

Small islands, significant solutions: Educational resilience in the Maldives during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract: Despite limited resources, Small Island Developing States (SIDS) have frequently shown exceptional resilience when confronting global challenges. Nevertheless, SIDS perspectives are often overshadowed in broader educational discussions. The Maldives presents a notable example of how a small island country adapted its educational system during COVID-19. This paper examines the Maldives' rapid approaches to maintaining educational continuity during school closures, emphasising digital readiness, community participation, and government programmes. The case study highlights the power of communal strength, personal relationships, and social connections in overcoming difficulties. It shows how unity, combined with informal networks, can establish a support structure that helps communities recover from crisis. The Maldives' experience provides insights for larger countries, showing that resilience stems from strategic planning and joint efforts, rather than size. Educational research can benefit from studying SIDS in comparative education contexts, and established platforms can help distribute SIDS research to broader audiences.

Keywords: community collaboration, COVID-19 response, digital learning, educational resilience, Maldives, Small Island Developing States (SIDS)

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Introduction

With their limited population and resources, Small Island Developing States (SIDS) have become essential to understanding some of the most pressing issues in the global context. Today, mainstream educational studies have much to gain from considering the experience of these countries that represent less than 1% of the world's population. The SIDS' experiences with global vulnerabilities, and their associated resilience, can help to inform policies and strategies for larger nations facing similar challenges. Yet, research shows that literature on SIDS is markedly absent in mainstream educational research (Jugessur and Ramessur, 2024), particularly studies highlighting various lessons that can be learned from the SIDS.

The Maldives, a SIDS, is an archipelago located in the Indian Ocean, crossing the Equator. The Maldives consists of 1190 coral islands, less than 1m above sea level, and of the country's total area, 99.99% is sea (Athif and Pimenidis, 2009), meaning that it is characterised as a large ocean state (LOS) (Hume et al., 2021). Despite its classification as a middle-income

country, the Maldives lacks a strong natural economic base and depends on income from the tourism and fisheries industries. The substantial reliance on imported goods results in a large percentage of the Maldives' revenue flowing overseas. This dependency on external markets makes the country susceptible to economic disruptions and natural disasters. The economic vulnerability was thoroughly tested during the COVID-19 pandemic, and this article explores how the Maldives responded effectively amid the uncertainties of a pandemic, unlike most countries worldwide, by ensuring educational continuity while maintaining all necessary precautions.

This paper aims to highlight the unique strategies of adaptation during crisis. The Maldives' response to the educational disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates how SIDS can address major challenges. By applying existing resources, capitalising on community cohesion, and showing systemic resilience, the country not only restarted its education system but in doing so created a model for other nations facing similar crises. These voices from SIDS offer a clearly defined survival and adaptation framework that other larger nations can adopt and can support the development trajectory of future international development targets (Crossley and Sprague, 2014).

Unity in crisis: The power of community collaboration in SIDS

The study of education in SIDS is not an isolated field but instead one that crosses and enhances various other disciplines. This connection becomes especially clear when examining the work of Veenendaal and Corbett (2015). Their argument emphasises the importance of small states in comprehending broader global patterns, particularly in democratisation. Small states, especially in the Pacific, Indian Ocean and Caribbean regions, have been historically underrepresented in research across disciplines. The Maldives, a typical SIDS, illustrates this research gap, highlighting the need for more thorough and inclusive research frameworks that encompass the distinct socio-educational contexts of geographically isolated societies.

Like many countries worldwide, the COVID-19 pandemic substantially disrupted education in the Maldives. This disruption affected over 91,000 students when schools closed for three months in 2020 (Muna et al., 2021). However, unlike most countries, the government's strategies to continue education during the lockdown, the mechanisms established to reach the student population, and the way community resources and actions combined, demonstrate the unity, harmony, and strengths of small communities and populations. The government's quick adaptation of its education system during COVID-19 provides evidence that SIDS can offer solutions to significant challenges when demonstrating resilience during a crisis.

The Maldives government acted promptly by introducing various remote learning strategies. One approach was *Telikilaas*, pre-recorded lessons broadcast on television for the entire nation via public broadcasting channels (Waseema et al., 2021), ensuring that even students without internet access could continue their education. The Maldives had already initialised a digitalisation strategy before COVID-19, equipping over 80% of public-school students with Android tablets before the pandemic (PSM News, 2018). This preparation allowed for a rapid shift to remote learning when schools closed in March 2020, particularly the widespread use of Google Classrooms. This shift was supported by telecommunications providers, who promptly offered various discounted and free data packages for students and teachers (Muna et al., 2021; Waseema et al., 2021). Furthermore, radio and social media were employed to deliver various school-based lessons. The use of existing technologies such as

television broadcasting and social media for education offer valuable lessons from the Maldives, particularly concerning the need to make proactive and strategic investments into diverse communication channels that prove beneficial during crises.

A key factor in the Maldives' educational recovery was the collective effort of teachers, parents, and the wider community. Teachers adapted quickly to new digital tools, parents assumed greater roles in their children's learning, local organisations provided resources to students in remote areas, and the government led professional development webinars for teachers. The Maldives managed its Education Response Plan for COVID-19 (MoE 2020), despite challenges such as limited internet connectivity, and differences in families' capacity to support at-home learning. In a small state, where close-knit communities are a strength, this level of collaboration played a crucial role in ensuring that no student was left behind (Muna and Shiyama, 2020). The Maldives demonstrated that when a nation unites around a shared goal, even the most challenging problems can be overcome.

Conclusion: a model of resilience for the world

This case shows that small states are not always constrained by their scale when addressing significant challenges. The Maldives' ability to adapt its education system to an unprecedented global crisis demonstrates how small nations can act strategically and respond quickly – providing valuable answers to the international community about resilience, adaptation, and unity. By combining early investments in digital infrastructure with creative solutions like televised lessons and strong community engagement, the Maldives not only maintained educational continuity but also reinforced the concept that resilience does not depend on size; it stems from strategy and solidarity.

Acknowledgements

We thank Emeritus Professor Michael Crossley, Professor of Comparative and International Education and Founding Director of the Education in Small States Research Group at the School of Education, University of Bristol, for his support in developing this paper.

Disclaimer

The authors declare no conflict of interest in writing this article.

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