



**Living on a crowded island: Urban transformation in the Maldives**

Background to a research in progress

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## Introduction

The Maldives is a group of about 1,192 islands situated south-west of India. The Maldives population estimated at 309,575 in mid 2008 live on 202 islands spread across an area of 115,300 square kilometers of which more than 95 percent is water. The islands of the Maldives are relatively small with only 2 islands having a land area of over 500 hectares. Despite the challenges of geography and size the Maldives has made considerable economic and social progress over the last three and a half decades. Its GDP per capita is the highest in the South Asia region and is on the verge being graduated from the UN list of Least Developing Countries (LDC). The Maldives has also made progress in raising a number of social indicators such as life expectancy, child mortality and literacy. However, these very changes have created increased tensions and challenges in terms of spatial development and urbanization.



Aerial shot of Male'

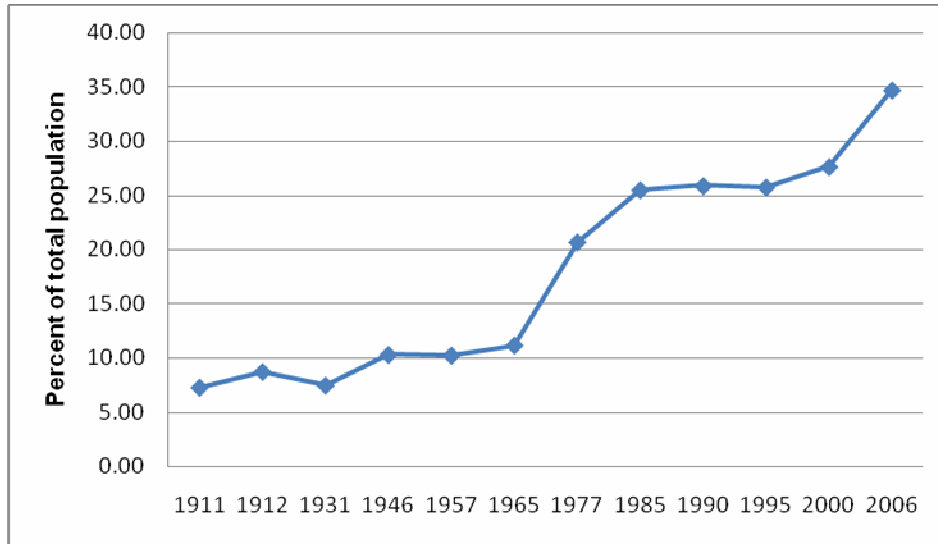
## Urban Growth

The problems of spatial development is manifested in the relative depopulation of already small populations on some islands and over urbanisation of the capital Male'. In Maldives as in other small island developing states (SIDS), internal migration and growth of a large urban centre (Male') can be attributed to spatial inequality due to urban bias in the availability of economic opportunities and provision of services and income disparities between Male' and other atolls. While there is some amount of inter-atoll migration, Male' is the main destination for both temporary and permanent migration in the Maldives. Historically Male' has been the centre of trade and administration. The advent of tourism in 1972 further increased the economic importance of Male'. Almost all the resorts that opened in the early phase of tourism development were located in Kaafu atoll, where Male' is located. At present more than 43 percent of all the resorts are located in Kaafu atoll. The growth of tourism and the service sector contributed to the remarkable economic growth witnessed by the country in the 1980s. The development of the tourism sector around Male', the rapidly expanding government sector operations in Male' and setting up of major education and health facilities in the capital city created significant disparities between Male' and other islands, which contributed to a large influx of migrants since the mid 1970s.

Figure 1 below shows the growth of Male' population as a percentage of the total population. When the first census was undertaken in 1911, Male' accounted for about 7.25 percent of the total population of the country. By 1965, this figure had risen to 20.67 percent. By 1985 every 1 in 4 people were living in the capital. The growth in Male' population coincided with the onset of tourism as seen by the sudden increase in the share of population from 11.15 percent in 1965 to 20.6 percent by 1977. According to the 2006 census about 1/3 of the country's population were living in the capital. In 1931 migrants constituted about 17 percent of Male' population. By 1985, the figure was almost 50 percent and remains at that level at the time of the 2006 census enumeration. According to the 2006 census the average annual growth rate of

Male' was 5.59 percent, compared to -0.06 percent in atolls. The national average was 1.69 percent<sup>1</sup>.

Figure 1: Growth of Male' population as a proportion of total population



The census population count of Male' do not include the transient population who come to Male' daily for a number of purposes. These include fisherman who come to sell their daily catch at Male's market, and traders and others who come for services that are available only in Male'. There is also a large number of expatriate work force residing in Male'. According to the Employment Ministry by the end of August 2008 there were 77,455 registered expatriates workers in the Maldives<sup>2</sup>. A large percentage of these workers reside in Male', adding to its congestion and housing problems.

<sup>1</sup> The census figures used in this paper have been calculated by the author using the 2006 Census dataset.

<sup>2</sup> reported in <http://www.haveeru.com.mv/?page=details&id=73610&category=irWfwyiv> , accessed on 20 September 2008



Photo: Ahmed Zahid

Migration, population growth and urbanisation has contributed to a number of social problems that impact the livelihoods of Male' people. Overcrowding, housing congestion and violence are some of the key social problems of urban growth in Maldives. These problems have been compounded by the large number of youth in Male'.

### **Social consequence of Urbanisation: Housing**

One of the most pressing social issues of rapid urbanisation is housing congestion and the lack of housing for the growing population. The island geography of Male' limits the available land for housing. There are also a number of competing demands on land as a result of the economic importance of Male'. An ambitious project begun in the early 1970s to reclaim the shallow waters around the island added about 60% of land to Male' which is now 197 hectares (1.97 km<sup>2</sup>) in size. Despite the increase in land size, Male' remains one of the world's most densely populated cities as population has continued to grow through migration. According to the 2006 census

figures, the population density of Male' is about 540 people per hectare (52,636 people per square kilometre), but may be a very conservative estimate.

A number of social and administrative factors affect housing use in Male'. In Maldives households are based on the extended family system and it is quite normal for extended families to live under one roof. In Male' land scarcity due to geography is compounded by inefficiencies in land use and allocation resulting in high housing prices and overcrowded housing. The government has stopped allocating housing plots in Male' for individuals as a result of land scarcity and high demand. New housing is being made available through private housing development projects at prices, which is beyond most migrants and residents of Male'.

In 2006 there were 14,107 households in Male' compared to just 9,700 in 2000. The average household size was 7.4 persons per household. The increase in number of households over the 6 year period is a result of subdivision of housing plots and families sharing a single housing unit. This has worsened the standards of housing, sometimes reaching slum conditions. The 2006 census used the density of household units rather than housing units or structure which gives an unrealistic average household size of size of 7.4 people per household. If density is calculated by housing unit or structure it will be quite high in Male'. It is common for a 2-3 bedroom houses to have 15 to 20 people. According to the Vulnerability and Poverty Assessment II Report between 1997 and 2004, the proportion of people living in houses with 40 square feet or few of housing area per person has increased from 17 to 22 and percentage of houses without compounds has decreased from 52 to 39 percent. The VPA survey estimates that the proportion of people living in houses with 5 or more people per room in Male' was 15 percent (MPND and UNDP 2004). This figure is likely to be higher now.

Large households combined with relatively small size of houses create very unhealthy living conditions, with people often sleeping in shifts. It is common to find whole families living in single rooms, which doubles as kitchen and living room. Such living conditions place great strain on families, sometimes leading to family break up. Official statistics reveal that 1 in every 2.3 marriages ended in divorce in 2006. While

there may be a number of reasons for such a high divorce rate, it is quite possible that living conditions can have an impact on family relations in Male'.

The Maldives has a traditional land tenure system under which land is administratively allocated on the basis of needs and remains the property of the government after having been allocated. While land cannot be explicitly traded, a semi formal real estate market has developed in Male'. However, with high demand, house rents are extremely high, with some families spending a large percent of their household income on housing. The 2002-2003 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) found that households paid an average of about US\$ 250 dollars for rent in Male'. Since the survey was completed Male's housing prices have sky rocketed with 2-3 bedrooms apartments now costing over US\$ 1,500. With average wages of about US\$ 350 - 450 dollars it is impossible for many to move out of family homes even though living conditions may be unbearable. It is interesting to note here that despite high rental costs the HIES found that 42 percent of Male' households were living in rented places. This raises the question of how money is found for housing and sacrifices people have to make in order to find a home of their own.

The HIES and the VPA survey found that poverty was negligible in Maldives, with no one below the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) dollar-a-day poverty line in Male'. However, about one in six persons in Male' were found to be below the highest poverty line of \$5 per person per day. The dollar-a-day poverty line has been highlighted as quite arbitrary and unrealistic as an indicator of poverty in developing countries. It is quite impossible for a household in Male' to live on US\$ 30 dollars or even US\$ 200 per month. Rising rents, utility prices and food prices means that there will be a number of households experiencing extreme poverty and hardship. This economic vulnerability, coupled with social vulnerability can create significant problems at a household and national level, that would impact the development gains of the past three decades.

### **Social consequence of Urbanisation: Youth violence**

The Maldives, like other developing countries has a relatively large proportion of people in the adolescent and youth age group. Nearly 75 percent of Male's population is under 35 years, with 31 percent of the population in the age group 15-24 years. It is also a telling fact that over 60 percent of Male's youth population consists of migrants. The young population creates demands for health, education, employment and entertainment which represent major challenges and responsibilities. A large working age population is good from an economic and human capital perspective if jobs can be found for them. However, there are also great expectations among the youth population about the kind and type of job they need, and the unavailability of such opportunities lead to disillusionment and frustration which often lead to violent and anti-social behaviour.

This has resulted in a significant rise in drug abuse and violent crimes in Male', especially among adolescents and youth. The problem of drug abuse has reached alarming proportions with estimates of about 30,000 drug users in the country, many of them in Male'. According to police records, drug offences had increased by over 500% and violent crimes by 200% between 2001 and 2007 in Male'. One of the most significant statistics in this context is the increase in the number of juveniles arrested for drug offences and violent crime over the 6 year period. In 2001 Police made only 16 juvenile arrests for drug offences. By 2007 the figure was 164. The respective figure for violent crime was 17 and 160. It is possible that the actual number of juveniles and adolescents engaged in these activities will be much higher as a number of cases goes unreported or are not investigated . A rapid assessment survey of the drug situation undertaken in 2003 found that 48 percent of key informants believed that the primary reason for drug abuse in Male' was family problems (NCB 2003). The congested living conditions in many households mean that young people spend most of their time outside the house resulting in group affiliations and gang violence. Since 2005, Male' has seen a rise in gang related fighting which has claimed lives. Since December 2007, five young people have been killed in gang-related violence and in April the army had to be mobilised in Male' to stop incessant fighting between gangs<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Accessed from <http://www.minivannews.com/news/news.php?id=4381>



## **Conclusion and proposed research**

The social problems of urbanisation has important developmental and policy implications. However, there is a lack of adequate research material on the issues of urbanisation. The research that exists, such as the Vulnerability and Poverty Assessment and Income and Expenditure surveys are mainly quantitative and does not explore the relationships between issues of housing, poverty, hardship, crime and violence. Furthermore, these reports ignore issues of poverty which appears insignificant in Maldives as they use conventional poverty line analysis of poverty. However, poverty and hardship are significant issues in Male' which needs to be looked at from a livelihood perspective. Other reports, such as those of drug abuse which makes links between living conditions in Male' does not explore the relationships to a substantial level. It is important therefore to undertake significant research in to the extent of the housing problem, its links to households relations, poverty, social capital and behaviour of youth in Male'.

### Proposed research

#### *Main research question*

How has urban transformation impacted livelihood in Male'?

#### *Objectives of the research*

1. Explore Male's urban transformation.
2. Understanding the features of vulnerability and deprivation in Male' and how it is understood in Male's context.
3. Identify ways in which urbanisation has impacted livelihoods, especially in relation to poverty, housing, social capital and violence.
4. Identify the relationships between housing congestion and household relations, social capital formation and violence.
5. Propose policy options to deal with the social issues of urbanisation.

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