## Information for the thematic report on climate change, culture and cultural rights by Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights

## Maldives’ responses to Questionnaire on Cultural Rights and Climate Change

**Negative impacts of climate change on culture and cultural rights**

1. ***What negative impacts of climate change on culture, heritage and the enjoyment of cultural rights by all have been documented in your context? Are particular groups, such as women, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, rural persons or peasants, and youth or future generations, as well as cultural practitioners being impacted in specific and disproportionate ways? What efforts are being undertaken to inventory and monitor such impacts?***
   1. Maldives is one of the most vulnerable countries to the adverse impacts of climate change. This is mainly due to its low-lying nature and other geographical features, environmental and socio-economic factors such as smallness and disbursed nature of islands and their high exposure to environmental degradation and to natural disasters. In addition, economic vulnerability due to limited ability to exploit economies of scale, limited natural resources, low diversified economy, dependence on narrow range of exports and high dependence on imports of strategic goods makes Maldives amongst the most vulnerable countries to face climate change impacts.
   2. Climate change is the most challenging issue faced by the country today and is considered as an existential threat to the country. The country’s natural assets such as coral reefs, beaches and mangrove ecosystems and their biodiversity are highly susceptible to sea level rise and ocean acidification resulting from climate change. These assets are interconnected to the culture and identity of Maldivians, as the country has survived within these islands for thousands of years. Further, our survival was based on these natural assets which are also intertwined with the cultural identity of Maldivians. As such, any loss to these assets will have irreversible impacts to the culture and identity of the country and its population.
   3. However, there has been limited work done so far to conduct a detailed assessment to identify the negative impacts of climate change on culture, heritage and the enjoyment of cultural rights, due to availability of limited resources and lack of institutional capacities.
2. ***Are cultural sites or resources which are critical to participation in cultural life identified as being threatened due to climate change and if so, how? What processes are used to analyse the risk of harm or inaccessibility to these areas and resources? Are records being kept about these risks and impacts?***
   1. The Maldivian islands are extremely small in size and have very low elevation; no more than 2 meters above sea level. Hence, majority of the critical infrastructure including cultural heritage sites, both pre-Islamic and Islamic, are often situated in very close proximity to the shoreline. This exposes these heritage sites to extreme weather events, storm surges and natural disasters induced by climate change.
   2. Heritage sites are situated all over the Maldives, including in uninhabited islands. As there have been no detailed assessments conducted for individual sites, the impacts of climate change on these sites are generalized, and are considered to be similarly affected as critical infrastructure such as utilities and health facilities. All these sites are at risk of damage due to beach erosion, flooding and wind storms.
   3. The Government of Maldives is facilitating climate proofing of cultural sites which are more prone to damage due to beach erosion, through construction of seawalls or coastal protection structures. However, additional resources are required to identify the possible risks and enable climate proofing of all the heritage sites.
3. ***Please provide examples of specific natural resources, local sites used for cultural practices or seasonal patterns that influence the ability to participate in diverse aspects of cultural life that may be subject to volatility due to climate change. Consider also diffuse geographical features or resources that may be at risk and are definitive or influential in the practice and development of culture on either a collective or individual basis.***
   1. Due to the low total area of land, coral reefs are the dominant ecosystem found in the islands of Maldives. Coral reefs play an important role for Maldives at various spatial scales. In addition to protecting the islands from the open sea and storms, coral reefs are also fundamental to the economy of Maldives. As tourism and fishing are the two main industries of the Maldives, there is a huge dependency on coral reefs for income. Maldives rely on the reefs to bring in more tourists and to support the burgeoning reef fisheries, which have grown to supply the demand from the tourism sector. As such, island communities interact with the reef on a daily basis. Coral reefs are thus of great value to the island communities and are strongly connected to our heritage and culture.
   2. Coral reefs are severely impacted by climate change. Coral bleaching has severely increased over the years which negatively impacts the aesthetic value of the reefs and in turn the economy, particularly fisheries and tourism.
   3. Taking into account the pivotal role these coral reefs and the marine environment play in the island communities, Baa Atoll of the Maldives was declared a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 2011. This was developed as an alternative to the conventional approaches to conserve the natural environment.
   4. Based on the success of Baa Atoll Biosphere Reserve, the Government is working to replicate similar sites across the archipelago (at least one site per atoll) to protect and preserve the natural assets and demonstrate socio-economic and cultural values associated with these sites to local and international visitors.

**Positive potential of culture and cultural rights to enhance responses to climate change**

1. ***What are ways in which culture and cultural resources, such as traditional knowledge, are being used to mitigate and/or adapt in the face of climate change? Where available, please share examples of best practices for applying traditional knowledge and cultural practices, such as those of indigenous peoples, peasants and fisher people, including traditional fire management and agricultural techniques that should be considered in developing mitigation and adaptation responses. What is being done to inventory and preserve such cultural resources that could be useful to addressing climate change?***
   1. The traditional method of elevation is being used in building houses, mosques and facilities in the islands, to ensure that the buildings are lifted to mitigate possible flooding events. Passive cooling methods have also been adopted.
   2. In addition, traditional practices are still being used to protect the islands from beach erosion and flooding, such as planting trees and providing natural and sand buffers to vulnerable areas which are prone to erosion.
   3. However, traditional and community knowledge and practices need to be well documented and studied to enhance climate change adaptation.
2. ***In what capacities do experts from across the field of culture and climate interact and exchange knowledge at the national or international levels? For example, are experts from various cultural fields involved in relevant climate change policy? Are climate change experts engaging with the cultural sectors, and if so how?***
   1. The Maldives Climate Change Policy Framework and Maldives Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) highlight the importance for engagement of stakeholders and different cross sections from the society in undertaking climate actions in the country. This includes experts from cultural fields and communities.
   2. However, more work needs to be done to identify the risks associated with climate change on the culture and cultural assets of the country.

**Measures taken and recommendations**

1. ***Are affected persons and groups being consulted and enabled to participate in discussions related to climate policy and climate action?***
   1. Inclusivity is a key policy of the current administration. One of the guiding principles of the Maldives Climate Change Policy, the principle policy document that addresses and mainstreams climate change issues in the country, is ‘Ensuring Intergenerational Equitability.’ Therefore, at all stages of the formulation of this policy framework, and implementation of climate actions, priority is given to ensure equitable engagement between population groups through recognition of the unique nature of each atoll, communities, diversity of needs and access to opportunities, services and goods. Particular attention is also paid towards respecting human rights, the rule of law, gender equality and vulnerable communities.
   2. The general public is also encouraged to participate and share concerns in the project planning stage of development projects through the elected island councils. In that regard, public consultations are carried out by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in the assessment process of the Environmental Impact Assessment Report (EIA) which developers are obligated to submit under the Environment Protection and Preservation Act of Maldives. The EIA process is opened for public commenting where the affected groups can raise their concerns during the initial stage. The decision of EPA takes into consideration the public comments. The project would be discontinued where the EIA is not approved by the EPA.
2. ***Are cultural rights defenders who are working on climate-related harms to culture and cultural rights facing specific challenges in their work, and are they at particular risk of threats, harassment and human rights violations? If so, how should these human rights defenders be better protected and supported?***
   1. Article 27 of the Constitution of the Republic of Maldives provides that everyone has the right to freedom of thought and the freedom to communicate opinions and expressions in a manner that is not contrary to any tenet of Islam. Furthermore, Article 28 of the Constitution provides the rights to espouse, disseminate and publish news, information, views and ideas.
   2. The Government of Maldives encourages human rights defenders to work freely without any threat or fear and is committed to respect, protect and promote the work of all human rights defenders.
3. ***Are*** ***the impacts of climate policy and climate action on culture, cultural rights and human rights more broadly being assessed? What should be undertaken in future in this regard?***
   1. Due to the availability of limited resources and lack of institutional capacities, there has been limited work done so far to conduct a detailed assessment to identify the impacts of climate policy and climate action on culture and cultural rights.

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30th April 2020