencies primarily focused on youth and sports activities and, hence, could not collaborate on governance activities. While 50 percent of CSOs surveyed indicated that they had provided input on certain policies on gender, vulnerable populations, and the environment, this was only among well-established CSOs, primarily in the capital. This may indicate that support to local CSOs outside of the capital in government engagement strategies may help support their work on governance issues. Ninety percent of CSOs reported collaborating with another CSO, and 80 percent collaborated with private institutions.

Opinion on regulatory requirements and access to regulatory information

Sixty percent agreed that regulatory information was accessible through websites. However, 40 percent expressed that contacting authorities to make specific queries directly was difficult. CSOs were divided on whether the registration process was easy or difficult. Ninety percent of the organizations also expressed the need for further regulations and procedures to better govern the sector, though none were specified.

Public perception

Public perception of CSOs was of concern to the organizations. They noted that negative perceptions were largely influenced by the prevailing sentiment that CSOs are political, conservative public sentiment on gender issues, the exclusion of CSOs from governance spaces, and the notion that CSOs were ventures for personal gain.

Consultations with primary stakeholders

Challenges in the CSO space were also identified in consultations with key stakeholders, including government institutions, donor/development agencies, and private institutions who approached CSOs for corporate social responsibility initiatives. The most frequently cited concern was the inability to contact CSOs due to a lack of updated records at the MoYSCE, the CSO oversight body for the Maldives. Moreover, as expressed earlier, the lack of CSO sustainability and longevity, the lack of capacity, high staff turnover, centralization of CSOs in Malé, and a lack of coordination on the part of the CSOs were also identified as challenges.

Recommendations

Several recommendations were proposed to strengthen the sector based on the observations and challenges outlined above.

- **Organizational structure:** While acknowledging the current state of internal governance, the study emphasized the importance of establishing CSOs with strong organizational structures and formulating strategic action plans to ensure organizational sustainability.
- **Facilitating networking and capacity building:** To build the capacities of CSOs, the study recommends supporting networks for information sharing, where CSOs may come together to learn of opportunities for training, funding, and participating in

policymaking. State and donor mechanisms for disseminating information must also be improved. Training opportunities for CSOs to gain subject-specific, technical, and programmatic knowledge were also highly recommended.

- **Access to CSO services:** CSO services, including opportunities for training and funding, must be made available to CSOs outside of Malé.
- **Funding structures:** Based on CSOs' requests, funding structures should be changed to include administrative and operative costs that would enable them to cover overheads and recruitment.
- **State-CSO partnerships:** There is a need to increase collaboration and partnership between both the state and other CSOs. This includes more frameworks for collaboration, training of government officials to understand the importance of CSOs, active inclusion of CSOs in governance activities, platforms for integrated development planning with local councils, and platforms for resource pooling.
- **Public awareness and perception:** The perception of CSOs as proponents of foreign ideologies and partisan political agendas needs to be improved. CSOs expressed that raising public awareness of the role of CSOs must be done through increasing transparency. This includes making sure information is up-to-date and available in the public sphere (particularly relevant organizational information, their scope of work, current projects, and contact details), using social media to increase the visibility of the impact of CSOs on development, raising community awareness on the role of CSOs in local development, and recognizing the work of CSOs in governance-related activities.



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