

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



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

A report prepared for The Asia Foundation by

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

ACC	Anti-Corruption Commission
ADB	Asian Development Bank
ADM	Association for Democracy in the Maldives
ARC	Advocating for the Rights of Children
AusAID	Australian Agency for International Development
BML	Bank of Maldives
CCF	Complex Crisis Fund
CDP	Capacity Development Plan
CF	Commonwealth Foundation
CFLI	Canada Fund for Local Initiatives
CHRI	Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative
CoDI	Community Development Initiatives
CSO	Civil Society Organization
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
DFAT	Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
ERI	Equal Rights Initiative
FGD	Focus Group Discussions
FNF	Friedrich Naumann Foundation
ICT	Information Communication and Technology
IFES	International Foundation for Electoral Systems
IRI	International Republican Institute
JP	Jumhooree Party
KII	Key Informant Interviews
LGA	Local Government Authority
MACCS	Maldives Arts and Craft Cooperative Society
MAPD	Maldivian Association for People with Disabilities
MDN	Maldivian Democracy Network
MDP	Maldives Democratic Party
MESA	Maldives Elections Support Activity
MIRA	Maldives Inland Revenue Authority
MMWM	Mission for Migrant Workers of the Maldives

MNPHI	Ministry of National Planning, Housing, and Infrastructure
MoEECT	Ministry of Environment, Energy, and Climate Change
MoGFSS	Ministry of Gender, Family, and Social Service
MoYSCE	Ministry of Youth, Sports, and Community Empowerment
NDI	National Democratic Institute
PACCB	Public Awareness and Community Capacity Building
PPM	Progressive Party of Maldives
PRIME	Promoting Resilience in Maldives
RTI	Right to Information
SAP	Strategic Action Plan
SASGP	South Asia Small Grants Program
SCD	Systematic Country Diagnostic
SGF	Small Grants Facility
SHE	Society for Health Education
SIMD	Strong and Inclusive Maldivian Democracy
SMEs	Small and Medium Enterprises
SOEs	State-owned Enterprises
TM	Transparency Maldives
UNDP	United National Development Programme
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WB	World Bank
WDC	Women Development Committee
WEAM	Women Entrepreneurs Association of the Maldives
WFD	Westminster Foundation for Democracy

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Executive Summary

In 2008, the Maldives ratified a new constitution based on multi-party democratic principles, which paved the way for electoral and judicial reforms, media liberalization, and strengthening key institutions - including the civil society sector. In parallel, the Maldives also initiated the involvement of civil society actors as partners in the nation's democratic consolidation, focusing on good governance principles and practices. Subsequently, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have contributed to large-scale initiatives and participated in consultations and forums at various levels to ensure accountability and transparency in government decisions and policymaking. These organizations have also pursued objectives such as meeting representational goals, fostering regional integration and global cooperation, and maintaining or re-establishing respect for human rights in the Maldives.

Mapping of the CSOs Operating in the Governance Sector in the Maldives, initiated by The Asia Foundation under the South Asia Grants Program (SAGP) and funded by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau for South and Central Asian Affairs, aims to provide an overall profile of civil society organizations working in the space of promoting good governance in the Maldives. This research employed a desk review, key informant interviews (KIIs), and focus group discussions (FGDs) engaging key stakeholders to assess the status of ongoing activities in the sphere of governance being undertaken by CSOs, government institutions, donors, development agencies, political parties, and community groups. It is important to note that while the sample of surveyed CSOs has been selected based on their engagement in governance-related work in the Maldives, the general findings of the survey also relate more widely to CSOs operating in the country. One reason for this is that CSOs in the Maldives are often more general in their areas of work rather than specialized in one area. As such, while the sample group has been identified as governance CSOs, they also engage in broader areas of work. Further, the desk review of existing legislative and policy documents and other general considerations related to challenges, opportunities, and the operating environment of governance CSOs may also relate to CSOs more widely.

This study seeks to understand the practices of CSOs in the Maldives under the current regulatory environment—particularly the amended Associations Act, the Decentralization Act, and the Right to Information Act—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 these organizations face and opportunities to strengthen the sector and support their role in promoting good governance in the country.

Among many findings, the study reveals that most CSOs working in the governance sector in the Maldives are registered in Malé and work at a regional, national, or international level rather than the community level. The majority of these CSOs encompassed multiple focus areas, indicating the ability to respond to communities' diverse and changing needs. This is especially critical given the evolving democratic landscape and adherence to international best practices for good governance. However, this also suggests that CSOs may lack expertise in specific focus areas, hindering their ability to work in the governance space. CSOs face critical challenges regarding capacity and resources, funding and training opportunities, disseminating and accessing information pertinent to CSO development, collaborating with other stakeholders, and public misconceptions about CSOs.

Based on the findings of the study, key recommendations to address challenges facing CSOs working in the governance sector include:

1. CSOs should have a strong organizational structure with a clear vision, mission statement, and objectives. To ensure the organization's longevity and sustainability, this should be coupled with an emphasis on strategic action planning and adhering to a structural framework.
2. CSOs should ensure that relevant organizational information, scope of work, current projects, and contact details are up-to-date and available in the public sphere.
3. Strengthening the flow of information regarding available funding and training opportunities. This would involve strengthening state and donor mechanisms that disseminate information and the capacity of CSOs (particularly those outside of Malé) to access available information.
4. Promoting access to opportunities for regional CSOs given that many opportunities in terms of training and funding remain centered around Malé. Donor-funded and state-led projects that aim to strengthen civil society should emphasize opportunities targeting regional CSOs.

5. CSOs garner a certain amount of negative public sentiment as they tend to be viewed as proponents of foreign ideologies or partisan political agendas. The negative public perception of CSOs could be improved by:
 - a. Community awareness programs to promote CSOs and discuss their roles and importance in local community development.
 - b. Engaging media and social media to feature work conducted by CSOs and the impact of their work on communities and development.
 - c. Encouraging recognition for the work done by CSOs in policy reform and governance.
6. Increasing networking opportunities such as CSO forums for CSOs to connect with each other, government institutions, private institutions, and donor agencies. Projects focusing on strengthening civil society in the Maldives might address this gap by incorporating elements to strengthen networks into their project objectives.

Introduction

Research Background

Mapping of CSOs Operating in the Governance Sector in the Maldives aims to provide an overall profile of CSOs active in the Maldives governance sector. It focuses on understanding the operating environment in which these CSOs work, their portfolio of activities, funding status, and capacity-strengthening needs. Other significant stakeholders, such as government organizations and donor and development agencies, are also considered in the assessment.

Objectives

The objective of this assignment is to carry out a mapping exercise of CSOs and donors engaged within the following thematic areas in the governance sphere in the Maldives:

1. Public sector transparency, accountability, and anticorruption
2. The right to information
3. Equity, social justice and inclusion
4. Social accountability, civic engagement, and participation
5. Environmental governance and climate change
6. E-Governance, Information Communication and Technology (ICT) for development and civic-tech
7. Misinformation, disinformation, digital media, and open data
8. Budget analysis and advocacy
9. Investigative journalism
10. Public infrastructure monitoring

To this end, the mapping exercise identified key civil society actors and donors in these areas and examined their operations, capacities, and funding practices. The exercise also focused on identifying key opportunities, challenges, and needs in the sector. The project adopts a qualitative and quantitative approach in which data was collected through both primary and secondary sources.

Sector Background

According to the United Nations definition, "good governance" refers to adding a normative or evaluative attribute to all governmental institutions, procedures, and practices that regulate and decide on issues of common concern. Some attributes include full observance of human rights, the rule of law, effective involvement, multi-stakeholder partnerships, political pluralism, transparent and accountable institutions and processes, and a productive and effective public sector. According to this definition, good governance also involves sustainability, equity, knowledge, access to education, the political empowerment of individuals, and behaviors that encourage accountability, unity, and tolerance.

Good governance in and of itself is neither imaginable nor achievable without adequate social development, which depends on the presence and viability of civil society. Typically, CSOs have greater proximity to communities than most government actors, giving them an advantage in their capacity to mobilize at levels the government may find challenging to reach. Additionally, their sensitivity to grassroots-level needs is crucial to achieving national development goals. Therefore, a proper connection between the state and civil society—produced through a dynamic and long-lasting process of reciprocal influence and cooperation—is needed for effective governance practices to be formed.

In 2008, the Maldives ratified a new constitution based on multi-party democratic principles, which paved the way for electoral and judicial reforms, media liberalization, and strengthening key institutions, including civil society. Simultaneously, it initiated the involvement of civil society actors as partners in the nation's democratic consolidation, focusing on good governance principles and practices.

Additionally, the Decentralization Act passed in 2010, gave the local councils more control over local governance and financial freedom. The increase in local community involvement in island development highlighted the need for a space for civil society in the governance sector. As a result, civil society has served as a bridge between the general public and decision-makers by encouraging greater citizen participation in social and political processes, integrating underprivileged and marginalized groups into the civic process, and initiating political dialogues and debates in the media.

According to UNDP Maldives (2011), six percent of all CSOs in the Maldives focused on promoting good governance and democracy. Over the last few years, this number has increased with the ratification of the former Associations Act and its amendment and the incorporation of CSOs as implementing partners in the review, amendment, and development of laws and regulations in the national strategic plan for 2019–2023.

Subsequently, CSOs have contributed to large-scale initiatives and participated in consultations and forums at all levels to ensure accountability and transparency in government decisions and policymaking. They have also successfully pursued objectives such as meeting representational goals, fostering regional integration, fostering global cooperation, and maintaining respect for human rights in the Maldives. These factors play a crucial role in affecting the democratic and governance landscape of the country.

Desk Review

The following section provides an overview and analytical review of existing legislative and policy documents related to the operation of CSOs in the governance sector, as well as relevant research published on the topic.

Legislation and Policy Documents

The following sections briefly summarize the primary legislative and national documents relevant to CSOs reviewed for this research.

The Associations Act

The new Associations Act (Act Number 3/2022) was ratified on May 9, 2022. Since it came into effect in November 2022, it has replaced the former Associations Act, which was in effect since May 22, 2003. The new Associations Act stipulates that organizations created under this act would be independent legal entities. The members of such entities would not have any ownership rights in the Association's assets.

The fundamental tenet of the newly ratified Act emphasizes that CSOs should be nonprofit, legal organizations that adhere to Islamic principles, the constitution, rules, regulations, and international agreements. The legislation also states that any money or income generated by CSO operations or fundraising activities cannot be distributed to members in a way that allows ownership of the funds. A registered CSO may promote its principles and opinions, sue other parties, be sued by other parties, advocate for policies, and communicate information to the public, according to Article 7 of the proposed legislation, which builds on the provisions of the former Act.

The Act maintains the provision from the former act that allows two or more individuals to apply for an association's registration. However, under the new system, both natural and legal individuals can now apply to register an association. As a result, associations can now be registered jointly by two or more businesses. The Registrar of Associations must decide on the registration of an association within 30 days of receiving the application. If it fails to do so, the association shall be presumed to have been registered so long as the registration papers meet the conditions set out in the Act. The new system also includes a mechanism

for two or more associations to merge into a new association, which will then inherit the members, assets, and liabilities of the merged associations. However, it is noted that these mergers do not apply to charities.

The Act further contains provisions allowing foreign-registered organizations to function in the Maldives in accordance with their local registration. Foreign associations in the Maldives that are run under bilateral agreements or treaties and international foreign associations to which the Maldives is a party are exempt from these restrictions. Foreign associations registered in the Maldives must follow all regulatory standards the Act outlines, including nominating Maldivians for the top two executive committee posts and as the financial head of the organization.

According to the Act, all associations must have a Memorandum of Association (MOA) outlining their core philosophies. To govern the group's internal operations, each association must create its Articles of Association (AOA) and set up an executive committee. Under the new system, associations are required to conduct general meetings at which members must approve the annual report and financial report. The association must then deliver the reports to the Registrar of Associations within 30 days of the general meeting.

Major changes brought about by the new Act include several that deal with associations' financial affairs, particularly their auditing and disclosure obligations. For example, while the Act permits associations to receive financial support from outside sources, financial support for any activity over MVR 500,001 requires the association to identify the source, the amount received, and the purpose of the support and provide this information in its annual report. An association must also undertake an annual audit if its total transactions exceed MVR 500,001 and submit the audit report with its financial report to the Registrar.

The Act also covers State Assistance, which requires the government to provide associations with annual financial support and tax breaks. The government is expected to set aside three percent of the Ministry of Youth, Sports, and Community Empowerment (MoYSCE) budget for associations. In addition, state-owned businesses and state shareholding firms are now expected to give organizations financial support equal to at least 25 percent of their annual corporate social responsibility (CSR) budget, per the guidelines established by the MoYSCE.

Another significant development was the renewal of the authority of the Registrar to dissolve associations if they failed to comply with specified governing policies. Assets that remain after paying off the associations' debts and responsibilities may be dispersed following decisions made at the general meeting with the Registrar's consent after the liquidation.

The Act was enacted on November 9, 2022, six months after ratification. Any association registered under the former act that had not carried out any activities, not paid the yearly fee, or had not submitted the annual report at the time of the new Act's ratification was given six months to pay fees, pay a fine, and submit reports. The registration of any association that failed to comply with the requirements was annulled under the new Act.

Act on Decentralization of the Administrative Divisions of the Maldives

The Act on the Decentralization of the Administrative Divisions of the Maldives (Act Number 7/2010), which was ratified in 2010, emphasizes the powers and duties of governance authorities, particularly regarding civil society activities and community empowerment, with the transition to decentralized government across the islands of the Maldives. The Maldives has long maintained a highly centralized administration system, making it difficult for small island councils to engage in significant political activity. The central government established in Malé handled local councils' development and financial plans directly, thereby not allowing them to play a significant role in the creation, execution, or funding of development initiatives in their neighborhoods.

Meanwhile, the decentralized system of governance is intended to be highly participatory and involved with the community, with CSOs remaining one of the key catalysts for fostering dialogues, particularly in island development projects. While the Act primarily sets the foundation to establish offices, posts, island councils, atoll councils, and city councils (including their characteristics, spheres of authority, and necessary principles or rules for decentralized administration of the Maldives it also describes the functions and powers of authorities concerning civic engagement.

For example, Article 22 (b) of the Act specifies that island councils shall prepare island development plans in consultation with the community and submit the plan to the relevant

government institution and atoll council for approval; the same applies to city councils. Article 68 further specifies that CSOs shall consult with the relevant councils before commencing a project in an administrative division and outlines the role of civil society actors in relation to initiatives carried out on the islands. Concerning community participation, Article 8(b) states that the atoll councils should "provide guidance and support in planning island development plans and provide community recommendations to all relevant stakeholders in planning development programs for the respective administrative division as a whole." In addition, Article 71 of the Act requires that the "the Council must endeavor to strengthen the role of private firms, NGOs, and groups in planning and implementing development initiatives."

Right to Information Act

The Right to Information (RTI) Act was ratified in 2014 and governs the public's access to information on state projects. Specifically, the Act "determines the principles by which the scope of the right to information in the Maldives is defined, and the principles by which providing the right to access information produced, held, or maintained by a State Institute is granted to any member of the general public so that matters of state are conducted with transparency and accountability."

The Act details the procedure through which information can be requested from a state institution and the disclosure of information by the institution, including the specific form by which requests for information need to be made, the period of acknowledgment, the disclosure of information, and exemptions from information disclosure. As per Article 20 of the Act, despite any exceptions stated in the Act, a state institute shall provide information upon request when the greater good of the public requires it, as opposed to withholding it when the interests of the greater good of the public outweigh the interest protected by nondisclosure.

Beyond requests for information, Article 37 mandates the disclosure of information that needs to be proactively made by a state institution, which includes and is not limited to the functions and structure of the institute, the services provided, the responsibilities and duties of high-ranking officials, the decision-making procedure, the details and reasoning of decisions taken that affect the public, and budget allocations.

With regards to CSOs, per Article 68, associations and organizations operating in the Maldives with funding from the state budget, a foreign government, or an international organization must adhere to all the rules and regulations that apply to state institutes under this Act despite what is stated to the contrary in another statute.

National Strategic Action Plan (SAP) 2019-2023

The SAP of the Government of the Maldives is a significant policy framework and planning document that directs the Maldives' overall development course for five years. It is the primary tool for implementing and monitoring the government's development objectives and policies. The SAP 2019–2023 outlines detailed goals and information on the implementing organizations, including ministries, government organizations acting as leading agencies, and CSOs acting as additional implementing organizations. The current SAP prioritizes community involvement and engagement in life-enriching and social activities and developing multi-purpose community spaces while emphasizing the importance of CSOs' involvement in supporting significant policies. As a result, lead agencies are encouraged to work with CSOs to carry out their policies. To support local- and community-level development, the SAP also emphasizes the growth and participation of civil society, particularly in light of decentralization policies that provide councils control over decision-making.

The SAP 2019-2023 also emphasizes strengthening and activating CSOs and highlights policy targets that are crucial to the operation and effectiveness of CSOs. Some of its major goals include:

- Ensuring that the CSO Act is passed, with the recommendations from the CSOs incorporated.
- Establishing a standardized practice for CSOs to access council and public facilities free of charge to conduct programs.
- Creating a national grant fund for CSOs to access grants from the government for sustainable development activities aligned with government policies.
- Establishing a mechanism with local councils to oversee the utilization of the funds by CSOs for social development activities conducted in the communities.
- Providing training and development opportunities for CSOs.

- Providing opportunities to increase women’s and PWD’s leadership and active participation in CSOs.
- Conducting robust monitoring to ensure that CSOs are registered in adherence with CSO regulations and conduct activities necessary to ensure the proper implementation of the CSO Act.
- Creating mechanisms for CSOs to participate in national and local development planning.
- Assisting island and city councils to include the expertise of CSOs in community empowerment programs.
- Creating a dynamic CSO Portal with an updated online database containing the relevant and up-to-date details of CSOs
- Establishing a connection between all registered CSOs by providing space to link CSO websites via the CSO Portal
- Assisting CSOs to work more efficiently by creating an avenue for online submission of all formal documents through the CSO Portal.
- Promoting volunteerism among youth, young adults, and other representative segments of the population (women, the elderly, foreign migrant workers, etc.).

The plan also describes the duties of the ministry and stakeholders, including CSOs, councils, and the Local Government Authority (LGA).

Existing Research and Discussions

Comprehensive Study of the Maldivian Civil Society (UNDP, 2011)

The 2011 UNDP report, “Comprehensive Study of the Maldivian Civil Society,” aimed to provide a broad situational analysis of the civil society sector in the Maldives and presents an overview of CSO operations, needs, and challenges. The report covers key topics such as administrative procedures relating to CSOs, including registrations, auditing, and reporting requirements, organizational perceptions of their role, organizational structure, internal governance, programmatic aspects, organizational principles, challenges to their credibility, income and funding sources, access to technical resources, collaborative ventures, and partnerships.

The report also identified obstacles to the sector's long-term growth. These include the civil society sector's heavy reliance on volunteerism, particularly to carry out a wide range of activities. The report further acknowledges the need to enhance the capacities of CSOs in areas such as organizational growth, management, subject-specific technical knowledge, financial management, and sustainable fundraising.

The study further provides recommendations on areas such as monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, internal codes of conduct, independence from donor agencies and political parties, control mechanisms to ensure independence, conflict management, credibility, public confidence, transparency, and accountability. It also recommended reforms to regulatory frameworks such as the Associations Act and other relevant regulations to strengthen the CSO sector's institutions and structures.

Strengthening the Interaction Between Civil Society and the Parliament: Positional Paper

UNDP is currently publishing a second iteration of the study, *Strengthening the Interaction Between Civil Society and the Parliament: Positional Paper* (Transparency Maldives, March 2015), which is expected to assist in informing and validating this mapping exercise's findings.

This position paper was produced by the CSO-Parliament Dialogue Group, which was established as part of a parliamentary accountability initiative managed by Transparency Maldives for the Maldivian parliament. The dialogue group was created to increase engagement between the parliament and civil society by offering a platform for interaction and collaborative work.

The paper examines the crucial role that CSOs can play in policy formulation and highlights the need to improve communication between civil society and the parliament to be more effective. It contends that several factors account for the lack of engagement between the two groups, including:

- An absence of platforms and mechanisms to engage in constructive discussions
- The absence of a formalized space or established framework through which CSOs can effectively influence policymaking and provide subject-specific policy advice

- The lack of knowledge and capacity of CSOs to engage in the policy process
- The lack of political will by Parliament to encourage and build an environment conducive to creating and nurturing a participatory civil society.

The paper offers various suggestions to foster this interaction, including three ways civil society might enhance its involvement and influence on policy and policymaking. This involves promoting CSO engagement through invitations from the committee, starting a discussion with CSOs directly to allow them to express their thoughts with the committee, and submitting suggestions through a member of parliament. The analysis also made clear that although these procedures are feasible, civil society actors are broadly unaware of them.

Study Methodology

This chapter outlines the research methodology adopted during this study, highlighting the challenges and limitations of the adopted components.

The study comprises three main research components:

- Desk review of existing literature
- Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with a sample of selected CSOs working in the governance sector
- Stakeholder consultations, including KIIs and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Special consideration was given to achieving a balanced representation of male and female respondents in the KIIs and FGDs.

Inception Stage

During the inception stage, an initial desk review was conducted to examine the current legal framework, including relevant laws and regulations and previous studies about CSOs in the Maldives. This included the assessment of the national legislation, policies, and constitutional documents as well as pertinent publications, reports, academic literature, and other literature regarding civil society and good governance analysis. The main objective of the desk review was to provide an overview of the current institutional landscape in which CSOs function.

A questionnaire was developed for each data collection stage: Questionnaire 1: Stakeholder Consultations (KIIs and FGD Meetings with key selected stakeholders) and Questionnaire 2: Key Informant Interviews with selected CSOs.

Stakeholder Consultations

Key actors in the CSO sector at local and national levels from political, governing, and institutional standpoints were chosen for stakeholder consultations. This included national-level stakeholders such as government institutions, donor and development agencies, political parties, island councils, women's development committees, and youth groups. Certain stakeholder consultation meetings that were initially proposed, including with three

political parties, could not be arranged due to a lack of responsiveness from the given stakeholders. The key stakeholders consulted are listed below in Table 1. The consultations aimed to understand stakeholders' viewpoints and their encounters with CSOs as experienced through collaborations or otherwise. It also sought to understand further their perception of CSO functions and effectiveness in the governance sector.

Table 1: Key stakeholders consulted per category

Category	Institution
Government Institutions	Ministry of Youth, Sports, and Community Empowerment
	Ministry of National Planning, Housing, and Infrastructure
	Local Government Authority
	Ministry of Environment, Climate Change, and Technology
	Ministry of Gender, Family, and Social Services
	Atoll and Local Councils
	Women Development Committee
	Donor/Development Agencies
Donor/Development Agencies	National Democratic Institute
	International Foundation for Electoral Systems
	International Republican Institute
	Westminster Foundation for Democracy
Political Parties	Maldivian Democratic Party (Could not meet)
	Progressive Party of Maldives (Could not meet)
	Jumhooree Party (Could not meet)
Community	Civil Society Organizations
	Youth

National-level stakeholders were consulted in Malé, and local-level consultations through face-to-face KIIs and FGDs were conducted on selected islands across different regions. The following table summarizes the sample of stakeholders consulted in the islands. Consideration was given to selecting one rural and one urban island in each region (North, Central, and South).

Table 2: Local-level stakeholders consulted per region

Region	Island	Stakeholders Consulted
North	HA. Dhihdhoo B. Goidhoo	Atoll Council Island Council Women Development Committee Youth Island level CSOs
Central	ADH. Mahibadhoo Dh. Rinbidhoo	Island Council Women Development Committee Youth Island level CSOs
South	GDh. Nadella Gn. Fuvahmulah	Fuvahmulah City Council Nadella Island Council Women Development Committee Youth Island level CSOs

Key Informant Interviews with CSOs

A series of KIIs were performed with 20 selected CSOs operating in the governance sector, collecting quantitative and qualitative data. The CSOs were randomly selected from the list of registered CSOs provided by the MoYSCE and are listed below in Table 3. Emphasis was placed on selecting CSOs from different governance sectors to gain a thorough overview of CSOs' operations, internal management, funding practices, and guiding principles and better understand their capabilities, challenges, and needs.

Table 3: Selected CSOs for KII

CSO Name	Main governance-related sector/theme
Parley Maldives	Environmental Governance / Climate Change
Uthema	Equity, Social Justice, and Inclusion
Clean Maldives	Environmental Governance / Climate Change
Women in Fuvahmulah	Social Accountability / Civic Engagement and Participation
Maldives Association of HR Professionals	Social Accountability / Civic Engagement and Participation
IUCN Maldives	Environmental Governance / Climate Change
Society For Peace and Democracy	Equity, Social Justice, and Inclusion
Middle Sports Club	Social Accountability / Civic Engagement and Participation
Zero Waste Maldives	Environmental Governance / Climate Change
Women Entrepreneurs Association of the Maldives (WEAM)	Equity, Social Justice, and Inclusion
Society of Health Education (SHE)	Equity, Social Justice, and Inclusion
Hithaadhoo Youth Wing	Social Accountability / Civic Engagement and Participation
Fainu Association for Community Endeavours	Social Accountability / Civic Engagement and Participation
Maaungoodhoo Youth Association for Island Development	Social Accountability / Civic Engagement and Participation
Transparency Maldives	Public sector transparency/accountability/Anti-corruption

Mission for Migrant Workers of the Maldives (MMWM)	Equity, Social Justice, and Inclusion
Women in Tech Maldives	eGovernance, Information Communication and Technology (ICT) for Development, Civic-tech
Association for Democracy in the Maldives (ADM)	Misinformation / Disinformation, Digital Media, Open data
Bridging the Communities Maldives	Social Accountability / Civic Engagement and Participation
Hope for Women	Equity, Social Justice, and Inclusion

Data Analysis

The quantitative data from the KIIs with CSOs were analyzed using SPSS software, and the profiling and triangulation were done based on criteria such as geographical scope, focus areas, income, membership size, internal operations, confidence in the CSO sector, and perception and familiarity with the regulation of CSOs.

The qualitative data collected from the KIIs with CSOs, stakeholder consultations with institutions, and the FGDs with island-level communities were analyzed to identify underlying themes and narratives to comprehend better the operating landscape for civil society activity in governance. This data was verified and cross-checked with quantitative data collected from CSOs to present the overall mapping of their opportunities, capacities, and challenges to formulate recommendations to strengthen the sector.

Challenges And Limitations

The following table summarizes the main challenges and limitations to the research experienced before and during the data-gathering process, including the adopted mitigation measures.

Table 4: Challenges and limitations with mitigation measures adopted in the study

Challenges and Limitations	Details	Mitigation Measure Adopted
Issues in the sample frame	The research team depended on the MoYSCE list in selecting CSOs for the survey. However, several phone numbers in the CSO list were either switched off, unresponsive, disconnected, incorrect, or belonged to individuals no longer active in the CSO.	Alternative contact details were obtained, and multiple attempts were made to contact the CSOs. If the CSO was still unresponsive after multiple attempts, they were replaced with another organization working in the same sector.
Sample Bias	There were some difficulties in identifying and reaching out to CSOs working in the governance sector, especially at an island level, as most CSOs are only active as sports clubs or are involved in multiple sectors of island development, which may not be governance-related.	CSOs were identified through the FGD and KII meetings held in the islands and via the activities CSOs have conducted over the last two years. This helped to ensure that the CSOs interviewed fell under the governance sector and that all the key sectors/themes were covered within the sample frame.
Limitations in sample size	Upon conducting the data analysis, it was noted that a larger sample size could give a clearer picture of the current CSO landscape in the governance sector.	The survey data were triangulated with the qualitative data and compared with the findings of earlier studies on CSOs.
Difficulties in reaching key stakeholders	Due to the upcoming election, reaching and arranging meetings with certain key	Multiple attempts were made to reach out to the stakeholders, and the duration of data

	stakeholders, such as political parties, was difficult.	collection was extended to ensure all key stakeholders' input was collected.
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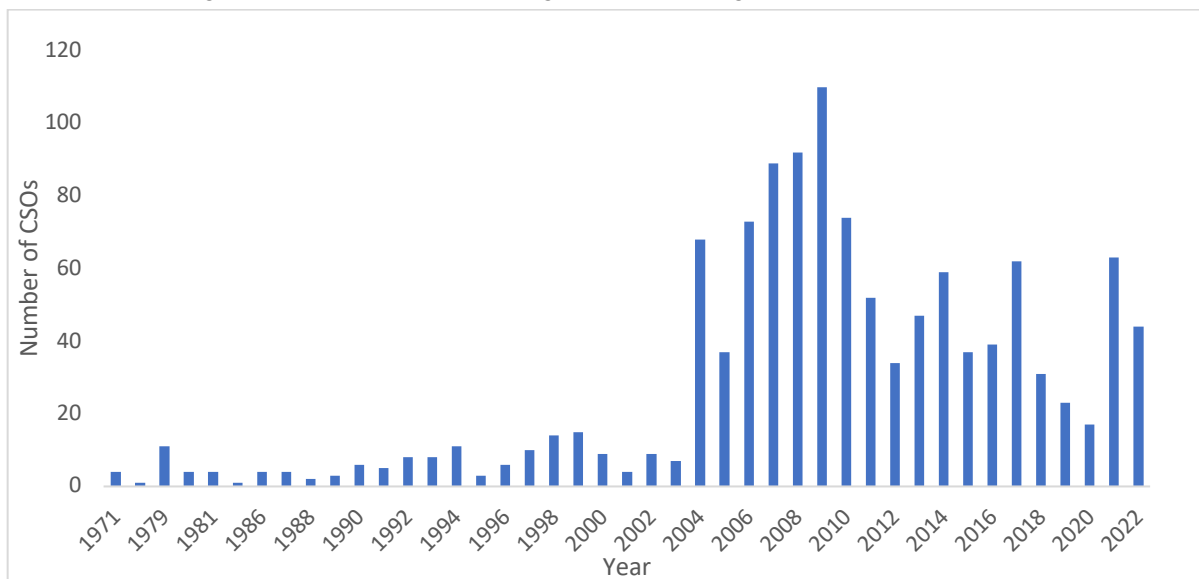
Demographic Overview of the Registered CSOs in the Maldives

This chapter provides a brief demographic overview of the CSO sector in the Maldives based on registration documents provided by the MoYSCE. CSOs are classified based on years of operation, geographical spread, and the key focus areas of work.

CSOs' Years of Operation

According to MoYSCE's CSO registration list, there are 1,204 CSOs registered in the Maldives operating from periods ranging between two months to 52 years. Notably, the number of registered CSOs increased significantly in 2004, with the majority registered in 2009 (9.1 percent), as shown in Figure 1. These spikes in registrations potentially correspond to key events such as the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami in 2004 and the transition to democracy in 2008.

Figure 1: Number of CSOs registered in the governance sector per year



To update the CSO registry, the MoYSCE initiated a re-registration of CSOs between March 16 and June 30, 2021. This correlates to the increase in registration between 2021-2022. There has been a significant decrease in the number of CSOs registered during this duration compared to the number of previously registered CSOs. This decrease can be attributed to the elimination of sports-related CSOs, which were moved under the new Sports Act (Act

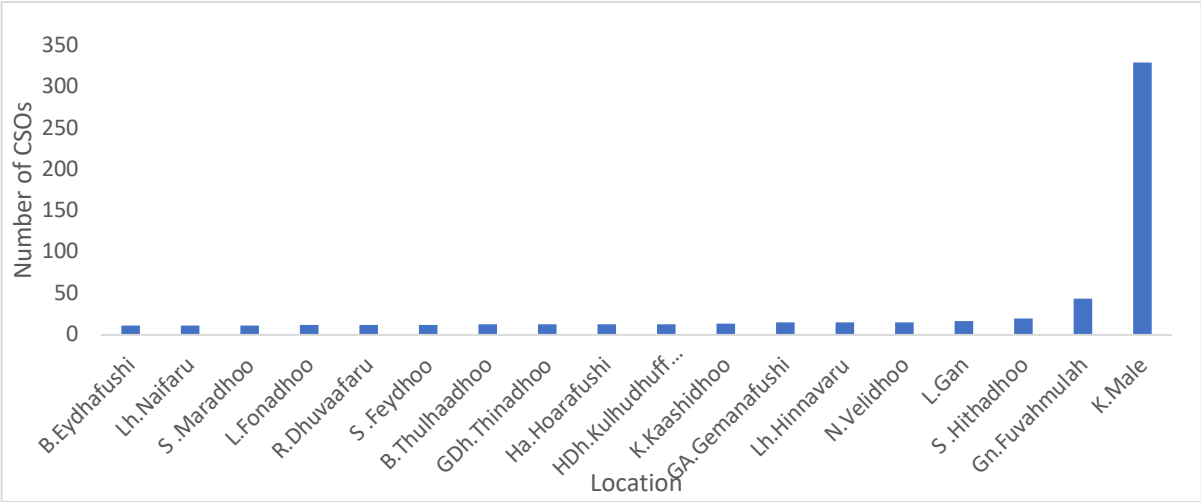
Number 20/2015), and the non-registration of previously existing CSOs, either due to difficulties in registration or the discontinuation of the CSO.

During discussions, stakeholders highlighted issues with the long-term continuity of CSOs. In the Maldives, CSOs are commonly started as passion projects or part-time hobbies of the founding members. Thus, the CSO tends to cease operations once the founding members step down or become unavailable due to other responsibilities. As such, even though many CSOs may be registered, only a few are active and operational.

Geographical Spread

The registered CSOs were scattered across 183 different islands of the country, with the majority of the CSOs being registered in Malé (27 percent). The analysis of the registration documents showed that 42 (23 percent) of the islands have ten or fewer CSOs, and 123 (67 percent) of the islands have five or fewer registered CSOs. In comparison to other islands, Gn. Fuvahmulah had a significant number of CSOs (3.7 percent), as shown in Figure 2. However, per the CSO list provided by the Fuvahmulah City Council, there are only 12 CSOs currently operational on the island, of which only a few actively conduct activities. Other islands surveyed also showed discrepancies in the number of registered and active CSOs.

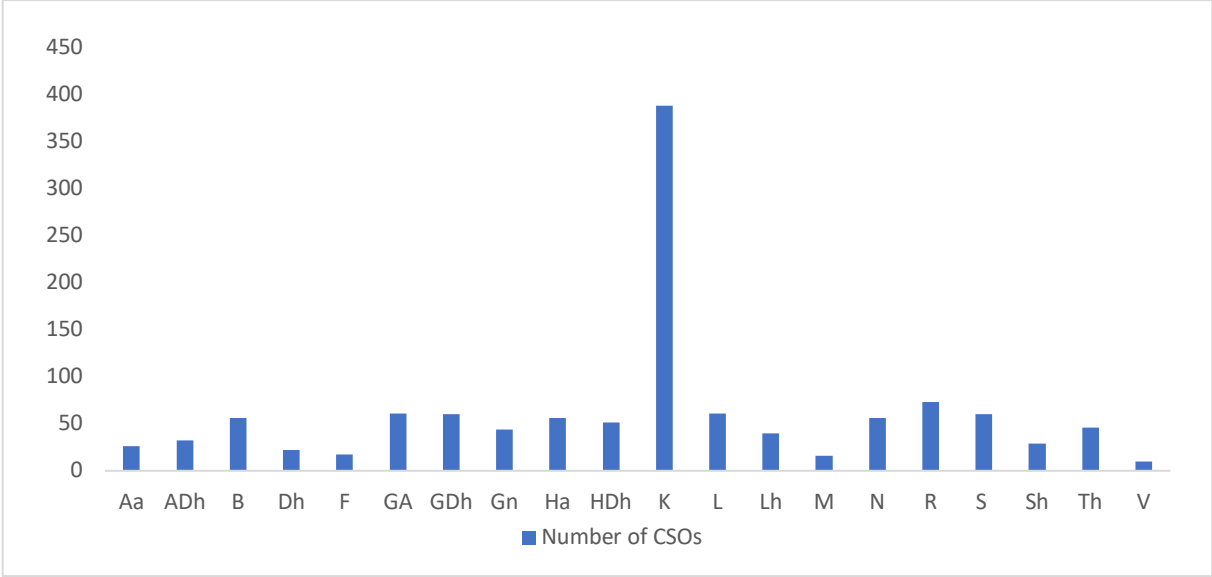
Figure 2: Islands with more than 10 registered CSOs



When the analysis for CSOs registered per atoll was made, Kaafu atoll had the highest proportion of CSOs (32 percent), owing to the high percentage of CSOs registered in Malé.

After Kaafu Atoll, Raa Atoll had the highest number of registered CSOs, with 6 percent. Faafu, Meemu, and Vaavu atolls had the fewest registered CSOs at 1 percent each.

Figure 3: Number of CSOs registered per atoll



The analysis of the location of CSO registration revealed that a CSO’s scope and reach may go beyond the registered location, which will be discussed later in the report.

Key Sectors

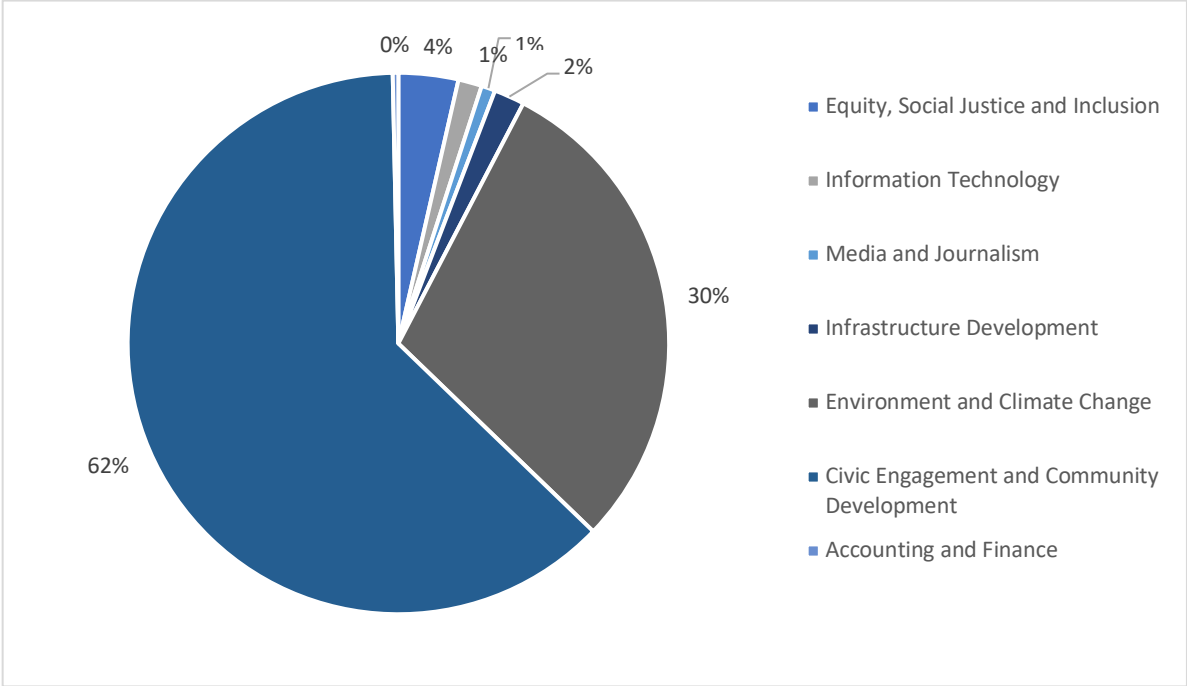
The CSO registration list provided by the MoYSCE was further analyzed to understand the key sectors in which the CSOs are engaged. The study found that CSOs were registered under seven key sectors, namely;

- Equity, social justice, and inclusion
- Environment and climate change
- Information technology
- Civic engagement and community development
- Infrastructure development
- Media and journalism
- Accounting and finance.

Further analysis shows that the majority of the CSOs (62.5 percent) are active in civic engagement and community development. This includes island-level CSOs that are engaged

in the development of the islands. Figure 4 illustrates the respective percentages of CSOs involved in other sectors. Notably, most CSOs in the Maldives are generalists and focus on more than one key sector.

Figure 4: Number of CSOs per key sector/themes



CSOs Operating in the Governance Sector

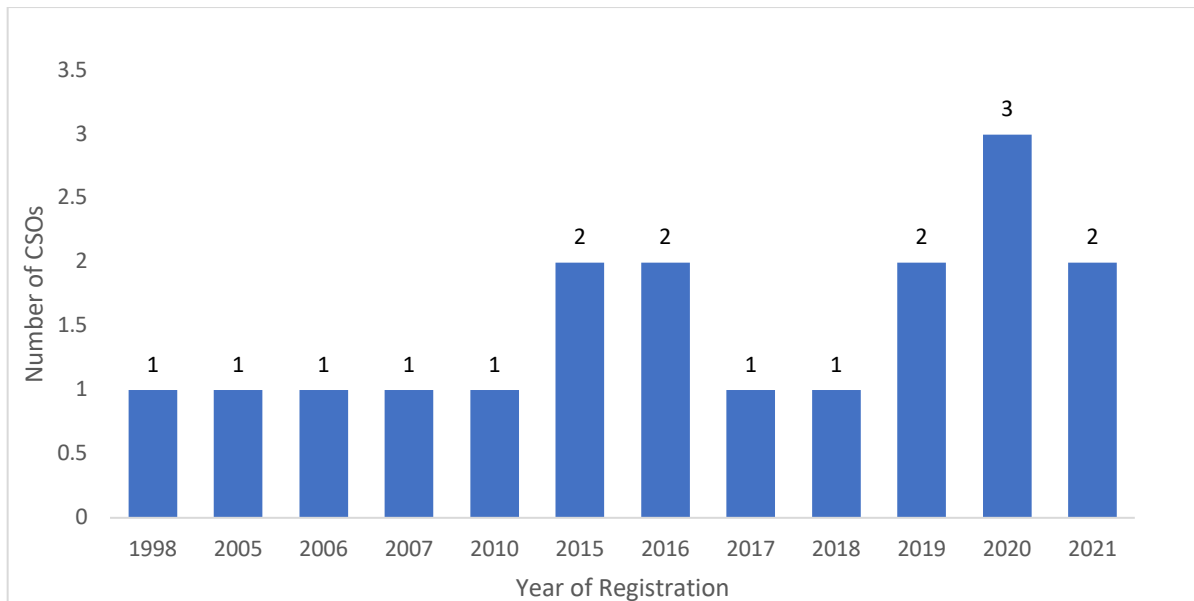
This chapter provides an in-depth analysis of CSOs working in the Maldives' governance sector. The findings were generated through an analysis of KIIs conducted with selected CSOs and corroborated with qualitative information from consultations with relevant authorities and FGDs with community groups. The analysis and discussions will cover CSOs' capacity, internal governance and regulation, scope of activities, and public perception.

Demographic Overview

Years in Operation

All the CSOs interviewed in the study were registered with the MoYSCE, with years of operation ranging from 1 to 24 years. The CSOs in the study sample were registered between 1998 and 2021, with the majority registered in 2020, as shown in Figure 5.

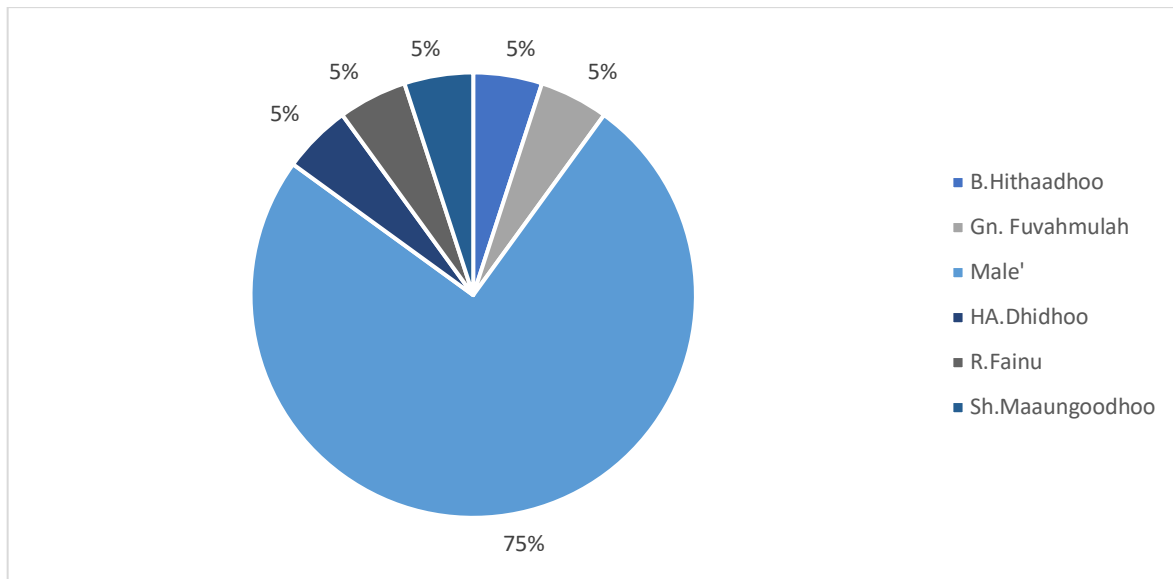
Figure 5: Number of surveyed CSOs registered per year



Geographical Location and Geographical Scope

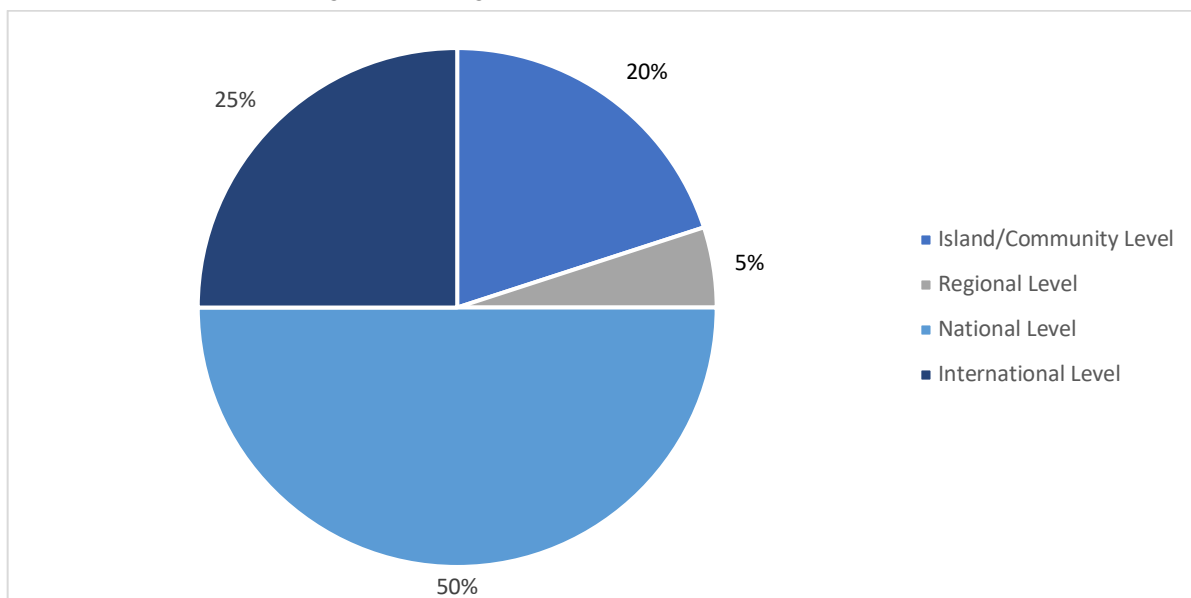
Among the surveyed CSOs, 75 percent were located in Malé. The others were located in B. Hithaadhoo, G. Fuvahmulah, HA. Dhihdhoo, R.Fainu, and Sh. Maaungoodhoo, or one from each island, as shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Registration location of the surveyed CSOs



Regarding the geographical scope of the interviewed CSOs, 50 percent work at a national level, while 25 percent work at an international level. Further, 20 percent work at an island/community level, and five percent work at a regional level (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Geographical scope of the surveyed CSOs



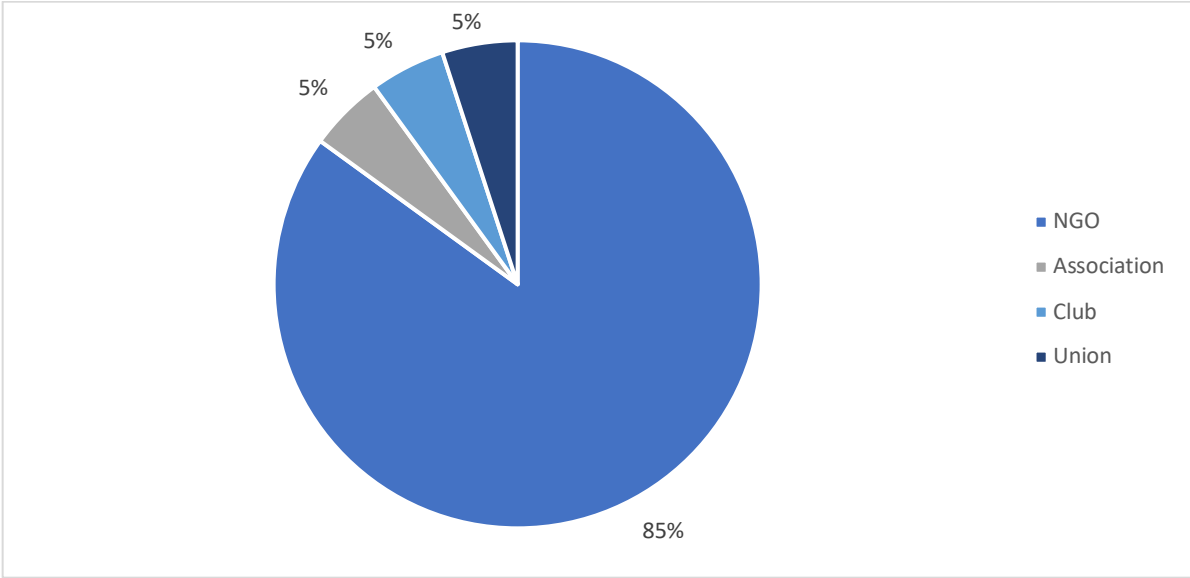
CSOs in Malé predominantly work at a regional, national, or international level. In contrast, four of the five CSOs working at the island or community level are in the islands. This demonstrates the disparity between CSOs in Malé and other islands. A contributing factor

could be the centralization of governance-related activities in the Greater Malé region. Notably, one CSO registered on another island operates on a global scale, demonstrating that although many island CSOs currently face limitations, there is an opportunity to expand beyond geographical scope and activities. To expand the geographical spread of CSOs, CSO-related services (regulatory and administrative) need to be decentralized while still providing equitable access to services for all citizens and bringing them closer to the decision-making processes, regardless of their geographical scope.

Nature of CSOs

Among the surveyed CSOs, 85 percent are classified as NGOs, and the remaining 15 percent are divided into association, club, and union categories, respectively.

Figure 8: Nature of organization of the surveyed CSOs

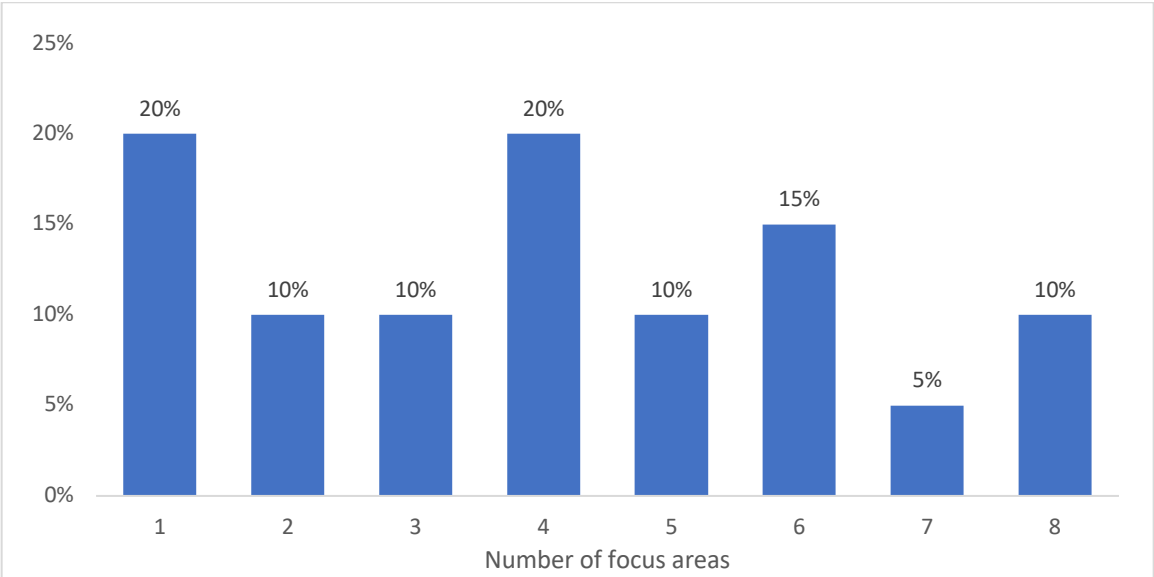


However, according to UNDP Maldives (2011), the various terminologies used to categorize CSOs do not consistently correspond to the organization’s structure, operations, functions, or aims. Interviews and stakeholder consultations revealed that while some CSOs are registered as NGOs to participate in sports events, there are also “sports clubs” that work in a variety of sectors, such as island development, disability rights, and the promotion of good governance.

Focus Areas

Seventy percent of the CSOs interviewed focused on three or more focus areas, as shown in Figure 9; this aligns with the general understanding that most CSOs in the Maldives work in multiple areas. For this study, CSOs working in more than two focus areas are considered generalists, and those focusing on two or fewer areas are considered specialists.

Figure 9: Number of focus areas of surveyed CSOs

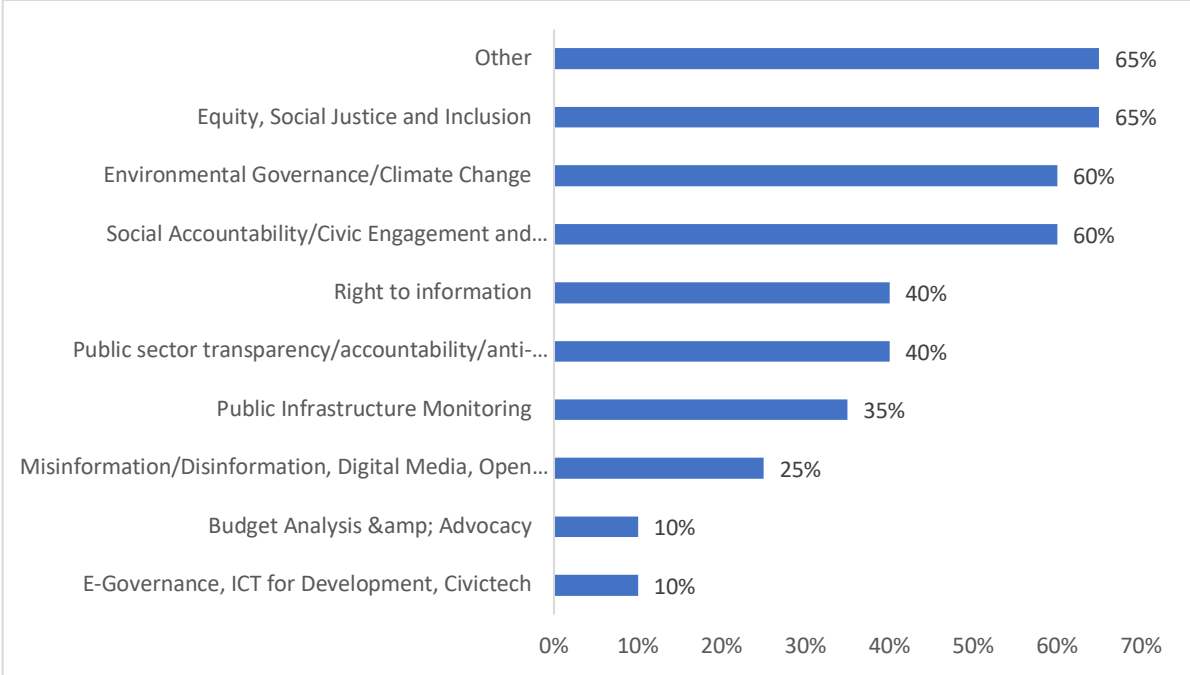


The identified generalist organizations tend to be tied to an island or a specific community and, therefore, are eager to support the overall development and advancement of that particular island or community. Typically, this entails identifying and supporting a wide range of projects and initiatives the organization considers significant or pertinent. This is relevant to understanding the current CSO landscape in the Maldives. Even in the governance sector, CSOs that identify as generalists are more able to respond to a community’s broad and shifting needs. This ability to adapt is vital given that the democratic landscape of the Maldives is still in its infancy and undergoing constant changes as it seeks to develop in accordance with international good governance practices.

However, the significant number of generalist organizations indicates a relative lack of access to professional and technical resources, a challenge identified during the stakeholder consultations. This makes it challenging for CSOs to express a knowledgeable and authoritative viewpoint on a particular subject and restricts their capacity to take the lead in

governance- and policy-related decision-making. The focus areas of the surveyed CSOs were further categorized based on governance-related themes and sectors, as illustrated in Figure 10 below. The majority of CSOs (65 percent) reported focusing on equity, social justice, and inclusion.

Figure 10: Focus areas of the surveyed CSOs



Equity, social justice, and inclusion have been focal points of good governance practices across the globe as they relate to addressing the underlying causes of systemic imbalances and questioning the fundamentals of how policies are made, implemented, and assessed. Historical disparities in resource distribution and structural barriers to opportunity, as well as disadvantages based on race, gender, disability, and socioeconomic status, must be recognized and addressed if an inclusive, equity-centered government is to be established.

Participants in the KII and stakeholder consultations concurred that CSOs in the Maldives have become the bridge between the government and the general public in addressing systemic inequality in policing, criminal justice, education, health care, housing, standards of living and business support, which is in line with the findings that showed that the majority of the surveyed CSOs focused on these areas.

The objectives of CSOs working in the ‘equity, social justice, and inclusion’ category include promoting gender equality, socioeconomic equality, the recognition of various Dhivehi dialects, equitable access to essential services across the country, and encouraging tolerance of different viewpoints among communities. This focus area also complements several other governance-related issues, such as social accountability and civic engagement, public infrastructure monitoring, transparency and accountability, and anticorruption in the public sector, with several CSOs choosing these fields simultaneously.

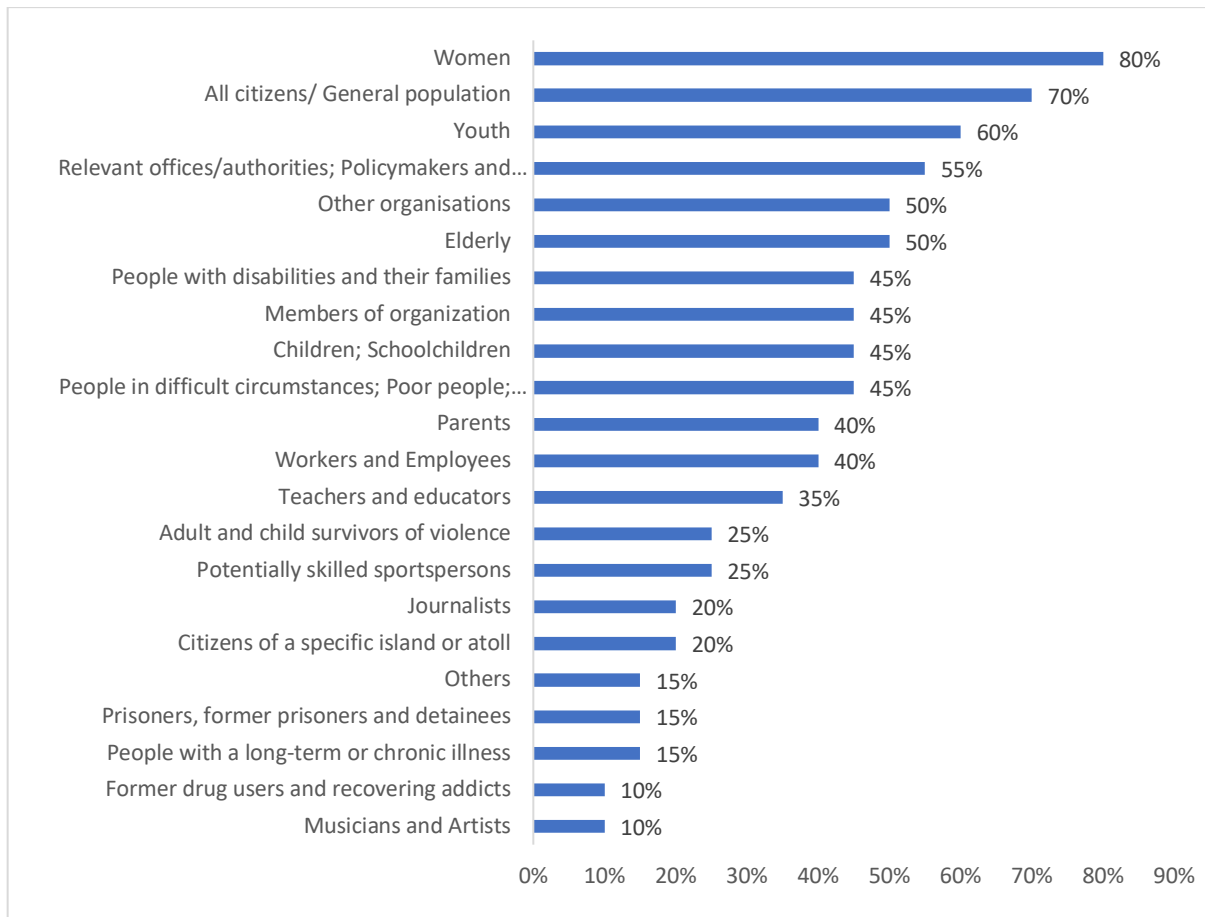
Similarly, environmental governance is crucial for the Maldives because of its vulnerability to environmental hazards, including climate change-related coastal floods and rising sea levels. A vulnerability assessment of the Maldives identified the following sectors as particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change: land, beaches, human settlements, critical infrastructure, tourism, fisheries, human health, water resources, and coral reef biodiversity. These sectors directly or indirectly impact communities and their development; therefore, in recent years, CSOs have concentrated on environmental protection advocacy and mitigating environmental effects brought on by policy decisions.

FGD and KII participants in the islands also drew attention to the overlap of activities, noting that due to their small number, island-level CSOs end up becoming involved in all facets of the island’s development, from ensuring good governance practices are followed by local governing bodies to boosting civic engagement in island development activities and leading social initiatives like island clean-ups.

Target Groups

Eighty percent of the CSOs surveyed chiefly focused on women; in comparison, 70 percent indicated they target the general population. The primary reported target groups of CSOs are shown in Figure 11. Notably, most CSOs working at the national level generally target “all citizens” as their beneficiaries as they focus on multiple sectors benefiting the general development and growth of the nation.

Figure 11: Target groups of the surveyed CSOs



The data also indicated a low percentage of services provided to groups such as former drug users, people recovering from addiction, people with long-term or chronic illnesses, prisoners, former prisoners, and detainees, despite the sample size being relatively small compared to the number of registered CSOs in the nation. This may be due to the stigmatization of specific populations, hindering their recovery and reintegration into society. The numbers suggest the need for CSOs to incorporate these target groups into their equality and social inclusion mandates and objectives.

Internal Governance

The study further aimed to examine the formalization of CSOs' internal operations. For the study, CSOs are considered to have the following internal governance characteristics:

- A written purpose statement

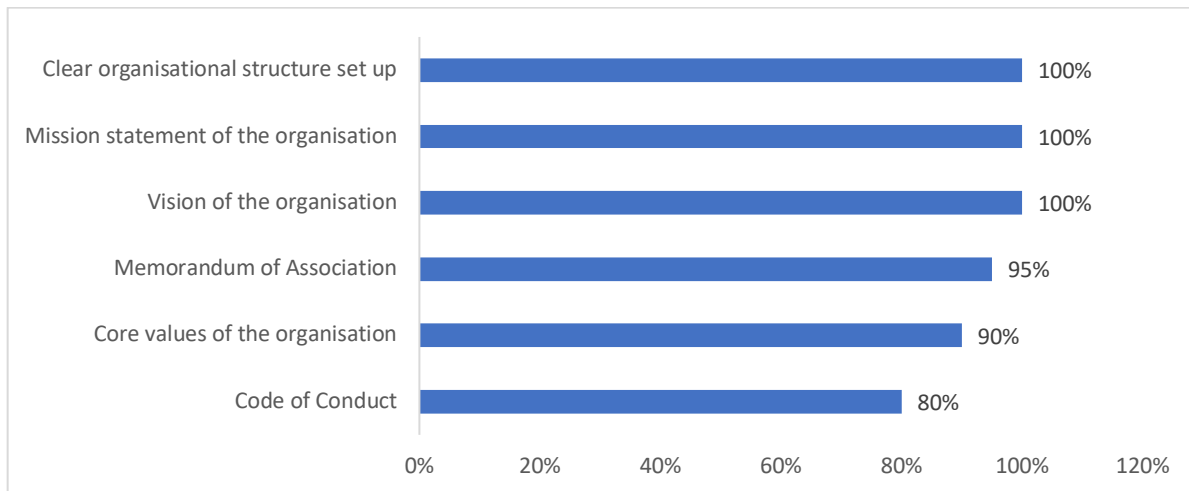
- A board of directors
- Standard operating procedures
- Modern management techniques such as strategic planning;
- Annual reports
- Monitoring and assessment procedures.

An organization’s internal governance quality significantly influences a CSO’s opinions and actions concerning “external governance,” which refers to CSOs supporting good governance in the state and public sectors.

Organizational Setup

The internal governance mechanisms of CSOs were evaluated based on the organization’s having an established vision, mission statement, core values, clear organizational structure, a memorandum of association, and a code of conduct.

Figure 12: Organizational structure set up of the surveyed CSOs



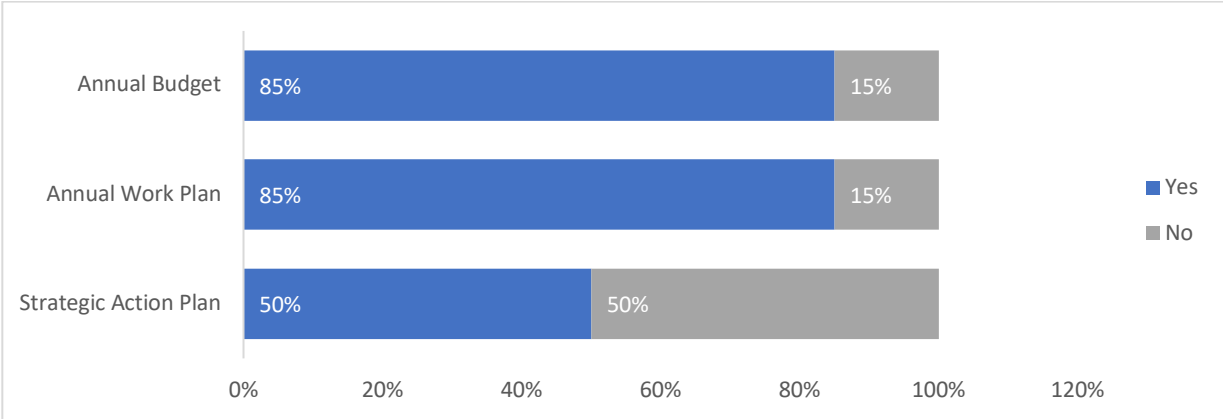
The high level of organizational setup among the surveyed CSOs is largely due to the requirements under the Associations Act (Act No. 3/2022). Moreover, most of the surveyed CSOs were well-established and have been conducting various programs and projects through donor agencies over the last few years, which appears to have a positive impact on the development of good internal governance in CSOs. However, this opportunity isn’t accessible to the majority of CSOs operating in the governance sector.

Planning and Budgeting

The study also sought to assess the planning and budgeting practices of CSOs, which are essential for managing challenges, allocating resources, and planning to achieve organizational goals. An annual planning process lays out the specific goals, desired outcomes, and details of activities for the year. A strategic plan ensures that the work plan's tasks and the planning process details are pertinent and contribute to the organization's long-term vision and trajectory. Planning and budgeting frequently work hand in hand, and ineffective annual and strategic planning can negatively impact an organization's operations and longevity.

With regards to having an annual plan for activities and programs and an annual budget, 17 of the 20 CSOs (85 percent) responded that they have prepared an annual plan, and 17 (85 percent) have prepared an annual budget, as illustrated in Figure 13. Even though the numbers of CSOs preparing an annual plan and annual budget were similar, the study found that these two factors were not linked.

Figure 13: Internal planning prepared by the surveyed CSOs

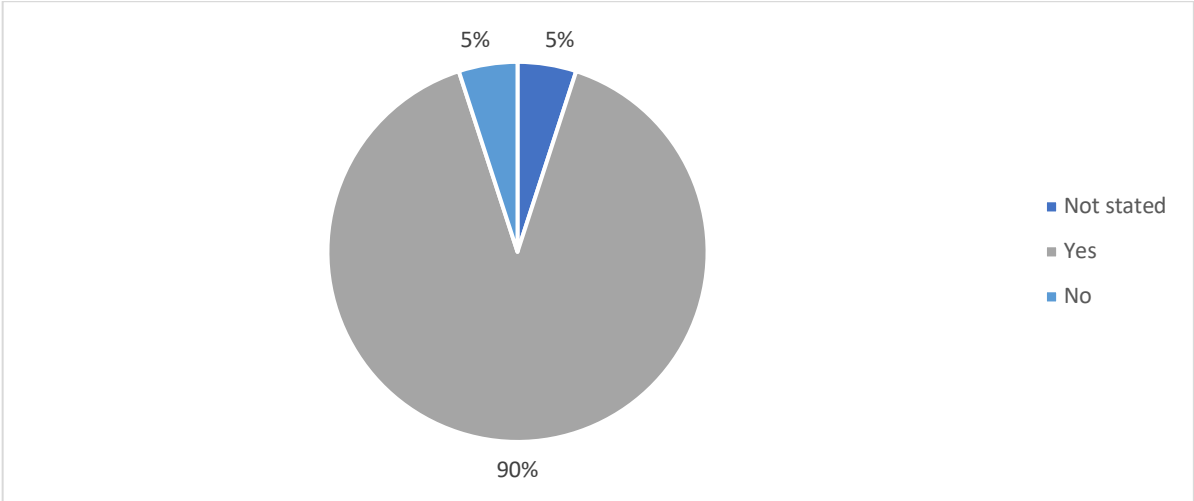


The CSOs reported different success rates for implementing their annual plans, achieving 50-95 percent of their goals. Plans are continuously monitored and evaluated by the CSOs, and budgetary restrictions cited as were the primary factor in failing to complete annual plans. As FGD and KII participants explained, CSO activities generally depend on the budget and amount of funding they can raise. The findings are consistent with the operations of CSOs in the governance sector, which are based on donor agencies' global initiatives with clear goals and strategies.

As for strategic action planning, the findings suggest that fewer CSOs in the governance sector have a long-term vision or strategy, with only 50 percent having one prepared. This is consistent with insights from stakeholder discussions, where participants highlighted the absence of a long-term vision, ideological foundation, and strategic thinking that should be ingrained in the operations of CSOs and that, in turn, can contribute to the organization’s sustainability. One possible explanation for this phenomenon could be that because CSOs are typically started by passionate or prominent individuals with specific short-term purposes, the vision and strategy for the longevity of the CSO remains underdeveloped. Due to insufficient institutional practices such as strategic action planning, organizations often cease operations once the founder departs. Strategic action planning is necessary to enable CSOs to successfully work with governmental institutions to establish and attain the rights and needs of the community. The value of strategic action planning by CSOs using the SAPs of governing bodies as a model was noted by local councils in consultation meetings, where they emphasized that scheduling activities after discussions could help mobilize resources and lead to higher success rates.

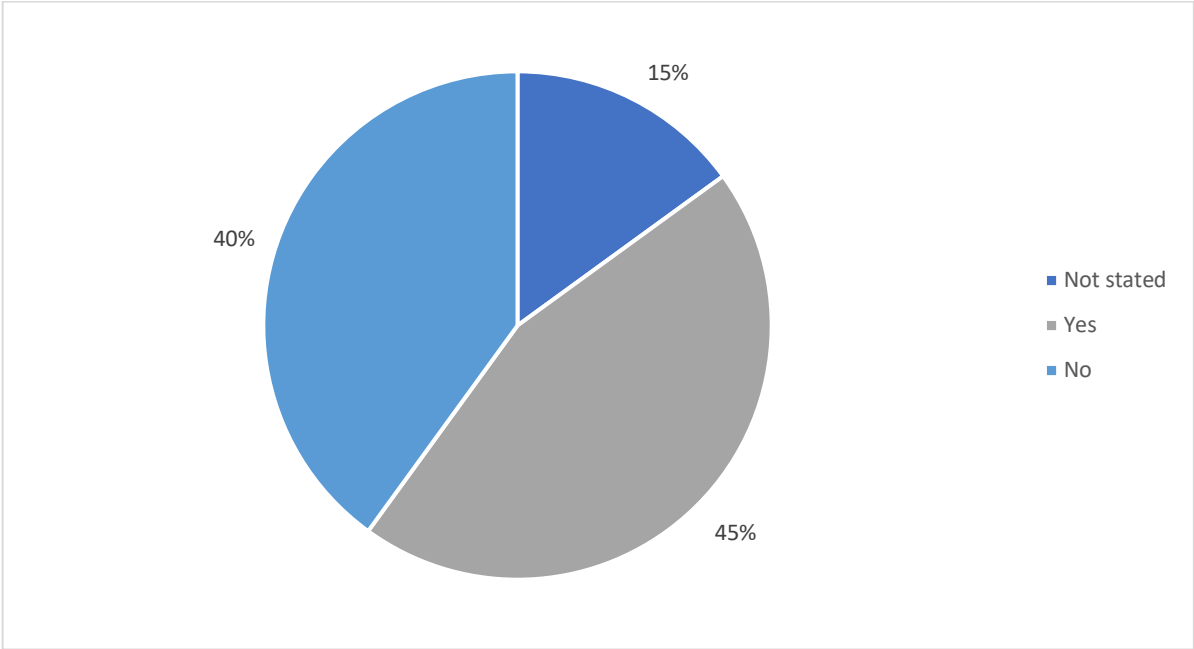
Action planning is also closely related to submitting annual reports and conducting annual audits, impacting CSOs’ internal governance. The amended Associations Act now requires that all associations convene a general meeting where the association must present its annual and financial reports. Within 30 days after the general meeting, the association must also submit the reports to the Registrar of Associations. Ninety percent of the surveyed CSOs said they prepared yearly reports, as illustrated in Figure 14.

Figure 14: Annual report preparation by surveyed CSOs



In contrast, less than half of the CSOs (45 percent) said they performed annual audits, as illustrated in Figure 15. The Associations Act’s minimum threshold could be one of the main reasons behind the lower percentage of CSOs performing audits, as an association’s total transactions must surpass MVR 500,001 for it to be required to complete an audit and submit an audit report and financial report.

Figure 15: Annual audit preparation by surveyed CSOs



CSOs whose transactions surpass the threshold tend to have a wide geographic reach and will be equipped with the knowledge and resources necessary to hold general meetings and submit yearly reports and audits in accordance with the Act. Still, this is only feasible for a small fraction of CSOs in the governance sector.

Participants of the stakeholder consultations cited that island or regional-level CSOs lack the internal resources and the expertise to draft these reports and must thus employ external resources to comply with the law. This, however, is not a sustainable solution for them due to budgetary limitations. Instead, replacing authoritative action with government support for CSOs to meet the requirements could present a solution. Regulations governing associations could also consider the CSO’s capacity to comply with them.

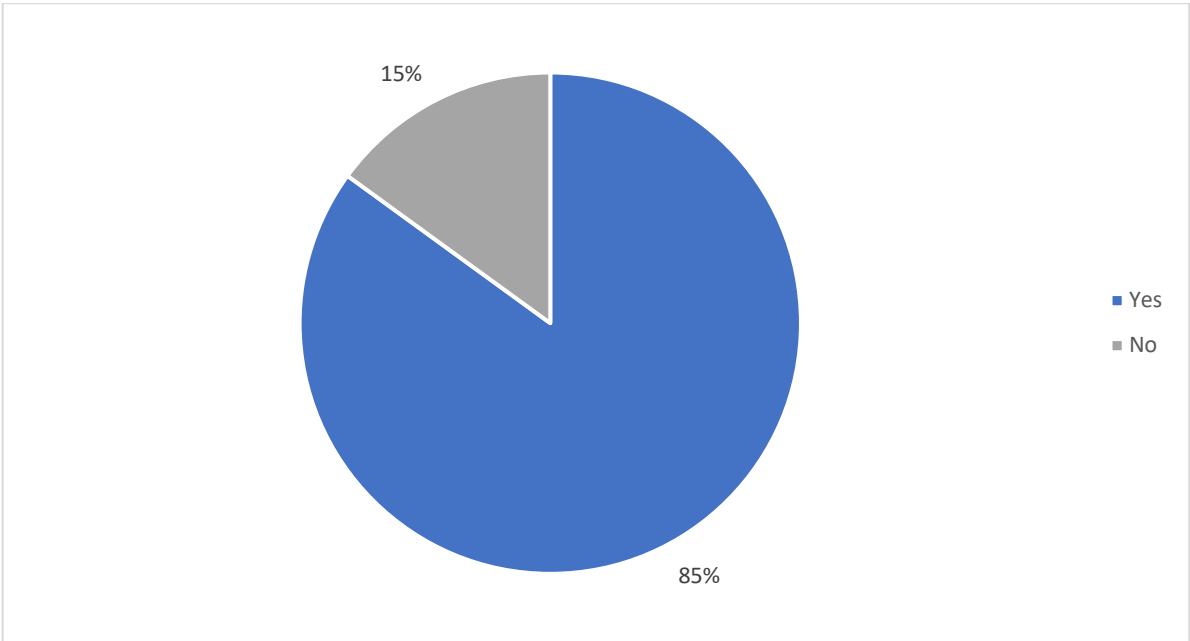
Another point raised by local institutions of the islands was the removal of their authority as an authenticator of the annual reports submitted by island-level CSOs. Previously, CSOs were

required to get the signature of the local council before submitting reports. However, this authority no longer rests with the local council, who note that their input, as the island’s regulatory governing body, is required to ensure the accuracy of the data provided in the reports.

Maintaining Ethical Conduct

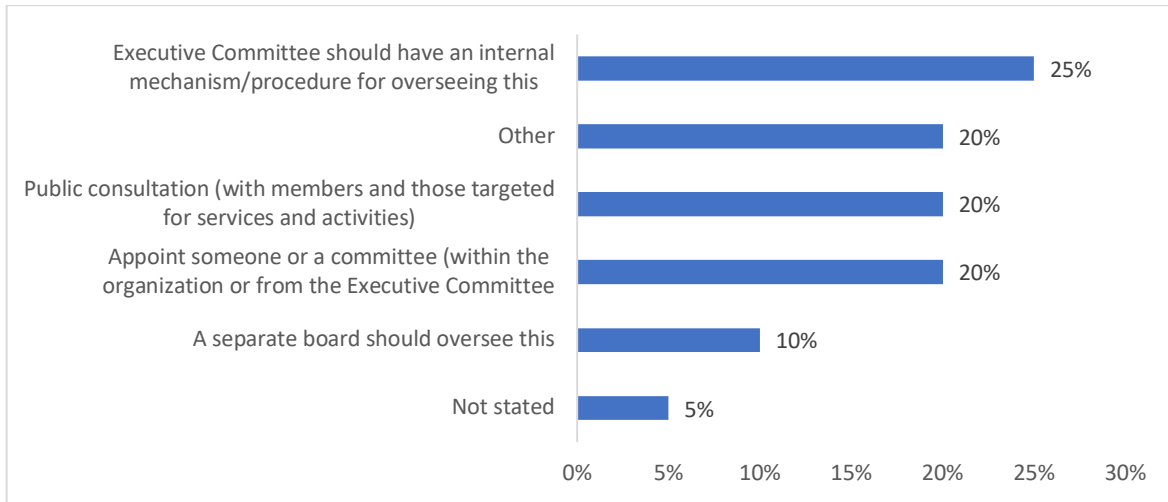
Ethical conduct is part of an organization’s code of conduct, which specifies the organization’s vision, values, and guiding ethical principles. It plays a role in creating an accountability framework, defining roles, defining appropriate professional actions, and setting standards for evaluation and reporting. As such, methods for maintaining ethical conduct must be defined as part of an organization’s internal governance. Of the surveyed CSOs, 85 percent had established methods of ethical conduct, as indicated in Figure 16.

Figure 16: Maintenance of ethical conduct by the surveyed CSOs



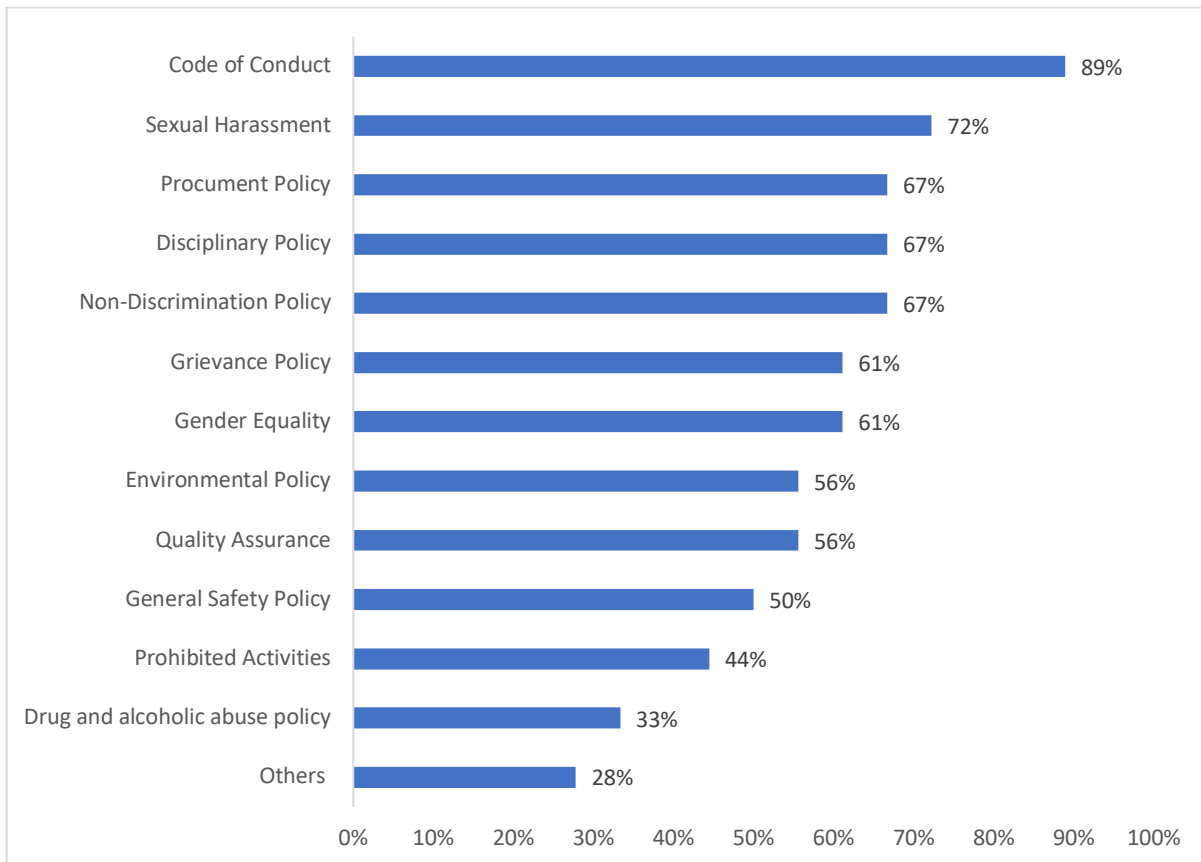
The methods of monitoring ethical conduct (from most to least preferred) are illustrated in Figure 17. Some participants responded “other,” explaining that management can monitor policies related to ethics and conduct while the board monitors other issues.

Figure 17: Most preferred methods of maintaining ethical conduct by surveyed CSOs



The majority of policies and standard operating procedures (SOPs) were established and followed by most CSOs, as shown in Figure 18 below. Notably, 89 percent of the CSOs have a code of conduct, and 72 percent have a sexual harassment policy.

Figure 18: Policies and SOPs established in the surveyed CSOs



According to the participants, policies on “prohibited activities” and “drug and alcohol abuse” are not established separately, as they are usually categorized as sections of another policy.

In addition to these policies, 3.7 percent also stated “others,” such as financial, HR, and recruitment policies. One CSO noted that they are currently working on a cybersecurity policy, while another stated that they follow the RTI Act as an SOP.

Based on the observed methods of maintaining ethical conduct, it is clear that CSOs understand the importance of establishing and maintaining internal governing mechanisms and processes. Similar findings were published in the UNDP Maldives (2011) report, in which all respondents identified monitoring CSO behavior as a crucial component of strengthening the sector, with internal mechanisms as the most preferred method.

Resources and Capacity Assessment

A CSO’s capacity and resource availability are directly linked to its effectiveness (a measure of how well an organization is doing the right things to accomplish its purpose) and its viability (its ability to survive and sustain itself for the long term). Therefore, evaluating the human resources, access to finance, and training available to CSOs is crucial for determining the needs and gaps in the sector.

Human Resources

A sufficient human resource base is a significant factor for the success and credibility of CSOs in their work at the community level and in undertaking productive dialogues with government actors and stakeholders on key development issues. The study found that the surveyed CSOs have an average of seven executive members and three founders, with a higher ratio of females to males, as indicated in Table 5.

Table 5: Average of executive members, founders, and board of directors

	Total Average	Average Female	Average Male
Executive members/founders	7	4	3
Founders/board of directors	3	2	1

Among the surveyed CSOs, the number of females in decision-making roles was higher than males, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Decision-making by gender

	Total Average	Average Female	Average Male
Involved in decision-making	7	5	3

However, it is important to note that this is not common in most CSOs or any sector in the country. Data from the National Bureau of Statistics (2019) showed that 55,721 women were employed in the labor force, with 67 percent being employees, highlighting the discrepancies between women and men in managerial positions. Additionally, as of February 2023, only 4 out of 14 political appointees in the cabinet were women. Thus, even though the study findings indicate a greater average of females in decision-making roles in CSOs, this does not reflect the general picture of women in executive roles in the CSO sector or the country. Instead, the fact that the majority of the surveyed CSOs are well-established and focused on women’s rights might have resulted in a higher percentage of female-led CSOs. The number of paid employees in CSOs working in the governance sector is illustrated in Table 7 below.

Table 7: Average of paid employees (full-time and part-time)

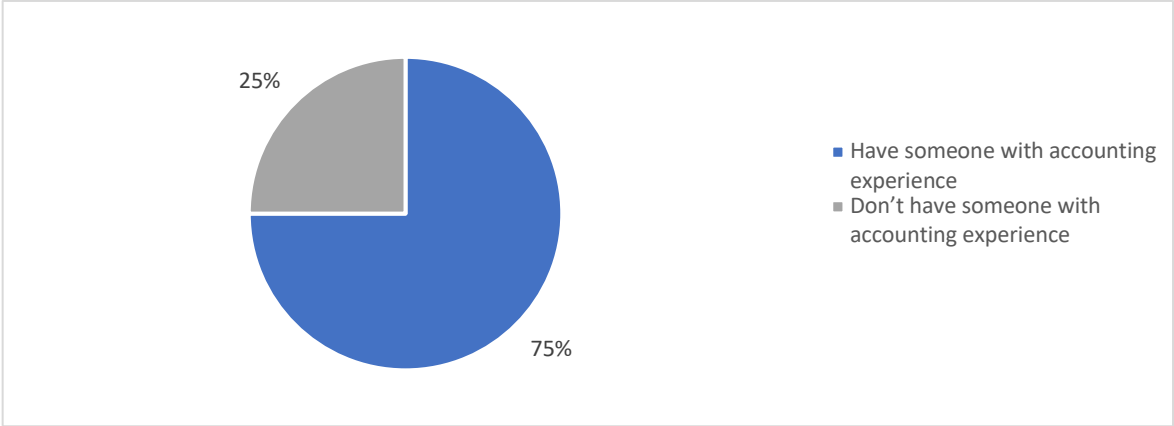
	Total Average	Average Female	Average Male
Paid employees (full-time)	5	3	2
Paid employees (part-time)	0.45	0.30	0.15

In general, there can be a lack of human resources and the capacity to take on positions in CSOs, including those that have been in operation for more than five years. The perception among the general public that CSOs are volunteer-based or side ventures can be correlated with the low average employee rate.

Participants of the UNDP Maldives (2011) study noted that the concurrent involvement of executive committee members in multiple organizations could also lead to improper resource allocation and reduced organization activity. In contrast, KII participants indicated that the current regulation, which prohibits an individual from being an executive board member of two or more CSOs, hinders their ability to share their expertise and knowledge and contribute to the growth of other CSOs.

The CSOs were also asked if they had accounting and bookkeeping expertise (whether through an employee, an executive member, a founder, or a volunteer). The study found that 75 percent of the CSOs had accounting personnel, while 25 percent did not, as illustrated in Figure 19 below.

Figure 19: Presence of accounting and bookkeeping personnel in the surveyed CSOs



The presence of accounting and bookkeeping personnel in the organizations can be correlated with a higher level of management and operations within the surveyed CSOs.

Figure 20: Surveyed CSOs per number of members

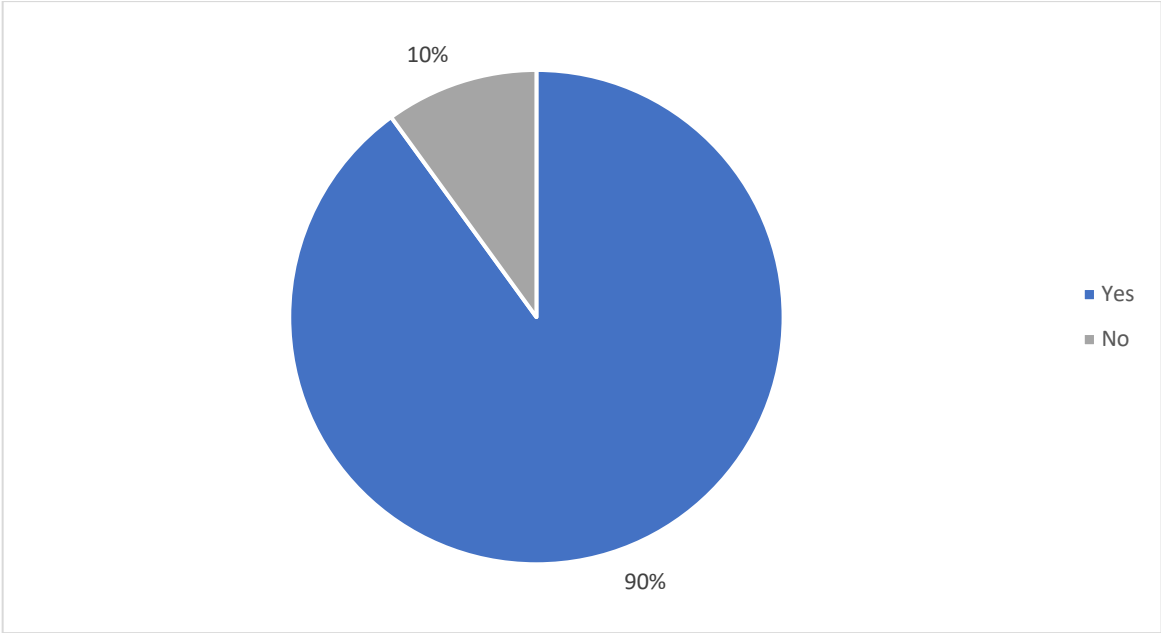


The difference in membership sizes, as illustrated in Figure 20, can be due to several reasons, namely: (1) well-established CSOs have a higher number of members who get specific benefits; (2) certain well-established CSOs do not utilize the membership concept; (3) the smaller populations in the islands result in less participation in the CSOs located there; and (4) certain island-level CSOs consider all inhabitants of the island to be a member without having specific membership applications.

Access to Training

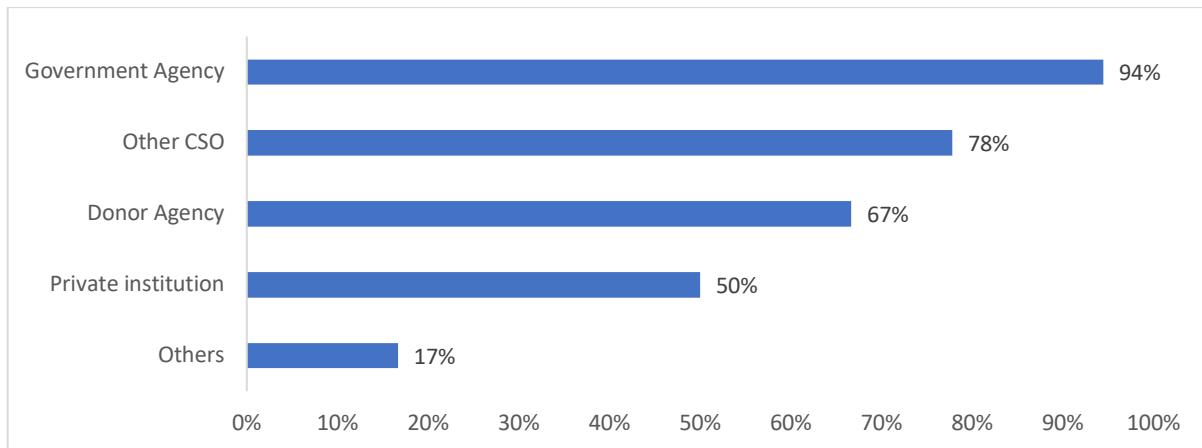
The differences in the capacities of CSOs across the governance sector can be attributed to factors including employee qualifications, expertise, and training. Accordingly, employee strengths and talents, which more often depend on the training capacities of the CSOs, are related to organizational capability under the governing systems and regulatory processes. Regarding access to training and capacity-building programs, 90 percent had attended different training programs, as shown in Figure 21.

Figure 21: Participation in capacity building and training programs by surveyed CSOs.



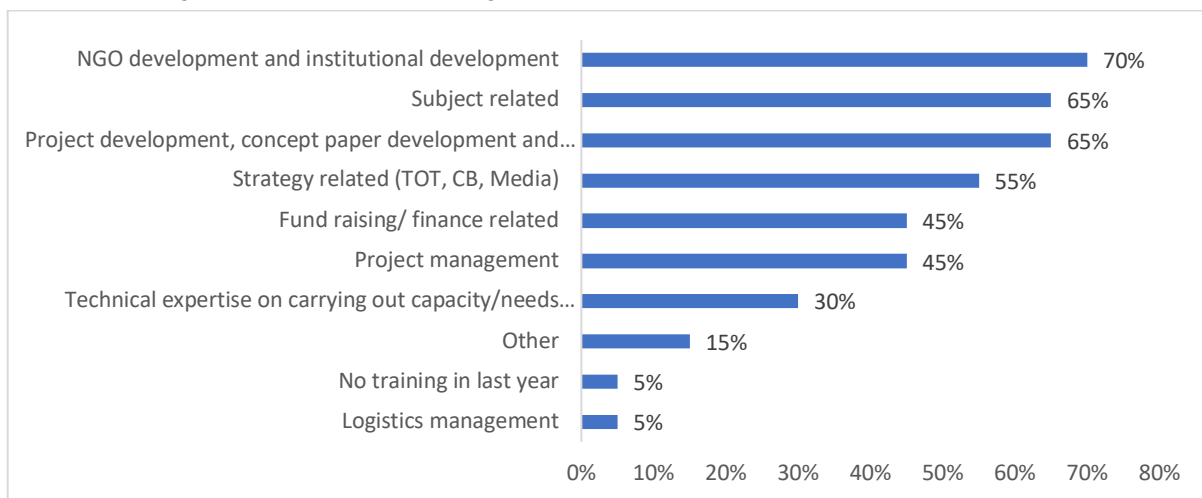
These training programs were organized primarily by a government agency (4 percent), followed by other CSOs (78 percent). Sixty-seven percent of CSOs attended training programs conducted by donor agencies, such as UNDP Maldives, as shown in Figure 22.

Figure 22: Organizers of the attended training programs by the surveyed CSOs



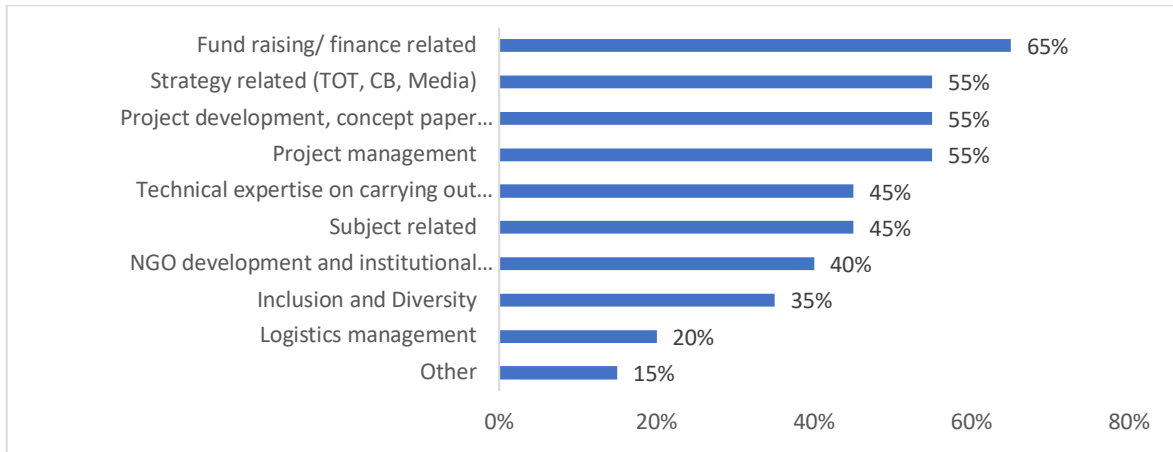
The CSOs were also asked to elaborate on the types of training they had attended. Most (70 percent) CSOs reported attending NGO and institutional development training. In comparison, 65 percent said they attended subject-related training, project development, concept paper development, and proposal writing training. Fifteen percent stated that they had participated in other training activities, particularly about local government policies, cybersecurity, and topics related to the environment.

Figure 23: Types of training attended by the surveyed CSOs in the last year



During the assessment of CSOs’ training needs, the majority (65 percent) highlighted the need for fundraising and finance-related training, which aligns with the identified financial challenges. Trainings in the “other” category, which were indicated as a requirement by the CSOs, included volunteer management and resource mobilization.

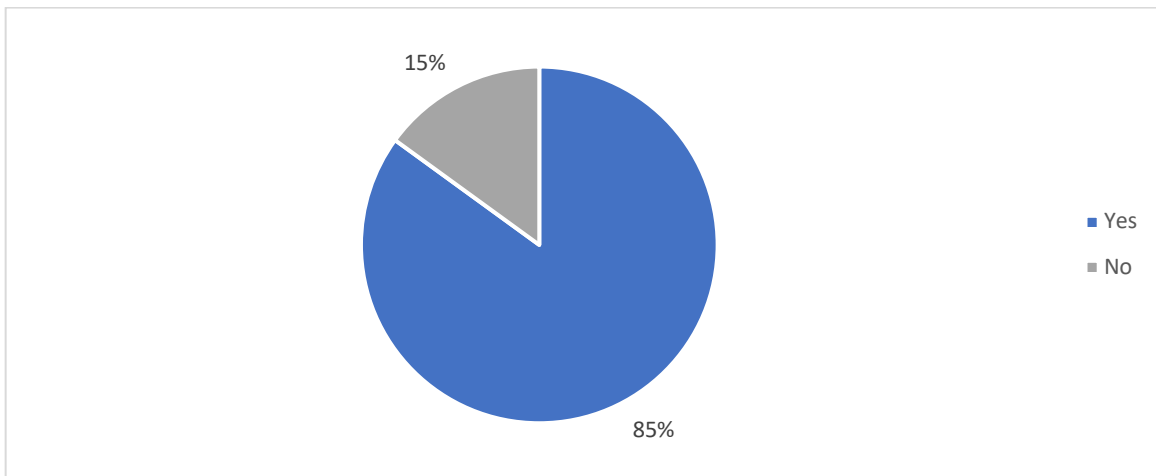
Figure 24: Trainings needs of the surveyed CSOs



Funding and Financial Resources

The capacity to hire an adequate human resource base and increase staff capacity requires the organization to have access to adequate financial resources. The financial autonomy of an organization was initially evaluated by determining whether it had a separate bank account for its organizational needs. The majority of the CSOs (85 percent) had a separate bank account under their name, while 15 percent did not, as shown in Figure 25.

Figure 25: Proportion of surveyed CSOs with a separate bank account

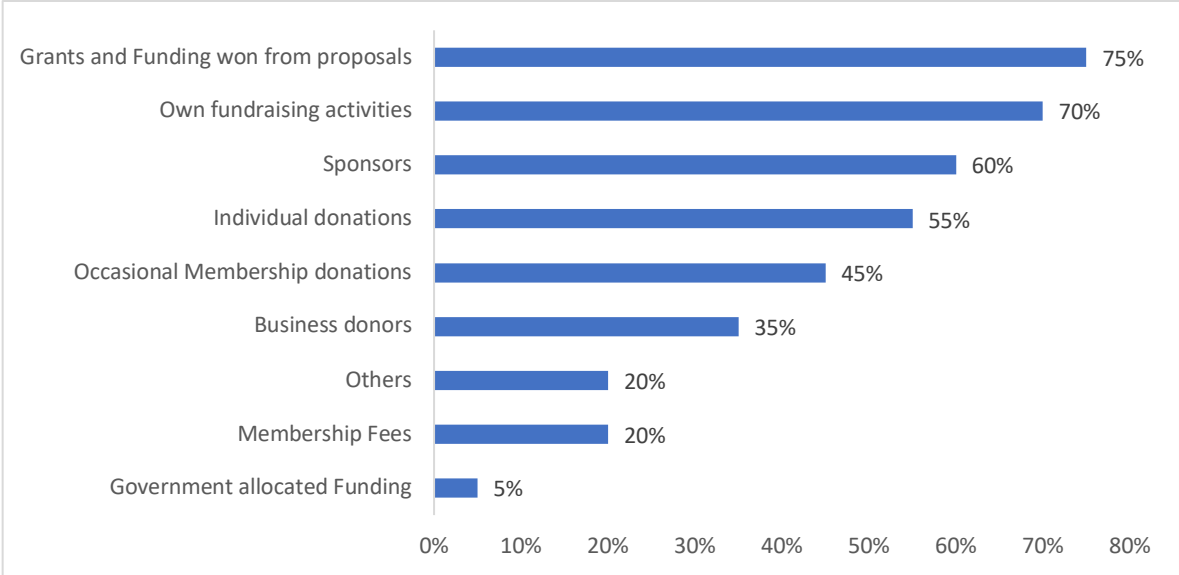


The sources of income of the surveyed CSOs varied, with the majority of the CSOs (75 percent) depending on grants and funding secured from competitive proposals. This highlights the dependence of the CSO sector in the Maldives on donor agencies. However, FGD and KII participants also noted challenges with structuring these grants. In particular,

they noted that the majority of grant schemes did not cover administrative and logistical costs, which hinders the ability of the CSO to sustain the projects in the long term without the aid of donor agencies.

While 70 percent of CSOs reported income through fundraising activities, participants also noted that the community had limited knowledge about conducting fundraising activities. A further 60 percent listed sponsors as an income source, with the major sponsors being the island representative parliament member or the nearby resorts for island-level CSOs. Large private companies were also identified as major sponsors for national-level CSOs.

Figure 26: Sources of income of the surveyed CSOs



The stakeholder consultations with the local councils noted that although they were willing to fund CSOs, budget constraints limited their ability to provide financial assistance. For example, the budget for Women’s Development Committees (WDCs), classified as governmental institutions, is allocated through the council’s funding and is typically insufficient for more than the members’ salaries. This limits their ability to carry out initiatives and programs to advance women on the island and support CSOs.

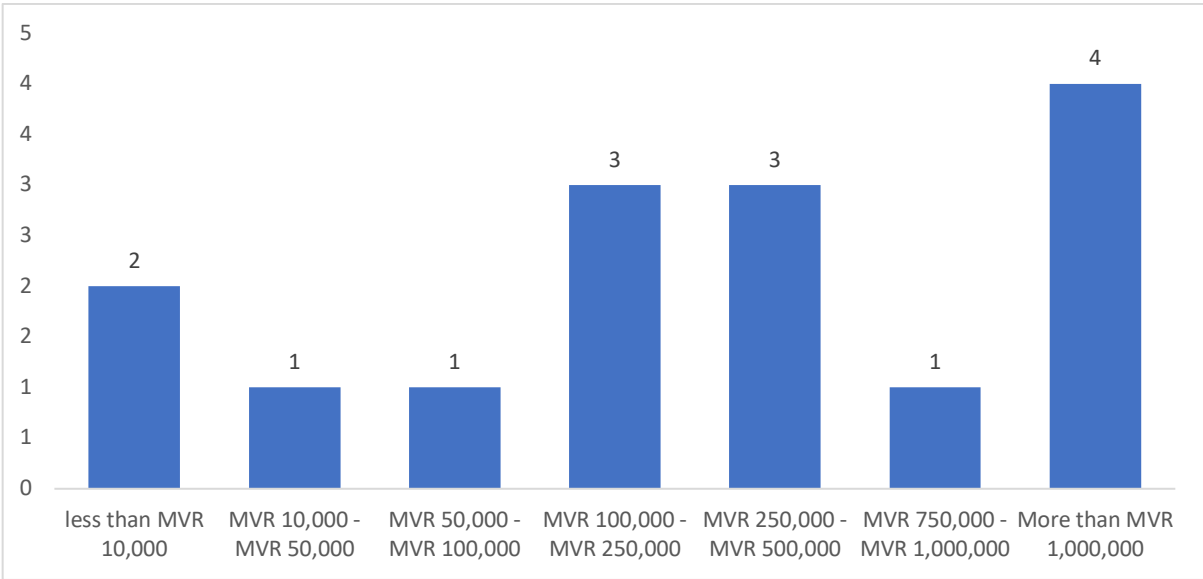
In accordance with the modified Associations Act, the government must annually provide financial support to associations, with 3 percent of the MoYSCE’s budget designated for this purpose. Additionally, state-owned enterprises and shareholding companies are obligated to

contribute at least 25 percent of their annual corporate social responsibility (CSR) budgets to associations as financial assistance.

Community stakeholder consultations indicate that most CSOs cannot secure the financial assistance provided by the government. The same organizations generally acquire financial aid from the government or CSR funding each year. Additionally, despite their aim to lead the island’s development through engagement with the government and the community, regional and island-level CSOs encounter difficulties taking advantage of these opportunities due to a lack of expertise in areas such as proposal writing and project management.

The study further inquired about CSOs’ annual incomes for the last year (2022), with the responses illustrated in Figure 27.

Figure 27: Annual income in 2022 of the surveyed CSOs



The majority of the CSOs surveyed are well-established and work at a national or international level. Thus, the annual funding received does not accurately reflect the reality on the ground in the CSO sector in the Maldives or among CSOs active in the governance sector. In general, most CSOs in the Maldives have no income or procure minimal levels of income based on their level of activities. This position is reflected in the UNDP Maldives (2011) study.

Scope of Work

A primary objective of the study is to understand the scope of CSO operations and the practices they adopt in working in the governance sector. As such, the study assessed the work of CSOs based on collaborations and partnerships, participation in policy reform, use of the right to information, techniques for sharing information transparently, and modes of accessing regulatory information.

Collaborations and Partnerships

Collaborations within the political system (which include central departments, local governments, public regulators, and other political, religious, and commercial groups) as well as multilateral and bilateral organizations; international and national NGOs; local civic groups; networks of informal functional associations; business organizations and the media are necessary to achieve the characteristics of good governance. These collaborations encourage widespread accountability and trust among institutions, leading to an institutional and societal commitment to achieve policy goals.

In terms of collaboration, 90 percent of the surveyed CSOs have collaborated and partnered with other local CSOs on their activities and projects, as observed in Figure 28. Seventy-five percent of the CSOs have collaborated or partnered with other regional and international CSOs, as shown in Figure 29.

Figure 28: Collaborations with other CSOs

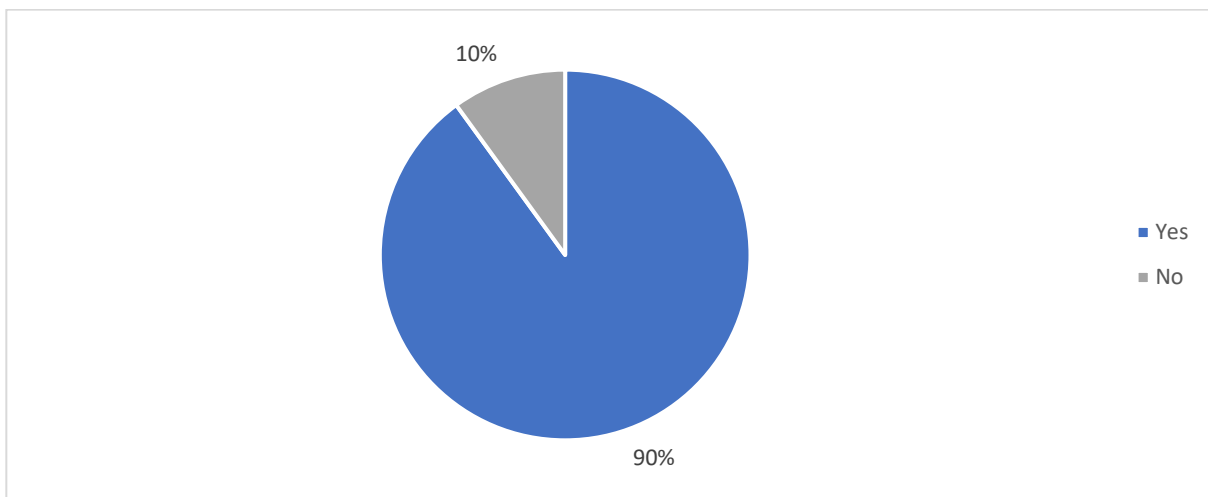
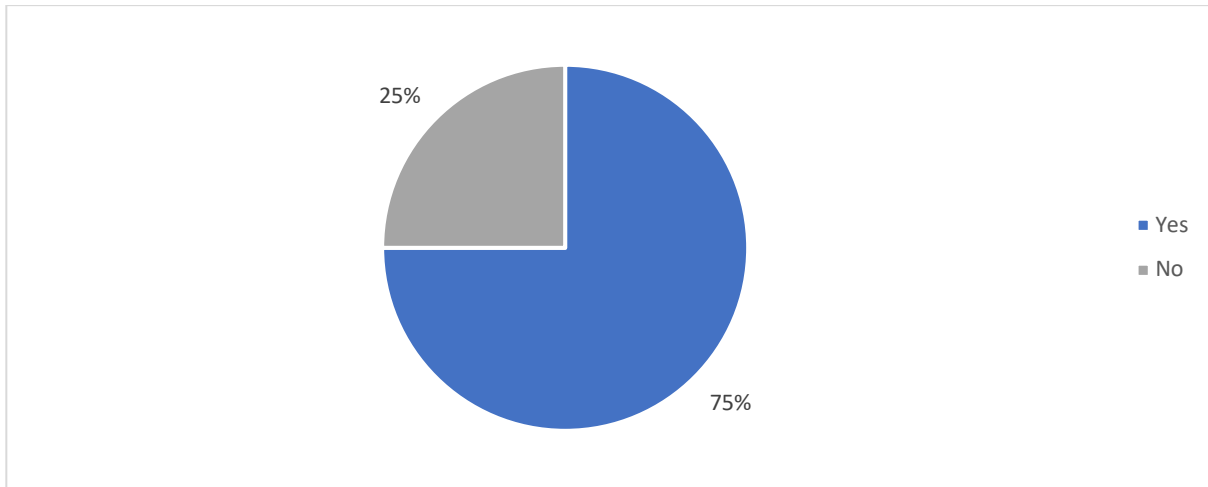


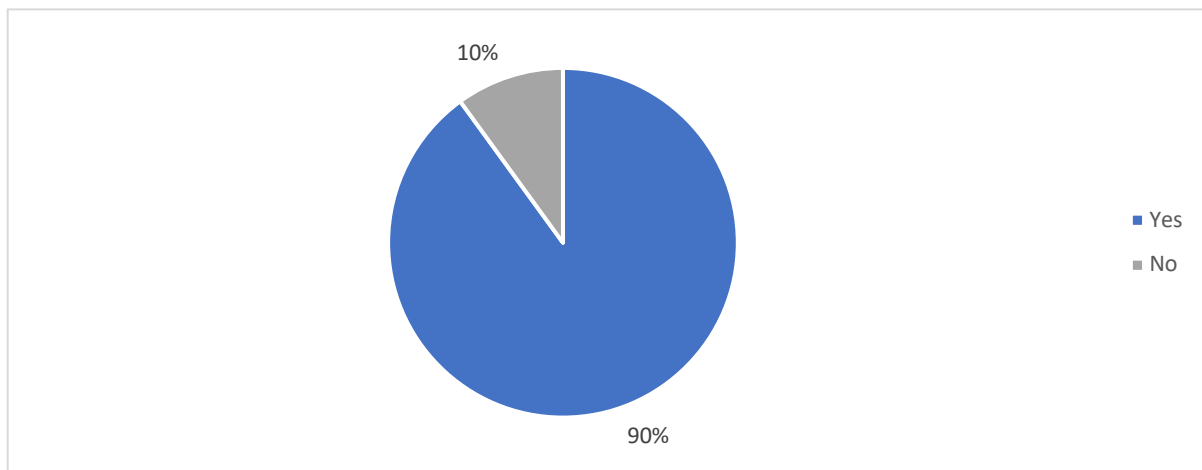
Figure 29: Collaborated with international or regional CSOs



A high level of collaboration and partnership is indicated among CSOs working in the governance sector. Yet, during engagements with stakeholders at the national and community levels, it was emphasized that CSOs are unaware that collaboration with another CSO with similar goals can improve program success rates, resource mobilization, and knowledge sharing. There is a requirement for increased awareness among CSOs on the benefits of collaboration, such as the ability to speak to outside parties with a more cohesive voice, which is particularly important given the scrutiny and criticism leveled at the civil society space.

Regarding government collaboration, 90 percent of the CSOs stated that they had partnered with government agencies on their organization’s activities, as shown in Figure 30.

Figure 30: Collaborated with government agencies

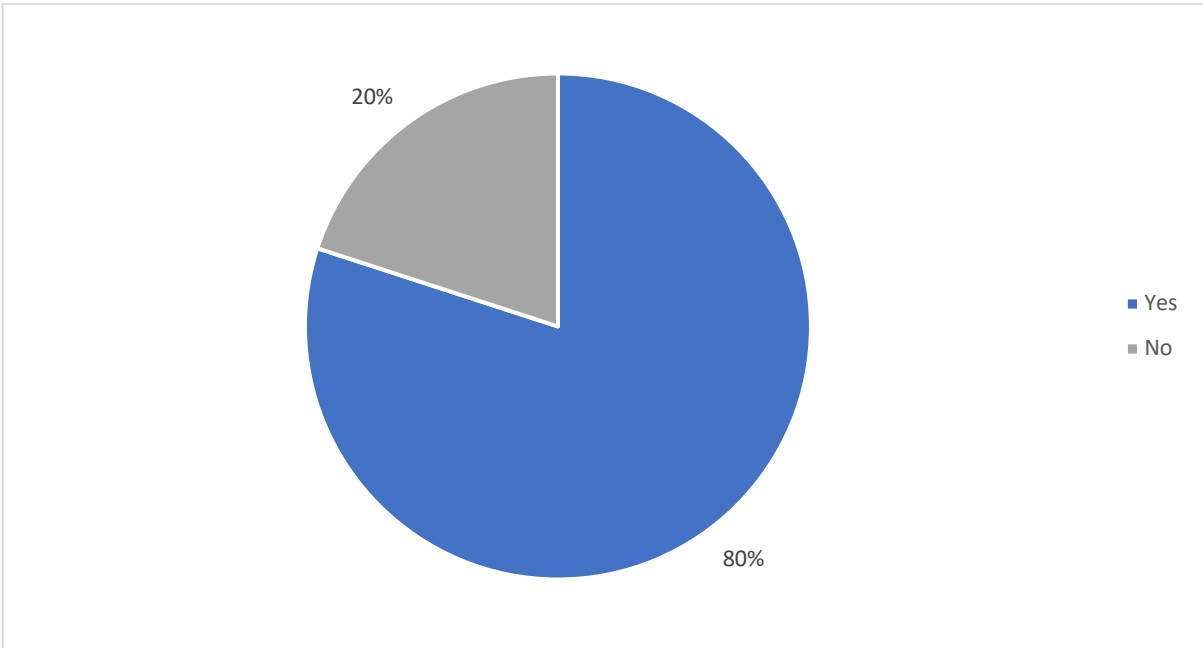


While Figure 29 indicates a positive proportion of collaboration and partnerships between the government and civil space actors, discussions with stakeholders paint a different picture. According to consultation participants, initiating collaborative works between government institutions and CSOs, particularly at the island level, often faced several constraints.

Differing explanations were given to explain these constraints, the first of which stated that the lack of coordination and capacity on the part of CSOs prevented them from participating in activities and consultations organized by local institutions, such as the preparation of land use plans, island development plans, and social issue resolution. Governmental stakeholders claimed that despite their desire to work with CSOs on governance-related issues, the majority of CSOs on the islands limited their operations to civic engagement, focusing on sports activities and other social events such as festivals rather than taking a lead role in policy-related activities. The CSOs, however, emphasized that their attempts to work together were frequently rejected if they had political beliefs opposing those of the government.

The study also found that 80 percent of the CSOs had collaborated with private institutions for their organization’s activities, as illustrated in Figure 31.

Figure 31: Collaborated with private institutions

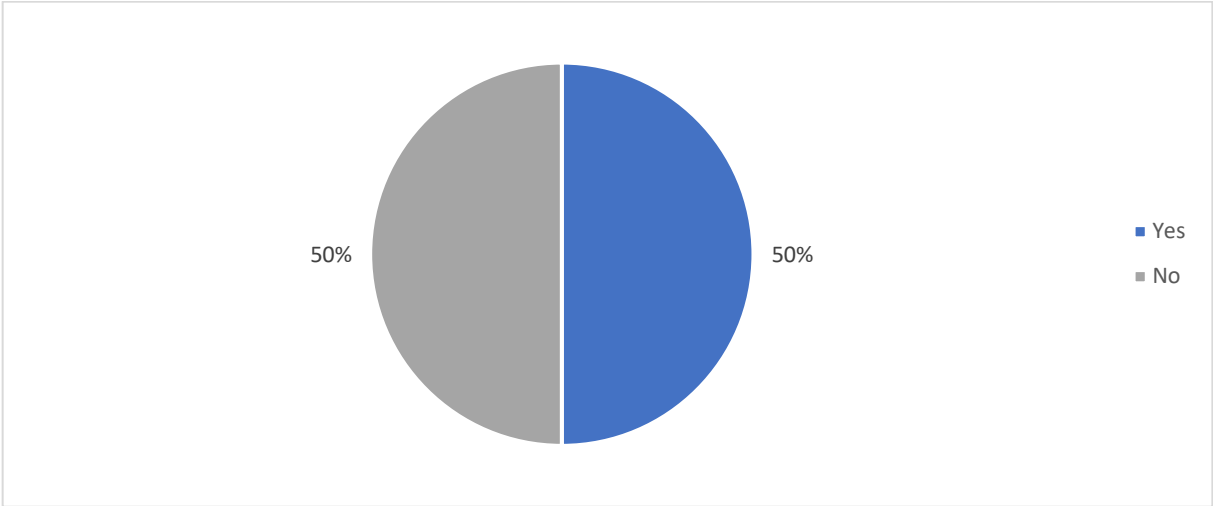


Consultations and discussions also noted that the majority of private institutions generally did not respond to CSOs’ requests for financial assistance and resources. To remedy this, both parties must recognize the benefits of combining resources and knowledge through CSO-private institution partnerships, which can contribute to inclusive and sustainable economic growth by creating “sustainable public value that would not otherwise be created by a single sector alone.”

Participation in Policy Reform

Further involvement of the CSOs in the governance sector was assessed based on their activeness in policy reform processes. Among the surveyed CSOs, 50 percent have participated in activities or movements that influenced policy reform, as shown in Figure 32.

Figure 32: Engagement in activities and movements that influenced policy reform



The activities and movements that these CSOs have engaged in include:

- Gender-based policies and protection of vulnerable populations:
 - Consultation with the government on family law review
 - Gender equality action plan
 - Improving policies against domestic violence and child abuse
 - Laws related to the reintegration of children under state care
 - Reform of acts relating to women, children, and people with disabilities.
- Environmental-based policies:
 - Parliament discussions regarding the Waste Management Act

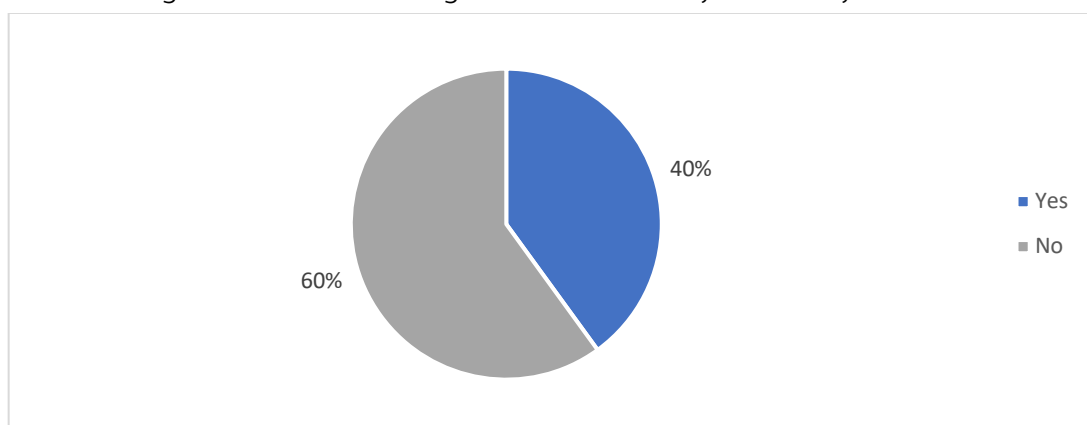
- Consultations regarding the national waste management strategic action plan
- Lobbying for stricter rules for governmental processes such as road reconstruction.
- Other policies:
 - Drafting of RTI Act and asset declaration bill
 - Consultation regarding the Minimum Wage Act
 - Policies protecting the rights of expatriate workers
 - Parliament discussion of the amendment of the Associations Act;
 - Advocating against corruption

CSOs engaged in policy reform are well-established, with greater capacity and access to information regarding government changes and political decisions. As per the stakeholder consultations, it is crucial to establish a mechanism through which CSOs can be made aware of opportunities to take part in policy reform. Specifically, participants stressed the importance of improving information dissemination regarding available opportunities to be involved in political processes, such as participating in parliament discussions, commenting on drafted bills, and advocating against government decisions when required.

Right to Information

The degree to which CSOs have used or resorted to the Right to Information Act in their governance-related work can reflect the level of compliance of government institutions on CSO requests. Forty percent of CSOs noted that they used RTI whenever necessary, varying from twice a month to a few times a year.

Figure 33: Resorted to right to information by the surveyed CSOs



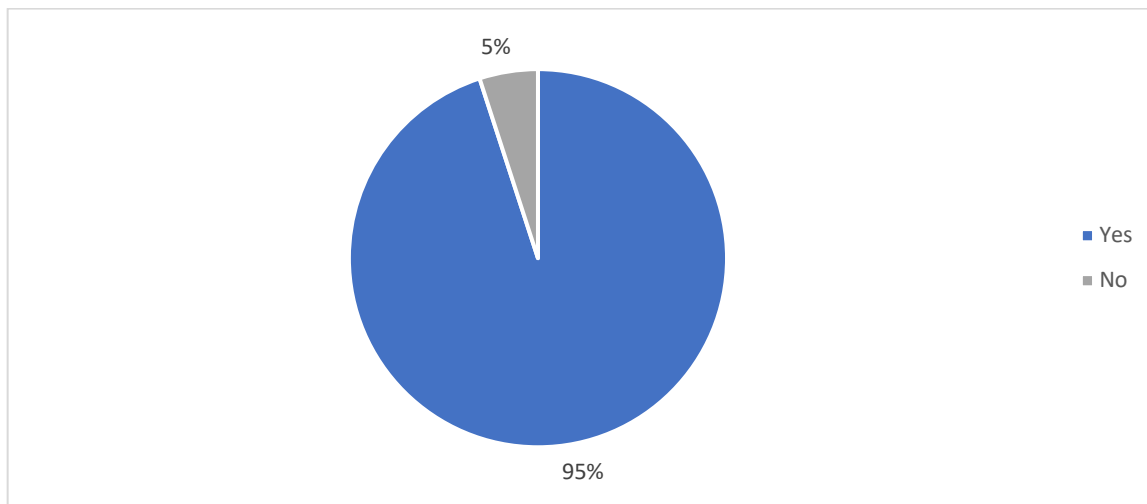
One CSO interviewed as a key informant has an ongoing RTI project that focuses on ensuring transparency in the structure and workings of government institutions. The CSO has sent 150 RTI forms in two phases to specific government institutions to understand better their level of knowledge and compliance with the RTI Act. However, since this was a particular project, it can be assumed that the use of RTI by CSOs, in general, would not be as extensive.

Transparency

Due to the right of associations to be free from interference by the state in their internal affairs, the requirement for transparency in the internal workings of associations is not expressly stated in international and regional treaties. However, transparency and openness are essential to build public trust and establish accountability in the civil society space. As such, the study looked into whether and how CSOs share program and financial information.

Ninety-five percent of the CSOs stated that they transparently share information about their activities and programs with their members and the general public, as illustrated in Figure 34.

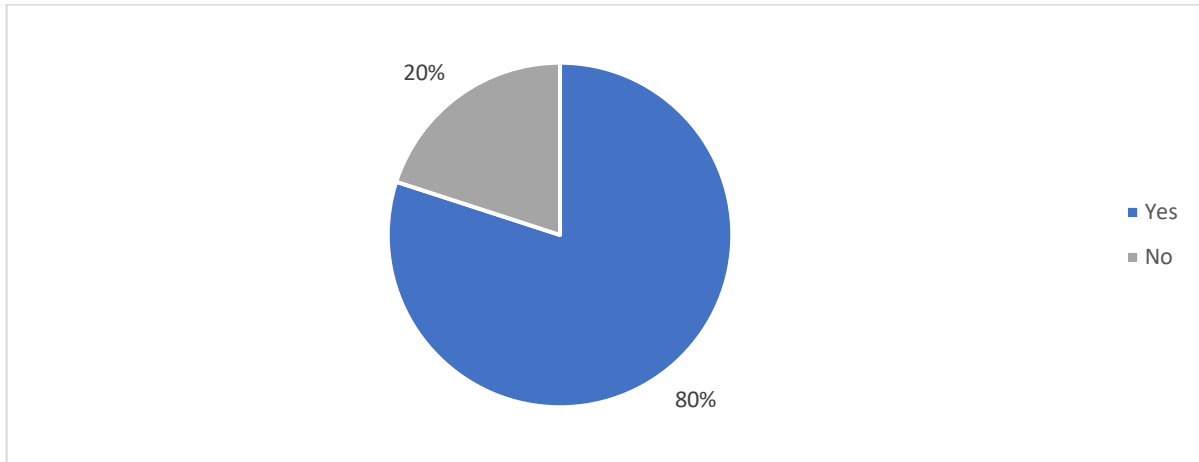
Figure 34: Sharing program information with members and the public by the surveyed CSOs



Social media, CSO websites, and annual reports were cited as the three most common methods of disseminating program information to the public. Other methods, used occasionally, include presentations at annual meetings, emails and letters, and publications.

Regarding financial information, 80 percent reported sharing their financial data with CSO members through annual general meetings, emails, social media, and annual financial publications shared on their websites, as shown in Figure 35.

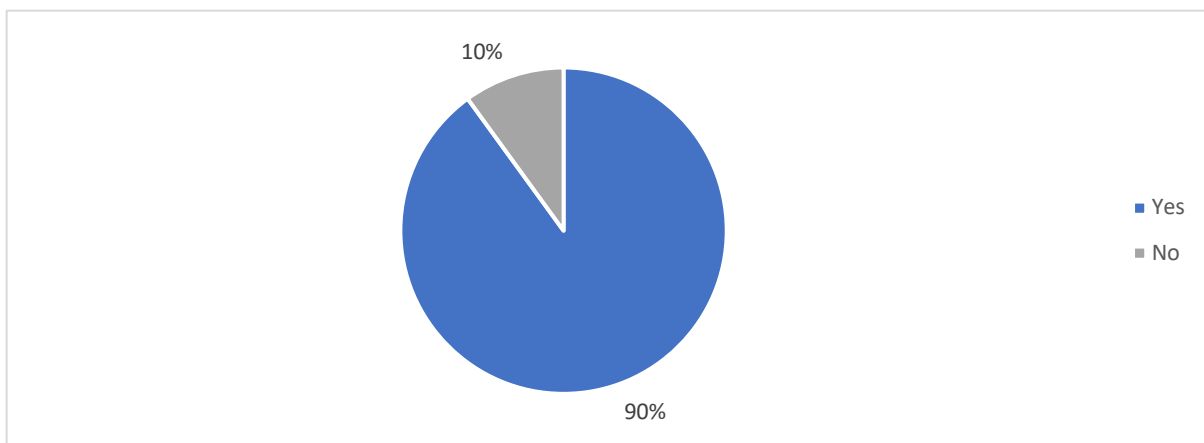
Figure 35: Sharing of financial information with the members by the surveyed CSOs



Familiarity with Rules and Regulations

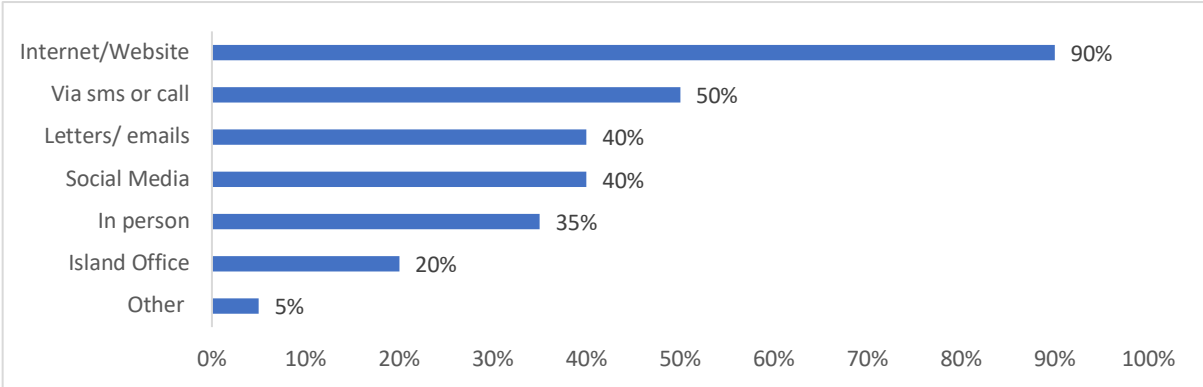
Prior to evaluating the opinion of CSOs on the need for rules, regulations, and laws in the civil society space, their familiarity with national or local rules and regulations pertaining to the organization's work was assessed. The majority of CSOs (90 percent) stated they were familiar with the rules and regulations, while 10 percent stated otherwise, as shown in Figure 36.

Figure 36: Familiarity with the national or local rules and regulations by the surveyed CSOs



The CSOs were also asked about their preferred modes of accessing relevant information regarding regulations and other legal requirements. The majority of CSOs (90 percent) chose the internet/websites as their preferred mode. Five percent selected “other,” as a lawyer in the organization had helped them to access legal information and other requirements.

Figure 37: Preferred mode of accessing information by the surveyed CSOs



Regulation of the Civil Space

The regulatory framework governing the CSO sector has the potential to either assist or obstruct democratic transitions and the involvement of CSOs in good governance. CSOs can use their rights to “establish themselves, work with and challenge government, and provide the institutional space in which individuals may freely associate.” On the other hand, restrictive regulations on CSOs or the policing of CSO activity can contribute to a regression of democracy and democratic space in the country.

Regulatory Requirements of the CSO Sector

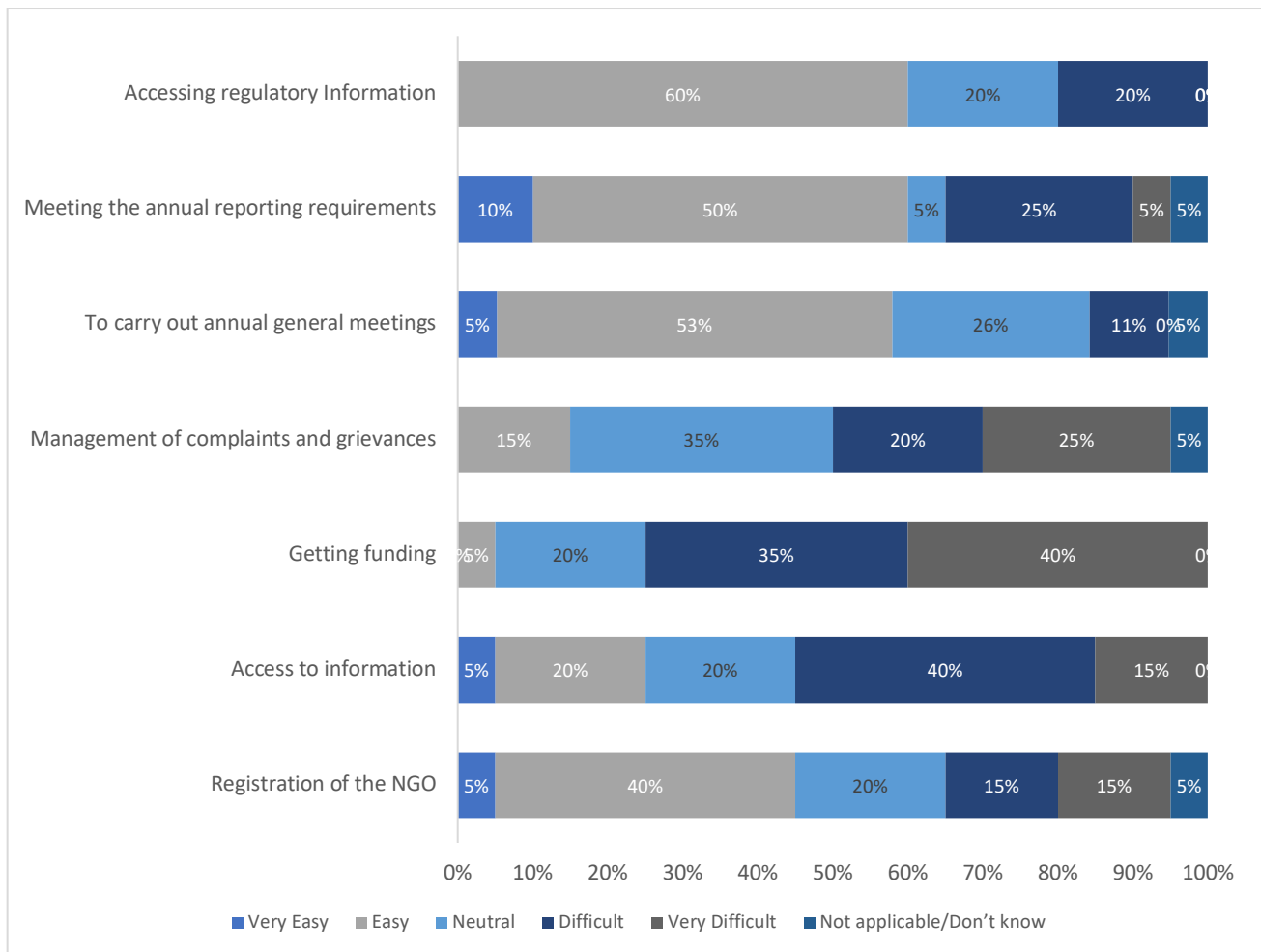
Decades of state legislative measures, justified as means to protect national security and ensure the transparency and accountability of CSOs, reveal the sector’s vulnerability to state suppression, control, and the centralization of political power. The activities and finances of CSOs are sometimes constrained by state-enforced limits, further complicating the legal foundation and sustainability of CSOs.

To better understand the freedom of association and expression granted to CSOs in the governance sector, it is crucial to assess how easily they can meet current structural,

organizational, and legal requirements while also analyzing other factors that may impact the sector.

Among the assessing criteria, the surveyed CSOs selected getting funding as the hardest requirements to meet (75 percent), while accessing regulatory information (60 percent) and meeting annual reporting requirements (58 percent) were chosen as the easiest. Regarding registering NGOs, 45 percent rated it easy, while 30 percent found it difficult.

Figure 38: Rating of requirements and factors relevant to the CSO sector by the surveyed CSOs



The triangulation of survey data with qualitative data from the consultation discussions shows a disconnect between government institutions monitoring the regulatory framework and the CSOs. Although the websites of the relevant institutions make it easy to access regulatory information, CSOs reported having trouble getting the government and other pertinent authorities to respond to their inquiries. Additionally, access to other relevant

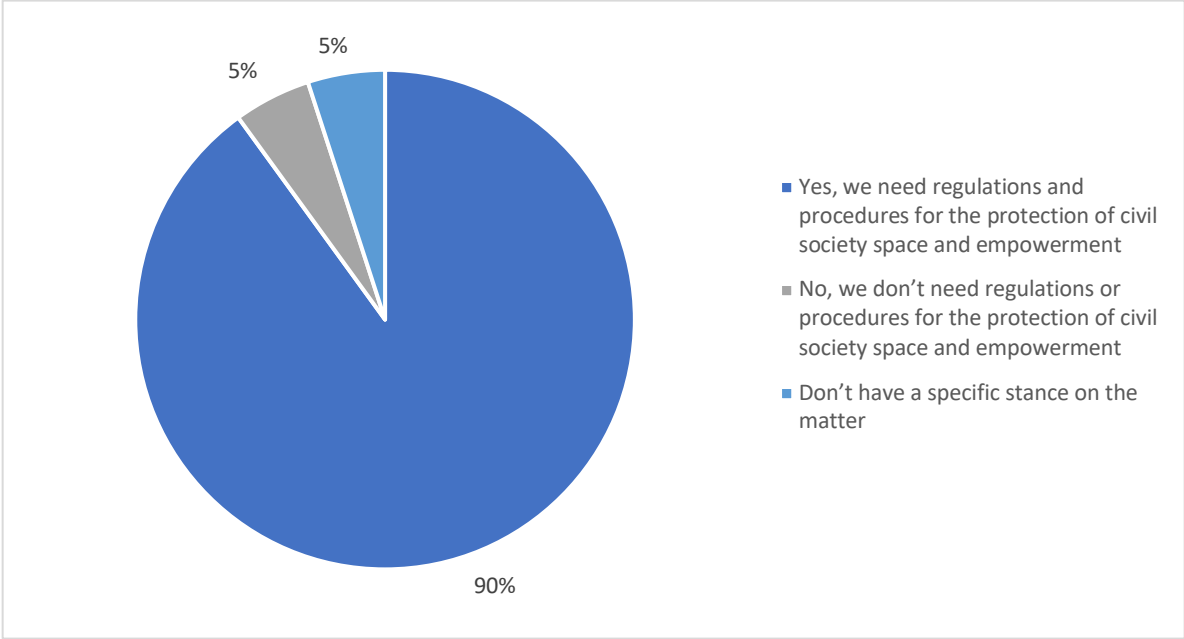
information is limited and ambiguous compared to regulatory information availability. Examples include information specific to subject or focus areas, funding and training opportunities, and the procedures to be followed when inquiring about the decision-making process for finalized policies. The findings indicate that, in addition to a strong legislative framework, a robust network must be established among stakeholders active in the same sector and working for the same purpose.

Need for Regulation and Procedure

Efforts to strengthen the CSO sector and increase the legitimacy and credibility of CSOs with stakeholders require an assessment of regulations in place to protect CSOs during conflict resolution. This is necessary to foster public trust and to preserve the political space for CSOs to operate.

In this regard, CSOs were asked about the need for regulations and state-enforced rules, for which 90 percent stated that regulations and procedures are needed. In comparison, five percent felt regulation or procedures were not needed, as indicated in Figure 39.

Figure 39: Need for regulations and state-enforced rules for the civil society space

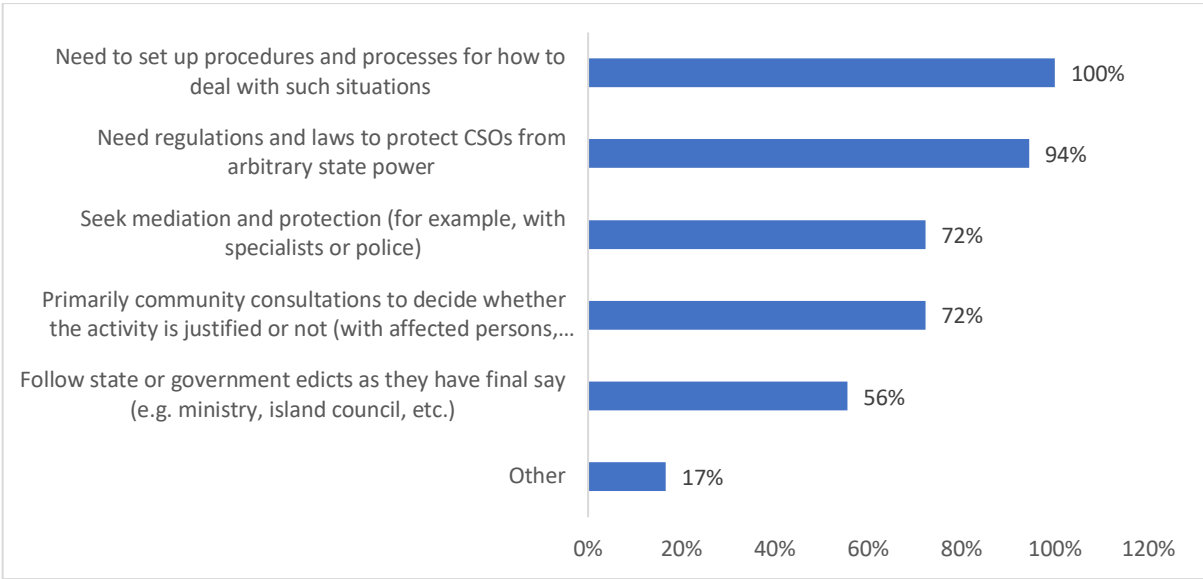


Conflict Resolution in Civic Space

The CSOs who believed regulations were important agreed that there should be protocols and processes to resolve disputes between CSOs and other external stakeholders. Ninety-four percent responded that laws and regulations should protect CSOs from arbitrary governmental power. According to 72 percent of respondents, experts or the police can act as mediators and protectors. Seventy-two percent of respondents believed that primary community consultations should be utilized to evaluate the appropriateness of activities.

Additionally, as shown in Figure 40 below, 56 percent chose following state or government decrees as their preferred way of resolving conflicts. The 17 percent who indicated alternative methods emphasized the need to raise public awareness regarding recently ratified laws and improve the implementation of existing laws and policies, amend conflicting laws and regulations, and have conflict resolution decisions made solely by courts of law or law enforcers without government involvement.

Figure 40: Roles of regulations in conflict resolution



Furthermore, the data collection process revealed some distrust towards the government among CSOs. One of the contributing factors is the arbitrary dissolution of the Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN), the country’s leading human rights organization, following claims that the group had insulted Islam in a report published in 2016. Other factors that may influence this distrust include cases of journalists receiving death threats and harassment;

the attack on human rights lawyer Mahfoor Saeed following his criticism of the government in a speech in 2015; government inaction to stop the spread of disinformation about advocates and their work; and social media campaigns demanding that the government ban CSOs for allegedly being anti-Islamic or extremist.

Most CSOs view the government as monitoring organizations more interested in taking authoritative steps against CSOs than aiding them and incorporating their ideas to develop the nation into a fully functional democracy. Therefore, although more than half of the CSOs surveyed for the study reported adhering to state or governmental directives in conflict resolution, CSOs generally prefer the judiciary to resolve disputes and for the police to maintain law and order.

Public Perception

Given their connection with communities on the ground, civil society has long been recognized as critical to achieving sustainable human development. CSOs have first-hand knowledge of the problems, limitations, and difficulties present at a community level and the steps required to address them. However, to do so, CSOs require public trust, as their activities hinge on public engagement. Thus, the FGDs and KIIs sought to understand the public perception of CSOs working in the governance sector.

Current Perception Assumed

The current perception of CSOs largely depends on a single factor: the level of their work. CSOs that operate at the regional or island community levels are deeply ingrained in local communities and are viewed as working for the development of the islands with their work aligning with the needs of the local communities. Usually, the deep-rooted connections between the CSO founders and the community enable the CSO to be recognized, trusted, and accepted, which helps the organization engage residents and successfully carry out initiatives. Conversely, CSOs that do not actively promote community engagement and island development may be viewed negatively, as the majority of community members would be unaware of their objectives and priorities.

On the other hand, CSOs that operate on a national scale lack strong local roots. As a result, public trust in them is significantly lower. In the governance sector, a lack of knowledge and

misinformation contribute to a primarily negative perception of CSOs' roles and actions in governance and policymaking.

Firstly, there is little understanding of issues such as gender equality, women's rights, and reproductive freedom among the general population, with a significant amount of misinformation and negative associations surrounding these concepts. As such, any organization actively promoting these issues is assumed to have a political agenda under the influence of foreign ideologies and is labeled with terms such as "political opposition," "partisan," "foreign agent," and even "terrorist." For instance, fighting corruption can be seen as oppositional to the government (political opposition), while advocating for women's rights can be seen as oppositional to Islam (a foreign agent). Even opposing government projects such as dredging, which have significant adverse environmental consequences, may be interpreted as working against national advancement because they are incompatible with prevailing public goals (partisan).

Secondly, public perception, credibility, and acceptance of CSOs and their work could change if they engage in governance or policy-related decisions. This is due to the common understanding that CSOs work to develop communities and should refrain from governmental decision-making, which is viewed as "political" or working as a political party. Additional viewpoints expressed by the community included CSOs being perceived as individuals who established organizations for their personal financial gain, organizations working for alternative motives (such as gaining popularity and power), and being unhelpful and uncooperative in island-level activities such as sports events.

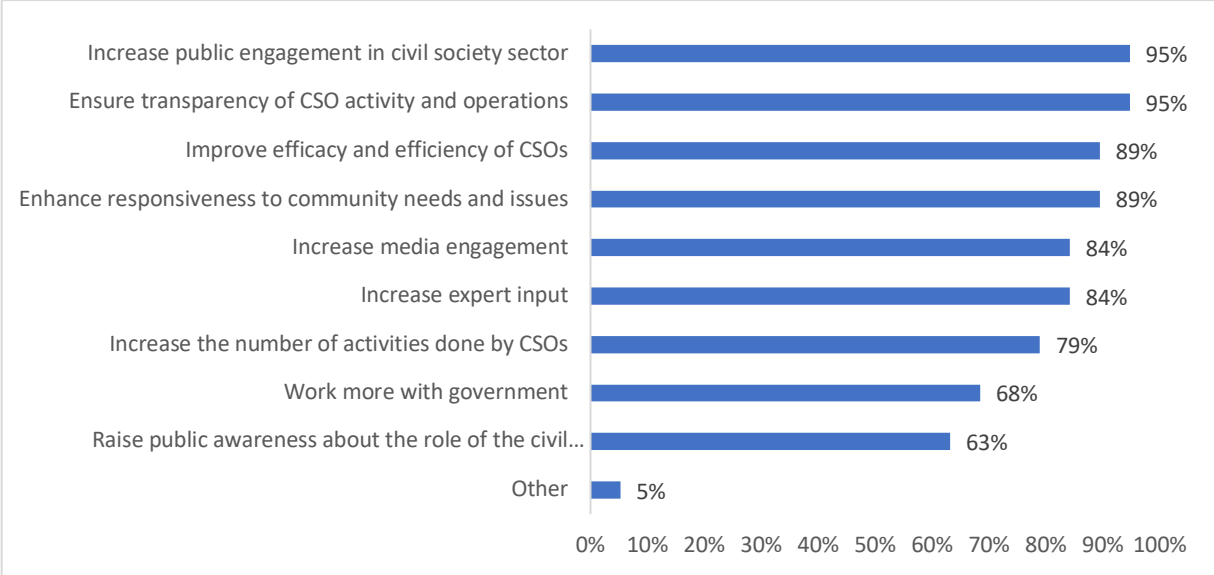
Therefore, a significant requirement is the need to improve the public perception of CSOs working in the governance sector. One possible starting point could be to raise awareness regarding the role of CSOs in the democratic landscape, particularly in ensuring characteristics of good governance, including transparency, responsibility, accountability, participation, and responsiveness to the needs of the people.

Ways to Improve Public Perception

Upon evaluation, the majority of respondents (95 percent) listed expanding public participation in civil society as a method of increasing the sector's credibility and public

confidence. The majority (95 percent) also agreed that CSO activities and operations should be more transparent, with further responses illustrated in Figure 41.

Figure 41: Ways to improve credibility and public confidence in the CSO sector



The same ideas were expressed in FGD meetings, where participants stated that increasing CSO activities could improve public credibility. This includes working closely with the community, assessing their needs through discussions, and developing and publicizing a yearly plan of appropriate activities to be conducted. However, such a plan must benefit all community sectors and cover diverse concerns, such as social and environmental activities and women’s and youth empowerment programs.

Focusing on activities that impact the whole community could help gain the community’s trust. For example, carrying out activities such as cleaning water tanks, painting schools, and repairing community spaces will positively impact people of all ages. This would help promote the view of CSOs as frontliners in community development and foster the trust that CSO priorities align with community needs. Women and youth empowerment activities were emphasized as important spaces through which CSOs could increase community engagement. For example, CSOs could provide youth training programs, career guidance, and alternative pathways after completing secondary or higher secondary studies. Increasing youth involvement in CSO programs and activities may also reduce crime rates.

CSOs who increase transparency by conducting annual general meetings and publicizing reports on their activities could significantly improve how their organizations are perceived by including details of funding received throughout the year and updates on project progress to demonstrate transparency in how the funding is utilized.

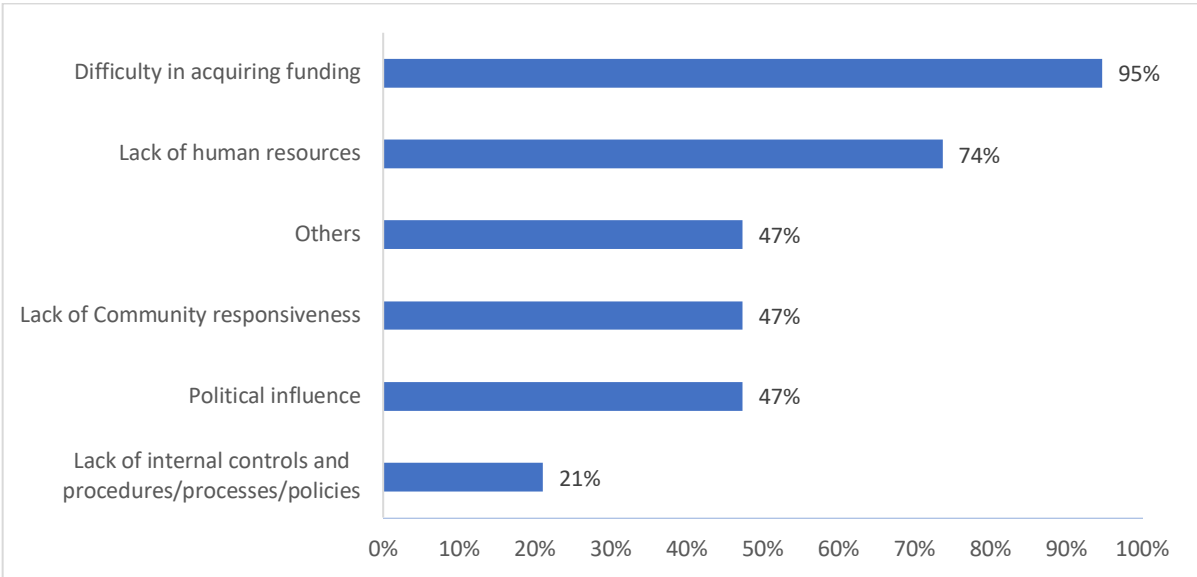
Better government relations could also help to improve the public perception of CSOs working in the governance sector. To achieve this, connections between CSOs and government institutions need to be strengthened, and governing institutions should be seen as accepting the criticisms of CSOs and working with them toward developmental goals. To this end, the government can conduct campaigns that highlight the efforts of CSOs in the governance sector.

Challenges

The study sought to understand the challenges CSOs in the governance sector encounter to better identify the needs, gaps, and potential mitigation strategies.

In KIIs, CSO participants were questioned about the challenges they face related to organizational management and efficiency. The majority (95 percent) stated they faced difficulty acquiring funding, and 74 percent cited the lack of human resources as a challenge. Further responses are highlighted in Figure 42.

Figure 42: Challenges in management and efficiency



Challenges related to internal governance, resources and capacity, governance sector practices, civil space regulation, and public perception were further explored during KIIs and FGDs. Participants elaborated on the following challenges.

Lack of capacity and resources

CSOs require a workspace or office to organize and conduct their activities successfully. However, CSOs working at the island/regional and national levels highlighted space constraints as a challenge. In the case of CSOs operating nationally in the Greater Malé region, the overhead costs of renting an office outweigh the funding received. Island-level CSOs, meanwhile, cannot acquire or be allocated land or workspace by the councils due to the limited supply.

As such, CSO staff generally work individually from their homes, at a member's house, or in a communal space. This affects the capacity of the CSO to recruit additional members and staff to conduct activities on a large scale and apply for further projects and funding, ultimately constraining their growth.

The lack of staffing also hinders organizations from applying for training to increase their technical expertise and meet donor requirements for available funding opportunities. For CSOs working at an island level, the small populations of the island become a challenge for growth. While certain CSOs have the capability to provide training for their members, these training opportunities are typically viewed as investments, with expectations on the trained member to contribute to the CSOs' growth in the future. However, the high staff turnover rate in the civil society sector often results in CSOs not receiving a return on these investments.

Lack of available opportunities for the CSO sector

An essential component for a thriving CSO sector is the availability of technical experts to provide advice and training in subject and strategy-related areas. However, a significant gap exists in knowledge and professionals that can provide necessary information in the current landscape. Even areas such as environment and health—interlinked with community growth—lack specialists who can provide guidance and expertise. In addition, applying for

international training programs is difficult and an added cost for CSOs. Moreover, the few available training opportunities are centered in Malé, and most CSOs at the island level lack the financial capacity to attend these programs.

The lack of technical expertise can also impact the accessibility of funding opportunities, as the most common source of income for Maldivian CSOs are grants and funding obtained through proposals. CSOs cannot design high-quality proposals to secure impactful projects and grants without the necessary technical expertise.

Lack of awareness regarding available opportunities

The study findings revealed that the geographical dispersion of the country poses a challenge to disseminating information regarding helpful opportunities. Despite the availability of funding and training opportunities, the majority of CSOs, especially those working at the island/regional level, remain unaware of these opportunities. While there are constraints on physically attending training programs in specific locations, most CSOs are also unaware of online opportunities that could be accessed. Only a small number of well-established CSOs were aware of and took advantage of opportunities, including funding opportunities. The lack of awareness surrounding the activities of stakeholders and other CSOs, as well as regarding funding and networking opportunities, negatively impacts the ability of CSOs to engage in capacity development.

Additionally, CSOs inclined to engage more at the governance level appear unaware of their rights and opportunities under the laws and regulations. This prevents them from taking more active roles in maintaining good governance practices and contributing towards policy reform.

Difficulties in working with key stakeholders

For CSOs to be meaningfully engaged in the governance space, a strong relationship between government institutions and CSOs is essential. However, even well-established CSOs at the national level face difficulties getting responses from governmental institutions with regard to their requests and concerns. A similar gap exists between local island-level institutions and CSOs active in the islands, even though both parties work towards island

development. Additionally, while the majority of the surveyed CSOs have had the opportunity to collaborate and partner with other stakeholders due to their years of operation in the sector, new and developing CSOs find it difficult to build connections with international donor agencies.

The lack of effort on the part of government institutions to include ideas and inputs from CSOs in decision-making processes remains an issue. Although the role of CSOs in development is recognized and mandated by law, institutions do not adequately facilitate the maximization of that role. Instead, CSOs are viewed simply as organizations that must be met at the last stage of a project for mandatory consultations. Ideally, CSOs should be involved in consultations at the grassroots level, as they can identify issues at this level more easily and are in tune with the pulse of the general population. Additionally, work that can be outsourced to CSOs (such as public services) is still being done by the institutions themselves.

Despite some improvement, understanding and acceptance of the role of CSOs in public decision-making processes remains limited, and no established mechanism currently exists for institutions to work with CSOs in the space of policy formulation. The CSOs also cited the challenges of the ever-changing political environment and the lack of political will to address social issues. CSOs with opposing political views often encounter barriers in expressing their positions and working with the government. For the public to accept the work of CSOs, it is important for government officials, irrespective of the country's political state, to be actively involved and engaged in activities addressing social issues. This would increase the credibility of CSOs and could lead to an increased interest among the general public in the work conducted by these organizations.

Issues in the current governing processes

The current parliament of the Maldives appears to have a significant legislative reform agenda, and new legislation is being ratified at a rapid pace. The parliament works closely with the government; however, with limited political opposition sitting in parliament, there is limited space for bills to be critically evaluated and for opposing views to be expressed. There are also no mandatory processes for public consultations. Consequently, the time allocated for the public to comment on proposed bills can be insufficient depending on the perceived

urgency of passing the bill. In the event that bills are opened for public comments, a lack of awareness regarding the procedure and method by which the drafted bill is uploaded or disseminated renders this inaccessible to the public.

Structure of funding provided

As noted previously, the most common source of income for CSOs in the Maldives is through funding and grants received through proposals. As such, the CSO's budget depends heavily on the size and types of the grants they receive, affecting the project's sustainability.

There is currently a scarcity of grants compared to the number of active CSOs. It was also highlighted that grants were awarded based on the priorities of donor agencies, which could limit opportunities for CSOs that work in multiple focus areas. Competitive proposals also limit CSOs from engaging in work within their focus areas, and often, CSOs reluctantly accommodate a shift in their mandates to engage in diverse areas of work rather than specializing in areas they deem to be sustainable. The CSOs also pointed out issues in the current structure of grants, wherein no money is allocated for administrative and operational costs. This impedes CSOs from applying for further grants as they lack the financial capacity to hire additional staff to meet donor requirements for specific projects. CSOs also lack institutional funding, which is detrimental to their sustainability and capacity development.

Other Issues:

Other challenges highlighted by CSOs include:

- A lack of trust and support from community members
- Persistently high turnover rates of executive board members
- Lack of volunteerism among youth
- An increase in self-censorship due to the dynamics and difficulties in acquiring funds
- Increasing intolerance to diverse ideas from among the public
- Specific issues within the focus areas of certain organizations (such as violent extremism affecting the women's rights sector)

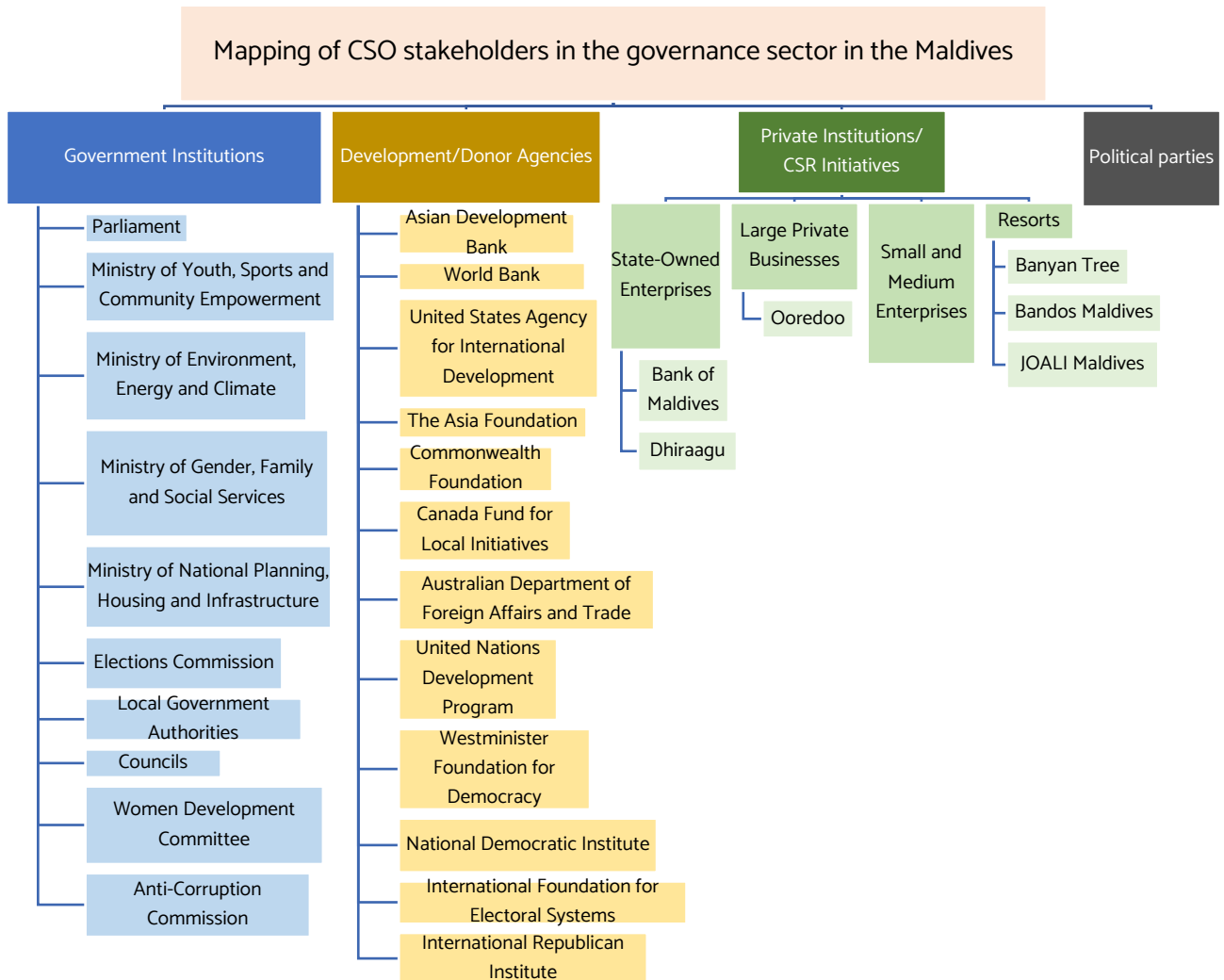
Key Stakeholders in the Sector

The key stakeholders involved in the operations of CSOs in the governance sector are discussed in this chapter, emphasizing donor agencies and the work they are currently conducting with CSOs. Additionally, the difficulties donor agencies face when working with CSOs are explored in this section.

Key Stakeholders

The main actors in the CSO space in the governance sector are depicted below in Figure 43.

Figure 43: Mapping of civil space in the governance sector



Under the new Associations Act, the CSO sector registration and monitoring is conducted by the MoYSCE (Ministry of Youth, Sports, and Community Empowerment), which also focuses on conducting capacity development programs and providing financial assistance through grant programs. Under capacity development, they have carried out programs in proposal writing and project development, which CSOs have identified as areas where training gaps exist. Providing these capacity-building training opportunities can reduce the need for CSOs to outsource administrative work, decreasing financial costs. Additionally, to improve the civil society sector, the MoYSCE is currently working with The Asia Foundation to explore and learn more about the functioning and governance of CSOs in other countries, which may help the ministry develop strategies to improve the current CSO space in the Maldives.

Other governmental institutions, such as the LGA, the Ministry of National Planning, Housing, and Infrastructure (MNPHI), and the Ministry of Environment, Energy, and Climate Change (MoEECT), work closely with CSOs in advocacy and provide technical assistance when needed. They have held several training workshops and are actively working to increase CSO participation in governance and policy-related decision-making consultation processes. An important program to highlight is the LGA orientation program, which briefs newly elected councilors on relevant laws and ways to collaborate with CSOs and the general public for community empowerment and development.

Donors and Development Agencies

Several international donor and development agencies are active in the Maldives in providing financial support, technical assistance, and capacity building to civil society actors to strengthen their capacity as leading partners in establishing a democracy based on good governance practices. The following sections provide an overview of key organizations working in this space.

The Asia Foundation

The Asia Foundation is currently implementing the “South Asia Grants Program” (SAGP) in the Maldives, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka. The main objective of the program is to support the work of CSOs in four core areas of governance: namely, (1) increasing public sector accountability and transparency; (2) strengthening the rule of law; (3) promoting civil

society participation and media coverage of these efforts, and (4) strengthening democratic institutions and practices.

The Foundation announced a call for proposals from CSOs in these five countries on December 1, 2020. Under this program, the focus is on increasing CSO-led policy reforms, constructive engagements, and social accountability in key areas of governance, as well as expanding the space for civil society to engage with and influence key democratic institutions in the region. The program also aims to increase the capacity of CSOs to effectively pursue longer-term reform in the governance sector. This current mapping exercise is a part of the program.

Asian Development Bank

As of February 2023, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) had given the Maldives 107 public sector loans, grants, and technical assistance commitments totaling USD 432.3 million. This includes financial partnerships between the ADB and government institutions, multilateral institutions, and private organizations such as CSOs.

Between 2015 and 2021, fifty percent of the approved sovereign projects by the ADB included meaningful, planned CSO engagement. One such project is “Strengthening Gender Inclusive Initiatives in the Maldives,” in which CSOs helped strengthen the gender dimensions of the project’s design. The project focused on improving the government’s ability to carry out gender-inclusive programs that comply with the current gender equality law and protocols to address inequalities and minimize the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic on women, a component of good governance under SAP.

Other ADB projects involving CSOs include the “Greater Malé Environmental Improvement and Waste Management Project,” which employed an NGO as a Public Awareness and Community Capacity Building (PACCB) consultant. The CSO’s involvement included developing and implementing a targeted public awareness and community capacity-building campaign; a communications strategy and plan in collaboration with regional CSOs and other stakeholders; and using traditional and social media to encourage long-lasting and institutionalized behavior change for solid waste management in local communities.

Canada Fund for Local Initiatives

The Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI) program assists small-scale, high-impact projects developed and created predominantly by local partners of developing countries that align with the engagement priorities of Global Affairs Canada. The proposed projects must align with one of the following CFLI thematic priorities: (1) environment and climate action, (2) inclusive governance, and (3) growth that works for everyone, including women's economic rights. CFLI also focuses on fostering positive bilateral relations between Canada and recipient nations and their civic communities.

Projects carried out by CSOs of the Maldives under the fund include:

- Building Local Democracy and Inclusive Development Project: Conducted by Community Development Initiatives (CoDI) Maldives between July 2017 and July 2018 in Addu City, Maldives.
- Fen Veshi Program: Conducted by Zero Waste Maldives in partnership with Common Seas and MoYSCE in 2021 to install three water refill stations at sports venues in Malé City and explore the effectiveness of household water filtration systems.
- Democracy Café Project: Conducted by MDN to engage and inform youth and first-time voters of sociopolitical issues in preparation for elections.
- Project WiP4: Conducted by Women & Democracy to "increase the participation and representation of women in politics and decision-making and to advance gender equality in politics and governance by empowering women to contribute to the political development of the Maldives."

Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

The Australian government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) has been providing development assistance to the Maldives through partnerships focused on building capacity, including providing direct educational opportunities, sharing knowledge on sustainable environmental and resource management, and collaborating with UN agencies to strengthen inclusive governance. In collaboration with the UNDP, DFAT supports the Maldives' democratic government in building its institutions, empowering media and civil society, and advocating for decentralization and gender equality.

DFAT (previously known as the Australian Agency for International Development or AusAID) was also a partner in the “Miyaheli 2022 – Social Innovation Camp” by UNDP Maldives with Ooredoo Maldives. This social innovation platform aimed to provide CSOs a venue to co-create solutions to address environmental and social issues in local communities.

In 2011, the Small Grants Facility, funded by the UNDP and DFAT, awarded USD 79,862 to 13 winners of the second round of the “Support to Civil Society Development” program. Focus areas include human rights, good governance, gender equality, youth development, and strengthening democratic principles such as transparency and accountability. Projects funded in the first round of the program included “Monitoring of Political Violence in the First Local Council Elections,” “The Empowerment of Women,” and “The Right to Empower.” In the second round, projects were selected based on the diversity of themes and by geographic representation, with projects chosen from 11 atolls. The Coalition for Human Rights received a grant for their “The Right to Assemble” project, which aimed to raise awareness of the constitutional right to assembly in Malé.

United States Agency for International Development

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) works with partners in the Maldives to improve the country’s capacity to adapt to climate change, conduct economic and democratic reforms, and establish a robust civil society. USAID projects focus on protecting the Maldives’ marine environment, strengthening democratic principles in governance, and providing public financial management. USAID has funded several long- and short-term projects for various CSOs focusing on governance thematic areas, including:

- Promoting Resilience in Maldives (PRIME): A four-year project implemented by Transparency Maldives to strengthen the resilience of vulnerable populations by addressing the obstacles to social cohesion and resilience that keep young people from realizing their full potential as economically and socially active citizens.
- Maldives Elections Support Activity (MESA): Implemented under the Complex Crisis Fund (CCF), the project aims to assist government agencies and CSOs in lowering political-related violence and raising civic engagement to support democratic transitions.

- Strong and Inclusive Maldivian Democracy (SIMD): Implemented in partnership with IRI, the program aims to increase the capacity and resiliency of democratic institutions in the Maldives by helping local councils support good governance practices and supporting WDCs and civil society members to build long-term global management, advocacy, and funding structures.

World Bank

The World Bank's (WB) initiatives in the Maldives include promoting renewable energy, youth employability and resilience, digital development, urban development, solid waste management, Covid-19 response, health, and education. The WB also provides analytical support to the financial sector and other areas, such as social protection, poverty alleviation, and macroeconomic monitoring and analysis.

The WB has been working with various stakeholder groups, including government agencies, development partners, CSOs, academia, media, women, youth, and citizen groups. Their work included consultations for its second Systematic Country Diagnostic (SCD) in the Maldives in 2019. FGD meetings were held in the Greater Malé region, Addu City, and Kulhudhuffushi with different stakeholder groups, including one with CSOs, think tanks, academia, and the media in each area.

Another WB project involving CSOs includes the PROBLUE-funded pilot initiatives led by the Maldives Arts and Crafts Society (MACCS), Parley for the Oceans, and Zero Waste Maldives. The project promoted household kitchen gardening, training on composting, and separating waste at its source across all atolls.

United Nations Development Programme

UNDP Maldives has been working closely with the government, civil society actors, private and public partners at the local and international levels, other UN agencies, and the general public to identify and recommend sustainable and achievable solutions for development goals. These include poverty reduction, democratic transitions, environmental protection, mitigation and adaptation measures for climate change, and shock and crisis resilience while adhering to CDP (Capacity Development Plan) priorities centered on prosperity, the environment, and peace.

UNDP's work with CSOs in the Maldives includes the "Small Grants Facility – Integrated Governance Program" that began in 2013. This program focuses on initiatives that assist the growth of civil society in the Maldives, specifically in the areas of good governance, human rights, women's rights, NGO development, and strengthening civil society engagement in the democratic process. The grants are administered through the "Support to Civil Society Development in the Maldives: Small Grants Facility (SGF)" program, which was created to support NGOs and enhance the civil society space in the Maldives.

With the support of the Government of Australia's DFAT, UNDP Maldives has also awarded small grants to six CSOs to commence projects that address gender equality and women's empowerment. The grants aim to support local CSOs in tackling social and gender norms, boosting women's economic empowerment, and raising the representation of girls and women in the public and political spheres.

The UNDP Country Program Document 2022-2026 includes CSOs as partners to be engaged in strategizing on climate action, strengthening the rule of law, human rights advocacy, and access to protection and justice. With regards to the latter, partnerships with CSOs are set to focus on providing pro bono legal aid for victims of sexual- and gender-based violence and migrant workers concerning labor rights. Additionally, CSOs have been included in plans regarding UNDP's work to strengthen governance and promote inclusive policymaking mechanisms. Seventeen CSOs participated in consultations held by UNDP Maldives to develop the documentation. UNDP Maldives has also partnered with other development agencies, donor agencies, and private businesses to conduct programs that strengthen civil society in governance.

International Republican Institute

The International Republican Institute (IRI) has been collaborating with CSOs at all levels of their projects, whether through direct partnerships or training and capacity building, since 2019. Currently, IRI is conducting the "Strong and Inclusive Maldivian Democracy (SIMD)" program, financed by USAID, which focuses on strengthening the capacity and resilience of democratic institutions in the Maldives. The program also aims to assist CSOs and WDCs in creating sustainable management, advocacy, and funding mechanisms across the country.

Women & Democracy (a CSO in Maldives) conducted a series of political empowerment trainings between November and December 2019 in partnership with IRI to increase women's political capacities and empower women's political participation in the 2020 Local Council Election. The trainings were conducted in four different regions of the country with a total of 100 participants. IRI has also provided grants to CSOs for various projects to strengthen governance and democratic processes in the Maldives.

National Democratic Institute

National Democratic Institute (NDI) focuses on promoting good governance practices such as transparency and accountability in government through developing political and civic groups, overseeing elections, and encouraging public involvement. As explained in stakeholder consultation meetings, almost all of NDI's programs are implemented with CSOs as partners. Current projects include monitoring political processes in partnership with ADM; the Equal Rights Initiative (ERI); a misinformation and disinformation-related project with Women in Tech titled 'Women & Democracy'; and increasing public involvement in environmental governance in partnership with Eco-Care and the Maldives Coral Institute. NDI is also discussing an election and open governance project with ADM.

International Foundation for Electoral Systems

Through partnerships with CSOs and electoral stakeholders, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems' (IFES) primary goal is to promote civic involvement for women, youth, persons with disabilities (PWD), and other marginalized communities.

Their initiatives include the "Vaane" (Women Can) Campaign, which seeks to increase women's opportunities to engage in nontraditional roles and political participation, engage in consultations with CSOs to develop plans and policies in communities, empower marginalized groups, particularly women with disabilities, collaborate with the Election Commission of the Maldives to achieve civic goals in the election plan, and conduct an evaluation of civic education in schools to modernize curricula and teacher resource materials. They also worked with Care Society to train PWDs, who then conducted further programs for 80 disabled women to identify their needs and priorities and ways to advocate for their rights.

IFES also provides funding for CSOs to implement programs in their priority areas. For instance, they have announced a call for applications from CSOs working for PWDs' rights for the "Project on Prosperity and Development."

Westminster Foundation for Democracy

The Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) is a UK quasi-government institute that became active in the Maldives in 2019 through a country director working in Sri Lanka. A separate office with a country director specific to the Maldives was established in 2021.

WFD currently runs the "Democratic Accountability and Stability Strengthening" program with CSOs, which aims to improve parliamentary committee operations to encourage accountability and scrutiny of laws and make the parliament a more inclusive, gender-responsive, and accountable institution. CSOs and the media are key program stakeholders who seek to increase their capacity to collaborate and participate in policymaking.

WFD also provides outreach support and small grant programs for CSOs to undertake advocacy-related projects. They have been conducting capacity-building courses in thematic areas. Currently, they are assessing the relationship between CSOs and the parliament to identify barriers to CSOs' involvement in parliamentary processes and formulate ways to increase their involvement.

Others

Other projects where funding institutions have worked with CSOs to strengthen governance practices include:

- Strengthening the Role of Civil Society Organizations project: Conducted by Transparency Maldives with funding from the Commonwealth Foundation (CF).
- Fostering Multi-stakeholder Outreach to Review and Realize Policy Action in the Context of Covid-19 and Beyond: Conducted by Women & Democracy in partnership with CF.
- Civil Society and Policy Reform in South Asia regional project: Conducted by MDN in partnership with the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), supported by the European Union and led by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNF)

- The Gender Equality Manifesto (GEM) project: Conducted by Women & Democracy and awarded by the British High Commission, Colombo.
- Parliament Watch project: Conducted by MDN, funded by the UN Democracy Fund and the British High Commission, Colombo.

CSR Initiatives of Institutions

Following the Associations Act, state-owned corporations and state shareholding companies are now required to provide nonprofit organizations with financial support equal to 25 percent of their annual corporate social responsibility (CSR) budget.

However, findings from the FGD meetings indicate limitations in CSO-focused CSR initiatives from businesses and cooperatives in the Maldives. While state-owned enterprises (SOEs) such as Bank of Maldives (BML) and Dhivehi Rajjege Gulhun Pvt Ltd (Dhiraagu), and large companies such as Ooredoo Maldives, have regular CSR funding and initiatives for women and youth empowerment, civic engagement, community development, and minority group empowerment, consultation meetings identified a lack of awareness regarding these opportunities and difficulties in applying for available opportunities.

Below are some CSR initiatives by SOEs and private businesses that target CSOs to increase community engagement and development.

- The BML Community Fund initiative supports local CSOs in conducting 20 community-based projects in thematic areas such as environment, education, sports, and community development. Selected CSOs are granted MVR 50,000 to implement their proposed projects. In 2021, BML invested 1 million MVR in 20 projects across the country. Additionally, BML donated MVR 100,000 to ARC (Advocating the Rights of Children), MVR 80,000 to the Maldives Deaf Association and Beautiful Eyes Down Syndrome Association, and MVR 100,000 to the Maldives Association for Persons with Disabilities (MAPD) to support its Healthy PWDs programs.
- In 2021, Dhiraagu partnered with Women in Tech to organize the “Hour of Code” event to mark the global Hour of Code™. They also held a program series called “Girls to Code” in partnership with Women in Tech to encourage girls and women to learn coding and programming.

- In 2022, Ooredoo Maldives, in partnership with UNDP Maldives, opened the 7th edition of “Miyaheli,” a social innovation challenge for CSOs. Ooredoo Maldives also held a Migrant Workers’ Cricket Carnival in 2022 in partnership with Mission for Migrant Workers of the Maldives (MMWM) to highlight migrant workers’ contributions to the community and to provide a ground for their enjoyment and leisure. Cyber Safety awareness sessions were held last year in partnership with Maldives Police Service and Women in Tech.
- Bayan Tree Hotels and Resorts donated a computer laboratory to the Maldives Deaf & Mute Association (MDA) to ensure that children nationwide have access to equal learning opportunities. They are also collaborating with MDA to promote global sign language.
- Bandos Maldives financially supports a variety of CSOs in the region and collaborates closely with them on initiatives aimed at reducing drug use, enhancing governance, and fostering youth development in the Maldives.
- JOALI Maldives advocates for community involvement, women’s empowerment, and environmental preservation. In 2022, JOALI Maldives funded three CSOs to promote these ideals: the Olive Ridley Project, Women in Tech Maldives, and Zero Waste Maldives.

In addition to these projects, other businesses, including tourist resorts and local SMEs, also support local CSOs. However, most of these projects are often one-off occasions or organized upon a CSO’s request rather than planned programs or collaborations. As mentioned, CSR-initiated funding opportunities for CSOs are limited, and partnerships between CSOs and businesses need to be improved.

Challenges Faced in Effectively Supporting CSOs in the Governance Sector

To better understand the reforms needed in the sector, institutions were questioned during stakeholder consultations about the difficulties they encountered in successfully supporting CSOs operating in the governance sector.

Difficulties in contacting CSOs

One of the main issues cited was the constant changes in CSOs' contact details, including email addresses and phone numbers, which are done without updating the Ministry's registry department. This hinders coordination and the sharing of necessary information with CSOs. Government institutions looking to reach out to island-level CSOs often must contact the LGA and local councils, which requires extra time and effort.

Lack of well-established CSOs

There are four to five well-established and experienced CSOs in the Maldives whose programs regularly receive funding and support from international organizations. This over-reliance on a few CSOs means those organizations must work beyond their capacities to implement programs.

Lack of proper CSO portfolio

Even if stakeholders attempt to reach out to specific CSOs to implement projects in specific focus and geographic areas, there is no established mechanism or network through which the stakeholders can identify which CSO does what work at which location.

Capacity issues

There are discrepancies in the capacities and resources of national-level and island-level CSOs. Stakeholders may have to spend extra time and resources to increase island-level CSOs' capacity to implement the program.

Limitations in human resources and high staff turnover

Due to high staff turnover in the CSO sector, staff that stakeholders work with for one project may not be available for future projects. Technical and institutional knowledge is also lost as trained members leave the organization.

Conducting programs in an inclusive manner

CSOs focusing on governance or human rights issues at an island level or in a particular region are scarce to non-existent. The task must be handed to a CSO stationed in Malé to implement such activities on certain islands. However, as the Malé-based CSO's network in the islands is limited, they will likewise have trouble carrying out and keeping the project going. Ultimately, Malé is where most projects are finally focused.

Maintaining the sustainability of projects and programs

If a project is started with an initial grant from a donor organization, issues exist with sustaining the project once the grant period concludes. Some projects have been halted mid-implementation due to this reason.

Lack of cooperation from the CSOs

Even though institutions try to involve CSOs in various governance processes and assist in capacity building through training, only a few CSOs take advantage of these opportunities.

Difficulties in balancing opposing ideas

In governance-related work, funding agencies often mediate between government officials and CSOs with opposing views. Thus, extra precautions are needed, as there is always a chance that neither of the parties may accept opposing opinions or criticisms.

Recommendations

Based on the in-depth analysis of quantitative and qualitative data from the CSOs, stakeholders, and community groups, the study developed recommendations to strengthen and improve CSOs' involvement in the governance sector. The study findings correlated with previous research in the sector, highlighting the need to improve the internal governance and regulatory framework for CSOs so they can actively engage in governance-related decision-making. The need to build the capacities of CSOs to increase the scope of their work in the governance sector was also emphasized. Building a coherent sector where all major players can collaborate effectively to support policymaking in a democratic environment will require enhancing public credibility and resolving issues faced by both CSOs and stakeholders. The government, CSOs, or other organizations can pursue the following recommendations.

Internal Governance and Regulatory Framework

- Providing guidance and technical support for new CSOs to establish an operational setup with a clear vision, mission statement, and organizational objectives. CSOs' understanding of the need for strategic action planning and following an established organizational structure should also be enhanced to ensure longevity and sustainability.
- Establishing SOP templates through a government institution such as the MoYSCE, which CSOs can follow during the organization's formation.
- Addressing and amending any contradicting laws or regulations.
- Improving the current mechanisms to manage and monitor CSOs through decentralizing the monitoring powers and establishing easy-to-follow protocols based on the structural, organizational, and legal requirements of the regulatory framework of the CSO sector.
- Ensuring that legislation pertaining to civil society does not impose restrictions on the activities of CSOs in the governance sector or contain unnecessary bureaucratic requirements.

- Establishing a mechanism to investigate any accusations against a CSO fairly and giving them the right of reply or procedural propriety in line with democratic principles.

Resources and Capacity Building

- Establishing a proper CSO networking platform wherein all information regarding the CSOs (their portfolios, current projects, contact details) are updated and through which stakeholders can inform CSOs about available opportunities (for the governance-related sector: training opportunities, opportunities to comment on drafted bills, invitations to public consultations for policymaking, etc.).
- Establishing mechanisms for CSOs to receive technical assistance from government and external experts.
- Proper information dissemination regarding available funding and training opportunities among CSOs.
- Facilitating training opportunities in all regions of the country.
- Widening the scope of training opportunities available, such as resource mobilization, strategic action planning, and project management.
- Capacity building for executive members and founders on roles and responsibilities.
- Providing guidance on good governance practices, navigating political disagreements, promoting active involvement in policymaking decisions, and holding government institutions accountable.
- Establishing a government start-up funds mechanism for newly registered CSOs for a specific duration of time.
- Ensuring equal opportunity is given to all CSOs at all levels to obtain government grants and CSR funds.
- Modifying grant schemes to include administrative and operative costs and a mechanism for CSO executive members to earn an income.
- Promoting volunteerism by conducting awareness programs in schools and providing information about CSOs and their role and importance in communities, especially to ensure good governance practices.

Increase of Scope of Work

- Promoting collaboration and partnership among CSOs by increasing resource pooling awareness and increasing program success rates.
- Establishing a collaborative framework that government institutions can reference to form partnerships and work closely with CSOs.
- Conducting discussion meetings between local councils and island-level CSOs before projects and making yearly plans and schedules to ensure that work done by both parties is complementary and supports partners during implementation.
- Creating a safe and accepting environment for CSOs to provide constructively criticize decision-maker's actions and have open discussions about alternative steps that can be taken.
- Encouraging CSOs to maintain close and genuine relationships with communities by promoting participation and empowerment of all age groups.
- Providing training to government officials about the role of CSOs in governance, their importance, and ways to delegate, collaborate, and partner with CSOs to achieve strategic goals.
- Actively including CSOs in the planning, ratification, and implementation of policies.
- Building partnerships among CSOs working in a similar sector and with other key stakeholders with similar missions.
- Protecting CSOs with opposing beliefs against intimidation, harassment, or attacks.
- Providing networking opportunities, such as NGO forums, for CSOs to connect with one another and with key stakeholders such as government institutions, private institutions, and donor agencies.

Improving Public Perception

- Ensuring that CSOs' internal governance processes and regulations are fully transparent and adhere to laws and legislation.
- Using media and social media to positively portray the work of CSOs, mainly to demonstrate the impact of their work on the community and its development.
- Increasing public participation by raising awareness about the purpose and importance of CSOs and their activities/programs.

- Publicly appreciating the work done by CSOs in policy reform and governance decision-making to strengthen the legitimacy of CSOs.
- Supporting CSOs to lead conflict resolution between individuals and groups of people in islands.

Conclusion

The research conducted for the *Mapping of CSOs Operating in the Governance Sector in the Maldives* provides information relevant to understanding the current picture of CSOs' involvement in governance-related work in the growing democratic landscape of the Maldives. CSOs play an important role in bridging government bodies and local communities by stimulating public dialogue around formulating and implementing government budgets and policies and enhancing government transparency and accountability. In the Maldives, this third-sector involvement in democracy and governance-related work is still in its infancy. Thus, it is important to understand the current scope of activities of CSOs in this sector, their level of internal governance, capacities, and resources, the regulatory environment they operate in, and the challenges they face.

There is a notable difference in the capacities of established CSOs working at the national level and their counterparts at the island level. For example, the internal governance assessment showed that most CSOs complied with the organizational requirements under the Associations Act. However, a thorough examination reveals this is true only for well-established CSOs. Often, CSOs working at community levels lack the technical expertise needed to establish a proper organizational framework, comply with annual reporting requirements, maintain financial transparency, and strategically plan for the organization's long-term sustainability.

Meanwhile, the resource and capacity assessment of the CSO sector showed a lack of opportunities available for CSOs across the country. This includes training opportunities, funding opportunities, and opportunities to partake in nation-building such as policymaking, increasing civic engagement, and advocating for social and environmental issues that impact island communities. A lack of workforce and volunteerism among the youth were also mentioned as factors constraining the development of CSOs.

In terms of collaboration, the study found that efforts can be one-sided and influenced by the political climate. The evaluation of the scope and practices of CSOs determined that CSOs and government institutions work together but that national-level CSOs typically initiate these collaborations. It was also noted in the stakeholder discussions that the formation of partnerships is affected by the country's political environment, wherein people

with opposing political mindsets may be unable to work together. As such, an environment where varied ideas and beliefs are accepted, and people work together despite having different belief sets needs to be cultivated.

The participation of CSOs in policy reform has increased over the last few years. However, the procedures established in government to accept external stakeholders' inputs are not specified, thereby complicating the process and hampering CSOs' efforts to participate. It was deduced that even government institutions are unaware of the protocols—such as the transparent publication of information on their websites—that they need to follow, highlighting a further scope of work for CSOs.

CSOs appeared to understand the importance of transparency in their work to gain public credibility and trust. Regarding transparency around information sharing, most CSOs publish information about their activities and programs on their website or social media. In contrast, financial information was mainly shared by publishing annual reports on their websites. However, national-level stakeholders still highlighted the need for improved transparency, civil engagement, and participation in the CSO sector.

CSOs recognize the need and purpose of a proper regulatory framework comprised of regulations and state-enforced laws. However, regarding conflict resolution with external stakeholders, the CSOs surveyed mostly believed that laws are needed to protect CSOs against arbitrary governmental powers, along with experts, courts of law, or the police to mediate conflicts. Distrust between CSOs and the government sector exists due to arbitrary actions that government institutions have taken against them. As such, there is a requirement for the relationship between CSOs and the government to be strengthened.

Further, current public perception shows that CSOs are accepted and trusted when working at a community level but face harassment, intimidation, and attacks when working at a national level where their work may be seen as being biased, influenced by foreign ideologies, anti-Islamic, or politically motivated. Even advocating for something beneficial—such as minimizing the environmental impact of government processes—may be interpreted negatively if it does not align with the public's perception of development.

The findings of this research are relevant for establishing and maintaining a democracy based on good governance practices in the country. The current scenario of CSOs operating in the governance sector can be understood through this study, which also evaluates the needs, gaps, and challenges CSOs face in the Maldivian context, including the strategies that need to be employed to strengthen and improve the sector.

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