



# THE FUTURE IS NOW

HOW YOUNG PEOPLE ACROSS THE ISLANDS ARE PUTTING THEIR CREATIVITY TO THE SERVICE OF THEIR COMMUNITIES

The energy in the air is palpable. Even through the artificial light of the laptop screens, it is clear that this group of young people are excited and ready to take on the world. Perhaps it was the seemingly never-ending wave of lockdowns, or maybe it was the prospect of being together with a like-minded group of peers that energised these youth; most likely a mix of both.

This was Youth Vision – Art Workshop: *Ekani Ekuga*, a virtual art workshop for youth where societal issues and personal identities were discussed and explored through different art mediums. A fitting term, *Ekani Ekuga*, which in *Dhivehi*, the Maldivian language, translates to ‘alone together’, symbolises the digital era that the COVID-19 pandemic brought in; a state of being physically alone, but virtually together simultaneously.

Many young people feel the same way, even now. Feelings of being alone, cynical, and unsure about the trajectory of the world around them is common amongst the youth who feel that they deserve better from their communities. Indeed, better opportunities, better resources, and better guidance are rights which ought to be afforded and awarded to our youth, if we are to hope for a better tomorrow.

The role of youth in any country is without a doubt a significant one. They are the morrow and the driving force of development and prosperity. The changemakers who will navigate our communities

to a brighter path. As such, their involvement in the decision-making process is crucial. They are not only the future, but the *right now* as well. The investment in young people should start today.

The youth population in the Maldives is large and increasing; 43 percent of the country’s population comprises of young people<sup>1</sup>. And yet, their meaningful representation in the country is minimal. Their presence in the civic space is insufficient, and this absence is deafening.

Empowering youth to engage more in society means providing them with essential opportunities to exercise their voices and placing the power in their hands. It requires equipping them with the fundamental and necessary skills and information to navigate the world. It means giving them a chance to explore different avenues and fostering an environment where they feel safe and comfortable enough to take these lessons and translate it to the wider community. Boosting creativity, critical thinking and leadership skills are key.

Through the art workshop, participants were able to take part in relevant dialogues about pressing issues such as job security and livelihoods, environment, leadership, violence and abuse, social cohesion, and peace. The goal was to create a safe, respectful harbour for them to express their opinions, without the fear of it being washed away in a tide of noise.



**“I work at the Maldives Bureau of Statistics, which has given me the opportunity to travel to different islands, to meet different people. I’ve truly learnt that the social problems that people face at the household level is so multi-faceted and affects each person individually. So, when things like that were brought to life during the sessions, I think it really broadened everyone’s horizons and perspectives; that many issues in society can stem from one problem, and not just the main stereotypical one we usually hear about,”** says Imsa, a Youth Vision participant.

By exploring art as a medium, Youth Vision participants were able to convey their thoughts and stories and relate it to the broader context of societal issues, while also developing their leadership and critical thinking skills.

“I think this workshop provided all the participants with the very essential basics; the research, the process and the brainstorming that needed to be done was explained in a systematic way. This made something that a lot of people would find overwhelming a lot more calming and enjoyable,” says Imsa. “I believe everyone, no matter their skill level, was able to learn some key points that may help them in any project that they may come across in the future.”

This is a similar running theme in all youth-focused programmes by UNDP Maldives. Miyaheli Social Innovation Camp focuses on youth-led innovations to tackle society’s most pressing problems, and at the recent Practice Parliament for Youth programme, youth were given training on parliamentary and democratic procedures.



In all these initiatives - including Youth Vision, the youth participants were guided on building their skillsets, then given the opportunity to apply what they learnt in a more practical sense; something that would certainly embed more confidence and knowledge in them.

Our vision is to build a generation of young people who are informed and empowered; to create a lasting ripple effect where they are strong and fearless enough to work towards making a positive change on their communities, in turn inspiring others to do the same and carry it forward. After all, this is the only way to ensure that our society moves forward.

The Maldivian youth are driven, creative and passionate about bringing about change. They are excited and ready to take on the world; all they need are the right opportunities to do so.