

# **A Study of the Cluster Schools Policy in the Maldives**

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In the Maldives, despite everyone having access to primary education, there are wide disparities in the quality of education provided by schools in the capital and schools on the rural islands. In an attempt to address the ongoing concern of the rural communities to improve their schools, the Ministry of Education introduced a new policy in July 1999. This policy led to the formation of clusters of schools which consisted of a 'lead' government school intended to serve as a resource and support to a number of nearby community schools. Each cluster is usually made up of 6 to 11 schools. The cluster policy has not been studied since its introduction six years ago. This research study aims to investigate the cluster policy - its rationale, processes of implementation, and impact on the schools through the perceptions of key stakeholders, with a broader view to improve schools in the Maldives.

For the research, I travelled to four regions to carry out four case studies. Each case study is based on a full cluster of schools of an atoll and a selection of schools in neighbouring clusters within the same atoll. Fifty schools were targeted in fourteen clusters. Data were collected from interviews with key stakeholders - the cluster heads, lead teachers, island chiefs and officials of Ministry of Education. The conceptual framework developed by Lunt et al. (1988) of antecedents, processes and impact in their study of clusters in the UK was used to structure the inquiry. The interview data were analysed thematically.

This study found that the cluster policy not sufficiently resourced and comprehensively conceptualised to engender the intended school improvement. Set within a context of small developing islands the policy lacked the essential ingredients for a collaborative venture of this kind to succeed. However, among the stakeholders there is an acceptance of the potential good such a policy can bring about. The problems identified in this research go some way to explain why the cluster policy was short-lived and has now effectively ceased to exist.

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***Dedication*** - *To my late grandfather Mohamed Luthfi, for believing in my abilities, my father Ali Ibrahim for instilling in me a love for learning and my former husband Ilyas Ibrahim for supporting me in my academic pursuits.*

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AEC Atoll Education Centre

EdD Doctorate in Education

DfES Department for Employment and Skills

GCE O' Level General Certificate in Education Ordinary Level

GDP Gross Domestic Product

ICSEI International Congress for School Improvement and Effectiveness

INSET In Service Education for Teachers

ISEIC International School Effectiveness and Improvement Centre

KENSIP Kenya School Improvement Programme

MoAA Ministry of Atolls Administration

MoE Ministry of Education

MPND Ministry of Planning and National Development

NDMC National Disaster Management Centre

OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OED Oxford English Dictionary

UN United Nations

UNDP United Nations Development Programme

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the study, raises the research issues to be addressed and provides a rationale for the study.

In the Maldives, as in many parts of the developing world, equity and the quality of provision of education are being given increasing attention by government. Although access to seven years of primary education for everyone had been nearly achieved by the year 2000, in the Maldives, (with consequent increase in demand for secondary education over the same period), the overall learning achievement in primary and secondary schools remains low (Ministry of Planning and National Development [MPND] 2002). Learning achievement is examined at national level at 16 plus through local examinations in Dhivehi and Islam and through the Cambridge Ordinary Level examination results. Overall, performance in the Cambridge examinations for Maldives has shown very poor pass rates across the system (Chandra and Kilby 2004). In 2002, for example, the English Language results were an abysmal 6 percent A-C grades and overall pass rates (grades A - C) in other subjects was low at 30 percent (Ministry of Education [MoE] 2003:8). These results raise serious questions as to the standards of secondary level education in schools in the Maldives.

The disparity among the achievement and in the provision of education in the capital and other urban centres and that of rural islands is of particular concern to the education service in the Maldives. The standards in the rural schools which are usually community schools, are much lower than in the urban schools, which are usually government schools. Although representatives speaking on behalf of community schools have been demanding a better quality of education for some time, the disparity between the urban and rural schools continues. There are many possible reasons for this disparity. A United Nations

Development Programme report (MPND and United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] 2000a) suggests that it has much to do with human and financial resource capacity. According to this report (ibid) there is a shortage of human resource capacity, characterised by a high percentage of untrained teachers and a heavy dependence on incompetent expatriate teachers. There is, in addition, a lack of financial resources to assist the system's ability to employ better trained expatriate teachers, and produce or acquire good quality teaching resources. Further, the report suggests that curriculum lacks relevance to students' lives and there is an inadequate national system to manage, monitor and supervise teaching and learning. These factors are those that contribute to the continuing disparity (MPND and UNDP 2000a).

The country's physical geography and its rapid population growth present additional challenges in the provision of education and other public services. The Maldives is made up of 1190 small, low-lying coral islands that extend from the Equator northward, forming a chain 820 kilometres in length within an area of over 90,000 square kilometres, located in the Indian Ocean 600 kilometres south of India. The population is spread over 200 islands with over a quarter of the population (29%) living on Male', the capital island. The population of the Maldives has been growing at the rate of 3.4 percent per annum during the inter-census period, 1985-1990 and at this rate of growth it is said that the population will double in 21 years i.e. from 213,215 in 1990 to 426,430 in 2010 (Chaudhury 1996). At the time of writing (2005) the population is approximately 300,000. Few of the islands have a land area in excess of one to two square kilometres; the capital Male' is 2 square kilometres in extent. Only 17 islands have a population more than 2,000, and the rest live on mostly rural islands with no more than 1,000 people to an island. Each island is separated from others by open sea. Essential infrastructure for development, such as transport and communications, is poor and haphazard. For these reasons alone, the provision and

management of education is complex and the challenges to improving the quality of education are immense. According to the 6<sup>th</sup> National Development Plan 2001-2005:

one of the major challenges that confronts the country has been to ensure that the benefits of growth and development are equitably shared among its highly scattered citizens. (MPND 2002:19)

A combination of different factors geographical, economic, and historical, particularly in the way the education provision has developed, has resulted in these wide disparities between the country's capital island and the other islands. These disparities in infrastructure, resources and standards in schools and services have been of continuing concern to families, community developers, educators and policy makers. They have questioned this disparity over time, in fora such as the annual atoll chiefs' conferences (Ministry of Atolls Administration [MoAA] 1998). Additional pressure from outside agencies, such as the United Nations, with its agenda of "Education For All" and objectives to achieve equity and quality in the provision of education in member states, has contributed to raising this matter with the relevant authorities and some efforts have been underway to address the issue. One such effort was the introduction of the policy of 'school clusters', in 1999 by the Ministry of Education.

The idea of school clusters has been developed in a number of developing countries. In Cambodia, Thailand, India, Uganda, and Peru it has been used as a method of providing a more equitable distribution of educational services (Bray 1987). In Namibia, Malawi and Kenya its role has been to improve teaching by sharing resources, experience and expertise among staff (Dittmar et al. 2002). It has also been employed in the developed world in countries such as the UK and Australia as a way of developing provision for pupils with special educational needs (Lunt et al. 1988), to build capacity and to share best practice (Barber 2003).

The main purpose of the cluster policy in the Maldives was, ‘to achieve greater efficiency in management and supervision of schools,’ (MoE 1999c:19). It intended to do this through the strengthening of educational provision so that educational objectives could be systematically provided for and achieved by *all* schools. In its policy document on the cluster policy, the Ministry of Education expressed the aims of this policy as being:

- To spend resources in the interest of the many;
- To provide professional support to improve school management;
- To improve access and quality for primary 1-7 (years 6-12) in all schools;
- To give closer attention to all schools;
- To establish accountability in schools;
- To foster bonds between feeder schools and lead schools so as to encourage more pupils to join the lead secondary schools;
- To develop supervisors (school leaders) and improve results of schools;

(MoE 1999a:8).

An opportunity to research the cluster policy arose as part of my professional doctorate in 2004, five years after the introduction of the cluster policy. I wanted to see if this model of cluster schools was contributing to achieving the objectives set out in this policy. I had been studying ‘School Improvement’ for my Masters degree prior to the Doctorate in Education (EdD) and having chosen to continue on this field, I became interested in improving the rural schools or community schools where conditions for schooling were very poor. This came about over a chance meeting when visiting some rural island schools with the then Minister. My previous experiences had been limited to working on improving a school which was located on the capital where I was an Assistant Principal and later the Principal. Then, I did not know very much about the conditions of schools on the rural islands and I wanted to

address this gap in my knowledge. To gain a better insight regarding the school system as a whole in my own country (the Maldives), with the intention of focusing on improving more schools than just one, a choice to study the cluster policy was made.

The cluster policy has elements of school improvement in its objectives - although stated in more general education terms - and seemed to promise improvement in helping to bridge the disparities gap. References made to 'improving schools' in the context of the Maldives are made in the general sense of the word rather than from an understanding of the term 'School Improvement' as it has evolved in the Western research and policy perspectives. A generic and widely quoted definition of School Improvement emanates from the work of Van Velzen et al. (1985). They define School Improvement as:

A systematic, sustained effort aimed at change in learning conditions and other related internal conditions in one or more schools, with the ultimate aim of accomplishing educational goals more effectively (1985:48)

Implicit within this definition of School Improvement is that while improvement occurs *within* schools, the schools are located in the larger system. This definition of School Improvement and the objectives that the cluster policy sought to achieve, hold a resonance for me, and I was keen to find out about this policy and how it had been formulated and implemented within the cluster schools. The following account represents the first study of the Maldives cluster policy and its workings in the Maldives. The objectives of this study are to investigate the cluster policy, its rationale, processes of implementation and its effectiveness on improving schools through stakeholder views. The stakeholders include policy makers (the Ministry of Education) and policy implementers (the head teachers, lead teachers, island chiefs and atoll chiefs).

The following are the specific aims of the study in relation to the cluster policy of the Maldives:

- To explore and analyse the rationale underpinning the cluster policy in the context of the Maldives.
- To describe and analyse the processes of policy implementation through the perceptions of stakeholders
- To examine the difficulties and barriers which facilitated or impeded its implementation
- To explore the operation of the policy, in practice, through four case studies.
- To begin to develop an understanding of ‘best practice’ in regard to the cluster policy, as perceived by cluster heads, and how this might be disseminated.

Therefore, the research questions are:

- What were policy makers’ and head teachers’ rationale for the ‘cluster’ policy and what influences shaped the introduction of the policy?
- What do the head teachers think of the cluster policy implementation and how effective do they perceive the policy to be?
- What are the main difficulties and barriers to the intended outcomes of the cluster policy and what factors, if any, facilitated or impeded its implementation?
- What do head teachers perceive as ‘best practice’ of the cluster policy and how can this be disseminated?

The research was carried out through four case studies and supplementary interviews. Each case study is based on an atoll, which usually included several clusters of school. A total of 50 schools in 14 clusters were visited and interviews conducted with cluster heads, lead

teachers, island chiefs and atoll chiefs on these islands. Further interviews were carried out to complement the case study data, involving seven Ministry of Education representatives and thirteen other cluster heads all of whom were heads of Atoll Education Centres, each representing an atoll and cluster. The case studies would it was hoped, illuminate the views of those interviewed on how well (or not) the policy was functioning within these clusters. The interviews with a representative group of cluster heads (and with MoE representatives) helped to triangulate the data and to explore possible differences among perceptions of the policy held by different stakeholders in terms of expectations, and practical application within the targeted cluster schools.

The cluster policy was introduced in 1999 to cover about 80 percent of schools in the country all schools outside the capital Male' (both government and community schools in the atolls) - a total of 198 schools with about 68,698 pupils in 38 clusters. Of these 198 schools 65 percent had less than 300 pupils and 20 percent had less than 100 pupils (MoE 1999b). This meant that there were numerous small schools where basic resources such as teachers were thinly distributed. Where teachers worked in isolation getting on with their day-to-day work it meant that they had no opportunity for dialogue among colleagues regarding work or professional development.

Five years after the introduction of the cluster policy (2004), changes to key positions at the MoE (three different Ministers lead the Ministry within this period), meant that some of the priorities in relation to education changed: various policies were questioned, leading to changes in direction in approach and policy over this time. Under the leadership (in 2004) the then Minister (when I had inquired regarding his views on the cluster policy) on the one hand, questioned the usefulness of cluster policy, commenting whether clustering was achieving its intended objectives of improved quality in rural schools. On the other hand, he said there were reasons for strengthening clustering as a means to gaining greater efficiency and decentralisation of the education system as a whole.

The significance of this research study is that this study offers the opportunity to address these questions on the basis of research evidence. While carried out as an integral component of a professional doctorate, this study will also be of use to the MoE as it represents the sole exploration and analysis of current practice regarding the cluster policy, including suggestions on areas for improvement and change, while drawing on the literature on school clustering in other developing countries.

This study is particularly important given the limited research on school clusters in developing countries. The thesis distinguishes itself from earlier studies by taking a broad school improvement perspective on school clustering. While the main focus is to investigate the cluster policy, this has the purpose of gaining an insight of the conditions and context for addressing school improvement in the Maldives. The scope of the study is limited to examining school clusters, in particular the cluster policy in the Maldives. It aims to take on board the point made by a World Bank report:

Analysis need not result in lengthy reports. What is important is clear thinking about how best to improve educational outcomes, using knowledge of good practice and conditions on the ground (World Bank 1999:26).

Following on from this research, I would have the opportunity to take on a key role at the MoE, Maldives, as Executive Director at the Education Development Centre, which is a crucial branch/arm of the MoE. Here I would be able to influence policy, drawing on the lessons from this study, and to change conditions as they operate on the ground.

The EdD opportunity has given me time to pursue academic study and research and has also given me invaluable exposure to the conditions of island schools that I have not had previously. The EdD has allowed me to prepare myself to work on school improvement more broadly having been able to read about and learn from experiences elsewhere. It has also given me the time to reflect on the realities in schools across the Maldives and within

the education system as a whole. In order to understand strengths and weaknesses and think about possible ways forward. In my capacity as a policy maker at the MoE, my aim will be to enable the provision of a more equitable distribution of resources and expertise so as to help bridge some of the gaps of disparities and in that quest pursue a goal to raise the quality of education across schools in the Maldives.

### **An Introduction to the Cluster Policy**

The cluster policy handbook (MoE 1999a) is a comprehensive document that outlines essential areas for the cluster policy's development and facilitation as well as roles and responsibilities for the programme. This handbook outlined the objectives and proposed advantages of the policy. It contained a map of schools belonging to each cluster and stated what was expected, and by whom, in order to implement the policy. The organisational hierarchy as given in the handbook is included in the appendix (Appendix 2). The handbook document also drew attention to the benefits to be gained by schools working collaboratively - by drawing on expertise for the common good of groups of schools.

#### *Mapping out school clusters*

A total of 198 schools (with approximately 68,698 pupils) were grouped into 38 school clusters covering approximately 80 percent of schools (MoE 1999a). These were schools outside the capital within the 20 administrative regions in the country. Schools on Male', the capital island, were not included in the cluster initiative. The reasons for this were not given, though it was possibly because schools on the capital were large, relatively well resourced and believed to be functioning efficiently on their own. The Minister's foreword to the Handbook explains the reasons for the cluster policy and its intended benefits for the community schools. The benefits of clusters as given were: (i) community schools, headed by island chiefs, were run without proper guidance from the MoE and, as a result, were

under-performing; (ii) the poor standards in community schools were a matter of concern that had been brought to the attention of the Government by the atoll chiefs on numerous occasions; (iii) Given the limitations in human and financial resources, and while it was not possible to allocate trained head teachers to every community school, this policy will provide a means to fill the gaps in leading these schools by allowing a professional head to be shared by a group of community schools. This policy gave an opportunity to an education professional to head community schools.

A community school was a government subsidised school run by the community, in which the island chief was the head of school. A government school was a fully financed state school run with trained personnel who worked under the directions of the Ministry of Education. Community schools were grouped into clusters with a government school. Each cluster was based on geographical proximity. Within each atoll there were two or four clusters depending on the numbers of islands and schools in the atoll. Each cluster had one government school which acted as lead school and a number of community schools or 'satellite' schools. The number in each cluster varied (usually between 6 and 11 schools) (MoE 1999a).

### *The Cluster Head*

Among the responsibilities of the cluster heads (as listed in the handbook, MoE 1999a) were: to give advice; to plan the academic calendar (ensuring adherence to systemic objectives as laid out by the MoE); timetabling (including guidelines and the review of lesson plans and schemes of work); monitoring of teachers' and pupils' activities (including supervision to ensure common standards); to improve standards (through the provision of INSET and other general advice on the running of the schools). The cluster heads were also expected to form a bridge of communication between the 'satellite' schools and the MoE; to keep the MoE and atoll chiefs informed (on a regular basis) of conditions within each of the satellites and to

provide an annual written report to the MoE. It was suggested in the handbook, that the cluster head would: visit each satellite three times a year; would be the professional in charge of advising on a range of matters, including liaison with parents and the community. Further details of the multiple tasks of the cluster head, the satellite schools roles, the island chief's role in an advisory capacity, as well as the MoE co-ordinators' role are included in the handbook (MoE Cluster Handbook 1999a).

The lead teacher in each of the community schools was known as 'supervisor', and referred to in this study as the 'lead teacher'. The lead teacher worked on-site and shared responsibilities for organising and running the teaching/learning programme. For the cluster policy to work, the presence afforded by the cluster head as the leading professional was paramount. However, because of the inadequate level of contact i.e. infrequent travel and limited communications these were challenges facing the cluster policy in terms of what can be achieved.

In summary this introduction identifies the central issue in the study, which is: cluster schools have been introduced in a number of countries to gain a range of educational outcomes. In seeking to explore the Maldives cluster policy situation I will argue that useful lessons can be learnt from examples of other countries, and evidence gathered from the Maldives can be applied elsewhere, and ways to improve schools can be gleaned from such a study. Hence, the intention and purpose of this study was to find out about the cluster policy in the context of the Maldives, to understand why it had been developed, how it was introduced, its effectiveness when implemented and to identify its barriers as it went from policy to practice. A further purpose was to gain a deeper understanding of the contextual realities and challenges within which these schools work so as to enable future development for school improvement purposes within the school system in the Maldives.

## Structure of the thesis

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1 has introduced the objectives of the research, has established its focus and the issues to be addressed and has briefly adumbrated the cluster policy. The next chapter is on the context of the study i.e. the Maldives – outlining the contextual environment of the policy, thus providing a backdrop for analysis and investigation of the policy. Chapter 3 is a review of the existing literature relating to cluster-type arrangements including those created for school improvement purposes focusing on examples to draw out the factors that influence such activities and examining their relevance to the context of the Maldives. Chapter 4 presents the research design and the methods used to carry out the research, showing how the research was framed within the qualitative paradigm. Chapters 5 and 6 present the research data. This involves four case studies contextually interpreted each providing a flavour of the regional differences in the practices within the cluster arrangements. The delineation of the case study journeys provide a glimpse into the conditions of schools and the quality of school work, adding important background to the identified differences in practice in following the policy in the different atolls/regions. Direct quotations from the interviews are used for purposes of illustration. Data from interviews with representatives of the MoE and cluster heads are also included in Chapter 6 as is the analysis of perceptions of the cluster policy in three stages: initiation, implementation processes and outcomes. Chapter 7 provides a discussion to draw together the salient threads running through the study. It finally sums up the main findings of the research and sets out implications for further work as well as directions for future research. The final chapter also includes a personal reflection on my own ‘learning journey’ and professional development.

In order to understand the conditions within the Maldives context that led to the introduction of the school cluster policy and to introduce the education system in which this study is set,

the next chapter describes the Maldives and some of the conditions and the chronology of events of the education service.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter provides a description of the Maldivian education context, its system of schooling, types of schools and some of the conditions in which teachers work. The chapter outlines information which suggests that education system in the Maldives has lacked the ability to address the needs of community schools to provide quality and standards comparable with those of government schools. The needs of the community schools are brought into focus and distinctions between schools made clear.

‘Every Maldivian will have access to quality primary and secondary education.’ These words form the first part of the ‘vision’ statement of the Ministry of Education, Maldives, as in the MoE website ([www.moe.gov.mv/2005-11-10](http://www.moe.gov.mv/2005-11-10)). Yet an assessment report not long ago suggests; that the quality of primary education as well as secondary education is ‘very poor’ (Cook 2004). Why is this the case? What has been the history and what are the conditions in schools in the Maldives? These questions will be explored in the sections that follow.

#### **The Maldives – Country Profile**

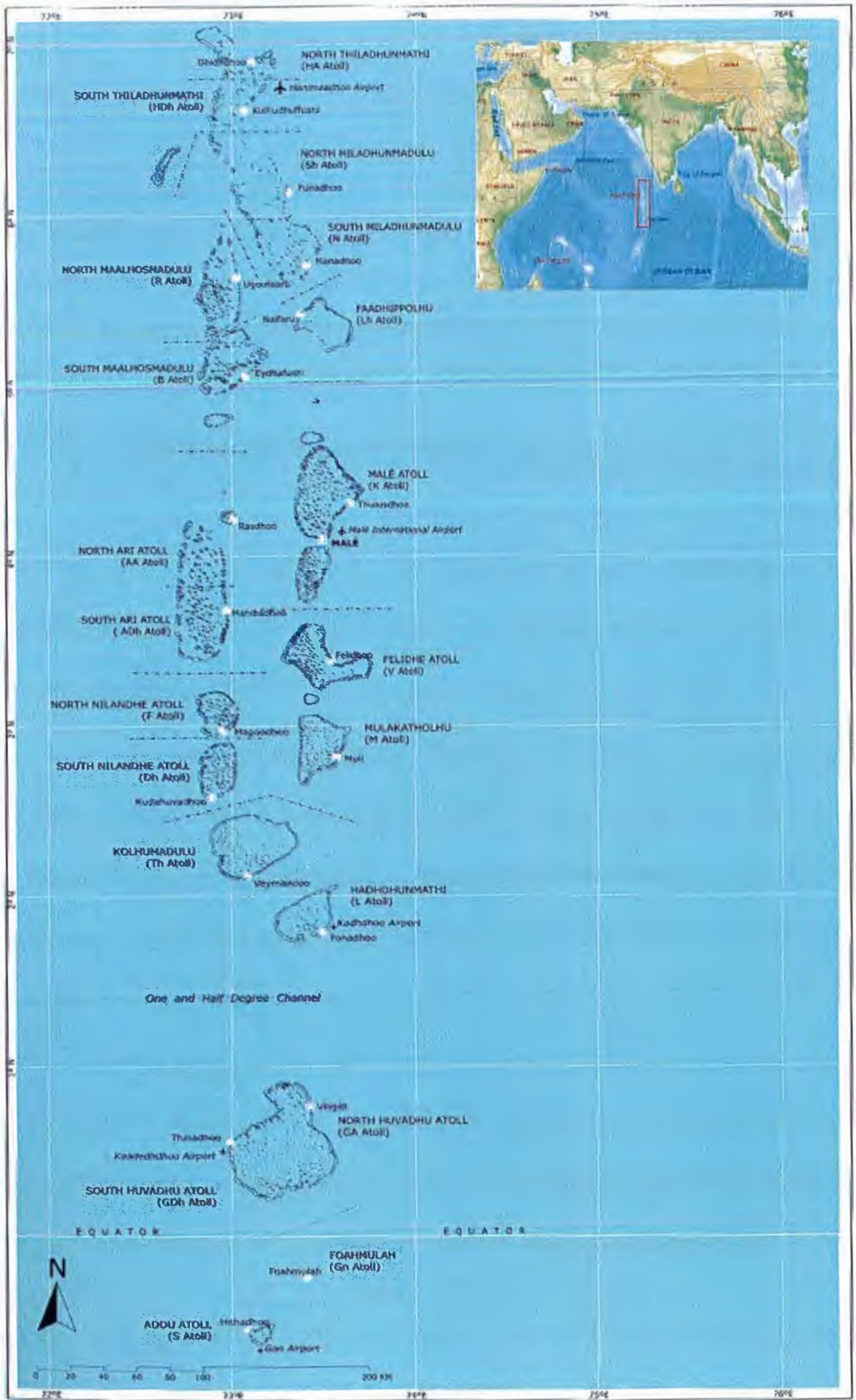
As noted in Chapter 1 (Page 8), the Maldives is an archipelago located in the Indian Ocean, 600 kilometres south of India. It consists of 1,190 small islands forming a chain 820 kilometres in length within an area of 90,000 square kilometres. The islands form 26 natural atolls each enclosed by a coral reef cut by several deep natural channels. The natural atolls are grouped into 20 administrative atolls. Few of the islands have a land area of one square kilometre and only 200 of them are inhabited. Most islands are surrounded by a protective coral reef and shallow lagoon that provides a natural defence against the strong currents of

the open ocean outside the lagoon. As noted in Chapter 1, the wide dispersion of population makes delivering public services and public administration cumbersome and costly. The dispersed nature of the island settlements is a unique challenge to the country's development and has led to a disproportionate emphasis being placed upon the importance of transport and communication in integrating society, the polity and its market economy. The common mode of transport in the Maldives is by mechanized boat. Although there are air transport options these are far too expensive for locals to use. Without an organized public transport network, the availability and frequency of trips between islands and Male', the capital, vary, giving rise to difficulties in relation to access to social services and markets. Significant differences and disparities exist between Male' and the other islands in areas of access to services and infrastructure including education. These inequalities are pronounced in the access to social services and physical infrastructure averaging a ratio of 4 to 1 – i.e. four times more favourable to someone in the capital in comparison to someone on the atolls (MPND and UNPD 2000b).

The islands that make up the Maldives are low-lying with none having an elevation in excess of 1.6 metres above sea level. This makes the country vulnerable to global warming, sea level rise and environmental disasters such as the recent Tsunami. The Maldives was one of the worst hit countries in the South Asian Tsunami, with a total damage to the country estimated at about US\$ 470 million – just over 62 percent of GDP. Nearly a third of the country's residents suffered from loss or damage of homes, livelihoods and local infrastructure (National Disaster Management Centre [NDMC] 2005). This disaster compounded the challenges the country faces today.

Fig. 1

### Map of Maldives



Source: MPND (2003); Microsoft Encarta (2002)

Prior to the Tsunami, there were significant pockets of vulnerability and poverty among the population; with the tsunami, many of the development gains achieved in recent years were lost in a matter of minutes, presenting the country with unprecedented challenges. According to the UNDP Report, *Tsunami: Impact on the Maldives*:

Just days prior to the tsunami, the international community had recommended that the country graduate from Less Developed Country status to that of a Middle Income Country. Sadly, much of the recent economic and social progress vanished with the tsunami floodwaters.... *The most vulnerable and poorest groups in society now face the spectre of an even more precarious future* (UNDP 2005, italics added).

After the Tsunami assistance from the United Nations in particular, provided the chance (and the means) to repair some of the damage caused by the disaster. Swift action was taken by the Ministry of Education to start schools on January 26 when the academic year began. Displaced children were allowed access to schools on neighbouring islands where they were provided with hospitality. With relocation these schools were provided with temporary additional classrooms and shelters. Quick dispatch of uniforms, exercise books and textbooks was carried out by the MoE, with UNICEF swiftly provided 'schools in a box' as aid to the schools, in the required amounts, so that no pupil went to school without books and basic equipment. Groups of teachers and social workers from Male' were dispatched to provide temporary support in rural schools while new teachers recruited from overseas were brought in to fill the gaps. Nine schools were so badly damaged that they had to be abandoned completely and the people moved out of the islands on to other islands. Another 31 schools reported damage when Tsunami waters entered the school destroying equipment and materials inside, although the buildings themselves were intact (NDMC 2005).

Environmental concerns, including that of weather watching, have become an important feature of life in the Maldives. Travel is further inhibited; pressure comes from various groups to relocate small populations on to more populous islands or on to larger uninhabited

islands, and these voices and demands have been ongoing since the Tsunami. There has been an influx of island people migrating to the already over-crowded Male'. The government and communities at large are trying to come to terms with what has happened and what measures have to be put in place. As a result of the Tsunami it seems as if many of the developments of the past few decades had been put back, and many people have lost loved ones, homes and their livelihoods and are suddenly poorer and more insecure than before. The immediate future looks bleak, as the main industries of tourism and fishing have been badly hit.

A year on (end of 2005), the Ministry of Finance and Treasury has made some hopeful projections for the period 2006-2010 which suggest growth, stable Government revenues and improving balance of payments (Cambridge Education, 2005). These projections depend, though, on an improvement of tourism from its current Tsunami induced low levels. Government finances are heavily dependant on taxes arising from tourist activities in generating revenues to the economy.

The Maldives is dependent on tourism and fisheries as its two main industries. Tourism was introduced in the 1970s and brought in considerable income bringing prosperity to the country. The country has enjoyed a tradition of political stability and cultural homogeneity in terms of a common history, language (Dhivehi) and religion (Islam).

The Maldives was a British Protectorate from 1887 until 26<sup>th</sup> July 1965 when it gained independence. It now has a highly centralised Republican government with the present President and a number of members in the cabinet in post for the past 27 years (since 1978). In recent years there have been reports of unrest, particularly among those who have grievances due to disparities between the poor and the rich, the rural and the urban. Calls for democracy, accountability, transparency and change are being voiced through internet based newspapers some of which is banned in the country. Recent upheavals recorded in these newspapers have brought into focus dissidents who are discontent, due to power being

continually held by a relatively small group of people. As the numbers of young people who have had some formal education grow; on leaving school, they vie for the very few jobs or training opportunities that are available. An analysis of the 1990 census data suggests that for every job vacant there are three job seekers (Chaudhury 1998). As the numbers of young people who have no jobs or training opportunities grow, this wave of discontent is bound to spread. Added to this are other developments such as the growing spread of drugs, the influence of elements of terrestrial media, the internet and changes in the social fabric, which sweep the country as it moves into the 21<sup>st</sup> century “global village”. It would seem that there had been little change in the pattern of livelihood in the Maldives in the several decades preceding the 1970s; however, the past three decades have brought an influx of new ideas and ideologies as well as changes in fashions and new products into the country. As a result, people’s values are changing, as are their ways of living and their needs and demands. Keeping up with new technologies within a highly technical world creates its own kinds of challenges.

... the nation is moving to a new stage of development which, while to be welcomed as evidence of tangible progress, is bringing challenges that are more numerous and formidable than those faced in the past. (MNDP 1999:3)

Over the past 40 years the population has trebled from approximately 96,000 in 1965 to almost 300,000 by 2005. The 2000 census showed that 17.3 percent of the population were under 5 years of age, 46.5 percent under 15 years of age and 70 percent are under 35 years of age while the median age of the population was 17.3 years (MNDP 2005). As a result there exists a high dependency ratio (the ratio of total population to working age population), which poses serious challenges to development efforts. Furthermore, the MoE suggests that: ‘development is seriously constrained by lack of qualified manpower’ (MoE 1999c:19). There exists a growing dependence on expatriate personnel which is not limited to professions, like accountants, doctors, nurses and teachers, but also extends to manual jobs.

For example housemaids come from Sri Lanka; and workers in hotels, handymen, and construction site workers from India and Bangladesh. This situation has come about largely because of the mismatch between job availability and skills of the people available, - a problem not uncommon in other developing countries.

The cultural value system of older Maldivians within some families is still strong and work in a way whereby relatives help each other, with those having jobs tending to take care of those without jobs. However, but these values are also changing over time. As Western models of education and development have almost entirely replace old indigenous practices of teaching and learning and apprenticeships, young people's ways of life and their principles are changing bringing about a rift between the young and the old. An observation made by Thaufe'nlungaki (1991:577) which Luthfi (2004:11) quotes is that:

Developing curricula which will cultivate in students confidence in them, pride in their culture and traditions and commitment to their national ideals and aspirations but at the same time developing mastery of the tools of modern development is the biggest challenge that many of the Small Island Developing Nations face today.

Perhaps precedence should be given to the development of a vision and curriculum that could give more Maldivian children a more culturally realistic education so as to give them skills necessary in developing themselves and the country (Cook 2004). There are just a handful of 'successful' graduates from the education system that go on to Universities abroad and some return home to hold professional jobs, while others choose to stay away and work in the host countries. Majority of school leaving population would live life and work in the Maldives and it is their future that has to be addressed.

Jobs involving technical and vocational skills are not well regarded especially among the young people who go through formal schooling. There is, therefore, a mismatch between the jobs available and the aspirations of those who are unemployed, and a gap between the

expectations of the young people coming out of schools and the type of job they are qualified to do (Chandra and Kilby 2004). The mismatch is leading to problems within society as more young people take to drugs and other deviant behaviour. As their numbers grow, these negative aspects which are detrimental to any society, cause the system to slow progress. Although efforts are being made by the relevant authorities and communities to address these issues of mismatch (between expectations and reality), educational quality, equity, efficiency and relevance, as well as expansion of secondary education to the rural islands, such efforts are slow in effecting the speed of change in culture, which the country is undergoing (Collins 1994; MoE 1995; MPND and UNDP 2000b; Cook 2004).

### **The Types of Schools, System of Education and Conditions in Schools**

Little has been written on the development of education in the Maldives. Documents accessible to the public are usually those written by consultants for UN agencies, for the World Bank or those found in overseas university libraries written as part of higher education qualifications gained by Maldivians who pursue higher education abroad. In his PhD thesis Luthfi (2004) identifies four phases or stages to development of education in the Maldives: a) the period of traditional religion-based education (1153–1940s) which started with Maldivians converting to Islam from Buddhism and accepting Islam as their religion in 1153; b) the period of the community schools system (1940s–1950s); c) the period of the English medium of education (1961 to date, 2004) and, d) the period of Universal Primary Education (UPE) (1979 to date). Today three types of schools exist: community schools, English medium schools which are largely government run, and private schools.

Schooling is provided in the islands through a joint venture of state and community. Community schools are found in the rural islands and are run by the community, with pupils paying fees which are subsidised by the state. These schools are in a poorer state than the government schools in urban centres. The government schools were established in the

islands much later under the banner of providing Universal Primary Education – a project still ongoing today. There are today two government schools to each atoll located on two of the more populous islands and this figure is on the increase.

The history of community schools goes back a long way. It is built on the traditional ‘eduruge’ (learned elder’s house) of the 1930’s and 1950’s model, where a learned elder gave lessons to children who were taught the three R’s. Remnants of this schooling still linger in some of islands. This is also where pupils were taught to read the Holy Quran - the religious book for Muslims. Traditionally the teacher or ‘elder’ would charge a small fee from the pupils and this practice still continues in contemporary community schools. The community school buildings are poorly built with makeshift classrooms and furniture and lack qualified teachers and teaching resources.

In 1999, when the cluster policy was introduced, there were 158 community schools which 44 percent of the student population were attending, and 54 government schools attended by 47 percent of the student population. There were 9 percent in private schools (MoE 1999a). The smaller, community, primaries are the schools that the cluster policy planned to reach, in terms of providing professional support and sharing of resources. The 44 percent student population in the community schools were thinly dispersed in 158 schools; each school being on a separate island. The school enrolment figures for 1999 show that for about 70 percent of the community schools the enrolment was below 300 pupils and among these a further 20 percent had pupil numbers below 100 (MoE 1999b). This suggests that some 70 percent of the community schools had less than ten teachers to a school, of which 20 percent had 4 or less than four teachers per school (MoE 1999b). With many schools having so few teachers and each school far apart from the other, teachers were professionally isolated. Furthermore, the percentage of trained teachers in the community schools is very low which reduces the quality of input.

In comparison, government schools are far better resourced and have had a more favourable development history than that of the community schools (MoE 1995). In 1960 the government introduced English as the medium of instruction in government schools in the capital and trained expatriate teachers were recruited to teach in English. At the time there were three government schools all located in the capital island, Male'. These were a pre-school based on the Montessori model for mixed sex and two single sex schools based on the British grammar school model which provided education from grade 1 to grade 10 (covering primary and secondary education). At the end of the secondary school, graduates sat for the London University Ordinary Level examinations. Teachers who taught in these three schools came largely from Sri Lanka and England.

From this time onwards, as a result of the introduction of the English medium in Male' government schools, a chasm grew between the school system of the capital and that of the rest of the country. The communities on the outer islands were left to get on with their education while the grammar school based education in the English medium was only available for those born in the capital or rich enough to live on the capital island. The justification for this was that these schools were said to be educating those who would take on positions of authority in the governance of the country for building a better tomorrow (Luthfi 2004).

Since 1978, following a change in the government, a new scheme of access to primary education for all were implemented by 2000 and provision of universal primary education became the goal. Today a similar system of education is available in each atoll as in the capital, with at least one or two government schools per atoll along these lines. The existing system can be said to be a comprehensive school system which draws pupils of all abilities and from all socio economic status. At present, (in 2005) the medium of instruction in schools is a mix of English, Dhivehi and Arabic languages. The curriculum is arranged according to the Maldives National Curriculum guidelines.

In the past twenty-five years, due to the government's involvement in education across the country, people's hopes have been raised and there is an expectation that community schools would be enabled to provide a similar education to that of government schools. However, government schools continue to be better resourced as they are fully funded by the government. These schools have their own budgets and authorised funds are allocated directly to schools by the government. In comparison, community schools continue to be poorly resourced and pupils are charged fees. The MoE identifies how much each community school can be given and this budget is sent to the island office for the use of the school. How they allocate the monies is not disclosed. The government funding goes towards the upkeep of the school buildings, on teachers' pay roll, and some allocation is made towards payment of the electric and telephone bills. It is known that this allocation falls short even for basic needs such as electricity bills; additional finances have to be found in order to pay bills.

As is clear from the above two distinct systems exist side-by-side for two different groups of people. For those in the urban centres government provides education based on a similar version to that of schools on the capital island, where students sit for the Cambridge O'levels and London (Edexcel) A'levels. In community schools, in contrast, the government contribution is small and standards are poor with the provision only being up to grade seven (end of primary). Pupils are then encouraged to move on to urban centres for their secondary education. The advantage of being born in the capital would appear to give a head start in life like no other factor. Pupils who come from schools outside the capital are required to sit an entrance examination to join secondary government schools; if they fail, then they have to attend a fee paying private school where standards and resources are lower. The disadvantage for those born outside the capital continues to deepen the inequalities, and although steps are being taken by the government to provide education for all, the disparities continue. All schools are day schools and pupils in schools away from home islands have to

find accommodation on the urban islands. Accommodation is costly and if they are unable to find suitable accommodation, they stay with relatives or friends and live as household help to earn their keep in exchange for boarding.

In the Maldives, education is still not compulsory. One of the government objectives in 2000 – access to primary education for all is – still being realised. The Educational Statistics Year-Book (MoE 2004a) does not give a record of the total number of school age children in the country, and the number of children out of school cannot be worked out from this data. Since education is highly regarded by the public, there is an assumption that almost all children are enrolled either in a community, government or private schools. However, data from another source revealed that, in 2004 the percentage of school-age children in school (grades one to seven) was 79 percent; (grades eight to 10) 62 percent, and (grades 11-12) 16 percent. Of the students enrolled, 49 percent were female and 51 percent male (US State Department 2006). This source also said that ‘In many instances, parents generally curtailed education for girls after the seventh grade, not allowing girls to leave their home island for another island with a secondary school’ (ibid). Given that access to primary schools (grades 1-7) is provided, it is surprising to find that one in five primary school age children do not still go to school according to this source. Further, one in three secondary school age children do not attend a school. It would seem that is the children on the rural islands, from the poorer parents, that do not go to school and therefore do not get the benefit out of the formal education system.

The Structure of the Maldives Education System comprises a pre-primary programme of two years (not common to all), a primary programme of seven years, lower secondary stage of three years and a higher secondary of two years, (2+7+3+2). Formal schooling starts at the age of six and lasts for seven years; this is the primary education phase where curriculum provision is common to all. The 3 + 2 secondary provision exists within government schools (two in each atoll) and a few private schools located in the urban centres. Tertiary education

provision is limited and is available in the capital, and very few of the urban centres, through the post-secondary College of Higher Education.

Today government schools offer classes from grades 1-10 and a few up to grade 12. At the end of ten years of schooling students take the British General Certificate of Education (Cambridge syllabus and examination) and Secondary School Certificate (similar standard local examination). At the end of higher secondary the (the London Edexcel) Advanced level examinations and Higher Secondary Certificate (local examination) are taken.

Despite a high level of government funding for education, the sector remains seriously under-funded. In GDP terms, educational expenditure has been between 7 or 9 percent in 2002 and 2004. In 2002, the education sector had a share of 17.7 percent of total government expenditure and in 2003 the figure was 18.2 percent. In absolute terms these were 589.8 and 698.5 million *rufiyaa* respectively. Salaries and administrative costs consume the largest share of this amount, leaving little available for quality improvement purposes (Chandra and Kilby 2004).

The budget allocations for schools are not derived from a formula based on the numbers of students per school nor does school funding distinguish between primary and secondary schools. The physical facilities of a primary school and that of a secondary school are often similar with a homeroom (classroom) that acts as the base where teachers come and go and a scattering of some specialist rooms together makes a school building.

Currently there is disparity in the way funds are allocated to different schools. It is also the case that budget allocation information is not disclosed. Anecdotal comparisons suggest that in X government school, schooling per month costs Rufiya 350/- per pupil while in Y community school the pupil average is just Rufiya 3.50/- per month. However, these suggestions are based on the conditions seen in the two very different types of schools and are, therefore, speculative.

Generally, the smaller the population the worse off their living conditions. For example, electricity may not be available at all or during the day. Schools tend to be in bad repair and lacking in furniture. Teachers are often poorly trained, if at all, and temporary assistant teachers take up full teaching responsibilities. The community school physical facilities in general are basic, multipurpose open plan having a small hall with space for three classrooms divided by makeshift blackboards: these rooms cannot be closed or locked. There are no spaces for staff room or toilets in many schools, and teachers and pupils have to go out of school for many basic needs. The taught curriculum is often a reduced version of what the national curriculum is. Without teachers to teach specific subjects like English language, Physical Education or Practical Arts, these subjects may not be taught for months on end. Trained teachers tend to choose to work on the more prosperous islands where demand is high for good teachers.

As someone who was born and had lived a privileged life on the capital island my fieldwork experience brought these factors to life for me. Some of what I saw and heard came as a surprise. I found rural islanders lived simple lives and held back their demands, not questioning what the central government did and offered. Indeed they accepted what was made available to be the best the government could offer. Communities saw in education a possible option for a better life for their children and it was encouraging to see the active interest parents took in sending their children to school. The children came to school on time in spotless white uniforms with bags full of books held by the parent walking the child to school.

Within the limitations and the level of manpower resources present on any one small island what is being achieved in community schools is often of a poor standard. There had been no reports on in-service training or even teacher induction for many years organised either within the cluster or at a national level. Schools and teachers are very much left to get on by themselves. Budgets for travel and communications are in short supply and teachers are

unable to meet with and learn from other teachers doing the same work or benefit from the experiences of each other. Most teachers prepare and present their lessons and examinations in isolation year after year. Separated by sea and limitations in communications in each school, teachers interpret the syllabus and the national curriculum on their own. Most of the time, the taught curriculum varies across schools. Similarly, they would prepare different schemes of work and set different standards for examinations. Not surprisingly therefore the standards between schools continue to be different and often are generally poor.

Half the teachers in the rural schools are untrained and work as temporary untenured teachers and these conditions go on for years without being addressed (Chandra and Kilby 2004). Advice and support comes largely from the MoE. However, many a year passes without a single visit from them or any form of in-service provision. Given this scenario the cluster head is the professional who could give support and guidance to other smaller school heads located within any proximity. This can only happen provided that resources and arrangements are made. In any effort to improve practice, sharing best practice and building capacity in personnel and conditions within school is very important. More teachers need to become professionally more proficient. So that more pupils could reap the benefits and collaborate actively through clustering which, potentially could address some of these needs.

This chapter has tried to locate the development of education in the community schools and the government schools within the broader context of educational history of the Maldives. It has identified implications for the study for researching the cluster policy. Thus the chapter has paved the path for the analysis of empirical findings in the subsequent chapters. In the next Chapter I discuss the relevant, though limited, literature on school clusters.

### LITERATURE REVIEW OF SCHOOL CLUSTERS

#### Introduction

There is limited, yet important, literature on school clusters, which suggests that the clustering of schools has been used in many education systems as a way of achieving various educational purposes pertaining to providing better schools and schooling within education systems over time. This literature review covers examples from both the developing and the developed world. It gives examples from the school clusters model applied to school systems, such as in Namibia, where organisation of all state sector schools in the country falls within such a framework to that of smaller pockets of schools working together in clusters to promote their own educational agendas, as reported by Elkins and Haydn (2004) in the UK.

The literature review shows that school clustering is a model favoured among policy makers in various education systems, as a model providing a framework for schools to work together to share limited resources, raise the quality of school experience; by having schools learn from each other, by building capacity among teachers to enhance the quality of delivery of the curriculum for all pupils in schools. The school clusters model, if used effectively, can address issues of disparity.

Key sources of literature on school clusters are by Bray (1987), Lunt et al. (1988) and Dittmar et al. (2002). Examples of initiatives for school improvement purposes in the context of Kenya, and UK (KENSIP Aga Kahn Foundation 2004, Elkins and Haydn 2004, Moynihan 2002, Rivorola and Fuller 1999, Sammons et al. 1998) have become recently available. These examples suggest that the school clusters model has become increasingly favoured, in varying contexts, by policy makers, both for developing schools and for promoting

innovation and change within schools.

This literature review will be driven by the following questions: what are school clusters? Where are some examples? How do they work? What are some of the benefits and drawbacks? What do we know about school clusters generally in developing countries and are they consistent with features of the cluster policy in Maldives?

## **What are School Clusters?**

### *The concept of the School Cluster*

Bray suggests that the cluster concept grew partly from developments in ‘micoplanning’ (1987:10). Advocates of microplanning pointed out that even in the smallest country it would be impossible for the MoE to know the specific circumstances of every school and community. The need to integrate plans by centralised MoEs school mapping had been introduced as an instrument for microplanning to identify the existing distribution of resources and major development gaps. Based on these developments, Bray (1987) suggests that the cluster concept came about due to a) an intersection of concerns regarding, microplanning, school mapping, decentralisation and local participation in decision-making and b) as a way to improve the use of scarce resources and upgrading of educational quality. The above observations provide a basis to appreciate how clusters came to be regarded as having an important part to play in the efforts to raise the quality of schools and schooling in many parts of the world.

The term ‘cluster’ as used in the literature refers to groupings of schools for purposes of collaboration, partnership, or networking. Each of these terms imply varying levels of connection between schools working together in teams, drawing from each other to achieve certain educational objectives on upgrading educational quality. Different activities have been implied within the term ‘cluster’.

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines 'cluster' as 'a close group or bunch of similar things growing together'. Writing about school clusters in developing countries, Bray (1987) defines a school cluster as a 'grouping of schools for administrative and educational purposes.' Lunt et al.'s (1988) research into schools collaborating for special needs purposes used the definition of a cluster as 'a grouping of schools with a relatively stable and long-term commitment to share some resources and decision-making about an area of school activity' (1988:17). While Bray's (1987) definition simply implies a grouping, the definition of Lunt et al. (1988) includes terms such as 'long term', 'stable' and 'sharing resources' and 'decision making'. The latter definition implies that the schools in the cluster make some commitment and have some shared power. These three definitions demonstrate different facets of school clusters. In their work Bray (1987) and Lunt et al. (1988) draw from a number of examples of 'clusters in action' where these definitions were used as frames of reference for school clusters in a number of contexts.

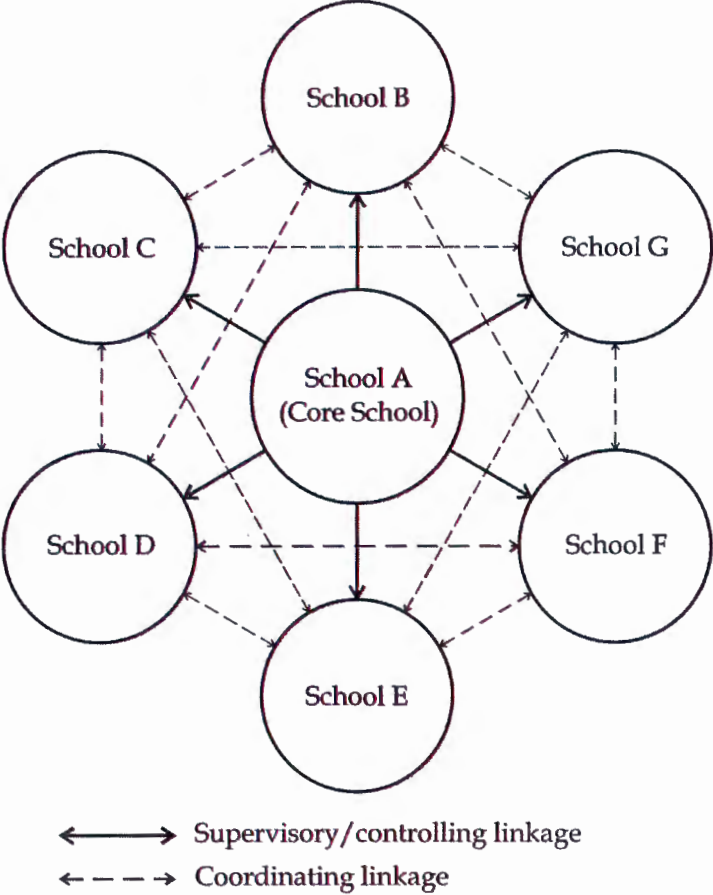
The description of clusters as given by the policy makers who introduced clustering in the Maldives will be considered next. The architects of Maldivian school clusters coined the practical name 'ihaa' to describe a cluster; 'ihaa' literally means a bunch of coconuts. The coconut palm is the most common tree in the Maldives and the Maldivian way of life revolves around this ubiquitous tree. This description, based on the symbolic representation of a bunch of coconuts all connected at the stem, suggests that school clusters are connected to the same source, all drawing strength from the cluster head and lead school and draws on the botanical idea of 'growing together' as used in the OED definition. A definition of a Maldivian cluster based on this figurative representation can thus be:

*A school cluster is a group of schools connected with a lead school in a synergistic alliance in which sharing and growth go hand-in-hand.*

The 'ihaa' depicts a powerful representation recognised for its value of belonging together in a bunch for growing and sharing. This depiction draws in all island schools, government and community alike, under the one education system, perhaps a politically astute portrayal. Such a portrayal blurs the differences that exist between the government and the community schools.

A cluster model seen as 'ihaa' is structured such that the lead school acts as the focal point. This model fits with a common cluster model as that presented by Bray (1987:8) (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. **COMMON CLUSTER MODEL**



Source: Bray (1987:8)

Where the model is structured around a lead school or core school (A) with a number of satellite schools (Schools B-F), the lead school coordinates the work of the cluster, with each satellite school working with the lead school and being supported in terms of resources, guidance and direction. This common cluster model, where neighbouring schools are grouped around a larger nucleus school to form each cluster is found in other countries e.g. Namibia, Cambodia, Sri Lanka (Dittmar et al. 2002; Katayanagi 2002; Bray 1987). As mentioned above, several models of school groupings exist, and in different countries different terms are used to refer to such groupings. Groupings also have variations in size, purpose and scope. For instance, Latin America used the word 'nucleo' to refer to school groupings while, India used the word 'complexes'; Papua New Guinea 'zones' and Philippines 'School Learning Cells.' In Peru, schools are grouped into 30 to 40 schools per nucleo, and in India each complex has up to twenty five schools while in Sri Lanka, each cluster has up to ten or eleven schools. The scope of cluster schemes also varies from country to country depending on their indigenous needs. In Sri Lanka cluster heads hold a great deal of power as they have authority to move staff and resources among schools, whereas in Papua New Guinea cluster leaders have little formal authority. The schools in Papua New Guinea are grouped for the specific purpose of in-service training and for the common use of Education Resource Centres.

In the developed world, for example in the UK, several kinds of clusters have been formed at various times. Such groupings have various educational objectives, such as to reach a short-term objective for a specified project such as the Technical Vocational Education Initiative, or for special education needs purposes (Lunt et al 1988), or to tackle a particular aspect of education, such as achievement (Hopkins et al. 1996).

More recently in the UK, school clusters have been identified as a system for networking to support mechanisms for school improvement, specifically for sharing good practice. As Elkins and Hyden states, 'the idea of schools working together to improve educational

outcomes has become fashionable' (2004:2), and "a prominent theme of 21<sup>st</sup> century education" '(Lieberman, 1999 cited by Elkins and Haydn 2004:2). In the UK, some examples of such initiatives include the Beacon Schools initiative (Moynihan 2004) or the Leading Edge initiative or the Networked Learning Communities initiative. The latter makes the assumption that clustered schools provide opportunities for networking and for sharing best practice (Barber 2003), and according to Gewirtz 'One of the assumptions underpinning current government thinking on education in the UK is that, through the 'cascading of best practice' all schools can be a success.' (1997:1). Glatter (2003) suggests that 'one of the DfES's six draft core principles of school improvement is 'collaborate with other organisations' (DfES 2003, cited by Glatter 2003:16). He further identifies examples of policies and initiatives many said to be of recent origin, that apply school organisational collaboration as a central feature. These include: Specialist schools, Federations, Diversity Pathfinders, Leadership Incentive Grants, the London Challenge and Networked Learning Communities. All of these groupings share the main purpose of working together on educational needs to improve quality of performance. Although not all of the above examples share similar objectives or organisation, their general characteristics can be said to have the following advantages for collaborative working:

- Reduction of isolation;
- Collaborative professional development;
- Joint solutions to shared problems;
- The exchange of practice and expertise;
- The facilitation of knowledge sharing and school improvement;
- Opportunities to incorporate external facilitation.

The above features were found in common among five networks studied by Hopkins (2003:154), which were:

- The Good Hope Programme, Portugal – A nation-wide programme that encouraged autonomy and experimentation in schools through a process of producing research on emerging good practices and dissemination of this information among schools;
- Durham District School Board and the Learning Consortium, Ontario Canada – A school/university partnership set up to improve the quality of education for students by focusing on teacher development;
- German Network of Innovative Schools – To provide information between innovative schools and professional development for teachers working in isolation; and
- Improving the Quality of Education for All, England – A network of schools forming School/University partnership to improve schools' capacity to manage external change for the purpose of school improvement.

In Hopkins' overview of these five networks (2003:156) he draws out a number of key conditions, which he says are not easy to acquire, but he nevertheless sees them as necessary conditions for networks to be effective in achieving their potential for innovation and change. These conditions are: (1) consistency of values and focus, (2) clarity of structure, (3) knowledge creation, utilisation and transfer, (4) rewards related to learning, (5) dispersed leadership and empowerment and (6) adequate resources.

*Consistency of values and focus* – by this term Hopkins means that networks have to have a common aim and purpose, in line with the overarching policy framework which should be well articulated and 'owned' by those involved.

*Clarity of structure* – is to have the network well organised with clear operating procedures and mechanisms of participation by all involved.

*Knowledge creation utilisation and transfer* – is about the need to create and disseminate knowledge regarding improvement and innovative methods, in a robust way based on clear evidence.

*Reward related to learning* – is about the need to make participants feel that their involvement is worthwhile in that it is an investment in people where supporting professional development and encouragement in learning is apart of the reward.

*Dispersed leadership and empowerment* – is to have highly skilful people who collaborates well and work together, providing opportunities for leadership among the many levels within the schools so as to empower each other.

*Adequate resources* – is regarding the necessity to have resources in terms of time, finance, human capital and flexibility in the ways in which these resources are utilised.

As noted above, these six conditions were made in reference to a study that summed up the five networks and their workings within OECD countries i.e. (Germany, England, France, Canada, Portugal). These conditions are necessary for networks (or clusters) to be effective or functional.

Hopkins' definition of networks, not surprisingly, provides parallels to that discussed previously when defining the cluster. While the cluster was defined as a group of schools connected by a lead school 'forming a synergistic alliance, to draw from and grow with', the definition for networks as given by Hopkins is more detailed:

Networks are purposeful social entities characterised by a commitment to quality, rigour, and a focus on outcomes. They are also an effective means of supporting innovation in times of change. In education, networks promote the dissemination of good practice, enhance the professional development of teachers, support capacity building in schools, mediate between centralised and decentralised structures, and assist in the process of re-structuring and re-culturing educational organisations and systems (2003: 154).

The latter definition conjures the association of like minds working collaboratively to engage in similar pursuits, drawing from each other and as a result building capacity to achieve set goals. These two, apparently separate definitions have clear connotations of working together, with and within schools; one in line with the conditions existing in the developing world, as this definition refers to that of the school clusters in Maldives, and the other, network definition, importantly taking into account the sophistication of the context of the OECD countries. These six conditions identified as necessary for networks to function effectively will be compared with in the final chapter to the cluster conditions in the Maldives, as found from the research in the previous two chapters.

### **Purpose of Clusters**

In studying the clustering in developing countries, Bray (1987) organises the purposes of cluster schemes into four themes. These are ‘economic’, ‘pedagogic’, ‘administrative’ and ‘political’. These themes inform the different purposes of clusters. Under the theme economic falls the categories such as sharing of facilities, sharing of staff, bulk ordering of materials. Under the theme pedagogic are the categories such as, improving quality, encouraging teacher development, curriculum development, providing an environment for innovation, encouraging co-operation in school projects and encouraging pupil competition (for example in sports and examinations). Under the theme administrative are, acting as a focal point for instructions from higher levels, as well as the centre for information

collection, making decisions on staff leave arrangements and deployment within clusters for administrative purposes, the cluster head is in a position to inspect and supervise teachers work frequently. Clusters can also be viewed as a formal unit in the administrative hierarchy, promoting efficiency and cost-effectiveness and simplifying the over-arching national administrative system; raising consciousness about causes of under development, and actions that can be taken by individuals and communities to shape the education system. And under the theme political are those purposes such as increased community participation in decision-making and reduced regional and social inequalities.

Some of these purposes are encompassed by the Maldives cluster policy referred to in Chapter 1. For example, sharing of resources in the interest of the many, to improve school management through streamlining administration under the guidance of the lead school and for political gain in order to be seen to have a system in place where all schools government and community schools feature equally well within the education system. Many of these activities are relevant for rural schools in the Maldives, because resources in these schools are limited, teacher-quality is poor and their geographical isolation limits professional development opportunities. Pupils in rural schools could thus gain from the sharing of facilities and staff as offered by the cluster framework, through a wider range of activities organised and facilitated, within the cluster. For the effective functioning of any school system, school clusters provide a model that has the potential for increasing the efficiency in management and development through better resource sharing.

According to Bray (1987) the 'common model' of clusters, such as in Figure 2 (on Page 36), is popular within schools in difficult circumstances, such as in developing countries, generally and in rural areas or inner cities in developed countries. One reason for this is that in less affluent conditions, when schools are less well resourced, there may be economic reasons for grouping and sharing resources and expertise. Bray's (1987) suggestion that cluster groupings are found in challenging circumstances is based on an assumption that a

school on its own can achieve only so much and a group of schools collaborating can be a better option. Thus cluster groupings usually involve some form of collaboration, sharing of resources or conducting INSET together and working together on a specified policy or initiatives. The groupings, add value to the individual schools by increasing the resource pool available and by building greater collaboration between schools (Department of Education Tasmania 2005).

Bray (1987) suggests that the introduction of school clusters in the third world is due to the growing pressures on many of their governments to seek innovative ways of achieving educational goals within a framework of financial austerity. He suggests that education systems in South Asia, including Sri Lanka, India, Philippines, Thailand and Peru have used the clustering of schools as a way to help provide a more equitable distribution of educational services by sharing scarce resources in order to generally upgrade educational quality. According to Bray (1987) and Haddad (2002) some of these examples of cluster reforms for example, those in Thailand, Peru and Cambodia, have been particularly worthwhile since they act as vehicles for decentralisation of decision making, budgets, planning and monitoring. An important observation made by Dittmar et al. (2002) in their study for the Research and Information Services suggests, in the case of Namibia, that clusters play a major role in 'enhancing the quality of education in a great majority of Namibian schools'.

Namibia as an example will be examined here because its education system bears certain parallels to that of the Maldives. The population of Namibia is small in comparison to most African states and is distributed in a vast landmass where the population is spread out with a high percent living in the capital. In Namibia, school clustering has been a key feature in the current organisation of its Education System (Dittmar et al. 2002, KENSIP Aga Khan Foundation 2004a & b). I will look into this cluster system in some detail and a further two examples of school clusters in Cambodia and Ethiopia will also be given below.

The following section draws from the works of Dittmar et al.'s (2002) and KENSIP Aga Khan Foundation (2004a & b). These studies capture key aspects of school clusters; the functions and features, benefits and drawbacks of the Namibia cluster experience. These studies suggest that in Namibia, school clusters have been used at various times to group selected schools together in order to meet the specific short-term needs of those schools. Some examples of such clusters included: those created to facilitate the training of lower primary teachers; those formed to upgrade the skills of Life Science teachers and those introduced in one entire region, the Rundu Region in 1996, intended to include all schools together in a comprehensive cluster system that grouped schools into one framework. Dittmar et al. (2002) suggests that the benefits that arose from the Rundu clusters led to the subsequent development of similar clusters in all other regions of the country. Thus the lessons learnt from the Rundu region – a pilot case - helped in building up a comprehensive network of school clusters across Namibia.

Having reviewed the Namibian cluster systems and other examples a comparison is drawn between the Maldives and Namibia's cluster policies. Later in Chapter 7, similarities and differences are identified in order to draw lessons from the case of Namibia, in formulating ways forward in organising the education system of the Maldives.

### **Examples of School Cluster Systems**

#### *a) - Namibia*

The school cluster system in Namibia has been developed within a general framework of decentralisation. As a result, this includes an organisational structure with a hierarchy of representatives placed at cluster, district, provincial and national levels who have specific responsibilities to work in monitoring and facilitating the functioning of this system.

It was suggested by KENSIP Aga Khan Foundation (2004a), that Nationwide school clustering was preceded by a successful five years pilot experience of the cluster system in the Rundu region. Lessons gained from the pilot initiative have informed the clustering process and they were put in to practice in other regions, in keeping with the demand made by schools and circuit officers eager to work in clusters. Since 1999, clusters were progressively introduced nationwide. By 2003 all schools (1700 in all) were grouped into about 260 clusters, each school belonging first to a cluster and then to a circuit. An inspection circuit usually made up of five to six clusters giving each inspector a manageable number of units to work with.

Based on geographical proximity, the Namibia clusters provide for students with a similar range of needs. Often primary schools are grouped together with leading secondary schools. A school that is better resourced and within accessible distance by other schools acts as the lead school, similar to that of the Maldives. However, unlike that in the Maldives, those in Namibia, have a pool of resources over and above the school resource allocation, which is set aside and spent on programmes across the cluster.

The lead school has extra rooms that function as workstations, with one of them being used as a cluster library. From the cluster library a book box was organised that then went around the cluster schools. Often, a teacher resource unit was set up within the lead schools where teacher in-service and materials were produced. Here, teachers met to discuss and interpret the syllabi, draw up common schemes of work, share good teaching practices and further enhance the culture of sharing. School principals and teachers would meet here to learn from each other, discuss issues and find common solutions.

The Namibian cluster schools worked with a number of select committees with representatives from across the schools. Such committees helped the clusters to improve their management, because they were decentralised. This allowed room for decision-making

within the platform of committees to share and resolve problems. Some examples of these committees were:

- a) Cluster School Committee – to make decisions, allocate resources, plan and implement cluster-wide activities. This was made up of a body of leaders from each school. One of the roles of this body was to develop a combined Learning Plan that detailed the identified areas of focus for the year; this body was then accountable for achieving these goals.
- b) Cluster library committee – to design resources that were shared between schools.
- c) Teacher Supervision Committee – to provide technical support to teachers.
- d) Assessment Committee – with responsibilities for maintaining teaching learning standards and for writing standardised test materials.
- e) Life Skills committee – to develop life skills programmes and saw to the teaching of this programme in the cluster.
- f) Counselling committee – to handle behaviour problems, emotional and social issues.
- g) Sports committee – to promote sports events and organise sporting competitions.
- h) Parent Associations – to develop cluster based associations that worked on raising awareness in education and promoting parental involvement in education.

The effectiveness of these committees was dependant on the commitment of many parties. The inclusion of these bodies in decision-making and discussion must have been complex, however, as it was noted to have helped strengthen the cluster model and, as a result, the services within the education service was seen to have improved (Dittmar et al. (2002).

Likewise the cluster system had been seen by Dittmar et al. (2002) to benefit in managing the teaching learning programmes. This was achieved within schools through a number of

functions each complementing the other. These were: a) participatory decision-making, b) resolving problems locally, c) through the cluster centre principals giving support and guidance to satellite school teachers, d) who in turn managed themselves in similar ways to that of the lead school, hence, bringing in a sense of uniformity and bridging disparities.

Furthermore, school clusters were said to: a) improve efficiency in channelling communication through the lead school, b) provide a framework from which training was organised, c) assist in appointment and transfer of teachers, d) enhance coordination of statistics, e) to make stationary and books orders in bulk and deliver them in a way that saved on funds, time and transport costs (ibid).

The cluster framework was also said by Dittmar et al. (2002) to have allowed for better planning as a unit of schools rather than each of the schools individually. It had also been reported to provide a basis to draw a larger community into school. As a result there had been better community involvement. Parents took an active role in schoolwork by involving themselves in extra curricular programmes and in the varied opportunities on offer for parental participation. These aspects was said to have contributed to the schools significantly.

Among some of the drawbacks identified in the Namibia cluster schools initiative were that teachers found difficulty in changing old ways of working, such as valuing group planning, or putting into practice new approaches to teaching. When the cluster initiative was introduced, it was reported that there was some confusion initially among those introducing the changes. This was exacerbated due to some role overlap that lead to some issue between key people. However, these initial setbacks were reported to have eased over time Dittmar et al. (2002).

To summarise the main characteristics of the Namibia cluster system: the clusters were located within a framework in an education system which ran along decentralised lines with

participatory decision making at all levels. Here a small number of schools came together to pursue a common set of goals. There was flexibility in sharing resources and voluntary teams managed the cluster mechanism. Capacity development was highly regarded. Team spirit was created among the cluster teams and cluster committees and this then contributed to maximizing involvement of stakeholders. Through the high levels of stakeholder involvement there was positive input on minimizing truancy and drop out rates. Schools were managed more as networks rather than individual empires. The objectives of addressing ineffective management and poor leadership were said, (ibid), to be addressed under the cluster arrangement.

Bray's (1987) proposed features - the needs for microplanning, decentralisation, community participation in decision making and sharing resources in order to improve educational quality, seemed to be a part of the practice in the case of the cluster policy of Namibia.

*b). Cambodia*

In Cambodia, schools were clustered from July 1997 to provide in-service training for the country's primary school teachers in a classroom methodology known as child-centred learning, under a nationwide initiative called Cambodian Assistance to Primary Education. This initiative was supported by USAID. Schools were clustered, cluster centres identified, cluster resource centres set up and training programmes conducted.

According to KENSIP Aga Khan (2004a), the Cambodia cluster experience showed that interventions which are well designed and well implemented, can be sustained once the local school communities had learnt the value of clustering supported by in-service training. Furthermore, as there was collective effort in improving quality and building capacity, the cluster committees continued work within the cluster framework, showed that even after the initiative's initial funding had ended working within the cluster model can be kept ongoing.

### *c). Ethiopia*

In Ethiopia, the school cluster system (KENSIP Aga Khan 2004a) was used to address the issues of quality of education, as there was a general lack of basic learning resources and a shortage of qualified teachers. In addition, the issue of girls' education was also addressed, as enrolment figures showed a large percentage of girls were not in primary schools. In order to address the above three issues the Ministry of Education in Ethiopia, with the support of UNICEF, developed a programme that focused on capacity building. This project was about clustering schools. Teachers worked in teams across schools, and engaged in the activities of teaching, learning, planning and management, working on improving performance through engaging in in-service and other on-the-job training possibilities provided by this new project.

According to KENSIP Aga Khan (2004a) this cluster initiative produced positive outcomes, such as a 14 percent percentage increase in the enrolment of girls to boys ratio between 1997 – 2000 and approximately 2,000 teachers were trained during this time to teach using child-centred and participatory learning approaches. Through these 2000 trained teachers another 12,000 teachers were trained.

### **Main Characteristics of School Clusters**

The above examples of Namibia, Cambodia and Ethiopia show that school cluster systems have been used to provide for and achieve credible progress in work on improving the quality of schooling in these countries. This work had been largely focused on building teacher capacity, raising awareness among wider stakeholders. At regional, provincial and state levels, and that of parents and community leaders regarding the working of the cluster system and how all members involved in the various layers can support each other. There is a two-way monitoring that enables teachers to learn from each other and keep abreast of what is on going in schools across the cluster. In this way, standards are maintained and

isolation reduced.

Some of the key characteristics of the successes of the three cluster systems are: -

- Schools across a cluster were sufficiently flexible and engaged in working towards a common set of goals.
- The school clusters were small, ranging from 5-7 schools with those in geographical proximity networking together.
- There was external funding to set up and run each of the cluster initiatives.
- Teachers and head teachers were engaged in working among teams and voluntary committees across the cluster, meeting regularly and dealing with issues through sharing and resolving issues through open discussion. There was transparency among members of the cluster committees or teams.
- These clusters paid particular attention to capacity building. Human and material resources were put together in such a way that they could optimise their utilization. For example, subject specialists could work with other teachers helping to improve not only the delivery but also planning the syllabus, preparing teaching materials, as well as setting examination papers which were then shared across the cluster.
- Drawing resources together in a cluster system provided a cost-effective way of maximizing benefits from minimal resources, and this was a clear feature in all three examples above.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, these characteristics share some common elements when looking at the features found among examples of collaborative interventions in OECD countries (Hopkins 2003). The one distinction is in that the OECD examples identified a set of features in which the terms of reference were similar to those mentioned earlier but were

expressed at a level of sophistication that can only come from examples from developed countries where there has been years of research and supporting literature. A possible reason for this is that these were highly developed systems with an extensive literature and research capacity, large in comparison to that of the examples derived from developing countries.

In the countries of the Anglophone West, including the UK, there is a major drive towards raising attainment and improving learning on all fronts. A number of different initiatives have thus been funded towards achieving these goals, as the examples given in the OECD study confirm (Hopkins 2003). School Improvement and School Effectiveness knowledge and literature is used widely in these countries to support educational policy-making. The term 'School Improvement' has specific connotations in this context. Hopkins' specific definition suggests that 'school improvement is a distinct approach to educational change that aims to enhance student outcomes as well as strengthening the school's capacity for managing change' (2001:13).

In the Maldives, references to improving schools are made in a general sense of the word rather than in terms of School Improvement as defined by Hopkins. As noted in Chapter 1, the word 'improving' is used many times in the objectives of the cluster policy of the Maldives, among them is improving pupil achievement, school management and supervisory mechanism. Therefore, school improvement and improving schools are used interchangeably here when referring to the context of the Maldives.

This chapter examined school clusters, its purposes and practices using examples to support the argument that school clusters provide a model that can, if followed consistently, organise an education system in such a way that it can help schools build capacity, contribute to raising overall standards in a cost effective way, and hence redress the disparities between schools.

The literature shows that, clustering has the potential to achieve school improvement goals by fostering collaboration, providing the potential of bringing together teachers and opportunities to share scarce resources and learning from sharing best practice. Also, those concerned with developing education systems need to give a lot more attention to the implication of schools working together. The next chapter will discuss the methodological approaches I have adopted in the conduct of the research to explore the potential benefits of clustering in the Maldives.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **METHODOLOGY AND METHODS**

#### **Introduction**

The previous two chapters provided the context and background to the ‘cluster schools policy’ of the Maldives and reviewed the literature on school clusters. This chapter presents the methodology and methods used in conducting this research study. Taylor and Bogdan (1984:1) refer to ‘methodology’ as the processes, principles, and procedures by which researchers investigate and seek answers to pre-defined research problems. It is about how the researcher approaches problems and seeks answers.

As previously stated, this study aims to investigate stakeholder views on the cluster schools policy of the Maldives to gain insights to the rationale for introduction, basis for development, effectiveness of implementation and impact of the cluster policy on school achievement and management in the context of the Maldives.

#### **Research Strategy**

I am aware that individual values, philosophical assumptions, theoretical backing and research methods should be related to each other and to the aims of the research (Blaikie 1993; Robson 2002). Methodology has as its basis, notions of social reality, which can be considered either broadly positivist or interpretive. Positivism makes the assumptions that social reality exists independently of the observer and that this reality is ordered and can be observed and explained for its uniformities. The interpretive perspective is based on the assumptions that social reality is produced by social actors and that in any social situation researchers have to systematically collate interpretations from the perspectives of those involved in order to provide understanding of events and phenomenon (Blaikie 1993;

Robson 2002;). In this respect what needs to be studied provides the basis for the design of research – the systematic examination of the phenomenon, data collection and detailed reporting of results. The phenomenon under study here is the cluster policy of the Maldives and in order to establish what had been the practice in the clusters, I had to visit clusters of schools and engage with key stakeholders through dialogue in order to gain insights into what was involved. There was very little written material about the policy. Thus, the inquiry draws on an interpretive perspective and adopts case study as its research strategy.

The rationale for using case study approach as a research strategy (Yin 1994) is that it provides the opportunity to illustrate the context such that attention can be drawn to the subtlety and complexity of the phenomena and is compatible with an emerging research design and searching for evidence in the context. Case study, as defined by Robson (2002), is a ‘strategy for doing research which involves contemporary phenomena within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence’ (2002:146). As noted by Cohen et al. (2000), ‘contexts are unique and dynamic, hence case studies investigate and report on the complex dynamic and unfolding interactions of event, human relationships and other factors in a unique instance’ (2000:181). These suggestions fit with the research activities planned and carried out for this study. The case study strategy is more appropriate than other available alternative strategies such as experiments and surveys. The experiment as noted by Gillham (2000:6) is ill-suited to the complexity, embedded character, and specificity of real-life phenomena. While the survey as noted by Yin (1994) is limited as a strategy in dealing with phenomena within this context. The strength of the case study method is that there can be an inclusion of many cases in order to develop a broader understanding of the same phenomena in this case the cluster policy, and practices in a number of clusters can be explored. Given the research issues to be addressed and the aims of the study, case studies remain the best strategy.

Additionally, the case study was chosen as a strategy for my own lack of familiarity with

other island schools and as it was essential for me to go and visit schools in-situ to get a 'rich picture' of clusters and their practice in this case.

## **Research Design**

Given the aims of this study, the research design is qualitative and the principal approach is case study. Preliminary focussing was achieved through perusal of available documentation and conversations with relevant people, and appropriate case study clusters were visited to cover clusters in atolls in the three main geographical regions of the Maldives i.e. South, Central and North.

Four case study visits were made to eleven clusters. Case study 1 was a visit to *Huvadhu Atoll* in the south (maps included in Chapter 5), where clusters 32, 33, 34 and 35 were visited. Case study 2 was in *Ari Atoll* in the central zone (to clusters 19 and 20). Case study 3 was in *Thiladhunmathi* in the north (to clusters 2 and 3) and Case study 4 was in *Hadhunmathi* in the South (to cluster 28, 29 and 30).

Each case study provided insights into conditions and practices in schools within the atoll. These visits provided instances of the varying dynamics within contexts that were represented and illustrated through descriptive narrative accounts relayed by the people working in these real situations. These four visits made up the four 'case studies'.

A purposive sample of MoE policy makers and a representative sample of cluster heads, one from each atoll, were interviewed to gain perceptions from as many stakeholders from across the country. Further, relevant documents were also perused. These sets of data provided a range of information from a variety of perspectives. This afforded the opportunity to corroborate findings and thus enhance the validity of the data through methodological triangulation (Denscombe, 2003). Methodological triangulation is particularly useful and is a 'process whereby a variety of data sources, different perspectives and methods are pitted

against one another in order to enrich and cross-check data and its interpretations' (Denzin, 1978:291).

### **Sample for Interviews**

The study population consisted of 198 schools in 38 clusters (MoE 1999a). Each cluster usually had six to eleven schools. Fifty schools in 14 clusters were visited as part of the research (including three clusters in one atoll which made up the pilot study). The cluster heads of all 38 clusters were key to this research. Due to constraints in time and budget, a sample was selected from among the 38 cluster heads representing each atoll (20 atolls). This sample was selected from the defined population using a technique that ensured a 'representative sample' (Burns 2000). The sampling frame of choosing the first cluster listed under each Atoll was adopted. This gave a total of 20 and of them 18 cluster heads were interviewed. The two atolls not included were *Addu Atoll* and *Fuva Mulah* where all community schools had graduated or 'moved out' of the cluster system by this time in 2004 and functioned under a headmaster and as government schools.

For interviews with policy makers, nine representatives of the MoE, some past and some present were approached and seven interviewed. With two being out of the country and no longer at MoE, I was unable to get interviews with them. Two out of the seven were identified through purposive sampling where individuals were selected for their specific role held previously in the MoE and relevance to the study. These two contacts were arranged through "snowballing" (from recommendation), as they had moved out of their previous MoE posts as well.

### **Gaining Access and Entry**

The 'gatekeeper' for this research was the MoE. With their approval, access and entry was not an issue. As head teacher of the largest government school in the country, I have had the

opportunity to work with many MoE officials as colleagues for a long time. Having personally approached and spoken to the Minister of Education and the Director of Schools, they affirmed that this was an area they wanted someone to look into and gave me their support which proved useful. I was given interview access to Ministry officials and access to confidential documents. I was also supported in making contact with island chiefs, cluster heads and lead teachers of the island schools I visited.

Early on in the research two opportunities that came my way helped launch my fieldwork and keep momentum. Firstly as part of an MoE team, I went on a trip in February of 2004 to visit six schools in two atolls. Shortly after, I was invited to speak at a conference for school heads. Both opportunities brought me face-to-face with the people I needed to meet. Having made initial contacts at this conference I then followed them up for interviews. I decided to visit an atoll that had three clusters, to pilot the study. This atoll was chosen because the head of the atoll education center was a close personal friend and through her, it was easy to arrange visits to schools in all three clusters in the atoll.

### **Pilot Study**

Although I had been in the teaching profession for over twenty years my past experience had been in one school based on the island where I was born and grew up. This school is one of the two oldest and most reputable schools in the country. Here I had progressively climbed the professional ladder to become Principal. Experience of schools and schooling in islands outside the capital was relatively new to me, as was the cluster policy. The head of the atoll education centre helped me to work out practical arrangements for the cluster visits when moving within islands and to hone my skills as a researcher so as to maximize my time and expertise for research in the field. The pilot study took six days and involved visiting ten islands in three clusters in the period 20<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> Feb 2004.

The pilot experience helped to crystallise crucial aspects of the research such as the number of schools that I could cover in one day, the time needed to engage with the key people I wanted to talk to and the time needed to be in any one school. It also raised my awareness of what to expect in terms of island hospitality and local customs, developed my skills in managing conversations for research purposes and most of all, gave me a firm grounding in order to make the most out of my visits. The pilot was an eye opener in many ways. This trip afforded me insights and experience within a comfortable environment that built my confidence in preparation for the main research work. It helped lay the foundations regarding the differences between the two systems that existed between Male' schools and the rural island schools, and between the atoll capital government schools and the rural community schools. Further, it brought home subtle gender differences that existed in the culture between rural and urban. For instance, I found that it was not a norm for a woman to travel on her own and accordingly I ensured that someone travelled with me during my later visits.

Each morning my team of three would set off in a speed boat around 7.30 a.m. and visit islands where schools had been informed of my visit. Two or three islands would be visited before returning in the evening to the base island. The islands within a cluster were reached, depending on the speed of the boat, in about 30 to 45 minutes. Two schools were visited in one day except of one instance. Where three schools were visited. On this occasion two schools were in two islands within the same harbour, right next to each other. Visiting a school meant visiting an island as each school was on a separate island.

The amount of time spent in schools ranged from three to five hours. This worked out to be sufficient to hold a conversation with the head, the island chief and some teachers, to look around the school, and to watch teachers and pupils in action in classrooms.

With the school in session throughout the day schools ran on two sessions, first session starting at 6.50 a.m. and the second sessions ending at 6.30 p.m. access to the school and the

head teacher was not an issue. This also was the case with the island chiefs as they made themselves available and gave their time to be with me during my visits. On arrival at the school I would formally introduce myself and inform the welcoming group of the purpose of my visit. I then assured them that any information they gave me would be confidential and that I looked forward to learn from their experiences of the cluster policy. I reassured them that there was no need for prior preparations and that they should give me as frank an account of what they thought was happening with regards to the policy in the school. In the case of the smaller community schools this meeting would be held under a tree in the open area of the school. In the larger government schools it was held in a vacant classroom. I would converse with the island chief and the head teacher on the themes which I had. Often the meeting would go on for an hour or two. Once I have satisfactorily covered my areas and probed for further clarity it would be time to move on. This was the common procedure adopted on these visits and it was one that was developed and enhanced through experience. Once this protocol was set, I found it to be an efficient way of getting the most out of each visit. In order to take in most of what was said I made copious notes during the conversations and wrote up a field report at the end of each visit.

### **Schedule for data collection**

It took a period of four months starting from the pilot study in February 2004 till the end of May 2004 to complete the visits to the clusters and to hold all interviews. The period between February and May was chosen as schools were in session during this time. The weather also was taken into account – this is an important factor in a country of islands, and it was crucial to avoid the rough seas which set in with the monsoon rains starting about late May and continuing through June into July.

### **Data Collection**

The main research tool was interviews or ‘conversations with a purpose’ (Robson 2002:228),

which drew perceptions of stakeholders, complemented by observations and documentation.

### *1. Interviews*

Semi-structured interviews were used. The questions were developed taking into consideration Mason's (2002) recommendations of using a number of thematic areas that allow for greater freedom of interpretation and expression. The questions posed were based on themes informing the research questions (see Appendix 3). The benefits of using this method were that I had flexibility to modify, probe and give explanations as and when necessary depending on how the interview proceeded and to gain the maximum out of the interview (Robson 2002).

Every effort was taken to make the questions clear so that there was no ambiguity in the meanings. Most of the time the conversations were conducted in Dhivehi (the Maldivian language) as respondents preferred to converse in their mother tongue (I translated the interview questions to Dhivehi). Throughout the research my field notes were written in English and when the conversations were in Dhivehi, translations were made.

Interviews were held with the head of cluster in the lead school, as well as with lead teachers and the island chiefs in the satellites. This was to find out how they felt about the cluster policy. It was also to ask about the lead teachers' reflections on the effects of clustering on their school and their perceptions on the role of the cluster head and how effective the head was in implementing the policy.

Interviews were face-to-face with the exception of eight telephone interviews with heads of clusters who could not be reached in any other way during the time. I chose to hold interviews rather than use questionnaires in order to allow respondents to express in detail what they had to say. Being an aural society the spoken word is the preferred mode of enquiry and rather than leave the respondents with a list of questions to tackle on their own,

the quality of responses and the 100% rate of response were factors considered. According to Drever, the strength of the interview is 'its capacity to seek explanations by exploring individual view points' (2003:5). Being a Maldivian I was accustomed to cultural norms and values, and believed interviewees would prefer verbal exchanges. Also the postal service being rather unreliable, the questionnaire would not have been effective in meeting the schedule set aside for collecting data.

Certain procedures were also followed to ensure that the interview was a success. An introductory contact was made with all interviewees in advance; they were requested to participate and asked if they would give time for the interviews. The time and place were arranged to suit the interviewee. In this introductory contact I explained what I was investigating and tried to establish elements of trust and openness. I worked to make them feel comfortable in the way I conducted myself in the interview, in the manner I dressed, and how I spoke. I did this in order to confirm my research credentials and because I wanted to make participants feel at ease.

Research is still rare in the country and it is not a common phenomenon for the average Maldivian to be questioned and listened to and his every word recorded. I sensed that some found the use of the tape recorder intrusive. Hence, during the case study visits not all of the interviews were recorded on tape but these were recorded in my note taking and complemented by my field notes. Participants' were told that anything they did not wish to be recorded would not be quoted. I note that the use of the words conversation and interviews is used in the thesis interchangeably although there is a variation of some having been recorded and transcribed, and some based on note taking. And that this added elements of query as to the consistency in the mode of record keeping. It is acknowledged that people can respond differently depending on what they thought was expected. There was an incident which I noticed during a tape recorded interview, where at the end of the interview when the tape was switched off, what was said was different to the opinion expressed moments earlier.

This incident made me aware that it was not easy to really gain insight into the realities of another's thoughts when the same person could have different opinions in a matter of seconds depending on what he thought was expected of his role and what he thought as his opinion an individual when removed from his role.

The interviews with policy makers and heads of clusters (apart from the case study clusters) were held at my home over cups of tea and refreshments. The two Ministers were interviewed at their offices. The respondents chose to come to my home and times were arranged so that there was no overlap. Interviews were conducted individually. Each interview took between an hour to two. I took notes during the interview which was also taped and soon after I made partial transcriptions of the tape attending to the language translations where required.

## *2. Observations*

During the case study visits in the course of my interactions during the case study visits with the respondents cluster heads, lead teachers of satellites and the island officials, I also made observations of (and field notes on) the conditions of the schools. I also tried to understand the relationships between key respondents when in contact with each other. I noted their behaviour and, at times, listened in to their conversations. Interestingly, such conversations helped to inform me of interconnected issues that they, as leaders of the school and island, had to deal with. On occasion I would ask for further clarity and these exchanges made me realise the reasons for some of the underlying tensions between these leaders i.e. the island chief, the cluster head and the satellite school lead teacher. These observations were written up as part of the field notes at the earliest opportunity.

### *3. Documentary Sources*

Getting details of the target respondents such as addresses, telephone numbers etc was one of the first activities carried out through several visits to the MoE. Documents compiled included: a map that showed the configurations of the clusters, where the lead school was in respect of the other schools, the lists of names of the islands and the schools' names, the names of cluster heads, figures in terms of pupil numbers, pupil teachers ratio and public examination results where applicable. There was just one document produced to introduce the cluster schools policy; this was the cluster schools handbook (MoE 1999a). Search for other official documents, be it circulars or guidelines produced in order to facilitate the overall development and implementation of this policy, was not fruitful. As there was a lack of clarity as to whether there was any more documentation prepared with reference to the cluster policy. This lack of documentation is common to the way the system works in the Maldives and is not particular to this policy. That there was a handbook prepared by the MoE regarding this policy was something quite substantial given Maldivian written norms (as will be referred to later in Chapters 4 and 5). Other information based on the Maldives and its education system were also collected and used to substantiate points made in the study.

Each of the school's log book held records of meeting held with the cluster heads. This was the only formal record of visits made. What could have been added but was missing, was the nature of the programme of the visitor - be it for supervisory purposes or for providing professional development. From the visits made, two written documents that reported on cluster training programmes by the Outreach Primary Advisors (VSO trainers working on a in-service teachers training project) were located. Other basic data such as the number of pupils and teachers allocated and O'Level results of the secondary schools was also collected from the MoE. Cluster heads had very little written documentation regarding the collaborative workings on clusters. This dearth of relevant material disadvantaged the

researcher to some extent. However, the vividness of the accounts relayed by the respondents made up for some of these failings.

## **Data Analysis**

Substantial amounts of data were collected in the research through the processes described above. The analysis of these data involved a number of inter-related iterative processes. Firstly, the data had to be managed and organised. The recorded interview transcripts, the field notes and the field reports were ordered in files according to a colour scheme and compiled for easy access. A profile of each journey was written out as a case report. Differences between the settings were identified comparing and contrasting cluster activities as reported during the visits. Four case study vignettes were then written to form a chapter drawing out significant aspects within the varying clusters.

The next stage of analysis centred on sorting data to fit a framework. The framework organises the research analysis into a time frame of antecedents, processes and outcomes. This framework was based on the work of Huberman and Miles (1984), adapted and adopted by Lunt et al.. (1988) in their work on cluster collaboration for special needs (a study conducted in England). The framework comprised the conceptual framework for the inquiry. As the interview questions were developed following this time line it was relatively easy to arrange the data for analysis following this framework. The data were then sorted on computer using Microsoft Word files under the three headings: antecedents, processes and outcomes, and then printed out. The sorting of data took place while reading and re-reading the print outs, having used a colour scheme to ensure that all new points and differences in opinion among the different stakeholders were constantly made note of and compared. The use of prepared computer software for analysing qualitative data to assist with the analysis process was considered, but it was felt that using Microsoft Word features and manually

organising the data was manageable for the size of the sample and more appropriate for the nature of the responses.

In order to test the integrity of the recurring themes and possible researcher bias, two volunteers were provided with a copy of the analysis and asked to compare with two transcripts and comment on whether there were any surprises or themes not incorporated. Their opinions, suggestions and criticisms proved useful. The outcome of this process was that the overall themes identified were consistent with what were in the transcripts indicating that the analysis process appeared to be robust.

Then the write up of the case studies and data analysis went through drafts improving in structure and clarity with the support of comments from supervisors and a critical friend. Indeed, the whole research process has been a continuous process of perceptive, inductive learning curve. This has resulted in a thorough understanding of the phenomenon under study. Re-working on the report drafts and simultaneously reading more broadly in the relevant areas allowed a better understanding about the research itself.

Collectively these stages enabled an intense engagement with the research questions leading to the interpretation of the findings.

### **Ethical issues**

Ethics in educational research are about how relationships are formed with individuals who form the sample participants in the research and about how interaction and information are organised and managed. According to Smith (1990), 'at a commonsense level, caring, fairness, openness, and truth seem to be the important values under guiding the relationships and the activity of inquiry' (Smith 1990:260). The importance given to the following strict ethical guidelines were appreciated and thus these traits were carefully adhered to in carrying

out this study. The British Education Research Association's research guidelines were the guidelines followed (BERA 2002).

Through out the research process, I was aware of the fact that I was recognised as an insider within the system although I was a researcher on this occasion in an area relatively new to me. There was a need to be mindful of how respondents may perceive my role as a researcher and student vis-à-vis my professional capacity as head of a government school and as a senior civil servant under the MoE. All along I made it clear that this was a study towards a doctoral degree and assured them that their responses would in no way be quoted and used for any other purpose but for the study. I informed my case study respondents that my trips were self-financed and that I was not in any way a representative working as a government authority on schools. The purpose and aims of the research were made clear at the outset. I also explained how I must adhere to research ethics (as stipulated in the research guidelines of the British Education Research Association 2002). I made it clear that all information would be considered in confidence and that it would be reported for the purposes of my EdD only.

This fact of me being who I was undoubtedly would have influenced how some respondents responded to me. Some of the cluster heads as well as MoE representatives commented that they expect people like myself with a good quality education to come to work at the Ministry level so that things can be made better. This kind of comment suggested that it was an advantage to be an insider. The respondents seemed to be reporting in all sincerity what they really had experienced. This may be because they believed that I would be in a position to make positive changes in time to come.

I was also aware that some of those interviewed said that the conditions were better than what actually was the case. The conditions were glossed over. This I know is a cultural phenomenon, it could be due to the smallness, isolation and political pressures we face as

Maldivians, we are conditioned to say that things are 'all right' to the visitor when in fact they may not be. Some accounts would be motivated too, because the person had wanted me to know a certain aspect, perhaps, hoping that I would be in a position to resolve that difficulty for that person. There could also have been those who, perhaps, wanted to give me the 'right answers' and thus said what they thought I wanted to hear.

As I became experienced as a researcher I was able to identify better with the realities and techniques to reduce bias. So as to reduce bias and possibly safeguard against errors a number of questions were asked and great care was taken with the interview schedules. In order to establish the trustworthiness of what was said I interviewed more than one person per school and per island and that allowed for different views about the same context helping to clarify the situation. This also helped to enhance the validity of the data. In addition, the discussion of the initial report with two respondents helped to reaffirm the reliability of the findings.

Every attempt was made to ensure that the study stood up to the criteria used to judge qualitative research which according to Johnson are 'transferability, credibility, dependability and confirmability' (1994:147). I hope that I have adequately described the processes and addressed the various concerns that readers need to take into account in assessing the quality of work present in this study.

### **Conclusion: My personal understanding of the research processes**

The EdD programme's modular basis and course work have enabled me to hone my research skills. During the course of completing the various assignments I have come to understand that the various research strategies, instruments and the processes of research presented their own respective methodological and ethical problems. The integrity of the research will be affected by not being aware of or not adhering to set guidelines can seriously affect the reliability and quality of the data collected. Hence as I progressively developed my thinking

through the stages of my course work I continued to develop my understanding as researcher and worked to overcome these problems in my research. For example, the use of multiple sources of information at the data collection stage (case-study, interviews, observations and documentary studies) helped to reinforce each other providing methodological triangulation where the weaknesses in any single method were compensated for by the counterbalancing strength of the other. The use of a tried and tested conceptual framework provided basis for this inquiry. The various steps taken to address the ethics in this study have been thought through. My critical attitude and reflexivity towards observing these processes and continued reading help increase the credibility of this study.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CASE STUDIES**

#### **Introduction**

This phase of the study comprised of visits made to eleven clusters that made up four case studies. Aspects of the findings from each of the case studies will be scrutinized in this chapter while delineating the case studies. This is to provide a picture of the nature of the settings, capture a sense of the views and attitudes of respondents and illuminate some of the influences within different atolls and cluster contexts. The case studies do not attempt to describe and analyse everything about the clusters but report aspects of them which support and exemplify the interpretations made in Chapter 6.

#### **Case Study 1. Visit to Huvadhu Atoll**

Huvadhu atoll is the largest atoll in the country (see the map overleaf). It is located in the South of the archipelago and is divided into two administrative sections namely Huvadhu atoll South and Huvadhu atoll North. This case study covered all six schools in cluster 34, the lead schools and two other schools in the clusters 32, 33 and other two schools which belonged to cluster 35 (Table 1).

Island hospitality was at its best. In anticipation of my arrival the island chief, the cluster head and one or two teachers had been waiting at the jetty to receive and welcome me. We would then set out walking, either to the school, or the island office or atoll office where the visitor's accommodation wing of the office was made available to me.

Fig. 3

Map of Huvadhu Atoll Case Study 1



Table 1.

**Case Study 1: Schools Visited**

<b>Atoll</b>	<b>Cluster</b>	<b>Island</b>	<b>School</b>
Huvadhu (North)	34	Thinadhoo	Atoll Education Centre
		Fioree	Fioree School
		Hoadedhoo	Hoadedhoo Maktab
		Nadalla	Nadalla Makthab
		Rathafandhoo	Rathafandhoo School
		Madeveli	Madaveli School
	35	Gadhoo	Atoll Scholl
		Vadhoo	Jamaaldheen Madrasa
		Fares	Farehu School
Huvadhu (South)	33	Villingili	Atoll Education Centre
		Nilandhoo	Nilandhoo Makthab
		Gemanafushi	Gemanafushi Makthab
	32	Kolamaafushi	Atoll School
		Dhevadhoo	Madhrasathul Sulthan Mohamed

The Atoll Education Centres (AEC) or cluster lead schools are government schools (see Chapter 2). These schools cover all ages and the student population often exceeds 1,000. They were in good condition with rows of whitewashed well-kept open plan classrooms with furniture arranged neatly in rows. Each classroom was a homeroom. A total of 32-34 pupils made up a class. As the school ran on two sessions each classroom would be the homeroom for two classes (one class per session), where teachers changed depending on the subject taught at any given period. There were offices for the head and administrative staff, a small library, computer laboratory, and toilet facilities for staff and students. They had ample staff including clerical and cleaning staff. The buildings were constructed in an 'L' shape, with an open quadrangle used for assembly. This space was also used as the playground and its layout seemed to prevent opportunities for normal playground behaviour (free playing of games, running around screaming and shouting). The area was always supervised with members of staff and other users using the space as walkways to and from class to class. It was not surprising to discover that play was restricted to weekends, and holidays and then in the form of organised games such as football and volleyball.

My visit to the lead schools started with meeting the secondary level teachers, to whom I did a presentation on a topic agreed in advance by the head (which often was on student motivation or assessment and evaluation). This gave me the opportunity to introduce myself and explain the reason for my visit. The teaching staff of secondary grade classes was mostly from India and Sri Lanka. Those teaching Dhivehi and Islam were locals. My sessions were conducted in both languages (English and Dhivehi), where appropriate, for the benefit of all the teachers present. The following morning I joined the morning assembly and addressed the students. At a convenient time during the school visit I held interviews with the cluster head or the lead teacher and the island chief, before moving on to the next island.

None of the heads of the four clusters in this atoll were locals. It would seem that it was an MoE policy to employ as head of school a person not from the same island. The reasons for this practice were never fully explained. A MoE representative simply said that this was how things were done. Two of the four heads were Maldivians from other regions, one was from the same atoll but a different island, and one was a Sri Lankan. The Sri Lankan seemed to have better benefits than the Maldivian heads of school. He was called ‘Principal’ and paid a higher salary and given better facilities. Principal was the highest title in headship followed by Assistant Principal, Acting Assistant Principal, then Headmaster/Headmistress. In the satellite schools – which were the smaller rural schools and community schools – the lead teacher was not referred to as Headmaster but given the lower ranking of ‘Supervisor’. Supervisors were often from the same island and had earned this position through long service in the school.

The satellite schools were very different from the lead schools. Urban and rural differences, and government and community differences were wide and obvious. Getting on and out of the rural islands was quite a daunting experience. On arriving in a launch, one had to get off it either on to a small dingy and then moor it on to the beach or step on to a plank of wood and do an incredible balancing act to keep walking on the plank. Alternatively, one could

wade knee-high in the shallow water in order to get onto the beach. In general, satellite schools were only at primary level only with pupil figures varying from 30 to 300. The school's physical infrastructure was meagre; a small multipurpose hall with three makeshift classrooms divided by temporary plywood and furniture that did not match. Apart from the supervisor (lead teacher) and either one or two (trained or untrained) teachers there were no other staff. The lead teacher handled all administrative responsibilities and parents cleaned the school, some grudgingly, on a rota basis.

Some satellite schools had a small room adjacent to the hall that served multiple purposes: a secure room, a staff room, an administrative room and storage space for equipment, books and teaching materials. Most satellite schools did not have toilets and pupils and teachers alike went home for this purpose. Most of the time homes were within 5 to 10 minute walk from schools. One of these schools did not have electricity, as the island had only six hours of supply (provided in the night).

In satellite schools the open space generally included ample playground space. However, it appears that this was not used, as the grounds were well swept and remained so throughout the day. A typical feature of the satellite schools was the water tank (a large black barrel), which contained drinking water, i.e., rainwater collected from the roof of the school.

Of the ten satellite schools visited in this atoll half the teachers were designated 'temporary' teachers, which usually means untrained. The most senior or the longest serving teacher took on the role of lead teacher. In these satellite schools the National Curriculum requirements were inadequately adhered to. There were subjects that were not taught due to a lack of suitable teachers. Timetable arrangements were also irregular. In one school there were two teachers allocated to the total enrolment of 40 pupils aged (6-12). Of the two one was a trained teacher and the other a temporary teacher. Here the island chief was still active in the capacity of school head and had created a timetable in which classes were arranged in two

sessions, with each age group or 'grade' taught separately even where there were less than 5 pupils in a grade. This resulted in an impractical and extended teaching day for the two teachers, each of whom taught separately with varying allocations for subjects. Even so they were unable to cover the subjects of the National Curriculum or provide pupils with the stipulated contact hours as required in the same curriculum.

There was no system of establishing pupil attainments or success at primary level. The interviews revealed the perception that the system only recognised standards in terms of the numbers of pupils who had gone on to secondary schools.

Interviews with the lead teachers and island chiefs showed that cluster heads were not actively carrying out their cluster responsibilities. It was reported that satellite schools were usually completely isolated from their cluster school and had no regular communication with the MoE. This was partly due to the absence of an established structure for communication among these schools. A common concern voiced in many satellite schools was: *"no one call us to find out how we were doing, we have to call to get some money for this bill or the other or to get a teacher arranged."* In one satellite school the lead teacher said: *"in the past five years two new Ministers of Education had visited us briefly on gaining the post, but no other officials from the MoE had visited us in this time."* The reality was acute isolation of these schools, which prevented the very thing intended by the cluster policy: collaboration.

The head of the cluster and the lead teachers of the satellite schools said that they were aware of the cluster policy and which cluster they belonged to, but this was the only information they appeared to have and the cluster policy seemed to end here. The cluster heads and lead teachers said that they had not been active in accordance with the cluster policy directives, and they did not appear to be familiar with the cluster handbook.

The four cluster heads were no longer sure if the policy was still in effect. The MoE officials had made little reference to the policy in the interactions they had had in the recent past.

They added that it was beyond their financial means to visit and meet the needs of satellite schools. They felt that such an expectation had not been even made clear in the policy, nor had funds been allocated for such visits. There were no financial or other incentives (or recognition) attached to the cluster head role although it was an added responsibility. One head recalled: *“there was no money put aside for this policy, other than a small amount given for transport, in the initial two years and allocation this was later cancelled and what was allocated did not cover the cost of one trip let al.one three.”*

The cluster heads said that running the lead school was their biggest responsibility and they did not have the time or the resources to attend to the needs of the satellite schools. A further issue was that when cluster heads were not on site in their own schools, teachers and parents could complain to the MoE. Resulting in a real threat that the heads may be moved from post at any time in response to parental complaints. More importantly they said that the measure of their effectiveness was measured by the results their secondary school students produced at O' Levels. Only students in the lead school entered for O' Levels.

The lead teachers in the satellite schools confirmed what was said by the cluster heads. They identified reasons such as difficulties in communication, problems in transport and access, the pressures put on the cluster head at his/her own school, the quality of headmasters as explanations for non-implementation of the policy. The lead teachers said that the cluster heads did not seem to be interested in the satellite schools, and they did not provide the much-needed professional support from a trained head nor were the cluster heads sufficiently well trained to provide such guidance. It was said that when the cluster head did visit, it was in the capacity of representing the MoE, not as an instructional leader. One of the satellite school supervisors clarified this view: *“Atoll Education Centres works as police, they act like this, they come to observe when MoE suggests, they come and check... they don't give support or advice or call for in-service. Clustering exists in name-sake only.”* Another said: *“I have gone to the lead school on two separate occasions looking for sample worksheets*

*and have had to come back empty handed both times.”* A further lead teacher said: *“every school aspires to be an autonomous school”* (meaning a government school with total allocated budget and direct communication links to the MoE). There was a resounding plea for this status among the community schools, i.e., that these schools become government schools. One lead teacher said: *“although trained as a head, the cluster head does not have the added training required to run a cluster,”* and continued: *“I accept the cluster policy as a good or useful model but there is no one to take the leadership responsibility.”*

These responses clearly suggest that supporting the satellite schools was not part of the way the cluster lead schools had been working in this region. Rather than being seen as a cluster team leader, the cluster head was viewed as a policeman, an inspector who carried out a check rather than giving advice or professional guidance. The cluster heads had not made their mark as cluster leaders within the satellite schools.

As explained in Chapter 2, before the cluster policy island chiefs were the heads of the community school, i.e., the satellite school. With the cluster policy this had been changed on paper: ‘the head of the government schools were the cluster heads and the island chiefs will be acting in an advisory capacity supporting the lead teacher in the day to day running of the school’ (translation from MoE 1999:11). Although this was what the policy stated, there were variations in how this directive was interpreted and implemented. In this atoll the island chiefs tended to continue to hold on to their roles as active heads of school. However, there was one island chief (out of the ten) who seemed to have given up this responsibility. Here the satellite lead teacher said: *“ I take matters to the katheeb (island chief) on a regular basis but he does not attend to them nor would he come in to school.”* On being asked why this was so the island chief’s response was that: *“I don’t meddle with the running of the school as I feel that the supervisor would like to be in-charge and therefore I allow him to do the running.”* Other island chiefs commented: *“I see myself as head of school and I act as such... there is nothing happening here in terms of clustering, if there is supervisory support*

or INSET this will be productive. Why this does not happen I don't really know...The cluster head does not come here. Today they are here because you are here and because they are scouting for possible students for their school." Such comments suggested that there was friction among leaders, i.e., that of the cluster head, island chief and the lead teacher.

The cluster policy implementation reflected a confused understanding of who was in charge, the cluster head, the lead teacher or the island chief. This grey area about roles was not perceived to be helping the satellite schools. In at least one case, it seemed to provide a reason for the island chief not to be active within the school. This had become an issue and where the island chief chose not to visit the school any more. In this situation the 'no contact' of the island chief probably limited some of the benefits that the school could otherwise have experienced had the island chief and the school lead teacher got along well. This kind of friction between individuals in key positions seemed to exist in this cluster and that hindered some of the progress that could have been in schools as well as more generally in the communities. The inactivity of the cluster head meant that the satellite schools continued to work in complete isolation without any professional guidance or support. With no means to upgrade, improve or guide teaching and learning, these schools were simply providing pupils with access to schooling rather than delivering a good standard of education.

Given the context within which some of the satellite schools were working, such as the lack of electricity, the space for school, adequate furniture, and modern communication systems, one trained teacher working two sessions flat out. It can be said that these conditions reflected considerable economic disadvantage. In addition, there were gaps in leadership which were linked to inexperience and inability to implement the cluster policy. A common response to my questions was "*I did not know that.*" This response was encountered even among some MoE officials who would be expected to be familiar with the policy. In

summary, of the four clusters visited for Case Study 1, none worked on achieving the cluster policy objectives.

Apart from the cluster leads' inactivity on the policy, this case study also identified shortcomings on the part of the MoE in supporting the policy, in terms of resources and communicating the aims and purpose of the policy. It was becoming clear that there was a lapse in the implementation stage and subsequent monitoring of the policy and there seemed to be little consistency in the way MoE dealt with satellite schools. Between 1999 and 2004, from the time the cluster policy was introduced to the time of this research data collection stage in May 2004, there had been three Ministers of Education. This led to frequent changes of direction and style of administration of policy which have also led in many cases to low morale amongst teachers and heads. Partly as a result of the weakness of the MoE's role, the cluster heads were not sure of their related roles of being the school head and the cluster head and the scope of their responsibility. Nor were there incentives for taking on this additional responsibility. For example, it was clear that although allocations for transport were made initially, this money was insufficient and was later channelled elsewhere. There was no system that provided the cluster head the leeway to move around even if he wished to do so, due to the demands of his own school. As a result the expected mechanisms of disseminating good practice through professional support was absent.

All in all, it was clear that there was a sense of ambiguity and ambivalence to the policy in terms of roles and expectations. It was also clear that because of the huge differences between the government and community and urban rural schools, it was difficult to make the policy work. Given the challenges in this context, with insufficient resources and lack of training of key players, including cluster heads, attempts to bring improvements to the satellite schools and their pupils' learning programmes seemed impossible. The bottom line was that what the cluster heads were asked to do was not easy or realistic. In this region it appeared that the cluster policy had never got off the ground.

In summary, of the four clusters visited for Case Study 1, it appeared that none was really functioning as a cluster. There was general awareness of the fact that the schools belonged to a certain cluster and this was the extent of the policy. What was expected of the cluster heads went far beyond what they found they could deliver; and they felt they were being asked to do the impossible. With the limitations in transport and communications, collaborative efforts had not come into force. In essence there appeared to be five factors contributing to the fact that these were clusters in name only: (i) Lack of knowledge of the policy and ambiguity of roles, (ii) having no resources specified for the policy, (iii) lack of time and incentives for the cluster head to take on additional responsibilities, (iv) limitations in the infrastructure and (v) limitations among cluster heads to coordinate and provide instructional leadership to under-resourced school. All of these factors served to impede a collaborative venture of this kind being effective in practice.

## Case Study 2. Visit to Ari Atoll

Ari Atoll is located near the capital Male' in the Central Zone (see map overleaf on Page 76). For this case study I visited clusters 19 and 20, visiting 10 schools in the two clusters (Table 2).

Case Study 2 had many similarities with Case Study 1. The physical conditions of the school buildings, the layout, the provisions available, the standards of teaching staff and their availability as well as the ways people received me and the accommodation provided, all were similar. A major difference however, was the main occupation of the people. In Huvadhu atoll (Case Study 1), the men were mainly fishermen who sold their surplus fish to the government fishery - an industrial site, established on one of the uninhabited islands in the atoll or were boat builders most of whom were involved in some form of fisheries-related work. In Ari atoll, in contrast, more people (both men and women) were employed in tourist resorts. Some worked in small tourist shops selling local and imported artefacts around the waterfront roads on the inhabited islands. Tourists from nearby resorts would come on short day trips to visit the inhabited islands. (Each resort was a self-contained hotel on an otherwise uninhabited island). Transport to and from this atoll was significantly more frequent and a lot easier due to tourist transfers and being closer to the capital Male' and the international airport. From the airport or from Male' both launches and seaplanes provided discounted seats for local travellers visiting this atoll. But as elsewhere, inter-island travel within the atoll remained still expensive.

Unlike the Huvadhu atoll experience where I found both the Atoll chiefs seemingly distanced from the education agenda, in this Atoll I found the Atoll chief was renowned for his work in education. Importantly this was an Atoll chief who had been in this post for a substantial period of time (eight years), which was rather unusual.

Fig.4

Map of Ari Atoll Case Study 2.

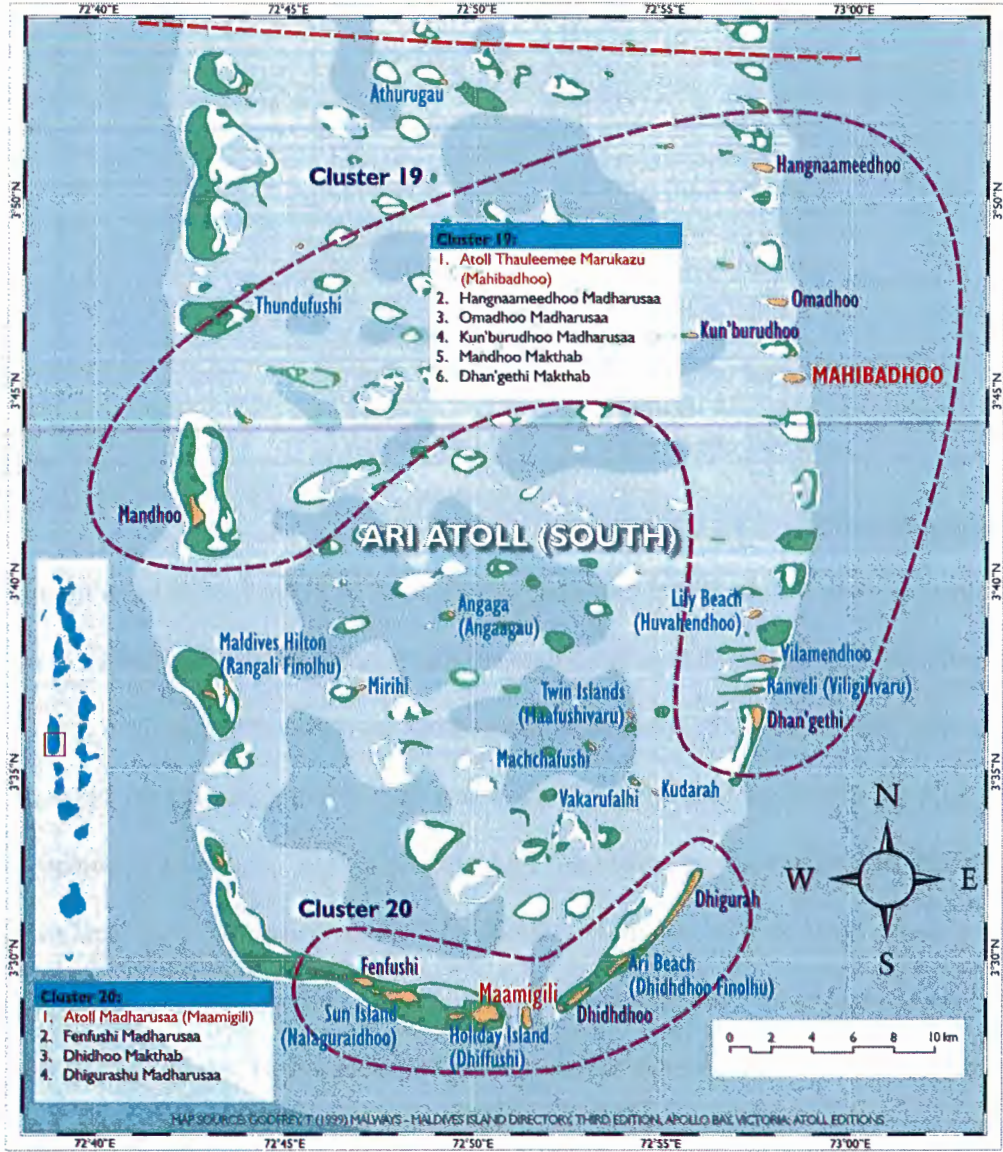


Table 2.

**Case Study 2: Schools Visited**

<b>Atoll</b>	<b>Cluster</b>	<b>Island</b>	<b>School</b>
Ari	19	Mahibadhoo	Atoll Education Centre
		Hanyaameedhoo	Hanyaameedhoo Madrasa
		Omadhoo	Omadhoo Madrasa
		Kuburudhoo	Kuburudhoo Madrasa
		Maandhoo	Maandhoo Makthab
		Dhagethi	Dhagethi Madrasa
	20	Maamigili	Atoll Scholl
		Dhidhdhoo	Dhidhdhoo Makthab
		Fenfushi	Fenfushi Madrasa
		Dhigurashu	Dhigurashu Madrasa

From the accounts I obtained through my interviews in this atoll, it became apparent that the cluster head had worked closely with the atoll chief in consultation with the Atoll Education Centre (AEC) and the MoE up until recently (January 2004) before this arrangement was changed. The practice in this atoll was a novel way of working within the cluster model. It appeared to have been working ‘rather well’ according to some people in this atoll and was also seen as a ‘successful model’ by the then Minister of Education. Here, an important distinction existed based on a decision made to separate the role of head of cluster from the role of head of the Atoll Education Centre (the lead school). Under this arrangement the lead school’s head had responsibilities specific to the lead school only. A senior member of staff of the lead school, while remaining on the roll of the lead school, worked collaboratively with all community schools in the atoll, as a cluster head coordinating work of the cluster. This arrangement had been hailed as a major success and was seen as the way forward by some of the MoE officials. However, in January 2004, this system was abandoned. The reasons for this were not made clear. The new Minister (who came into post in October 2003) in the interview and in reference to this atoll said: “*I have not been able to see any significant difference even in this Atoll.*” By the beginning of the academic year in January 2004, two new heads were put in-charge of the two lead schools in the two clusters. The

cluster head, who had been very active in the role was transferred to a new post as head of a community school that had ‘moved out’ of the cluster arrangement.

The timing of my visits, being April 2004, was just three months into major changes in this cluster and among cluster heads. I found that key individuals were quite critical about the impact of the change. The newly appointed heads of the cluster lead schools were yet to take the decisions on how to take forward work on the cluster policy within respective clusters. I could sense low morale among some of the staff in a number of schools both lead schools and satellite schools. I witnessed how sudden leadership change can stall important progress.

Interviewing previous head of cluster (who was now head of a community school) revealed that he had worked for two years in his previous role as cluster head. During his period of engagement (2002-2003) he said that he had visited all the schools in his cluster at least once every year and had brought in a number of changes. He said he saw it as crucial that the lead teachers and island chiefs understood the cluster policy. He noted that he had undertaken the task of writing an easy-to-follow handbook based on the cluster policy handbook produced by the MoE, intended to complement it. He gave me a copy. He said it went a step further than the MoE handbook in explaining the processes in an easy to understand manner. His objectives were to fill in the gaps (where possible) that existed in satellite schools, bringing in, as far as is possible, a system of management and a structure of organisation that worked for these schools. He voiced concerns over equity such as school fees and teacher quality, which were major issues in the satellite or community schools. Pupils in community schools continued to pay fees towards their education. The amount charged varied from school to school. Community schools tended to be on the more rural islands where the most disadvantaged and poorer, parents lived. These people were doubly disadvantaged in that teacher quality in these schools was the poorest and they pay fees for the poor quality education. He also said that two years was not a sufficient time period to show the impact of the work he had done in the cluster.

Lead teachers in the satellite schools related examples of the work done by the previous cluster head. They showed appreciation for his work and his role saying how productive he had been. They spoke of having attended joint workshops that enhanced their skills in developing schemes of work and lesson plans; they spoke about the supervision and feedback they had received from him and his monitoring and supportive role during visits to the schools. They also spoke about the parents' meetings the cluster head chaired and how this had led to greater involvement among the parents benefiting the school and its pupils. It was also noted that there had been a trained teacher (professional) made available to work with teachers (who had received little or no attention before) and that this was seen to have benefited the teachers and helped raise their morale.

In addition, there had been a co-ordinated effort between the cluster head and the Atoll chief to address some of the issues impacting education on the island such as providing support for developing teachers so as to improve whole school performance: This was what was needed for teachers working in these smaller schools. It was clear from the interviews with him and the lead teachers that his role had been found useful; that he had been involved in providing support in the teaching and had offered guidance in the administration of satellite schools in his cluster.

What was particularly significant in this atoll was the atoll chief's active involvement in helping to develop the provision of education in schools. This interest was apparent at many levels: in providing transport and accommodation where needed to the cluster head; in promoting an atoll-wide baseline examination and ensuring that it was given at the end of the primary stage to all schools. This examination was used to gauge effectiveness of teachers and where necessary in supporting teachers in schools which had lower results than others. Hence, the cluster head and atoll chief worked together to provide a seemingly viable means to strengthen the education standards of the atoll. Such a relationship between the cluster head and the atoll chief, as key parties with responsibility for overseeing standards of

education in the region, appeared to have created a very productive joint venture and one that could have been expected to continue. It is not clear why the cluster head had been moved to another school but with this arrangement dissolved it remained to be seen how the present cluster heads would develop their roles in the future and what the MoE expectations of them would be.

Although this interview presented the situation in retrospect and described practice which had been in place until three months previously, the atoll chief's clear involvement in enhancing educational quality was what caught my attention most in this case study. This was an unusual arrangement linked to the development of the cluster policy based on the specific needs of the atoll. This level of flexibility should, perhaps, be built into the cluster policy in general. In this arrangement the cluster head worked in a supportive role to the lead school's head and had the opportunity to be a mobile member, out in the satellite schools, working with each satellite school for a period of time. Being located in the atoll office premises and having access to the atoll chief, the cluster head was able to arrange transport and communications, an atoll-wide examination in a way which was not possible in the cluster visited for Case Study 1. In addition, he had managed to arrange joint in-service training by inviting teachers from the satellite schools to the main island where accommodation was made available free, again thanks to the support of the atoll chief. These activities are approaches to improving the quality of education which are applicable to any atoll. I think every effort should be made to sustain good working relationships between schools and atoll chiefs. Why this positive arrangement was allowed to collapse needs further investigation.

Two key observations are pertinent here. First, the atoll chief was an important key resource in the work on improving education quality. Atoll chiefs were instrumental in making this need heard and have a sense of ownership of this policy unlike any other party. This atoll chief, having been in post for a substantial period of time, had a clearer sense of commitment

to improving the quality of education in this atoll. Second, the cluster head was someone other than the AEC's head who had time to concentrate on cluster administration rather than running a lead school. It gave him the added status which seemed an important incentive to work on this role, and by working closely with the atoll chief seemed to have been effective in providing professional support to the satellite schools.

The two clusters visited for Case Study 2 provided an interesting example of where the cluster policy appeared to have been successful or was functioning well with one set of staff. The change of personnel had brought existing progress to a halt at the time of the visit. For successful change and the effectiveness of new policy, the role of leaders and their importance as key people for continuity cannot be over emphasised. The literature on change and new initiatives would support this view (Fullan 1991, 1992, 1999; Barber 1996; Stoll and Fink 1996; Harris 2000). Also the structure adopted is vital for the policy to function in practice. With a change in people and structure, it seems in this instance that the cluster policy has been abandoned; the future of the cluster policy on this atoll is, at this point uncertain.

### **Case Study 3. Visit to Thiladhunmathi**

The third case study arose from a trip made to Thiladhunmathi taking in visits to Clusters 2 and 3. This atoll is the Northern most atoll of the country (see map on Page 83). The atoll is celebrated in our country's history for the bravery of three brothers who challenged and successfully overthrew the Portuguese garrison then occupying the country over a period of 17 years, in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. The old home of the heroes and a more modern building which holds a museum and mosque takes pride-of-place as one approaches the island square of Utheem. Another impressive landmark in the region is the Northern Secondary School which is one of the more established regional secondary schools in the country. This school offers students education from grades 6-12. At ages 16 and 18 students are presented for GCE O'levels Cambridge Examinations and GCE A'levels Edexcel London examinations respectively.

I flew to the atoll by a domestic flight landing in the Northern Regional Airport and visited the surrounding islands via speedboat. The islanders here were largely fishermen, with some subsistence agriculture, carried out by women. A primary feature of the island which hosts the Northern Regional Airport, was a large area where vegetables were grown using hydroponics. The people in-charge of this programme said that this method of growing vegetables had been tried and experimented with, for a few years, and had been found to be successful. It was being taught to groups of locals who were now growing their own vegetables and fruits (e.g. pumpkin, brinjal, cucumber, tomato and water melon).

For this Case Study, I visited all seven schools in Cluster 2, and one school which was out of the cluster at Utheem in addition to three schools in Cluster 3 (table 3).

Fig. 5 Map of Thiladhunmathi Atoll - Case Study 3

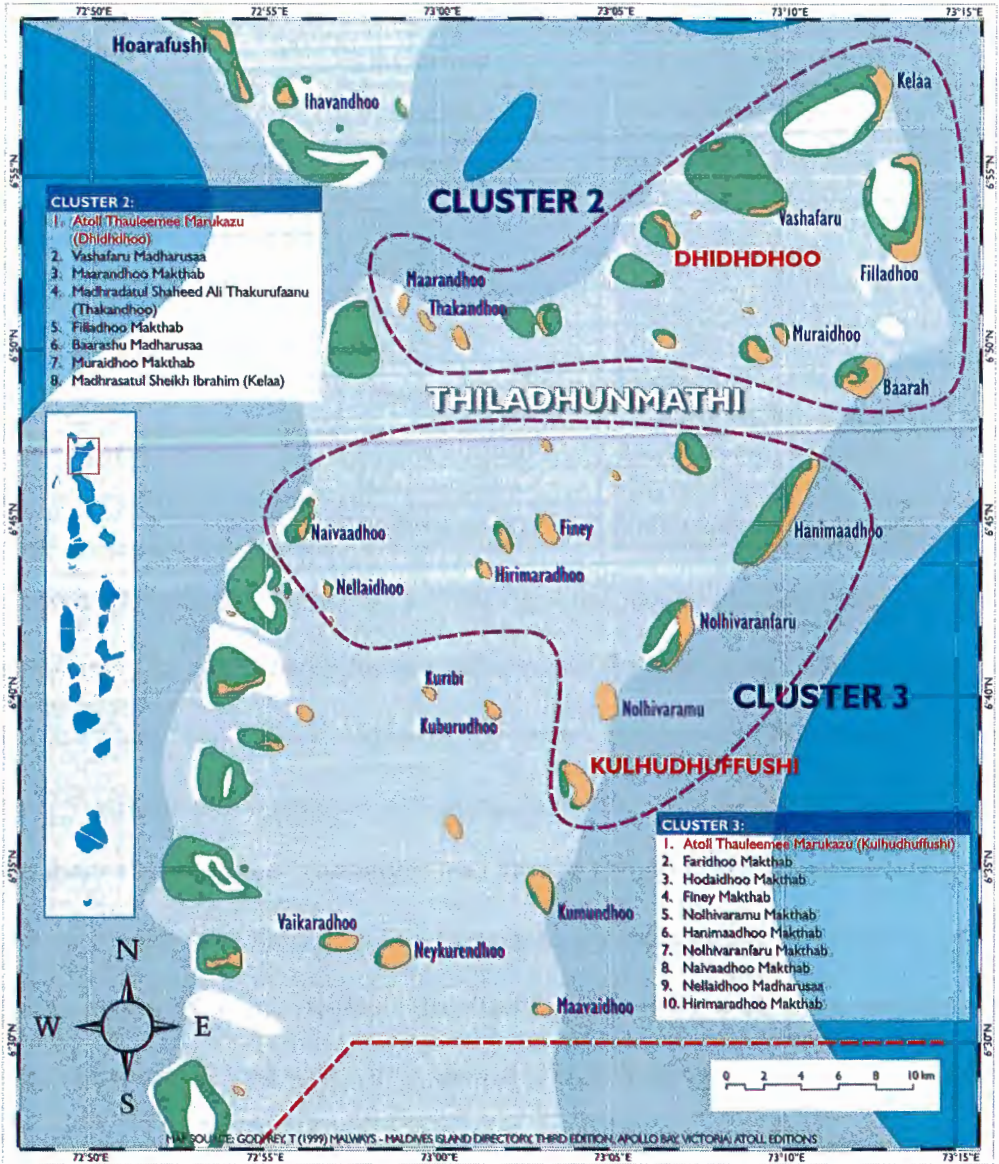


Table 3.

**Case Study 3 - Schools Visited**

<b>Atoll</b>	<b>Cluster</b>	<b>Island</b>	<b>School</b>
Haa Alifu	2	Dhidhdhoo	Atoll Education Centre
		Vashafaru	Vashafaru Madrasa
		Maarendhoo	Maarendhoo Makthab
		Thakandhoo	Madrasathul Shaheed Ali Thakurufaanu
		Filladhoo	Filladhoo Makthab
		Baarah	Baarah Makthab
		Muraidhoo	Muraidhoo Makthab
		Utheemu	Madra. Sulthan Mohamed Thakurufaanu Azum
Haa Dhaalu	3	Kulhudhuffushi	Atoll Education Centre
		Hanimaadhoo	Hanimaadhoo Makthab
		Nolhivaranfaru	Nolhivaranfaru Makthab

These islands and their respective schools Fig.4 had similar physical features to those found elsewhere. The gap between the government and the community schools was apparent, as was the urban / rural divide. However, the cluster heads in the two clusters here had a very positive attitude to the policy of clustering. Interviews with these two cluster heads showed that those who had been heads in the lead schools before them had made it a routine practice to support schools in the cluster. This was quite encouraging and different from the practice in clusters visited so far. I was told that there was a working relationship between the schools which went back a long way. There seemed to exist a closer sense of community among the people and the sharing of information and regular communication was reported to be the norm rather than the exception. The cluster heads were from the same Atoll, although not from the same island, and knew the lead teachers. They spoke about the satellite schools in a way which showed familiarity with them. This familiarity was seen to work to the advantage of both the cluster head and that of the satellite communities.

In Cluster 2 there was the usual practice to call representatives from all satellite schools to a meeting held at the beginning of each academic year at the lead school. This meeting was chaired by the cluster head and set the agenda for work planned out for the rest of the year.

Significantly, this process facilitated face-to-face contact with colleagues and their counterparts in the respective schools. This opportunity for creating friendships and collegiality by sharing experiences helped to bond the teachers involved and so enhanced connections between the teachers of the cluster. This introductory meeting was then followed up by two or three visits a year by a team from the lead school providing further professional support and monitoring of the work practices in the satellite schools. According to the head of one of the two clusters in this atoll, trips were made within the lead school's budget and the trip was supported by satellite lead teachers and parents who arranged local accommodation and food for the visiting team. This case suggests that having a local from the atoll as a cluster head may assist the successful implementation of the cluster policy.

In Clusters 2 and 3, both cluster heads seemed to be well informed of the activities in the cluster. They were familiar with the cluster handbook having read and used it regularly. Although they faced similar financial challenges, in general, there was a positive attitude among the head teachers regarding the objectives set out in the cluster policy. They showed that having the will to visit satellite schools in order to provide professional expertise was something that was necessary and had been achieved even under the existing challenges.

One of the satellite lead teachers said: "*there is complete and full support of the cluster head,*" which suggests that in this cluster the policy was active. One example of cluster practice was that the pupil report books (that go to parents three times a year at the end of each term), was signed by the cluster head. The cluster head said that he attended to this practice without fail. In addition to keeping a close watch on pupil performance at the end of each term, his signature on the pupil report card gave a clear message to teachers and parents about who was the head of cluster. The cluster head also met parents regularly on these visits. Communications between the cluster head and satellite schools were established through an understanding that when the satellite school lead teacher called through a private mobile phone the cluster head would call back immediately using the lead school's

telephone. As communication costs are high this consideration encouraged communication and indicated commitment. Both the heads and the lead teachers said that this arrangement was working and had allowed close communication links to be established between the cluster head and the supervisors of satellite schools. In this cluster, there was one formal examination given to all satellite schools for those pupils sitting their final term examination at the end of primary education at Grade 7. This examination was set and marked by the lead schools.

However, a serious problem voiced by the cluster heads concerned the hostile reception given to new students from other island schools who join the lead school (Northern Regional Secondary School). Students who had been to the primary school on the same island as the lead school are the students who make the joining students from other islands feel unwelcome. The cluster head said he was unable to understand why this happened but noted that this hostility (in the form of bullying) was directed largely at those students who outperform, the students who had been in the lead school's island primary all along.

To sum up, what stood out most in this case study was the easy relationships between the cluster heads and the communities of islands that made up the clusters. The fact that both the cluster heads come from this atoll is, perhaps what made these relationships strong. I found the attitudes of these two cluster heads were very positive regarding the cluster policy and quite unlike other cluster heads encountered in the previous Case Studies (1 and 2). Here the cluster heads were able to put into practice some very important approaches, such as planning meetings at the beginning of the term for all cluster teachers and review meetings three times a year. The signing of pupil report cards by the cluster heads was also a practice which fostered goodwill and commitment to the policy. Such practices showed that collaboration was in practice even though previously identified and raised issues of transport, communication, time factor, training and financial constraints were there too. As a follow up to this study it would be worthwhile to find out more about the personal and professional

characteristics of the heads who had worked in this region. Such a study would offer insights into how to further improve practices within clusters.

There appear to be four factors contributing to the fact that these clusters displayed conditions favourable to the cluster policy: (i) attitude of the cluster head towards the policy, (ii) cluster heads 'place' in the community of cluster schools regarding trust and respect, (iii) a sense of community spirit and a tradition of bigger schools scaffold smaller schools, (iv) a prior agreed arrangement for communication in place that allowed a mobile phone call from a satellite school to be returned from the lead school, reducing costs of smaller schools.

#### **Case Study 4. Visit to Hadhdhunmathi**

Located in the South of the archipelago, Hadhdhunmathi (see the map on Page 89) has the longest island in the country. It extends for 11 miles and covers four separate villages. Arriving on the airstrip via a small airplane and then on to land transportation via car allowed me to reach each of the four schools in the island relatively easily. Within the one long island of Gan lies cluster 30, made up of three primary schools and a secondary school which acts as the lead school. In the atoll are Clusters 28 and 29; two schools in each of these clusters were also visited. Each school was on a separate island and therefore travel was by boat.

Visiting schools in Clusters 28 and 29 was an experience similar to that of the visits made in Case Study 1 (the Huvadhu atoll clusters). These islanders were mainly fishermen. During the day the fishermen were out at sea while the women sent the school age children to school and attended to cleaning the island and homesteads. There were very few males on the island during the day; those who were present were old men and young children. These rural islands seemed almost deserted, as the number of families living in any one of these islands was no more than 100 to 200.

The layout and conditions of government school buildings were similar to that found on the Huvadhu atoll. However, the conditions of the satellite schools here were slightly better than in Huvadhu atoll - electricity was available; classrooms were recently painted and trained lead teachers were present. These teachers seemed more competent in their roles compared to some of the other lead teachers met in previous case studies. The cluster heads, however, were inexperienced and new to their posts having been recently appointed (in January 2004). As a result they were not familiar with the procedures of the cluster policy at the time of the interviews. This reflected the by now familiar pattern of high turnover among cluster heads.

Fig. 6

Map of Hadhdhunmathi - Case Study 4

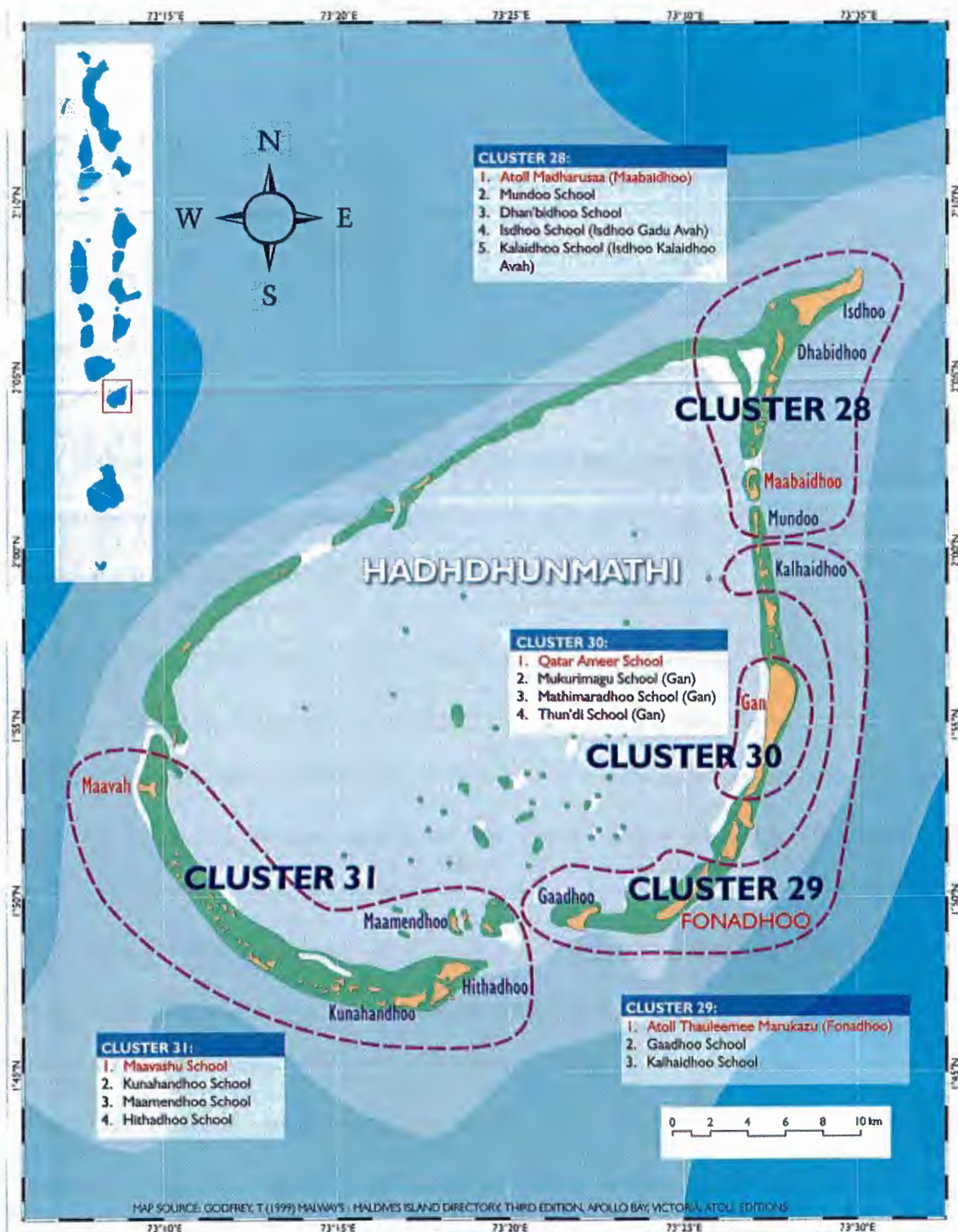


Table 4

**Case Study 4: Schools Visited**

<b>Atoll</b>	<b>Cluster</b>	<b>Island</b>	<b>School</b>
Laamu	30	Gan	Qatar Ameer Secondary School
			Mukurimagu School
			Mathimaradhoo School
			Thundhi School
	28	Maabaidhoo	Atoll School
		Mundoo	Mundoo School
	29	Fonadhoo	Atoll Education Centre
Kalhaidhoo		Kalhaidhoo School	

In the satellite schools, lead teachers said they worked in isolation without input from the cluster lead school. They knew that they were within a particular cluster, but that was all they claimed to know. They were not familiar with the objectives of the policy or the guidelines written in the cluster handbook, nor were they sure if the policy was being pursued or had been abandoned.

Within the same atoll, Cluster 30 consisted of four schools on one stretch of the island known as Gan. The set-up was quite different here to that of the other clusters elsewhere and had practices different from other clusters. This cluster was exceptional in a number of ways. The lead school was the finest school that I have ever come across in the islands and had been built from a donation by the Amir of Qatar. It was a modern building with spacious classrooms, a hall, purpose-built rooms (such as a library, laboratories, staff rooms), as well as a quadrangle for assembly and a separate playground area for sports. The head of the school was an ‘Assistant Principal’- an expatriate from India who had been in the post for three years. Under his guidance the lead school’s links with the three satellite and feeder schools, seemed well-forged. The lead school handled the budget and the administrative staff managed the expenditure for the whole cluster. Of particular advantage was that all four schools were classified as government schools, which meant that the government provided finances for the running of all four and so parents did not have to pay additional school fees.

This cluster had the advantage of being located on one island with schools within easy reach (five to twenty minutes by bicycle). The three satellite schools were direct feeders to the main school which were for all ages. The satellite schools had primary level classes only (from grades 1-5) and pupils moved on to secondary school starting from grade 6 and continuing on to grade 10. This grade arrangement was different to that found in other schools. The lead teachers in the satellite schools were all locals.

From the interviews with the lead teachers and island chiefs, it was clear that in this cluster the cluster head worked closely with the four schools and was accepted as the leader. He made frequent visits to the satellite schools and the satellite lead teachers co-operated with him. The cluster head saw to the working arrangements of the timetable the lesson planning, lesson delivery and assessments. Furthermore, he arranged meetings with parents and took decisions on what forms of punishment were to be given to those pupils failing to follow the regulations of the school. In this cluster there was a real sense that the satellite schools worked closely under the governance of the lead school.

Here even the island chiefs said that they saw the cluster head as the person in charge of the schools and accepted his professional role and leadership. At the same time, the island chiefs agreed that their role in schools was advisory and they played a contributory role in handling instances of bad behaviour, when referred to them. There was no indication of the atoll chief's involvement in these school's activities. The atoll chief was seen as someone who visited, usually by invitation, for celebratory occasions. The cluster head was working directly under the direction of the MoE. The cluster head seemed to be active in providing professional development for the three lead teachers working with him and had, in the recent past, arranged for the satellite heads to go on visits to primary schools in the capital - this exposure was said, by the satellite heads, to have been very productive and a rich learning experience. This cluster arrangement seemed to be working well.

The following factors appeared to contribute to Cluster 30 being a 'functional cluster': (a) the cluster was on one island and schools were in close proximity, (b) the satellite schools were feeder schools to the lead school, (c) the head of cluster was qualified for the job and commanded the respect and acceptance of the lead teachers and the island chiefs, and having been in post for a three year period and had developed trust (d) the government provided a full budget to cover the costs of all four schools, (e) and the budget was handled by one school where there were task specific clerical staff, (f) there were opportunities for professional development for staff, (g) there were regular visits and close monitoring of satellite schools by the cluster head, (h) MoE was said to have briefed this cluster head as to the expected procedures of the cluster and the head, in turn, followed those guidelines, and, (i) had the continuing support from the MoE. These factors all seemed to contribute towards making Cluster 30 functioning well as a cluster.

The two other clusters in the same atoll, however, did not share the same features, nor did they seem to be working on the cluster policy. As for these two clusters the cluster policy seemed restricted.

## **Discussion**

The four multi-site case studies reported earlier helped to illustrate the complexity under which the cluster policy was operating and indicated some of the challenges and difficulties it faced in particular contexts. Factors that came up repeatedly included: resource limitations, (both human and material), and as Louis and Miles (1992:261) noted, 'add-on resources are clearly needed for improvement. No new resources little change.' It would seem that there was a lack of financial commitment, despite this policy being heavily dependant on such a commitment. Another factor was time; cluster heads did not have enough time. Cluster heads viewed leading their own school as their prime responsibility. The large lead schools with students of all ages and the associated complex problems spared him little time for satellite

schools. For the lead school there were no obvious gains that could be had by belonging to the cluster. Another factor was a clear lack of knowledge regarding the cluster policy objectives by most of the stakeholders. The lack of effort to raise stakeholder awareness of the policy in the initial phase, and consequent lapse in monitoring, especially with the high turn over of cluster heads and MoE representatives, led the policy to start off with a low status – it never really gained the momentum which a new policy needs in order to promote engagement on the part of stakeholders. There was a clear lack of a sense of ownership of the policy on the part of the stakeholders which was disadvantaging the process of policy adoption in the first place. A key factor here was the ambiguity of roles. The atoll chiefs, for example, were the very people who raised concern over the status of their schools but the island chiefs were, in fact, sidelined by the policy. Instead of maximizing people's potential and cooperation available, their loyalties and time, the policy sidelined these very people. This was a crucial oversight.

Although it was the atoll chiefs' call for improvements in community schools which in the first place kick-started the process leading to the formulation of the cluster policy. The atoll chief's sense of ownership and actual commitment to the cluster policy varied across a spectrum from no involvement to being very involved. Individual relationships had a lot to do with this as did inter-departmental politics. One example where the atoll chief was actively involved was in Case Study 2, which indicated what can be done through cooperation between the education personnel with support from the atoll chief. The island chiefs' response and engagement with the policy also differed from island to island and school to school. Island chiefs showed a similar spectrum of being involved and not being involved; some holding on to being the head of school, hanging on within a power struggle, while others, having accepted that their role was advisory gave support only in this way by leaving the running of the school to the lead teacher under the guidance of the cluster head.

Another factor was that the quality of cluster heads was called into question by a number of lead teachers who felt the cluster heads, themselves, required additional training to engage effectively with supporting the running of the satellite schools. There was a lack of clear plans for capacity development; as a result, none was taking place. Some of the cluster heads who were headmasters had only a basic training of one year and this management training programme for many was the only education or training they have had since their GCE 'O' Levels. (The O' levels were often of a poor standard). Given this background, it was clear that many of the head teachers did not have the necessary skills to engage in the collaborative efforts required of such a policy, nor did they understand how to make use of such an opportunity, especially as there were no resources that went with it.

One of the key objectives included in the goals of the cluster policy was to improve the quality of the supervisors' or 'lead teachers' work. Because cluster heads were not able to provide the necessary professional development, lead teachers of satellite schools were not getting the required development. There was a consensus view that without additional training, the cluster heads were not capable of taking on their additional role. Those skills required of a cluster head included for example, a lot of diplomacy and tact as working with communities which the cluster head only visited occasionally, required negotiation skills and other skills that allowed to make a good impression within a limited time. There are specific skills that made up the cluster heads job.

Another significant factor that inhibited the policy from being implemented was the lack of continuity of the cluster head. The frequency of change at the leadership level had detrimental effects that prematurely stopped good efforts that were made prior to the particular leader being moved on to a new post and planned activities being replaced. In the 11 clusters studied for the research, just one head had been leading the cluster for a period longer than three years, two of the others had been in post for two years and the rest, eight cluster heads, had taken up posts the same year. As a result, they were new to the cluster they

had been assigned and for some they were new even to the job. Therefore, they did not really have the knowledge required or experience to undertake cluster management successfully.

Difficulties involved in visiting satellite schools especially without the funds from MoE for transport, was cited as another barrier. The fact that the policy on the part of the MoE being introduced in an indirect means impeded the policy implementation process, such a policy required to get key people on board from the start and work as a team. Crucial information regarding the policy was passed initially only through word of mouth from the MoE officials to cluster heads, instead of any announcements made through the media or through a circular from the MoE. This caused tension among the island chiefs and some cluster heads due to this lack of information and the means used to inform key people regarding the cluster policy.

The cluster handbook had details of task description. The book stated that the cluster head would communicate with each of the satellites once every day and check on the day-to-day activities of the school (such as attendance of pupils, teachers and monitor all programmes). However, it was not clear how the cluster head was supposed to deal with the day-to-day matters of the satellite schools when the cluster head was located elsewhere, as was often the case. Nor was it clear how the cluster head could report weekly to the atoll chief and regularly to the MoE on the activities of the school when s/he was expected to visit the school just once every term, i.e., three times a year. Such unrealistic expectations and ambiguity need to be addressed and would entail a review of the handbook. Some island chiefs were sceptical of what can be achieved by a cluster head based in another school a few miles away on a separate island.

The above discussion drew together the reasons gleaned from the study for inactive clusters. Two clusters that had varying levels of engagement with the cluster policy were the two clusters in Case Study 3 and one cluster in case study 4. In Case Study 3, the connections

among schools were said to have been a way of life even before the introduction of the cluster policy. Since its introduction and with locals at the helm, there was an advantage and incentive to continue to support and guide schools in the atoll. But even they said that they found the cluster policy a challenge without the necessary resources. Case Study 4 was the one example where the notion of the cluster policy as it was intended was in place. In cluster 30, conditions were favourable. In this case, the cluster was within easy distance from one another, the head of cluster was in the position as head for sometime and had managed to gain the trust and respect of the lead teachers and island chiefs who co-operated with the power-sharing as expected by the cluster policy. All four schools were government schools and the fact that their budgets were handled by the lead school made the running of the four schools work well within the 'ihaa' definition of the cluster.

In summary, the case studies have demonstrated that the clusters engaged with spirit of the policy were the minority. These had conditions such as an active cluster head who was familiar with the policy goals, and had the respect of the communities. Schools were of close proximity and easily accessed, they had funds for the cluster management, established communication links and MoE support. These were pre-conditions necessary for the cluster policy to flourish.

In the final analysis of the 11 clusters visited in the four case studies, only one cluster appeared to be operating as a fully functional cluster. Two others had some factors favourable. As the cluster heads in Case Study 3 showed, commitment and the right attitude could go a long way towards working collaboratively. Even these two heads of clusters though found the policy was difficult to sustain without the necessary resources. The other eight clusters at the time of the case study visits appeared to be clusters in name only.

## CHAPTER 6

### CLUSTER POLICY: ANTECEDENTS, PROCESSES AND OUTCOMES

#### Introduction

The previous chapter presented the findings of the four case studies. This chapter complements the discussion by presenting findings from interviews with thirteen other heads of clusters and seven policy makers to gain wider stakeholder perceptions of the cluster policy, its rationale, implementation process and impact. The interview questions followed a time line, which considered the origins, the operations and the outcomes of the cluster policy. A conceptual framework used by Lunt et al. (1988) was used to frame the enquiry as explained in Chapter 4. This used a time frame of antecedents, processes and outcomes. The interview questions were developed using this time frame. Quotations from the interviews are used to demonstrate specific points.

#### The cluster policy initiation

This section addresses research question one: What do policy makers and head teachers perceive was the rationale for the ‘cluster’ policy and what influences shaped the introduction of the policy? It focuses on the reasons, which led to the MoE’s policy on clusters. Interviewees were asked: Why was the cluster policy introduced? What influences shaped the policy?

#### *The rationale and influences that shaped the policy*

The reasons behind the cluster policy were said to be “*to provide better standards in the community schools*”. For community schools being managed under the leadership of the island chiefs, where the island chiefs’ being none education professionals, these schools have

had a history of weak management and resource limitations. As a result standards and conditions of these schools are comparatively poor.

The reasons given by the cluster heads for the cluster policy was as a response to repeated requests and calls made by atoll chiefs and island communities to raise standards of provision of education in the community schools. At the 1998 Meeting of atoll chiefs as documented in the *Report of the 9<sup>th</sup> meeting of Atoll chiefs held in Baa Eydafushi* in August 1998 (Ministry of Atolls Administration 1998:56), the Minister of Education then Dr. Mohamed Latheef had said that there would be a response to this repeated request. Following the meeting which, the Minister responded with the introduction of a cluster policy which was planned, piloted briefly and introduced nationally across schools outside Male' in July 1999.

The MoE representative views on the reasons for the cluster policy were to improve the management of community schools. This was to introduce similar standards to that of government schools, to improve the quality of these schools through sharing of professionals and resources. As well as due to a political need to make these schools more inclusive of the state sector.

From the interviews with MoE representatives it was said that a two-member team of headmasters stationed at MoE, were given the task of writing the Cluster Policy Handbook. The two members team was said to have worked under the directions of the architect of the policy the Minister of Education. In the interview with one of the headmasters who wrote the handbook, he said that he was told what to do, in time his suggestions were taken on board by the Minister, and often these suggestions were drawn from some of the literature they had found, which gave examples of clusters in Singapore among some other examples in South Asia. He said he thought he was chosen to write the handbook because of his background as a writer, something he did part-time. He further pointed that during the write up process,

there were no others (i.e. consultants) other than the Minister himself who gave any input. Once a draft was created this was sent to the MoE section heads, some of whom commented and others did not. Subsequently the book was printed and the policy set in motion. The handbook was used as one of the key means to publicise the policy. He also said that this handbook was sent to the Office of the President for approval, but no formal approval appeared to have come back. MoE officials said that the local media were not informed of this initiative, nor that it was being introduced, even though the policy covered over 80% of schools and created significant changes to the power relationships between the island chiefs and the heads of schools. The fact that there was no media coverage of the introduction of the cluster policy, nor the recognition or acceptance by the President's Office, suggested that there was little political interest in promoting or publicising this initiative.

From the interviews I gathered that the two headmasters who drew up the cluster policy did not have the expertise or the background to draw up such a policy. Nor was there proper consultation or dialogue among the stakeholders. The policy seemed to be formulated as a directive of the Minister. The cluster policy was a policy on education development at macro level, and such policies in some countries would be backed by theories on education and would have been derived from an established basis on policy and change efforts. There was no indication here, however, that there was any theoretical grounding used in drawing up the cluster policy. There were no direct use of such a literature nor references acknowledged in the document. This was the only document regarding this policy that was available for scrutiny. This is no fault of the writers per se, but shows that within the Education Ministry, expertise was thin. The reality was that there were only a handful of officials who had had any formal tertiary education at MoE.

According to the present Minister of Education, (Minister from Oct 2003 to July 2005), who was the then Chief Curriculum Advisor, a pilot cluster was trialled before the policy was introduced nationally. He said that this experience had given the MoE some "insight" as to

whether the idea of clustering would work. There was no document regarding the pilot experience (as discussed from the MoE representatives), and there was no formal analysis or evaluation of the pilot experience. Any gains from the experience, were therefore limited to those directly involved.

The Minister of Education, at the time of interview said that the pilot trial showed that there were many complexities surrounding the implementation of the policy as it called for major changes in the way schools worked. Before the cluster policy, island chiefs were the heads of community schools exercising both professional lead and executive role of budget and maintenance. However, with the introduction of the cluster policy island chiefs were asked to act only in the capacity of advisor to the school with joint authority for spending. The professional role of the head of school was given to the cluster head who was located on a different island to the community school. It was acknowledged that these were very sensitive issues, with possible practical downsides, such as the potential for friction between those three individuals who had leadership responsibility over the one school i.e. cluster head, head of satellite school and island chief (acting in an advisory role to the head of satellite school). The general impression I got regarding this initial cluster policy introduction phase was a concern about political sensitivities among officials at the Ministry. This led to the policy being introduced in an indirect and “low profile” mode.

### *Cluster policy introduction*

According to these interviews the introduction of the policy was through briefings by MoE officials to the heads of clusters, which was five years ago. This meant that the island chief and the atoll chief heard of the policy through the cluster head and not through any other official channel. This was how the Minister, it was suggested, wanted to introduce this policy. This practice immediately caused some strife between cluster heads and some island

chiefs. This turn of events influenced how the island chiefs subsequently worked with the cluster head and the lead teacher in the satellite school.

Two changes directly affected the island chief's role. One was that of handling the community school budgets. Community school budgets were made up of funds from MoE and funds raised by the school through fees and other fund raising events by the parents. Under the cluster policy, the island chiefs' control over the budget was weakened. This made a fundamental change in the local island power structure. Decisions on expenditure were to be taken by the lead teacher instead, in consultation with the island chief, who could only influence in a joint signatory capacity. Secondly, as head of community schools, island chiefs used to sign pupil report books which went home to parents three times a year. This rather public aspect of his role was also removed from the island chief and transferred to the cluster head. It meant that the school can effectively run without any visible links to the island chief. Some island chiefs said they found it difficult to come to terms with this practice. They said it felt that undermined the island chiefs' role in the eyes of the island community. Naturally, the marginalization of island chief's role led to tensions between the school leaders and the island chiefs.

Another aspect, regarding the formulation of the cluster policy was the absence of the atoll chiefs and island chiefs' points of view. Why they were not consulted on the final formulation of the cluster policy? There was no indication that their opinions were sought nor were they briefed once the policy was ready to be introduced. One would have thought that as they had been concerned with the educational provision and standards in the community schools, their views would be sought when looking at ways to develop education provision. One would have also thought the consideration of their views was important given that their support and backing were necessary. Instead, I found that their authority was undermined by this policy. What does this mean in terms of implementing the cluster policy?

The section on implementation processes will answer that question. In essence the cluster policy introduction phase was insufficiently managed and lacked stakeholder ownership.

### **The Cluster Policy Implementation Processes**

This section addresses research questions two and three.

- What do the head teachers think of the cluster policy implementation and how effective do they perceive the policy to be?
- What are the main difficulties and barriers to the intended outcomes of the policy and what factors if any, facilitated or impeded its implementation?

In answering these questions this section will be structured around six factors and other themes drawn from the data. These six factors i.e. (catalyst, resources, problem or task to be solved, trust, reward, co-ordinator) are identified as important in setting up and running collaborative schemes, (Lunt et al 1988). Also, those conditions identified by Hopkins (2003) in his work into networking among schools in the OECD context: (consistency of values and focus, clarity of structure, knowledge creation, utilisation and transfer, rewards related to learning, dispersed leadership and empowerment and adequate resources) have certain parallels here and to that of the Lunt et al. (1988) factors and hence these conditions will also feature in the analysis.

*A catalyst* – This is instrumental for any initiative to take off and continue effectively. The Minister of Education, initiated the cluster policy, (after calls made by atoll chiefs for improving education provision in community schools). Between July 1999 when the cluster policy was introduced and May 2004 (when this research was undertaken), there had been three different Ministers of Education and so there had been changes in directions in administration and in policies. MoE representatives and cluster heads said that those who replaced the vacated posts at the MoE had not been active in following up on the cluster

policy.

*Extra resources*, – MoE representatives said that there were no resources earmarked for the cluster policy. They reported that during the first two years of the policy some funds were allocated to enable the cluster heads to travel to satellite schools. This money, MoE representatives confirmed, has since been reallocated. It was a perception of an MoE representative that “*you can't be improving schools until the basic resources are there and there are major difficulties*”, and another said: “*There was a unit set up within MoE to coordinate this cluster policy. Since the coordinator of this unit a headmaster moved out to a school there was no unit and this work was directed to the Atoll Schools Administration Section/ Development Unit. This unit already had a lot of responsibilities in terms of quality control there were so much to do in this unit and with no extra people no particular emphasis could be given to the cluster policy as a result there was less attention given to the clusters*” (MoE representative). It does seem that more clusters were inactive due to the pressure of expectations that went unheeded, unresolved because of the constraints on resources of (people, energy, time and money) and the workload that this involved.

Without extra resources in finance and further training of key people such a policy posed quite a challenge from the start. The opinion of one MoE representative was, “*If we built a system whereby we expect the cluster head to be going and checking on the smaller school this is not going to work. I feel it is difficult to get to the top and second tier management to go and look after other schools. This is a stepson complex... The reactions aren't going in the way its been perceived or projected.*” It does seem that the reasons underpinning the cluster model when it was introduced were not in-keeping with the political and resource realities that existed in the Maldives at the time. The expectation that a lead school's head could provide for satellites was seen to be a major short sight in implementing the model.

The head of cluster was in charge of a large all-age school and had a heavy workload throughout the day (double session schools). As one cluster head put it there are “*no incentives for the cluster heads. the cluster head is given a big task with no recognition to this role. there is no appraisal system and no approval to those who work well and no blame to those who don't work well either.*” Lack of additional resources or financial incentives were reasons cluster heads gave for their perceptions that those at MoE had really not thought through this policy. They reported that the existing pay structure gave a headmaster in charge of 300 students working on one island school the same salary as that of a cluster head (some of whom were Headmasters) who had 2000 students spread in six different islands. These conditions did not raise morale in motivating cluster heads. Only a few had seriously taken on the additional responsibilities.

A sentiment many cluster heads expressed was that “*I am not able to run the cluster as I am also responsible for the full running of my school.*” Not having the resources to get a qualified person as a second in-charge (who could relieve the head when he went travelling to other schools) was a further barrier identified. Cluster heads showed a strong commitment to the lead school although their time in one school was usually short. Lack of continuity of leadership was a barrier to this policy.

Cluster heads said in interview that there were numerous requests from the satellite schools due to raised expectations as a result of the new policy. Yet they had no means to provide for those requests because they did not have the extra resources or the abilities to resolve the many issues that they were expected to solve. Although the cluster heads were given a responsibility, the role did not come with additional funds or even, according to some cluster heads, the necessary authority.

The following quote from a cluster head outlines the frustrations. “*When (X) was working at MoE section, he used to call me and ask me how the cluster was functioning, but since he left*

*I have had no calls from MoE. Now I call when there is a problem like no running water or when a teacher expected has not turned up. ...From the MoE I get no answers and my phone bill gets high. My phone has been disconnected for the past one month and it is only the fourth month of the year. I have no idea how much money there is towards phone bills as the MoE manages this money. We school heads have no control over how to manage our budgets or our phone bills. This stops us communicating with the satellites. It was just the other day that one of the satellite school lead teacher called in through the phone booth and asked me to call back. When I said I could not make outgoing calls we did not have that conversation.” This was the reality. Another head said, “When I go to the islands and listen to the grievances there is an expectation that something will be done... yet this isn’t so. I am not sure how MoE sees this policy. Last year there wasn’t a single cent given towards transport costs. I decided that it was no point in going to assist the satellites”. The cluster heads said that far too much was expected of them. But if they did nothing to respond to the demands from satellite schools or to pursue implementation of the policy, there was no monitoring or other follow up by the MoE. As time passed it appeared that it was left optional whether the cluster head chose to be active. There were no rewards or penalties for activity or inactivity.*

*High teacher turnover - In the Maldives there is a very high turn over of teaching staff including heads of schools. At the time of this research there was just three cluster heads in Atoll Education Centres (of the eighteen interviewed) who had been in charge of the same cluster for a period over two years. This lack of continuity impedes the continuity of many new schemes, which gets started but quickly fizzles out. Some evaluations of policy initiatives done in the West, for example, ‘Improving Quality for All’ (Hopkins et al. 1996), have shown that if key people move too quickly, or changes rely too heavily on the drive and commitment of one person, there can be dangers to the continuity of these initiatives. The majority of the cluster heads that I interviewed were new to the post. Those new to their*

posts said that they had not been briefed on cluster roles when they took up post. Some said that they were not at all aware that they had to work on this policy any more. This lack of knowledge on what was expected, due to a lack of briefing for new heads, and support for continuing heads, seemed to account for the belief that the policy had failed.

The request to be based at home (on the island where they originate from) where their family and loved ones were was a request which I heard from a number of heads: *“I was moved after one year and this is my first year here. I would like to be settled in one island and preferably stay in my own island. However, this is not the policy at the Ministry. When I get moved I feel demotivated and I am not able to function at my best. I think this is not just my problem but also a problem shared among many of the head teachers.”* (Cluster head). This seems an understandable request which needs to be met.

I was surprised to find out there was just one woman cluster head. (This was during my pilot study) She has had the experience of working on the home island. But, even from her, it was apparent that she was totally immersed with running the lead school: that she found little time to be active in pursuing work with the satellite schools. It was view shared by the majority of cluster heads’ that due to the above limitations there is little involvement with the cluster policy.

*A task or problem to be solved* – Having a specific focus seems to be an important factor for cluster schools to work together. The cluster policy sought to address a range of objectives and there was no single task or problem identified or goal to be attained. Without an ongoing dialogue between the cluster heads (those trying to implement the policy) and the architects of the policy according to the cluster heads these were areas which needed further clarity. The Cluster Schools Handbook specified a number of broad objectives (MoE 1999), which included all matters related to the running of the cluster. A cause for concern among cluster heads and the lead teachers was that there was little agreement on what had to be done. The

cluster handbook's listings of the responsibilities were couched in broad terms, and the cluster heads appeared to be responsible for everything. This lack of clarity led to some frustration among the heads and the lead teachers - as parties expected to implement the policy.

Many of the cluster heads and lead teachers had said that they had heard of the book but had never actually seen it or read it which suggests there can be problems in terms of clarity – not being sure of what was expected. Even those who said they had read and understood the objectives expressed some confusion as to how they could reach the objectives. By not sufficiently addressing how to implement the policy during the planning processes and without the needed two-way communications between the cluster head and the MoE, the stages of implementation were not robust.

*Differences in expectations* – The cluster heads said that the island chiefs and also some of the atoll chiefs saw the cluster policy as a means of getting the physical structure of the community schools developed rather than improving the quality of teaching, learning and the management of schools. It was their view that, when the atoll chiefs called for improving community schools “ *they (island chiefs and Atoll chiefs) were interested in when they can have a larger school with better classrooms and equipment and they thought these would be provided. Development here is synonymous with infrastructure development.*” As a consequence, cluster heads said that, there were clashes of interest and there was a major difference in expectations. The atoll chiefs and island chiefs were asking for improvements they had certain expectations however, certain other aspects were promised in return. As a result, the cluster heads said that, this led to some disagreement between the key parties: the cluster head, the lead teacher and the island chief. Moreover, the cluster heads said that some of their efforts were not acknowledged by some of the island chiefs, as it was largely to do with professional support, and as the island chiefs were not getting what they had hoped for in terms of materials and facilities.

One of the other challenges in implementation the cluster policy faced, according to some cluster heads, was island pride. One cluster head said that the, island pride “*plays a predominant role in pushing out even good ideas if they are coming from elsewhere.*”

These features indicated to me that there was some resistance towards the policy in some clusters suggesting that there was a lack of readiness to accept the policy among these schools. It is my view that had they been involved at a consultative level during the planning stages this resistance could have been avoided. As is the practice in the Maldives, that policy issues are decided by persons at the top, because the Minister at the MoE is the authority on education, when the Minister was driving the planning process for this policy, he may not have felt that there was a need to include any other representative parties. Perhaps, this was the reason why some form of representation at the level of island chiefs or atoll chiefs were not drawn on as part of the planning process: by not drawing in key stakeholders the policy was handicapped from the start.

*A level of trust among the participants* – the cluster arrangement within this context was that all schools were supposedly on an equal footing. However, the cluster head in the lead school seemingly above the rest. As the cluster head was a trained professional working in an all-age and resource rich school. In the satellite schools, however, the heads were normally untrained teachers (but were the most senior teacher, in terms of length of service in that particular school). They work in poor conditions with minimum resources. In this arrangement there was a gap in terms of professional standing and knowledge between the cluster head and the lead teacher in the satellite school. Where one teacher has power and authority over the other, rather than being in a collaborative relationship in which equals work for mutual gain. Within a context where cluster heads change as frequently as every year, there is little room for trust to be built. To cultivate a sense of trust, time is a key factor, and without the time, where there is no consistency among those in leading positions, trust

cannot be established. It was said by heads that the high turnover had stifled some of the good groundwork which had been laid by previous heads.

The cluster handbook (MoE 1999:10) stipulates that once a satellite school had gained a Headmaster (this was based on student numbers exceeding 300) then that school could leave the cluster. As more and more satellite schools increased pupil numbers, they were eligible to get a Headmaster and once a Headmaster was appointed, they preferred to leave the cluster. Satellite schools said they preferred to work on their own and outside the cluster. Unless there were specific gains to be had, most schools wanted to be autonomous. Lunt et al. (1988) suggested that this occurred with some clusters in the UK, echoing the practice in schools in the Maldives. The trend - to leave the cluster was partly because the satellite schools had not found the cluster arrangement beneficial. Had there been more resources and better working relationships between the satellite schools and the lead school then moving out of the cluster would not have been the preferred way by satellite schools.

*Reward* – cluster heads said that there were no direct rewards from the cluster arrangement though some suggested that there were intrinsic rewards such as an increase in the respect and approval of parents. According to one head the role contributes to a sense of personal satisfaction: *“Just the fact that I was supporting the community was enough. ...I like handling a cluster because I feel I am a more important person for it gives me additional satisfaction when I am received well by the people on the islands.”* (Cluster head).

*Co-ordinator* – This is another essential factor to ensure the continuity of any new initiative. Both the policy makers and the cluster heads affirmed that the co-ordinator’s role at the level of the MoE was short-lived. After the first two years in post the co-ordinator moved on to a headship posting he was not replaced. When in post the co-ordinator said that he was instrumental in the processes of communicating the policy’s objectives and that he was the focal point for clarification. He also said that at the time, *“by the end of the first year about*

60 percent of clusters were active.” This was quite an achievement for a policy according to this representative that was introduced in a covert way for “*political sensitive reasons.*” Communications were aural between the MoE and the cluster heads so as not push aside the island chiefs’ involvement in these schools. He said that the Minister was particularly mindful about the island chief’s possible reactions hence was careful and astute in introducing the policy. Once the co-ordinator was moved, with no one to facilitate the implementation and monitor progress, the policy’s importance seemed to have been eclipsed.

*Effectiveness* - There were no objective methods provided by the MoE for gauging cluster effectiveness, which made it difficult to evaluate the success of the policy. None of those interviewed were aware of any guidelines on how to evaluate the outcomes of the policy.

There had not been any appreciation of the need to set targets about time frames and outcomes or review built into MoE policies that I have so far come across to date, and in this respect, the cluster initiative was no different. This was perhaps because evaluations were not part of the way we traditionally work in the Maldives. Evaluating policies for cost effectiveness and impact is yet to be introduced into the Maldives context. This exploratory study is the first attempt to move in this direction.

No base line data were available to measure the impact of policy on educational performance or quality. There is no national assessment or examination at primary level in the Maldives. If such data existed it might have been used to compare pupil performance across clusters, and between satellite schools and lead schools at primary level. There is a national examination for students age 16 plus, (O’ level) after ten years of formal education. However, most satellite schools were not teaching for this level or offering students this examination. As intake into the lead school is not limited to pupils within the cluster, 16+ examination results were only available for students graduating from lead schools. A

comparison of the lead school' O' level results does not therefore, provide, a reliable indicator of the performance of students in the cluster over time.

With key people changing, (the Minister, Deputy Minister, Director and Deputy Director for Atoll Schools and the author of the cluster handbook) in such short time frame (1999-2001) MoE was left with none to take full responsibility for this policy. The departure of the significant others for the policy from the sector left MoE with an institutional amnesia of the policy. The way the policy was formulated to be implemented in a light-handed manner, based on a soft approach had also a lot to do with the lack in momentum for continuity.

Based on the interview data and keeping in mind the range and level of involvement of those interviewed and the passing of time, it has become apparent that, those suggested by Lunt et al. (1988) and Hopkins (2003) as factors and conditions necessary to be in place for successful collaborative efforts or networking, were not in place in the Maldives cluster policy context. Some were severely compromised and at best, were short-lived. An MoE representative agreed that: *“the way it has been planned for and introduced is not sufficient.”* The result was that most clusters just started out to recognise their status as cluster schools and only got so far as knowing that they belonged to a particular group.

### **Outcomes of clusters**

The next stage of the analysis intends to seek positive aspects and beneficial outcomes of this policy.

Answering the final question – What were best practices and how can they be disseminated?

According to MoE representatives, the cluster groupings gave the MoE a systematic way of dealing with the community schools and allocating resources to these schools. The MoE representative interviewed agreed that there were potential benefits to cluster policy if it were better resourced (in terms of financial and human resources), implemented and

monitored. The policy could be a good policy that would achieve the objectives set out in the cluster policy in line with the current trend for decentralisation.

*For the schools involved* –Interviewees, in particular the cluster heads agreed that clustering could give satellite schools the opportunity to access people and resources that they would not otherwise have had access. Cluster heads and satellite heads said that they may be able to share expertise, learn from each other and generally develop better administrative and teaching and learning capabilities. It was also suggested that where cluster heads had worked with satellites, the structures and working systems within satellites had changed and were streamlined with the lead school. Written documentation, records and forms used for administrative purpose were also shared and satellites were said to be more confident in using these tools. Where satellite schools were shown how to adopt or implement MoE directives in areas such as curriculum planning, lesson planning and even timetabling, it was felt that better standards followed. One of the satellites the cluster head found that, *“the timetable was set according to 23 and a half minute periods. It was the island chief who had responsibility for time-tabling then”*. Another cluster head commented *“Satellite schools have become more efficient in dealing with the administrative and budgetary paper work because of my support.... now they can prepare budget reports according to the Audit Office guidelines and expectations”*.

Among the ideas which cluster heads noted to have come out of cluster policy for the schools included sharing reading programmes or reading materials; sharing work sheets, dialogue on how to improve lesson planning; and lesson presentation, developing of schemes of work; developing assessment work, sharing examination setting and marking responsibilities, setting up and starting a small library scheme to enhance English and Dhivehi language reading skills. These point to the opportunity for possible curriculum development through clusters and greater information sharing about new practices. These are aspects of a collaborative effort which can contribute to improve the performance of schools.

Research experience suggests that if these kinds of practices happened as a matter of routine, 'by and large such schools would come to be the most successful' (Hedger and Jesson, 1997, in Brundrette and Burton 2000:30). If within the cluster, the lead school can act as a catalyst for capacity building in identifying, informing and disseminating some of the many routes to raising achievement and if such practices can become routine, this can indeed make the extra work worthwhile and result in improving achievement.

Furthermore, where clusters were found to be working, cluster heads commented that through the active collaboration between cluster schools a close connection was formed among the people involved. As a result, new regard for authority and a respect for professionalism was said to have developed among the cluster heads, the lead teachers, island chiefs as well as among the parents in those communities.

Some lead teachers acknowledged that through clustering, their teachers were exposed to in-service opportunities that helped improve teaching and learning thus benefiting the school and its pupils. These lead teachers also reported increased confidence and competence among members of staff who had been involved in INSET or teacher exchange programmes.

*For teachers* - Cluster heads said that teachers who had participated in cluster INSET and other developmental meetings had said that they had found that this was a much needed source of development. For they had gained knowledge and skills in dealing with their pupils and felt that they had benefited from the exposure.

The cluster heads also agreed that such exchanges improved communication, resulting in teachers realising that the problems they faced in their schools were not peculiar to them or to their school. The most consistently positive outcome for teachers that the heads perceived was the breakdown of isolation when there had been INSET meetings and teacher exchange possibilities. The heads reported that their teachers were clearer about how to access extra

support and resources and knew how to work to get help even though the extra help was not always easy or forthcoming.

One cluster that had made the link among satellites had also developed outside links, in case of cluster 30 in Case Study 4. They had established routes and gained access to outside support in terms of resources and access to some good primary schools in the capital island, Male'. The lead teachers of cluster 30 said they had visited primary schools in the capital. They said that this initiative of the cluster head was exceedingly beneficial.

*For pupils* - Cluster heads felt that it was difficult to measure the outcomes of cluster system in terms of direct impact on individual pupils. This was, in part, because the outcomes were difficult to identify and to attribute to specific factors. In some of the cases in which the cluster was active the cluster heads said that there had been positive outcomes for pupils although no specific examples were cited as tangible proof. Some respondents had said that they felt that the pupils had benefited through cluster efforts.

It was suggested by the cluster heads that there was better organisation of teaching and learning in clusters where cluster activity was ongoing. In these circumstances pupils would have benefited by this input which could have lead to gains to better exam results.

These proposals and views of the cluster heads implied that there was a positive view about the cluster policy and that it would directly contribute to pupils. But at the same time showed no substantial evidence or outcomes to prove that these were in fact happening among the clusters. Instead there was an acceptance that there was the potential rather than actual.

## **Conclusions**

This chapter has addressed the antecedents, processes and outcomes found within the clusters in the Maldives. For antecedents there were no differences of opinion on why and how the policy was introduced. The majority of cluster heads said they had been inactive in

implementing the cluster policy and gave several reasons for this as reported in the Case Studies in Chapter 5.

Of the eighteen AEC cluster heads interviewed just two of them said they had been working with the satellite schools with visits and follow-on requests. These were the heads of Cluster 2 and Cluster 3 from Case Study 3. Their reasons for this involvement were personal interest and they wanted to help the satellite schools. However, they too said that the circumstances of their work were not conducive as there were many limitations in terms of resources, communications and travel. Moreover, lack of time to travel, finances to arrange the travel and the pressures of work were factors cited that made the cluster work difficult for all cluster heads. Even when these trips were made, according to an MoE official, *“it is only the administrative aspects which are quickly perused and that isn’t enough to make an input on the teaching learning programme”*. Hence the objectives of the cluster policy were far from being met.

Although improved communication and relationships between schools were desired outcomes of cluster activity, they appear to be by-products of the process of working together on specific tasks, suggests Lunt et al. (1988). That collaborative efforts lead to the formation of good relationships was not something unheard of but this was more an exception in the Maldives’ clusters. In the few clusters where some of these issues were overcome it was because of the activity of individual heads driven by their motivation to provide better outcomes for their pupils. It was found that for most of the cluster heads, the difficulties far outweighed the positives that could be had.

The above analysis showed the complexities in the Maldives cluster context and policy. What this study found had similarities to the findings of Lunt et al. (1988) in that the role of the co-ordinator, a sense of ownership, effectiveness, size and complexity were factors deemed important in the continuation of cluster relationships over time. Likewise, the

derailment of initial efforts when the co-ordinator moved on, the cluster heads lack of commitment to what the policy sought to achieve and having very little support from the MoE brought to light that the majority of schools were unable and inactive in following the cluster policy.

Therefore, finding ways of overcoming these barriers would be important, in order to strengthen the education system. The challenges that exist due to disparities between the community schools and the government schools continue. At present there seems to be very little which the cluster heads and lead schools could do to help develop satellite schools and bridge this divide. It does seem apparent that the MoE has to address these very issues, as there is a continued need to address the disparities.

In 2004 five years on since the cluster policy was introduced, the policy was no longer being followed in about 80% of the clusters. There was just a small pocket of clusters where the policy was thriving. There was a consensus view however, on the acceptance of the usefulness of such a policy and a need for a systemic drive in improving schools. That such a policy can be instrumental for sharing limited resources and that it can be applied and made to work seemed an acceptable view for most. This recognition by new heads and island chiefs that clustering does have the potential as a tool for promoting school improvement goes some way in suggesting that a second attempt may be viewed differently. At the same time it must be said that the economic situation in the country has not changed and those infrastructure barriers and resource barriers still exist. While there may be a need for a policy that would address the need to improve the provision in community schools there has to be a review in how and what changes have to be sought in order that a newer version can be any more successful.

Chapter 7 draws together the main findings of this study based on the rationale given in the introduction, the implementation process and the impact of school clusters as evident from an exploration and analysis of the Maldives cluster network.

## CHAPTER 7

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

#### Introduction

This final chapter draws together the salient threads running through the study, summing up the main findings of the research, and providing conclusions on consideration of the research aims. (These aims are on Page 12). The research sought to investigate the cluster policy through stakeholder perceptions to explore the rationale for introduction, effectiveness of implementation and impact of the cluster policy in the Maldives.

This chapter also reflects on my learning and professional development during the research process and on the significance of it for me as a would be policy maker with responsibility for improving schools.

In Chapter 1 I introduced the reader to the purpose and aims of study and to the cluster policy, followed in Chapter 2 by a general background to the context of the Maldives where the policy was set. Chapter 3 formed a literature review of the concept and phenomenon of school clusters and included examples of clusters. I then discussed the methodological approaches adopted in the context in the conduct of the study which adopted a qualitative case study approach, based on a holistic view of the cluster policy – from its rationale its introduction and implementation processes to its impact as perceived by some of the stakeholders. Four multi-site case studies provided an in-depth view illuminating and interpreting the context and experiences of the stakeholders and Chapter 5 is a portrayal of these multi-site case studies. Chapter 6 analysed the research data, addressed research questions.

## **The cluster policy – rationale, implementation and impact**

The findings from the previous two chapters suggest that the rationale underpinning the cluster policy was: a) to improve standards in community schools through greater efficiency in management and supervision of these schools and b) a response to demands of the atoll chiefs for better resources and support for community schools. The study suggested that the need for a response to improve standards in community schools had become urgent by the time the decision was made to introduce clustering.

Some of the policy objectives indicated that the cluster system was intended to address issues of equity and the disparities between the community schools and the government schools by improving the conditions and quality of the community schools. To achieve those objectives and, to make the cluster function, a number of interrelated intractable issues should have been addressed at the outset. The central issues included questions about: a) how to share finances, human resources and equipment with community schools without jeopardising standards in existing government schools; b) who, within the cluster structure, should be accountable and have responsibility for budgets and managing the day to day running of the satellite schools; c) what would be the arrangements for in-service or sharing of best practice; d) which of the many needs of the community schools should be given priority, e.g. building better school facilities or providing curriculum materials or training the teachers? These questions were not well conceptualised in the formulation and planning processes hence the policy implementation became untenable with the result that the disparities between government and community schools continued. For example, it is a sad reality that the very poor continue to pay fees for basic schooling and to use facilities with inadequate standards of teaching whilst the affluent attend better performing schools which are fully funded by the government. The cluster schools (both the lead school and satellite schools) needed much more support from the government for collaborative sharing of expertise and resources to become a reality, and to improve their chances of achieving the

objectives of the cluster policy. Hence suggest that the cluster policy, when introduced, had the features of a rushed decision.

The study found that the cluster heads were largely unable to implement the policy because they lacked the necessary training, resourcing and support to overcome the challenging circumstances. The frequency of turnover of head teachers only exacerbated the problem. Over time the cluster heads had reached the conclusion that it was not important whether or not they implemented the cluster policy. No demands were made of those who did not follow the policy, by MoE and those heads who tried to continue with the policy did not get any recognition for their efforts. All in all, across the country, the policy seemed to have been abandoned, except for small pockets where the cluster head was highly motivated in implementing the policy. This was unsurprising given that, as found by this study, the MoE representatives agreed that the policy was challenging to implement and sustain, and admitted that it was no longer resourced or monitored by them.

It seemed that satellite schools were expected to remain within their cluster over the long term, as a means of overcoming or reducing problems caused by a lack of resources. However, the study found that satellite schools were in fact choosing to move out of the cluster, as soon as they became large enough to change their status and gain a headmaster. This was because given the conditions they worked in, without easy access to the cluster head through communication or direct contact just by clustering the schools difficulties, were not eased in any significant way. The raised expectations through this policy only damaged local working relationships as some satellite school lead teachers concluded that the cluster heads were ineffective as they were not able to meet the demands made by the satellite schools.

Harber and Davies (1997), in discussing the developing world, found that schools were at times hesitant to receive ideas from other schools, unless the people involved understood

clearly what they could gain from it. The low-key introduction of clustering, without efforts to directly engage key people in the schools or to explain the intended workings of the cluster arrangements, failed to create a supportive climate for collaboration and sharing. Persuading people to change their working practices requires leadership, at the local level and within individual schools (Lunt et al. 1988, Hopkins 2001). Although the cluster policy was about improving community schools provision through sharing resources and learning from best practice, in the Maldives it had failed to be attractive to the community schools. There were no effective arrangements for making it functional. There were a few exceptions such as Cluster 30 in Case Study 4 and Clusters 2 and 3 in Case study 3. With the exception of Cluster 30 the conditions were favourable and the situation was unusual when compared to the rest. Here schools were on one single island in close proximity over land to each other, and were direct feeder schools unlike other schools on separate islands divided by water and without easy access to travel.

The study found that the biggest problems for the community schools stem from a lack of resources. In conducting the study it was found that there was a lack of clarity or transparency about how the MoE and government decide the overall budget for the education sector. I was unable find this out how much funding was allocated to each school. There was no established formula for funding. There was no definite way of finding out how much the MoE spent on each community school each year. Those in the community schools reported that they get very limited funds; have little power or influence to obtain more money from MoE. There was little scope to raise income from the local community. They simply did not have the money to get better teachers and or more teaching resources. It was also clear from the study that the government schools, which were cluster lead schools, had funding problems in terms of meeting their own needs. So, without additional resources they were bound to have problems meeting the needs of the satellite schools. How the Government decides the overall education budget and its allocation between schools; what it sees as the

priorities for improvement; and its longer-term goals for education all need further study. But it seems clear from my study that a failure to approach clustering as part of a strategic programme for educational improvement, played a large part in its relative ineffectiveness in the Maldives.

Another contributing factor in the failure of the cluster policy was the fact that the schools were not provided with a conceptual framework that could enable them to function as a cluster on a common platform. The means to link each school with the other was insufficiently conceptualised against the limitations of infrastructure within the context. The lack of participants' voice as active implementers of the policy not being worked into the planning agenda also left gaps in the implementation. A functional plan on what and how the clusters would act was lacking. Katyanagi (2002:26) in expressing Bredenberg's (2000) views says 'that school clusters need technical content to get out of the surface structure definitions of clustering, otherwise it would become a "paper cluster".' 'Paper clusters' were the case for a number of the clusters in the Maldives.

The case studies given in Chapter 5 addressed my research aim of – exploring the operation of the cluster policy in practice through four case studies. The conclusions formed from the case studies regarding the cluster policy were that of the 11 clusters visited in the four case studies, only 1 cluster appeared to be operating as a functional cluster. Two others had some factors favourable in Case Study 3 where the heads of clusters had shown some commitment and the right attitude. Even in these clusters though, the heads had said that they found the policy difficult to sustain without the necessary resources and training. The other eight clusters appeared to be paper clusters.

The research questions were further examined in Chapter 6 by interviewing a range of stakeholders (13 heads of clusters and 7 policy makers). The final aim was to begin to develop an understanding of 'best practice' of the cluster policy as perceived by cluster

heads and how this might be disseminated was also discussed. It was found that the 'best practice' was about building capacity in terms of physical and human resources and managing schools effectively and how these best practice, could be disseminated. Without the cluster policy there was no means for dissemination.

On the whole, the study found the cluster policy was under-conceptualised. In the majority of clusters the policy had not functioned. My reservations, as discussed before, stem from the way in which it was introduced and implemented. It did seem that the concept of 'clustering' was imported from abroad and adopted as policy with little evidence that those introducing the policy considered the full implications of what the policy entailed in order to function effectively. Or it was a feasible policy considering the geography, the infrastructure in communications and travel as well as the capacity within the existing education system in terms of resources both human and material in the Maldives. Seem to have not been considered.

The two member-team in-charge of the policy write up process was found to have had no training in policy formulation or expertise or knowledge of clustering. Haddad and Demsky (1995), termed this type of policy action, the 'acting out approach' where the policy maker seeks only to adjust present difficulties rather than to anticipate future problems a practice that promotes 'incremental improvement' (1995:32). If this was, in fact the motivation behind the cluster policy, that might explain the low profile way in which it was introduced and implemented and the diminishing support it subsequently received from the MoE and the cluster heads over the six years since its adoption.

One of the real difficulties in finding out more on this policy was the limited documentation. This, as I said previously, is not unusual for the Maldives. The handbook is a comprehensive document and it represents a step forward with regard to documentation, as policies are not always compiled in a handbook. Another limitation was that I was unable to get an interview

from the Minister at the time Dr. Mohamed Latheef (who had since moved to a posting overseas). He was the architect of the policy. All four other key officials who had direct involvement with this policy no longer worked at the Ministry (although two of them gave their views in the interview). These limitations and the fact that the numbers of cluster heads involved in these interviews were proportionately higher their voice does dominate in this study.

### **Clustering – A Wider World View**

My interpretation of the evidence reported in Chapters 5 and 6 has been informed by the model of school clustering discussed in Chapter 3 where the case of Namibia clusters, among others, provided a framework for a more equitable distribution of educational resources, and for systemic improvement of schools. Certainly schools on their own, especially in isolated rural settings, do not have the expertise or capacity to improve without much needed extra resources. The concept of sharing resources in expertise and material and working together towards improvement is what is so exciting about this model. This view was supported by almost all those interviewed in the study as being potentially progressive.

As discussed in the literature review, sharing good practice through collaborative means had been tried and tested and justified by several examples in different school systems around the world, and examples from the UK were discussed. To make a difference in schools would involve making change in the classroom. That would mean developing teachers' know-how and giving them the necessary skills. It was clear from the literature review that without such development a change could not be made. Just expecting teachers to bring about change while working on their own, learning from books or an instruction manual, is never going to be enough. There needs to be ongoing communication among practitioners regarding what works where and why, and considering how the underlying factors in different settings could be applied to local practice. Such discussions should be provided as part of any

implementation. This can be achieved most effectively through planned in-service training and professional development programmes with continuous support and adequate incentives from the education authorities (see for example MacGilchrist, Myers and Reed 2004; Nias, Southworth and Campbell 1992; Harris 2002 for some examples in the UK education system, and Dittmar et al. 2002; Aga Khan Foundation 2004 a & b for examples of Kenya and Namibia). Without such support there can be no real change in practice at classroom level.

In the study I found that there were many similarities between the education system of Namibia and the Maldives, although there were a number of significant differences between the two. Hence I would briefly bring these aspects into this discussion. In Namibia, where the clustering model appears to have been effective in achieving educational improvement, a crucial factor was that they undertook a comprehensive overhaul of the organisation of the system. They moved from a centralised system to a decentralised system, which required changes in the way the Namibian MoE worked and had to restructure and reorganise to keep in line with this new development. There were resources earmarked for running the cluster scheme and in that way each cluster lead school was given the extra facilities and staff to administer and run workshops, share resources and make teaching materials, and provide training opportunities for improving practice to all teachers in the cluster. Importantly, there was an international donor agency providing financial assistance and human resources in planning and overseeing the introduction and implementation of the cluster system for a period of over three years. Such an injection of resources, both human and financial, and the training programmes that was part of the introductory phase of the cluster initiative were key to making the Namibia cluster schools policy an effective one. It does seem that this can be a way forward for the Maldives education system to follow.

## **Conditions for effective clusters**

This study suggests that for clustering to be effective in improving schools and education systems there have to be certain conditions in place. Such as those identified (on Page 47), which had similarities to those indicated by Lunt et al. (1988) and Hopkins et al. (2003) in their studies. The all-encompassing of these were the conditions suggested by Hopkins, which are: consistency of values and focus, clarity of structure, knowledge creation, utilisation and transfer, rewards related to learning, dispersed leadership and empowerment and adequate resources (Hopkins 2003:156).

My review of Namibia's cluster school experience (Dittmar et al. 2002), the Kenyan School Improvement Project reports (KENSIP Aga Khan Foundation 2004 a & b), and the study by Lunt et al. (1988) confirms that these factors are crucial to the effective running of collaborative schemes. Having studied the cluster policy within the Maldives, (as discussed in Chapter 6), it is clear that the Maldives approach lacked some of these factors and conditions.

The findings of this study regarding the Maldives cluster policy could be summed up as follows: There was no catalyst to drive the policy and to empower participants to make the changes necessary to deliver the cluster objectives in an ongoing systematic way. Soon after the introduction those key people who planned the policy had left MoE. There was no prior training for the cluster heads to help them understand the cluster policy, enable them to act in a leadership role and support them to manage the necessary changes effectively. There was a lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities, and some role overlap among the cluster leads, atoll chiefs and satellite school head teachers. Knowledge creation and transfer within cluster schools were limited again due to lack of skills among the teachers and the dearth of inertia or means to build capacity. There was a lack of arrangements for in-service training, no time off for professional development or fora for sharing good practice or support from

experts in school improvement and change management. There were no rewards or incentives to commensurate with the substantial additional workload in implementing the policy directives. Or aimed at encouraging teachers in the community schools to adopt new practices. The MoE had made little attempt to persuade the key cluster participants of the value and purpose of the policy, or to gain their support for the significant changes in local power relationships envisaged under the new arrangements for local budgetary decisions. There were no MoE monetary arrangements (especially since the first two years) to ensure implementation and longer term commitment to the objectives of the policy. These factors contributed to a lack of engagement with the policy among key participants. No attempt was made to ensure continuity of cluster heads. Therefore, cluster heads did not have time to get to know their schools and communities well enough, to identify common goals and values and to be able to focus on these. There were no additional resources – equipment, facilities, teachers, or funds earmarked for the cluster policy by the MoE other than a paltry sum allocated for transport costs in the first two years of the policy. There was no investment to overcome problems of communication among schools.

The overall conclusion, therefore, is that, although the concept of clustering schools for educational improvement purposes has been around for sometime for its potential benefits for school improvement, to be effective it is essential that initial planning addresses, at the outset, the structural, financial and change management issues that such collaborative arrangements will inevitably engender. This study suggests that the relative failure of the Maldives' cluster policy has been due to insufficient preparation, lack of trained people and suitable training and inadequate support for implementation.

### **A future approach to educational improvement in the Maldives**

The policy implications arising from the evidence and theoretical perspectives discussed in the last section which may be relevant to policy makers include the following:

1. What extra resources would need to be allocated for implementing the necessary changes? Where can the resources come from and how can they be financed? Is professional expertise needed for the planning and implementation phases? How can it be obtained – locally and /or overseas?
2. Can the Maldives' traditional model of top down directives work to deliver this sort of change? For example a model such as clustering requires stakeholder involvement from the outset, which would mean finding a mechanism for consultation that suits the social and political realities of the Maldives. There would be a need to develop ways to handle cultural change, and to build change management into the development process.
3. Is providing equity of educational opportunity the key issue for educational improvement in the Maldives? If so, what kind of system is necessary to provide this and how can this system be created and sustained over time? For example, should change be gradual through smaller scale projects or should there be comprehensive reform nationwide?

Based on the study, it does seem that a clear priority for the government should be in finding effective ways to improve the situation in the community schools. The indications from the study are also that capacity building (in terms of physical buildings, training of teachers and better teaching resources) should be key within such a priority. One or more of the leaders (either the atoll chiefs, the island chiefs or the lead teacher) should be held accountable for community schools. At present there are no means for collaborative peer support, for capacity building and no one is held to account regarding the state of the schools. Or its teaching learning programmes, or for the failure of policy such as the cluster policy. These conditions should change and the means for closer monitoring, transparency and accountability in governance should come to the fore.

A promise to provide access to good quality education for everyone has been an ongoing message of the present regime since assuming to power 27 years ago. However, large numbers of students still leave formal schooling ill equipped without the necessary qualifications to take up further education and training opportunities or find employment. Many people in the recent years are becoming vocal questioning the ability of the government to provide the education necessary for obtaining better life chances for more people (Ali 2003). After the Tsunami on the 26<sup>th</sup> of December 2004, when a third of the population was made homeless, rebuilding lives and homes have eclipsed educational quality for other priorities. Living conditions for many people are worse than before, the economy is on a downhill with tourism, - the main industry, - slow in picking up (NDMC 2005). These realities aggravate the present climate and foster insecurities.

Given the situation of the country, there is a dire need to rejuvenate the education system. Careful planning and a lot more resources need to be made available immediately and over the long-term. There is much evidence, from World Bank and other research, that poor quality schooling reduces local capacity for entrepreneurship and economic growth. For this reason many countries, including poorer countries - see investment in education as a high priority. In the context of Maldives, improving educational provision and bridging the disparities between government and community schools has to become a state priority. The examples of clustering policies in Namibia or Kenya or Cambodia show how this might be done effectively in developing situations such as the Maldives.

There is a clear need to improve the quality of the education provided in the Maldives especially in the community schools and further research is required to identify the best way forward. One such area of work should focus on a comparative evaluation of how developing countries spend their education budgets to provide more equitable access to good quality schooling. Another study should examine how isolated small communities can develop the means to communicate well in order to manage the education system effectively, identifying

ideas that can be fruitfully transferred to the Maldives. Another study should show how best practice in teaching and learning can be shared across schools and within a context where resources are limited. For example whether the potential for virtual clusters linked online, would be feasible.

The fact that the clustering policy introduced in 1999 has not delivered the intended improvements should not rule out a similar approach being taken in the future for educational change. Other projects to improve the Maldives education system over the past 20 years have made some valuable headway, and the lessons learnt from those initiatives and this study of the cluster policy could be used to develop fresh ideas on how to target the specific needs of the community schools. They show that external expertise and funding can be obtained to provide the necessary resources, i.e., human, financial, materials and, training to formulate and deliver a model that would suit the conditions and the context of the Maldives.

Over the past 20 years, three separate Education and Training Projects have been implemented with funding from the World Bank, and other smaller projects with funding from sources such as UNICEF, UNDP, ADB and specific country assistance programmes. These projects have made significant contributions in providing the education services and standards available in schools today. However, they have not specifically addressed the problem of how to bridge the gap between government and community schools. So there is still a need to address the objectives the cluster policy sought to achieve: promoting equity, improving quality, raising achievement, improving supervision, streamlining administration, reaching all pupils and providing a better quality for more than just the few.

This research opportunity has given me valuable insight into what exists in terms of the provision of education within the rural schools system in my country. It has also given me time to reflect, as well as to read about and learn from, what is happening in the context of

the Maldives and other countries with regard to school improvement at a system level. Having undertaken this research my own professional thinking had begun to change. From being a head of a school to moving into the Ministry, I have been offered a new position and in my new position at the MoE as Director of Education Development, I will have responsibility for making a difference to the situation at the system level. My experience of the EdD programme has shaped my thinking and given me confidence in facing up to some of the challenges before me. I have also gained a better understanding of the policy making process by talking with those involved in making the cluster policy. Previously, I believed that, whilst I might disagree with a particular government policy, it would no doubt have been carefully thought through by a number of people. My experiences of researching the origins of the cluster schools policy surprised me by showing that this was not necessarily the case. This has given me a more critical stance to policy than I would otherwise have had.

This research will add to the scarce research on education in the Maldives and, it will link to earlier research in school clusters and contribute to the body of knowledge about school clusters within developing countries - i.e. a case study of the Maldives cluster policy. In sum, clustering can provide a vision by which schools can move forward and this was a view backed by many stakeholders who felt the cluster model was a good means for school improvement. Yet as currently conceived in the Maldives and for the reasons explained in this study, it is unlikely on its own to lead to improvement.

I offer this study in the hope of making a positive difference to the quality of schooling at system level in the Maldives, in particular, focussing on the community schools. I intend to ensure that its findings can contribute to new policies that will build school capacity, and improve teaching and learning, so as to give students a better education, therefore, contribute positively to the lives of the young people across the Maldives. It is through these means that I see hope for shaping a better future for the people of the Maldives.

41,240 words.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1

#### GLOSSARY

*Atoll* – Usually is a natural grouping of islands, bordered by coral reefs. Some of the larger naturally formed atolls are divided into two for administrative purposes and are referred to as atoll too in the Maldives.

*Atoll Education Centre (AEC)* – A large government school located usually on the most populous island on the atoll, where formal education from 6-16 is provided.

*Atoll School* – A second, smaller often primary level government school on a second populous island in each atoll.

*Cluster in Maldives* – grouping (or iha) of 6-11 schools

*Lead School* – government school which community schools are clustered with.

*Satellite School* – community schools grouped within the cluster.

*Atoll Chief* – government elected representative for each atoll.

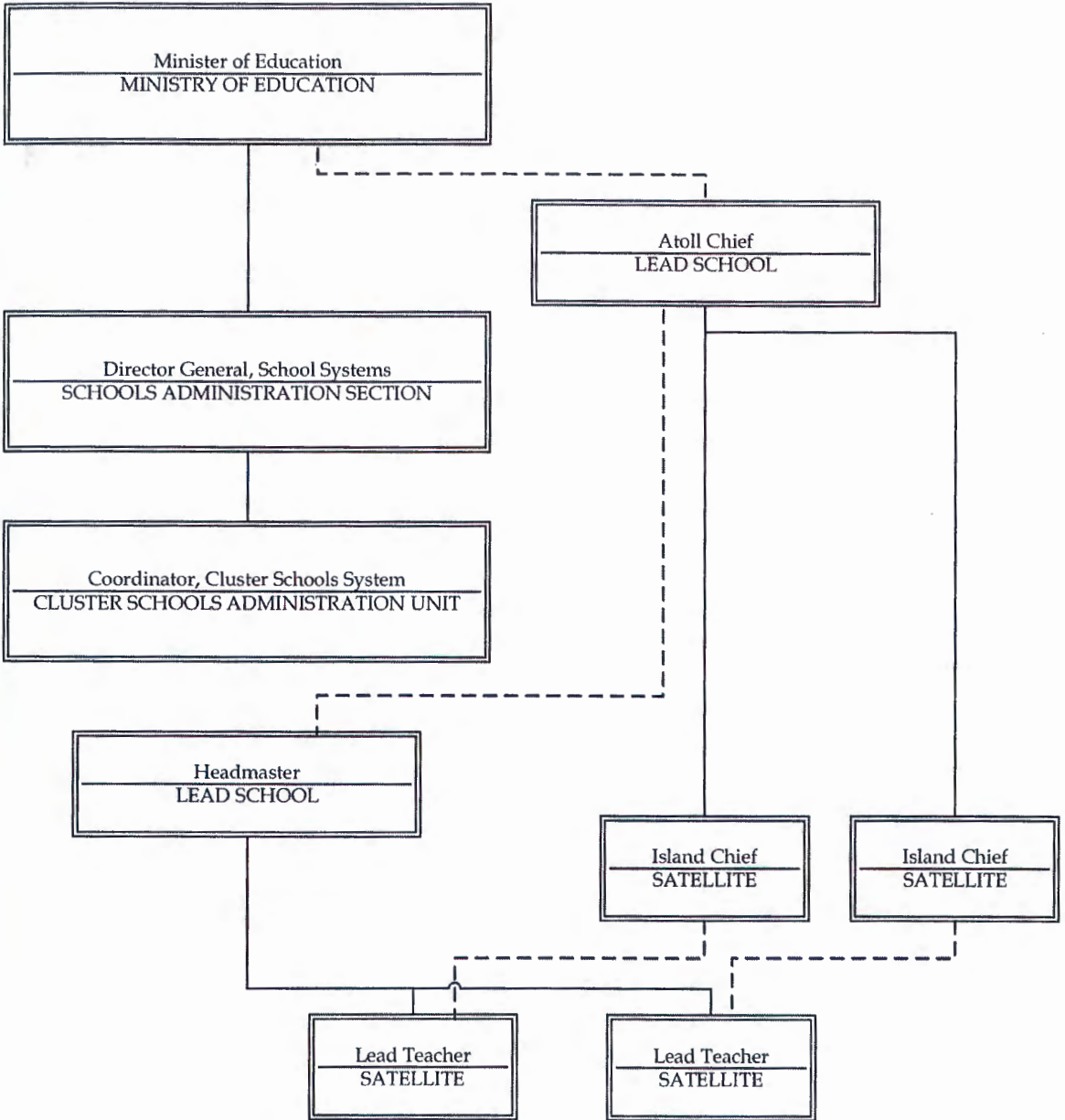
*Cluster Head* – head of a group of schools.

*Island Chief* – government elected representative on each island.

*Lead Teacher* – head of a community /satellite school

APPENDIX 2

ORGANATIONAL HIERARCHY - CLUSTER SYSTEM



Source: Derived from Cluster Policy Handbook (MoE 1999a:10)

## APPENDIX 3

### Interview Schedule

#### *Profile:*

Name:

Age:

Name of School and island:

No. of years experience as head of school:

Type of school -

Positions held in the past 3 years:

Educational background –

Academic

Professional Training

#### **Key Questions:**

- What is the cluster policy?
- Why was it introduced?
- How was it implemented?
- What are the barriers and constraints?

#### **Interview Questions**

1. What do you know about the cluster policy?

- How did you know of the policy?

- Are you familiar with the objectives of the policy?

- Are you aware of the CP handbook?

- Did you read the handbook?

2. Why do you think the cluster policy was introduced?

- What influences do you think shaped the policy?

- How was it planned to work?
- What has been the practice?
- The policy suggests in its objectives that it sets out to a), b) c ....  
do you think any of these objectives are being met?
- do you see the CP as a model for school improvement in the Maldives?

3. How was the policy implemented in your cluster?

- What is your experience?
- Would you say you are following the policy?
  - If yes what are your practices?
  - If not why not?

4. What are the difficulties or barriers of the policy?

- Do you think it is working in your cluster?
- Do you think there are changes as a result of this policy?
- How do you know if there has been a change?
  - What about practices in the satellite schools
  - Have they changed?
  - If yes how? If not why?
- Are there benefits for being the lead school?
- What about pupil performance: are academic results improving?
- How do you gauge improvement?

5. What would you think is 'good practice' within the cluster model?

- Do you think these are being put into practice within your cluster?

