



## **CSO Engagement: A Guidebook for Local Councils**

Local Government Authority & Maldives Institute of Local Governance (MILG)

Atoll Post Building

Boduthakurufaanu Magu

Malé, Republic of Maldives

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### **Authored by**

Fathimath Afshaan Latheef

### **Contributing Partner**

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# PREFACE

The Local Government Authority presents this handbook to guide local councils in engaging with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in the Maldives. It provides frameworks for effective partnerships for local councils with CSOs in strengthening local governance.

The Maldives Constitution and the Decentralisation Act establish the framework for decentralised administration in the country. The 2019 amendments to the Act transformed local governance, significantly expanding council authority and responsibilities. This broadened mandate opens promising opportunities, empowering councils to strategically leverage partnerships and resources to maximise community impact.

Civil Society Organisations serve as crucial partners in realising these governance objectives through their deep community understanding and established public trust. They bring distinct advantages to the collaboration through specialised expertise in crucial areas like environmental protection and social development, alongside their proven ability to mobilise resources and citizen participation. These strengths complement councils' statutory authority, creating opportunities for more effective and responsive governance.

This handbook provides practical frameworks and tools for building productive council-CSO partnerships. It draws from successful experiences within the Maldives and relevant international examples. The handbook covers essential collaboration areas, including policy development, capacity building, emergency response coordination, transparency initiatives, and conflict resolution. It provides step-by-step guidance on these key areas. The handbook also addresses critical aspects such as community engagement and advocacy partnerships, while offering concrete tools for strengthening accountability and civic participation. The implementation guidelines are designed to be adaptable, recognising that each council operates within its unique local context and may need to modify approaches based on their specific community needs, available resources, and local priorities.

We thank the councils, CSOs, and stakeholders who contributed their experiences and insights to this handbook. Their input demonstrates how collaborative approaches can strengthen local governance and improve community outcomes. We extend our particular gratitude to The Asia Foundation for their technical support and guidance in developing this resource.

Councils, as the drivers of local development, are uniquely positioned to understand and serve their communities and are essential to building a more prosperous Maldives. This handbook aims to help councils build strong CSO partnerships to better fulfil this vital mandate.

Local Government Authority

Republic of Maldives

# INTRODUCTION

This handbook is designed to empower local councils and civil society organizations (CSOs) in the Maldives to form effective partnerships that strengthen community governance, increase transparency, and address local needs through collaboration and cooperation. Local governments and CSOs have ample scope and opportunity to work jointly towards addressing complex social, economic, and environmental challenges, especially in a geographically dispersed island nation state. By leveraging the strengths of each sector and building trust of the community in their partnerships, councils and CSOs have the potential to harness efficient use of available resources, foster innovative solutions, enhance citizen engagement, and build more resilient and responsive communities.

The Decentralization Act of the Maldives mandates local councils with the provision of essential services, and the formulation and implementation of policies that impact residents' daily lives. CSOs possess clarity on community-specific needs and grassroots perspectives and are able to utilize resources that might not always be accessible to local councils or other state institutions. While local councils have authority over governance and policy matters, CSOs are often bolstered by public confidence and trust. Effective partnerships between local governments and CSOs will ensure greater engagement of the public in their programs, wider representation in planning, design and implementation of projects, an additional resource for service-delivery as well as to fill in gaps in areas where local government might have had shortcomings.

This handbook provides a framework for local councils to engage with CSOs, offering strategies, practical tools, and real-world examples that illustrate best practices. The handbook is aimed at helping local councils and CSOs embark on greater collaboration to foster participatory governance, while amplifying community voices and driving meaningful, positive change.

# PURPOSE

This handbook is designed to guide local councils in building meaningful, productive relationships with CSOs. By encouraging open dialogue, shared goals, and transparent processes, local councils can tap into the strengths of civil society, benefiting from their insights, resources, and community trust. Through practical strategies, case studies, and best practices, this guide aims to equip local councils with the tools they need to engage effectively with CSOs, fostering partnerships that strengthen both governance and community well-being.

# THE MALDIVES CONTEXT

## **Evolving Decentralization**

The 2019 amendments to the Decentralization Act marked a significant shift in local governance, giving local councils unprecedented authority over their jurisdictions, including ownership of land and resources, enhanced financial autonomy of councils, mandated 33% women's representation in council seats, and established Women's Development Committees (WDCs) as legal entities. These enhanced powers and responsibilities present both opportunities and challenges for local councils, requiring strategic engagement with other stakeholders, including civil society partners.

## **Environmental Urgency**

Local councils must adapt to unprecedented environmental challenges that threaten their communities. Rising sea levels, coastal erosion, and increasing extreme weather events pose existential threats to island communities, while coral reef degradation affects both fishing livelihoods and tourism potential. Councils must rise to the challenge of protecting vulnerable groups, including elderly residents, those with limited mobility, and economically disadvantaged households. Traditional top-down approaches are no longer sufficient; councils need to adapt by fostering community buy-in, leveraging local knowledge, and developing innovative solutions that balance development needs with environmental protection.

## **Fiscal Constraints**

Local councils must adapt to a challenging economic climate marked by reduced national budget allocations, growing service delivery costs, and limited revenue-generating opportunities. Councils must rise to these fiscal pressures by developing strategic resource sharing approaches, maintaining transparent communication about service changes, and creating innovative service delivery models. The situation demands that councils adapt their financial management practices and rise to the challenge of maintaining essential services through creative partnerships and resource mobilization.

## **Demographic Shifts**

The Maldives is experiencing significant demographic changes that pose complex challenges for local councils. In the atolls, councils must adapt to increasing depopulation as young people migrate to urban centres, leaving behind aging populations, diminished workforces, and evolving community ties as families separate. Malé City Council faces the opposite challenge of rapid population growth from internal migration, creating intense socioeconomic pressures and increased demands on public services. For both atoll and city councils, these demographic shifts require proactive planning, new service delivery models, and creative approaches to maintain community well-being with changing populations.

## **Alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**

With only five years remaining to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, local councils play a vital role in advancing these global targets. As the Maldives works towards its SDG commitments, councils are well-positioned to transform national pledges into tangible local action. The SDGs intersect deeply with council mandates and current challenges across environmental protection, social development, and economic resilience. Local councils need practical support to translate these global goals into local solutions, making CSO partnerships essential for programme implementation, community engagement, and resource mobilization.

## **Why Now?**

These pressing contextual challenges make this handbook particularly timely and vital for local councils. As councils work to adapt to and rise to unprecedented challenges, the need for effective partnerships with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) has never been greater.

## **Growing Focus on Localization**

There is increasing recognition that local solutions work best for community challenges. This shift toward community-led development reflects both global best practice and local demands for more participatory governance. Communities expect to be active partners in development, not passive recipients of services. This localization trend aligns with growing demands for transparency and accountability in local governance.

## **Increasing Community Expectations and Service Demands**

Maldivians are increasingly vocal about their expectations for transparent, participatory, and responsive local governance. Communities not only demand greater involvement in decisions that affect their lives but also expect higher quality and more diverse services from their councils. Complex social issues, from gender equality, youth unemployment, to elderly care, require sophisticated responses that exceed traditional council capabilities. The public increasingly expects councils to address these challenges while maintaining core services, despite resource constraints.

## **Evolving Communication Environment**

The current media and communication landscape demands more sophisticated engagement for truth and accuracy. With the rapid spread of information—and misinformation—through social media and other channels, councils must adapt their communication strategies. CSO partnerships can help councils navigate this complex environment, ensuring accurate information reaches communities and facilitating meaningful two-way dialogue that builds trust and understanding.

## **Growing CSO Capability**

The Maldivian civil society sector has matured significantly, with organizations developing specialized expertise in areas crucial to these challenges—from environmental protection, gender and youth, disaster preparedness, disability services and support to rule of law. As councils face mounting pressures with limited resources, CSOs' experience in mobilising

community action and delivering targeted programmes becomes increasingly valuable.

## **Enhanced Local Authority Amid Resource Constraints**

Recent legislative changes have empowered local councils with greater decision-making authority and resource control. However, the additions come amidst significant funding pressures. Councils must find efficient service delivery models and creative approaches to stretch limited resources. Partnerships with CSOs offer practical ways to exercise these new powers while ensuring community needs are met through collaborative, cost-effective approaches.

## **Complex Challenges Requiring Coordinated Response**

The scale and interconnected nature of current challenges—from climate resilience to fiscal and economic obstacles to demographic shifts—demand responses that draw on collaboration with community partners. No single entity can effectively address these issues alone. Through partnerships with CSOs, councils can develop community-driven solutions while optimising limited resources through strategic collaboration. These partnerships enable councils to create more responsive services and build more resilient, adaptable communities. Ultimately, such collaborations strengthen local governance through truly participatory approaches that reflect community needs and aspirations.

The chapters that follow provide detailed guidance for local councils on understanding the CSO landscape in the country, establishing partnerships, and stewarding productive collaborations that serve community needs.

## **Section 1: The Rationale for Engaging with CSOs**

## 1. Good Governance, Accountability, and Transparency

CSOs can promote good governance by ensuring the accountability of state institutions and advocating for transparency in decision-making and resource allocation. They can advocate for anti-corruption laws and reforms, pressure state institutions to disclose information regarding expenditure, revenue, and budget, and urge for ethical, efficient utilization of state resources. CSOs, working independently or as a collective, can bring about open government initiatives, provide tools for whistleblowers, and encourage citizens to report corruption. Local governments can garner the trust and confidence of their communities by supporting these efforts of CSOs to promote good governance.

Key functions:

- Monitoring and evaluation of government programs
- Advocacy for anticorruption reforms
- Implementation of social audits
- Support for information disclosure
- Oversight of public resource utilization

Benefits for councils:

- Enhanced public trust
- Improved accountability
- Better resource management
- Strengthened transparency & greater policy compliance

**Janagraaha** in India is a civil society organization working towards reducing and preventing corruption, improving urban governance, and ensuring accountability in public services through citizen engagement and advocacy.

Janagraaha advocates for the effective use of the RTI Act and assists citizens in requesting information from public authorities. The organization collaborates with government bodies to advocate for reforms in urban policies. They also provide research and recommendations to improve governance frameworks, such as the Municipal Finance Reforms or Urban Local Body empowerment.

The organization initiated the and MyCity, advocate MyBudget for project to help residents budget allocations and advocate for their needs. These platforms are integrated with government initiatives, allowing citizens to provide feedback, report issues, or contribute to city planning, making the budget process more transparent and accountable. They also collaborate with government agencies to organize forums and discussions that bring together citizens, civil society, and public officials to address corruption and improve accountability in governance. It produces studies such as the Annual Survey of India's City-Systems (ASICS), which provides insights into the systemic challenges faced by cities and how governments can address them.

## 2. Community Engagement and Social Cohesion

CSOs facilitate citizen participation in governance, thereby promoting inclusivity in dialogue and policymaking processes. Encouraging the say of more members of the community fosters bottom-up planning and implementation in development projects, ensuring increased ownership of the community as well. Civil society plays an integral role in nurturing community ties and trust, encouraging collaboration between citizens and local authorities. CSOs are often capable of identifying and addressing prevalent social issues that might have been overlooked or underestimated by state authorities.

Engagement mechanisms:

- Monitoring and evaluation of government programs
- Advocacy for anticorruption reforms
- Implementation of social audits
- Support for information disclosure
- Oversight of public resource utilization

Benefits for councils:

- Stronger community networks
- Enhanced citizen participation
- Better issue identification
- Increased community ownership
- Improved public dialogue

**Folkets Hus och Parker (People's Houses and Parks)** in Sweden is an organization representing a network of community centers that foster local governance and civic engagement across the country. The Swedish government and local municipalities provide some of the funding to maintain and develop these community centers, support cultural programming, and to conduct educational workshops and activities for young people, in partnership with the government's educational bodies.

These cultural centers encourage citizen participation through forums, workshops, and cultural events, providing a space for community members to discuss local issues and engage with their local governments. The organization collaborates with municipalities to develop strategies that promote citizen engagement, and partnering with local authorities, they work to create policies and initiatives that enhance community participation and strengthen democratic governance.

### 3. Resource Development

Civil society organizations are often well-positioned to collaborate with local governments and state institutions, donor agencies, corporate partners, and other similar organizations to mobilize resources for the betterment of the community. As identified in UNDP's Comprehensive Mapping of the Maldivian Civil Society, CSOs possess clarity on community-specific needs and grassroots perspectives and are able to utilize resources that might not always be accessible to local councils or other state institutions. While local councils have authority over governance and policy matters, CSOs are often bolstered by public confidence and trust.

Resource capabilities:

- Securing diverse funding sources
- Establishing corporate partnerships
- Building donor relationships
- Managing community contributions
- Coordinating multi-stakeholder resources

Benefits for councils:

- Access to alternative funding
- Cost-effective programming
- Sustainable resource models
- Strategic partnerships
- Efficient resource utilization

**The Akshaya Patra Foundation** in India operates one of the largest school meal programs globally, providing nutritious meals to over 2 million schoolchildren daily across 14 states in India. The foundation is the implementing partner of the government's initiative Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS), aimed at improving school enrollment, attendance, and children's nutrition. The government supplies subsidized grains through the Food Corporation of India (FCI) under the MDMS. Additional financial assistance is provided for cooking costs, which is supplemented by funds raised by Akshaya Patra from private donors and corporate partners.

They have established centralized, cost-effective kitchens for large-scale meal preparation and distribution in partnership with local and state governments and have partnered with celebrities to garner attention to their operations. They also utilize their reach via digital platforms to draw individual donations and crowdfunding.

In addition to the midday meal program, government bodies and the foundation partner on research in children's nutrition and to conduct supplementary programs, such as nutrition education, which align with government health and education initiatives.

## 4. Advocacy for Marginalized Groups

Some CSOs are established to promote and protect the interests and rights of vulnerable and marginalized groups. They do this by educating authorities and the public on the needs of these groups, pushing for policy reforms to cater to their needs, researching and collecting data on issues facing such groups, and enabling platforms for them to air grievances, concerns and policy reform and recommendations. Supporting local CSOs in government engagement outside the capital could enhance their impact in governance work.

Focus areas:

- Education and awareness building
- Data collection and research
- Platform creation for marginalized voices
- Needs assessment and documentation
- Stakeholder engagement

Benefits for councils:

- Better understanding of marginalized needs
- Evidence-based advocacy
- Enhanced representation
- Improved service access
- Empowered communities

**Refugee Rights Turkey** is an organization that collaborates with the Turkish government and international agencies to support and advocate for the rights of refugees and asylum seekers. This has been a crucial partnership as Turkey hosts one of the largest refugee populations in the world, particularly from Syria. The organization collaborates with the Turkish Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) to ensure compliance with the 1951 Refugee Convention and domestic asylum laws.

Turkish government works with the organization to train law enforcement officers, immigration officials, and judicial personnel on refugee rights and best practices in refugee protection, to advocate for improvements in refugee protection policies, such as access to healthcare, education, and legal employment for refugees and asylum seekers and to provide support services such as psychosocial counselling. The government and the organization working together have strengthened Turkey's asylum framework by promoting alignment with international legal standards and have enhanced the capacity of government systems to handle refugee cases effectively and humanely.

## 5. Service Delivery

CSOs can engage in service delivery, complementing government efforts and filling gaps in service provision. While state reluctance to authorize such services might exist, stemming from concerns over quality, standards and safety measures, and sustainability, nevertheless, in an island nation like the Maldives, this might be an effective avenue to explore, especially in smaller communities. State machinery often formulates and implements national policies that might not address the most pertinent issues of a specific community.

Service areas:

- Essential service provision
- Gap identification and filling
- Quality service standards
- Local needs assessment
- Community-based delivery

Benefits for councils:

- Extended service reach
- Specialized expertise
- Local context adaptation
- Quality assurance
- Community accessibility

**Aman Foundation** in Pakistan focuses on healthcare, education, and emergency medical services for underserved populations, where healthcare access is limited for low-income families. One of its impactful initiatives was the Aman Ambulance service. The government of Pakistan collaborates with Aman Ambulance to strengthen emergency response systems, especially in urban centers like Karachi, and this initiative provides affordable, high-quality emergency medical response and transport. This was essential for vulnerable communities, where access to emergency medical care can be lifesaving. In December 2018, the Sindh government and the Patients Aid Foundation (PAF) signed an agreement to take over the Aman Ambulance service and was renamed Sindh Rescue and Medical Services.

The government of Pakistan also collaborated with Aman Foundation during the COVID-19 pandemic where the organization was able to support vaccination drives, emergency medical response, and community health education.

## 6. Solutions through Innovation

CSOs can utilize novel ideas and approaches, promoting innovative solutions to community challenges. State machinery often formulates and implements national policies that might not address the most pertinent issues of a specific community. In a geographically scattered country like the Maldives, such initiatives can play a significant role in attending to issues that might have garnered insufficient attention and notice. Through innovative methods, they can reach underserved populations and create solutions tailored to local contexts.

Innovation approaches:

- Novel program design
- Technology integration
- Adaptive solutions
- Local context customization
- Pilot initiatives

Benefits for councils:

- Context-specific solutions
- Efficient service models
- Community-appropriate methods
- Scalable programs
- Localized impact

The local government of the City of Cape Town partnered with **Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading (VPUU)** in South Africa to improve urban safety and socio-economic development in marginalized communities by combining innovative design and participatory governance. VPUU developed Safe Node Areas, where community members actively participated in designing urban spaces that promote safety and inclusivity, such as improved lighting, pedestrian-friendly pathways, and public spaces that encourage community interactions and deter crime. Residents were trained and empowered to manage and maintain infrastructure, creating a sense of ownership and responsibility. VPUU and the City of Cape Town used data analytics to identify hotspots for violence and prioritize interventions, and surveys and crime data were combined with community input to tailor solutions for each area. VPUU introduced digital tools for real-time communication between local authorities, service providers, and residents to report issues and ensure quick responses.

As a result of this collaboration, urban hubs were designed combining schools, health clinics, libraries, and recreational facilities in a single space, where services were accessible safely and conveniently. The overall impact of the project was a significant reduction in crime.

## 7. Conflict Resolution

CSOs are well-positioned in most instances to mediate, foster dialogue, and seek avenues for agreeable solutions in matters of disagreement and conflict within communities, or between communities and local or national governments. CSOs can also encourage a culture of dialogue to settle disputes peacefully through workshops and trainings. They can be trusted, unbiased moderators of negotiations, conduct peacebuilding and community healing activities in cases of prolonged, ongoing conflict, and offer support and help to victims in post conflict situations.

Mediation roles:

- Dispute resolution facilitation
- Dialogue promotion
- Peace-building activities
- Conflict prevention
- Post-conflict support

Benefits for councils:

- Peaceful dispute resolution
- Reduced community tensions
- Sustainable peace
- Community healing
- Enhanced stability

The Northern Ireland Executive, the devolved government of Northern Ireland, collaborated with the **Community Relations Council (CRC)**, a civil society organization, to implement strategies for conflict resolution, peace building, and improving relations between divided communities, with the CRC acting as a mediator, facilitator, and advocate for reconciliation efforts. The CRC worked with the government to support the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement (1998), which laid the groundwork for peace and political stability. The local government funded CRC initiatives through programs like Peace IV, and the CRC provided grants to local community groups for projects aimed at reducing intercommunal tensions and promoting cultural understanding.

The CRC partnered with local councils to support cross-community initiatives such as shared housing projects, community festivals, and joint economic ventures to foster open communication and understanding. Local governments worked closely with the CRC to monitor social cohesion and provide research-based recommendations for policy adjustments and collaborated in conducting surveys and studies on intercommunity relations to measure the impact of peacebuilding initiatives.

## 8. International Engagement

CSOs report on local human rights issues to international bodies such as agencies of the United Nations, to promote states' adherence to international charters and conventions. CSOs also attend international forums, representing local voices on matters like good governance, climate change, human rights, and sustainable development. In the governance sector specifically, 50 percent of CSOs operate nationally, 25 percent have international reach, and 20 percent work at the community or island level.

Global connections:

- International reporting
- Forum participation
- Global networking
- Cross-border collaboration
- Knowledge exchange

Benefits for councils:

- International visibility
- Global standard alignment
- Best practice sharing
- Technical expertise access
- Enhanced credibility

**Hope for Women** in the Maldives conducts regular Universal Periodic Review and CEDAW Reporting. The organization works with numerous international organizations and is a member of a number of regional and global networks of CSOs, which enables it to utilize opportunities, platforms, and resources that are not accessible to local councils.

Hope for Women has conducted advocacy and awareness sessions as well as trainings across the country, many in collaboration with local councils, the most recent being a successful collaboration with the Shaviyani Atoll Council. In addition to local governments, other state institutions, development partners, and donors have frequently worked with the organization on common issues of interest, given their expertise and experience working with local communities.

## 9. Legal Support

CSOs offer free legal support and representation to ensure access to justice, especially for economically and socially marginalized and vulnerable groups. They also research and advocate for law reform and non-discriminatory implementation of justice. The registration of CSOs falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Youth Empowerment, Information and Arts, as mandated by the amended Associations Act.

Legal services:

- Free legal representation
- Rights awareness programs
- Legal research
- Reform advocacy
- Justice access facilitation

Benefits for councils:

- Enhanced legal access
- Improved rights protection
- Better law implementation
- Informed communities
- Strengthened justice systems

The **Public Interest Law Center (PILC)** in the Maldives offers legal services aimed at ensuring access to justice, protecting human rights, and advocating for the public interest, particularly through pro bono or low-cost legal representation in courts for individuals who cannot afford private lawyers and offering legal advice and guidance with a special focus on women, children, and other disadvantaged groups such as migrant workers facing discrimination or rights violations. They have conducted awareness and capacity -building programs across the country, many in collaboration with local councils. State institutions and development partners have worked with PILC to address issues as workplace protection and workers' rights, gender- based violence, sexual discrimination and harassment, and in developing user -friendly resources on laws and legal processes.

In addition to information and awareness camps, local councils have sought their support in specific campaigns, lobbying efforts and legal action pertaining to safeguarding their communities' interests.

## 10. Crisis Response

Following the global COVID- 19 crisis, there has been a rise in the establishment of informal groups with representation of diverse sectors, including state institutions, CSOs, media, technical experts, and corporate bodies. During and post COVID-19, there has been an emergence of informal groups that contribute to the work of local and central governments in attending to socioeconomic, health and environmental issues. Some islands have also included representation of local CSOs, proving particularly effective in emergency response and recovery efforts.

Emergency capabilities:

- Multi-sector coordination
- Rapid response systems
- Information dissemination
- Community mobilization
- Recovery planning

Benefits for councils:

- Quick action deployment
- Coordinated response
- Community resilience
- Efficient communication

**Maldivian Red Crescent Kulhudhuffushi City Unit and Kulhudhuffushi City Council** hold a mutual understanding when operating in and managing emergencies/disasters. During heavy rainfall, both agencies assess the situation, and analysis often conducted through MRC ERT dictates the actions for flood dewatering and discharge, and whether actions of other first responder actors are required. During such a crisis, MRC ERT was provided access to the City Council's operations rooms and even operated helplines of the Council at times.

Both agencies shared information and responsibilities to minimize resource doubling during recent fire incidents. MRC was able to step in when urgent cash assistance was required for clothing, where state support for disasters could have been delayed. Details of individuals requiring psychosocial support were also referred by the Council to MRC to

## Best Practices Observed in the Maldives: The CSO Perspective

**Ecocare**, a local CSO working towards environmental awareness and protection and climate change advocacy, has worked with local councils across the country. Advocacy Director of Ecocare, Maeed M. Zahir, noted many positive experiences collaborating with local councils. He highlighted their experience in AA Ukulhas as a particularly fruitful one.

**Council:** AA Ukulhas Island Council

**Project:** Citizens Climate Assembly involving members of local communities'

**Positive aspects:**

- Local council highly engaged and reliable
- Council undertook all logistic arrangements and assigned a designated focal point
- The council had a partnership on the use of Convention Centre in Ukulhas with local guest houses and other establishments; easy process in place to utilize the centre
- The council had healthy existing engagement with the community which made the community more open and responsive to the program

**Diabetes Society of Maldives**, a local CSO working to create awareness on diabetes, focusing on screening programs across the country, and advocacy on prevention and management of diabetes, has experience working with island communities for the past two decades. Chairperson Aishath Shiruhana noted many positive experiences where their work was facilitated with assistance of local governments and community leaders. One of the most notable has been in M. Dhiggaru.

**Council:** M Dhiggaru Island Council

**Project:** 1 year lifestyle adjustment program for 120 community members and training 10 lifestyle coaches from the community to assist the participants [currently ongoing]

**Positive aspects:**

- The council took the initiative to partner on this project which the organization had been attempting to conduct in several islands but failed to materialize previously
- The council offered to cover 1 /3 of the project's expenditure from the council budget
- The council has been enthusiastic and driven in sustaining and ensuring success

**Cancer Society of Maldives** is a CSO working across the country to create awareness on prevention and management of cancer and to conduct screenings. Chairperson of CSM Juwayriya Saeed. Among the organization's positive experiences in engaging with local councils, she highlighted working with Shaviyani Atoll Council as particularly collaborative and effective.

**Council:** Shaviyani Atoll Council

**Project:** Cancer awareness and screening in all islands of Shaviyani Atoll

**Positive aspects:**

- > Shaviyani Atoll Council facilitated coverage of all islands for awareness and screening programs as intended by CSM through communication with all the islands and encouraging participation
- > Assisted with logistics where needed
- > Collaborative spirit and positive, appreciative attitude towards working on a project beneficial to the community

**Transparency Maldives (TM)**, the country chapter of Transparency International, conducts nationwide awareness and advocacy campaigns on good governance, transparency and accountability. TM's Governance Manager Azza Mohamed noted it prioritized consultation with councils during trips for TM's projects for its insight and to keep it informed and engaged.

TM has worked on lobby campaigns with councils. In 2018, the government had announced plans to develop an airport on the island of Fainu in Raa atoll. The community and council lobbied passionately to prevent this project from proceeding, noting the uprooting of 38 % of the island's vegetation and destruction to the marine ecosystem following dredging and reclamation. CSOs, such as Transparency Maldives, supported the campaign.

The island of Dhapparu, in the jurisdiction of HDh Filladhoo, had been leased to a private company in 2010. Following the amendments to the Decentralization Act in 2019 which stipulated that all assets within the jurisdiction of an island fell to the ownership of the council, the community and council of HDh Filladhoo lobbied for the island to be transferred to the ownership of HDh Filladhoo council. TM supported this campaign and in 2020 Dhapparu was returned to Filladhoo's jurisdiction

## Best Practices Observed in the Maldives: Local Councils' Perspective

**B. Kihaadhoo Island Council** has partnered with the island-based CSO Kihaadhoo Development Society to initiate a program on hydroponics farming, supported by a grant from the Bank of Maldives. Kihaadhoo Island Council's President Hussain Shafiu notes the council has already handed over land plots of 2500 sq ft to most households for agricultural purposes. The council allocated land for the hydroponics project and provided resources and support. The CSO ensures community engagement and participation. This project is currently ongoing and was received with enthusiasm by the community.

**Kulhudhuffushi City Council** has conducted numerous programs with CSOs on a range of issues. One of the most successful programs has been a recent collaboration with the Small Island Geographic Society (SIGS) on the Sustainable Livelihood Planning project. SIGS secured funding from the Australian Government's Direct Aid Program for the project.

According to Kulhudhuffushi City Council Mayor Mohamed Athif and Secretary General Adam, the findings of the studies undertaken as part of the project contributed to long-term development plans of the City Council and to insight into the state of the city's current economy. Data and reports of the projects have been shared with donor agencies as the Asian Development Bank to provide better understanding of the city's needs. A skills registry was established, and training sessions were undertaken in light of the study's findings, including on home gardening and entrepreneurship.

**N. Kudafari Island Council** has collaborated successfully with the CSO Soneva Namoonaa to formulate a 'zero waste' waste management plan and implement segregation and baling of waste. As part of their partnership, there have been community outreach and awareness programs on segregation, reusing, recycling, and upcycling waste as well as environmental advocacy programs for Kudafari's residents. Kudafari Island Council President Ali Shameem Mohamed states the council's goal is to reach their zero waste targets, with the exception of demolition waste, by the end of 2024 and notes collaborations on this and other projects with CSOs have yielded very favorable results.

According to Mayor of **Fuvahmulah City** Ismail Rafeeq, involving CSOs in planning stages has been the most effective approach. Fuvahmulah City Council shares the council's proposed activity plan with CSOs and gets input on how partnerships can be formed with the CSOs in relevant areas. This helps the council put together a collaborative work plan that engages CSOs in implementing their programs designed to meet both parties' objectives.

Fuvahmulah City Council has conducted a number of capacity-building and awareness programs with CSOs utilizing this approach.

## **Section 2: Practicing and Institutionalizing CSO Engagement by Councils**

## Review of the Maldives Legal and Institutional Framework for Local Councils-CSO Engagement

The mandate and scope for engagement between councils and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) is established through several key pieces of legislation:

1. Constitutional Basis Article 30(b) of the Maldives Constitution states “Every citizen has the right to establish and participate in the activities of political parties, and to form and participate in associations and societies.” Articles 229-234 under Chapter VIII establish the decentralized governance framework, including the creation of local councils. These two constitutional provisions establish both CSOs and local councils as key entities in the Maldives’ governance structure, laying the foundation for their interaction.

2. Mandated Responsibilities Under the Decentralization Act

The Act provides clear directives for how councils can collaborate with CSOs:

- Councils can partner with associations for basic service delivery and economic development (Articles 71, 72)
- Councils have authority to provide financial, technical, and other assistance to associations for development projects (Article 73)
- Councils must be consulted by CSOs before project launches in their administrative division (Article 68)
- Councils must receive Environmental Impact Assessment reports from CSOs before project implementation (Article 68 b)
- Councils operate under an LGA Board that includes civil society representation (Article 59)

These provisions ensure councils have clear legal backing to engage CSOs as key development partners, particularly in service delivery and project implementation.

3. Specific Council-Level Requirements

The Act mandates each council level to engage with CSOs:

- Article 8 for Atoll Councils
- Article 22 for Island Councils
- Article 39 for City Councils

This consistent inclusion ensures councils at every administrative tier have the mandate to work with CSOs as essential stakeholders.

4. Supporting Framework

- a) The Associations Act (3/2022):

The Associations Act is the law that governs the incorporation, registration, and operation of associations, parties, and clubs in the Maldives. All CSOs working in the Maldives have to register with the stakeholder Ministry under this umbrella Act:

- Helps councils verify legitimately registered associations
- Clarifies the legal status councils are engaging with
- Provides framework for financial dealings with associations

- Includes provisions for councils working with international organizations

Key points include:

- outlines the process for registering associations and the required content for their governing regulations.
- establishes the legal status of registered associations as separate entities.
- sets rules for financial management, record-keeping, and reporting.
- provides guidelines for membership, leadership, and decision-making within associations.
- includes international organizations operating in the Maldives.

Note: The act does not provide specific measures, guidance, or limitations for engagement with local governance and councils. The act preceded the establishment of local councils and the decentralization system by law in the Maldives.

b) The Local Council Elections Act (10/2010):

- Enables councils to accommodate CSOs as election observers (Section 5)
- Allows councils to work with elected members from civil society backgrounds (Section 31)

c) The Right to Information Act (1/2014):

- Guides councils in handling information requests from CSOs
- Establishes councils' obligations to CSOs as legal persons with information rights (Section 4(a))

Overall, the legal framework empowers councils to actively engage with CSOs, establishing clear mandates and mechanisms for collaboration. The multiple references across different laws provide local councils with comprehensive authority for engagement, from basic service delivery partnerships to development project collaboration.

## Civil Society Organization (CSO) Landscape in the Maldives

The information presented in this component is based on UNDP's "Comprehensive Study of Civil Society in the Maldives", April 2023, and The Asia Foundation's "Mapping of Civil Society Organizations in the Governance Sector in the Maldives", February 2024.

### 1. Organizational Forms

The CSO landscape shows a strong preference for traditional organizational structures, with NGOs dominating the sector:

- 80% identify as NGOs
- 10% operate as Associations
- 5% function as Clubs
- Small percentage operate as Foundations, Networks, or Movements
- Greater organizational diversity in Malé compared to island-based CSOs

This homogeneity in organizational forms, particularly prominent in island regions, suggests potential barriers to establishing more complex civil society structures

outside the capital. The limited diversity might constrain the sector's ability to address varied social needs through different organizational approaches.

## 2. Geographic Distribution

The distribution of CSOs reveals a striking urban-rural divide:

- 49.3% (299) of registered CSOs are based in Malé
- The remaining 308 CSOs are distributed across various atolls

This concentration of CSOs in Malé reflects both the country's centralized development pattern and the gravitational pull of resources in the capital. The even numerical split between Malé and the rest of the country becomes more significant considering the population distribution, indicating an over-representation of CSOs in the capital relative to population size.

### Urban-Rural Divide Analysis

#### Malé-based CSOs

The capital-based organizations demonstrate clear advantages in resources and capacity:

- Greater organizational sophistication
  - More diverse institutional forms
  - Better developed organizational structures
  - Higher technical capacity
- Resource Access
  - Superior access to technical resources
  - Regular capacity-building opportunities
  - Consistent donor funding
  - Available professional expertise
- Operational Characteristics
  - More specialized focus areas
  - National-level operations
  - Stronger donor relationships
  - Better infrastructure access

#### Island-based CSOs

Rural organizations face systematic challenges while maintaining strong community connections

- Organizational Structure
  - Simpler organizational forms
  - Limited resource access
  - Strong community integration
- Operational Challenges
  - Restricted access to capacity-building programmes
  - Limited funding opportunities
  - Basic infrastructure constraints
  - Geographic isolation challenges
- Adaptive Strategies
  - Multi-purpose programming
  - Community-focused operations
  - Local governance preference
  - Emphasis on practical community needs

This concentration of resources and capabilities in Malé creates a self-reinforcing cycle where established CSOs become increasingly sophisticated while maintaining preferential access to funding and support networks. The specialized nature of these organizations reflects their ability to focus on specific issues rather than spreading resources across multiple needs.

The challenges faced by island-based CSOs have led to adaptive operational models that prioritize versatility and community responsiveness over specialization. Their preference for local governance (81% versus 37% for Malé-based CSOs) reflects both their operational realities and a desire for more accessible regulatory frameworks.

### 3. Operational Focus

#### Primary Sectors of Engagement

CSOs show varied engagement across sectors, with a strong emphasis on social development:

- Social activities (71%)
- Sports (30%)
- Religious activities (21%)
- Environmental initiatives (18%)
- Rights-based work (15%)

The dominance of social activities suggests CSOs are primarily filling gaps in social service delivery and community development. The relatively low percentage of environmental initiatives is noteworthy given the Maldives' vulnerability to climate change, while the limited rights-based work might indicate cultural preferences or operational constraints in advocacy.

### 4. Detailed Activity Areas

The breakdown of specific activities reveals a more nuanced picture of CSO engagement:

- Education, Training and Learning (49%)
- Sports, Music, Arts and Leisure (36%)
- Environment Protection & Climate Change (33%)
- Social Cohesion & Volunteerism (30%)
- Sustainable Development (21%)

The high engagement in education and training indicates a strong focus on human capital development, while the significant involvement in sports and arts demonstrates CSOs' crucial role in cultural development. Notably, when environmental work is broken down into specific activities, it shows higher engagement (33%) than indicated in the general sectoral overview (18%), suggesting more specialized environmental work than initially apparent.

### 5. Operational Characteristics

#### Scope and Scale

The operational patterns of CSOs reveal a balanced approach between specialized and general services:

- 55% are generalist CSOs (multiple focus areas)
- 45% are specialist CSOs (1-2 focus areas) - Operational reach:
- 52% island/community level
- 33% national level
- Limited presence at the atoll, regional, or international levels

This distribution demonstrates a mature civil society sector with diverse approaches to community development. The predominance of island/community-level

operations indicates strong local embedding of CSOs, though the limited regional and international presence might restrict access to broader resources and knowledge networks.

## 6. Council-CSO Engagement

The relationship between councils and CSOs demonstrates an emerging but constrained partnership framework:

### a. Collaboration Framework

Current engagement patterns show a focus on basic community activities:

- Planning procedures (land use plans, island development plans)
- Social activities and celebrations
- Religious events
- COVID-19 related tasks
- Community activities (beach cleanups, training programmes)
- Sports tournaments

This collaboration profile reveals an emphasis on event-based and operational activities rather than strategic partnerships. The pattern is particularly noteworthy given that 52 % of CSOs operate at the island/community level, suggesting significant potential for deeper engagement.

### b. Institutional Dynamics

The engagement landscape is characterized by several key constraints:

#### i. Administrative Challenges

- New/inexperienced council administrations
- Limited initiative-taking capacity
- Insufficient monitoring capabilities
- Need for improved engagement mechanisms

#### ii. Regulatory Preferences

- 52% of CSOs prefer local government regulation, indicating:
- Strong desire for localized oversight
- Recognition of councils' potential role
- Preference for decentralized governance
- This preference contrasts with current council capacity, creating a governance gap

#### iii. Geographic Implications

- The even split between Malé-based (49.3%) and atoll-based CSOs (50.7%) affects engagement patterns
- Council capacity limitations have a disproportionate impact on island-based organizations
- Engagement quality varies significantly between urban and rural contexts

The current state of council-CSO relationships reflects a broader transition in local governance where institutional development lags behind civil society needs and expectations. This is particularly evident in the disconnect between CSOs' preference for local regulation and councils' current capacity to provide effective oversight and support.

## Types of Civil Society Engagement

1. **Shaping Policy:** Local councils can harness the expertise of CSOs to create more inclusive and well-informed policies. Through active engagement in policy consultations, CSOs can ensure that local governance considers diverse community perspectives and reflects the needs of underrepresented groups. CSOs often conduct research and submit policy recommendations, providing local councils with data-driven insights to address pressing community challenges more effectively. Additionally, their role in advocating for stakeholder interests can lead to more responsive, people-centred governance.

**Example:** In the context of local councils, organizations focused on environmental conservation can collaborate to draft regulations that protect natural resources, while health-focused CSOs can contribute to policies ensuring better community health services. Similar to Human Rights Watch or Amnesty International, which elevate human rights concerns, local CSOs can bring awareness to community-specific issues like waste management, access to public services, and gender equality.

2. **Capacity Building:** CSOs play a critical role in enhancing the capabilities of local councils by offering training that strengthens council members' understanding of social issues and governance techniques. By providing workshops and resources on topics like financial literacy, digital skills, and inclusivity practices, CSOs help council representatives better serve their communities. Capacity-building initiatives also empower councils to become more effective advocates and communicators, fostering a proactive approach to community engagement.

**Example:** The Grameen Foundation's work in financial literacy and empowerment of women serves as a model for how local CSOs can offer specialized training for council members. For instance, they could conduct sessions on effective budgeting and financial planning, enabling councils to make informed decisions about community resource allocation. Additionally, training programs can help local council staff build partnerships with other organizations, strengthening a collaborative network for regional development.

3. **Lobbying and Advocacy:** Local councils can benefit from the expertise and experience of CSOs in lobbying and advocacy, particularly by directly targeting and communicating with specific focus groups and conducting information and awareness campaigns. Mobilizing the community through CSOs enables councils to give greater ownership of the programs to the wider community and foster greater confidence in advocacy programs, especially when related to issues such as public health, social issues, environmental protection, among others. CSOs often collect grassroots data, conduct studies, and analyse trends that can inform local government policies. This evidence-based approach strengthens lobbying efforts and improves policy outcomes. Local councils and CSOs can collaborate to draft policy proposals, frame legislative reforms, or advocate for funding. This partnership amplifies their voice when lobbying higher authorities or stakeholders. In addition, local councils can also facilitate platforms where CSOs, businesses, and citizens can engage, enabling inclusive policy discussions and coordinated advocacy efforts

**Example:** In islands like B Kihaadhoo and N Kudafari, local councils have been able to partner with NGO Soneva Namoonaa to promote sustainable practices for better waste management and waste reduction. They have also utilized the collaboration to showcase their successful partnerships as viable models for other local councils.

4. **Mobilizing in Emergency Response and Relief Efforts:** Local councils can utilize the resourcefulness of CSOs in emergency and crisis situations, responding to aid and relief efforts on the ground as well as in planning and preparation for emergency response.

Local governments often work with CSOs to develop emergency response plans, leveraging CSOs' local networks and knowledge of vulnerable populations. CSOs can access funding, donations, and volunteers, complementing the resources provided by local governments. Local councils can also seek CSOs' support to distribute aid effectively, reaching remote or underserved areas, as well as to disseminate information.

**Example:** Maldivian Red Crescent is an active partner in many islands, partnering with local councils in emergency and crisis preparation, management, and response.

5. **Consultative Roles:** By providing CSOs the opportunity to serve on advisory councils and committees, working groups, and task forces, local councils can foster wider discourse and engagement of the community, diverse viewpoints on issues, and greater collaboration in utilizing combined resources to address the identified issues in a timely and efficient manner. Local councils can work with CSOs to co-design policies and programs, particularly in areas like health, education, and social welfare, ensuring they are effective and responsive to community needs. CSOs can act as intermediaries, gathering community feedback on government programs and relaying it back to local authorities. This ensures that policies remain accountable and relevant.

**Example:** A good example from the Maldives is the informal taskforces and committees set up across the country during COVID-19 for emergency response planning and implementation.

6. **Social Enterprises:** Local councils could facilitate avenues for CSOs to establish commercial ventures that address social issues while being financially sustainable, by creating supportive policies, providing funding, and facilitating networking opportunities. Local councils can offer grants, incentives, or regulatory support, fostering an environment where social enterprises thrive. CSOs can contribute to these efforts by building awareness, offering training, and connecting social entrepreneurs with resources.

**Example:** M-KOPA in Kenya provides affordable, solar-powered energy solutions to low-income households that do not have access to grid electricity. M-KOPA aligns its operations with local governments' rural electrification strategies, helping communities without grid access obtain affordable, clean energy, and in some instances, local governments provide subsidies or grants to support the installation of solar systems in underprivileged areas. Local governments support M-KOPA's efforts to replace kerosene lamps with solar lighting, improving indoor air quality and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. During natural disasters or emergencies, M-KOPA also works with local governments to provide solar lighting and charging solutions to affected communities.

- 7. Philanthropy and Fundraising:** Under the Maldives Finance Act, local councils in the Maldives are required to use funds strictly for purposes that align with their legal mandates and development responsibilities, and allocations must comply with approved budgets and plans that are subject to oversight by the Ministry of Finance. Expenditures outside the normal scope of council activities, such as donations to charities, often require additional approvals from higher authorities, such as the Ministry of Finance or relevant government bodies. Partnering with CSOs provide s local councils the opportunity to fundraise for charitable and philanthropic initiatives that benefit their communities.

**Example:** The International Red Cross and Red Crescent supports, provides assistance, and raises funds during conflict, following manmade or natural disasters or in cases of chronic poverty.

- 8. Transparency and Accountability Efforts:** Local governments can leverage the strengths of CSOs in advocacy, monitoring, and community engagement to bolster transparency and accountability. Local governments can partner with CSOs to establish citizen oversight committees that monitor public projects and expenditures. They can also engage CSOs to conduct participatory audits, ensuring community members have a voice in evaluating government performance. In addition, local councils can work with CSOs to develop open data platforms where information about budgets, expenditures, and decisions is made accessible to the public. Partnering with CSOs to collect and publish citizen feedback on local services such as healthcare, sanitation, and education through citizen report cards is an initiative that is gaining favour. Local councils can also work with CSOs to develop e-governance tools such as mobile apps or websites to allow citizens to track public spending, report issues, and access information.

**Example:** The Asia Foundation has supported the development and use of electronic citizen report cards, or eCRCs in Sri Lanka. The eCRC is a data tool for local councils to collect and analyse citizen feedback and functions as a quick, portable, convenient, and cost- effective way to ascertain the reach and efficacy of urban services. It also aids in identifying patterns of discrimination and exclusion.

- 9. Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding:** Local councils can partner with CSOs to mediate disputes between conflicting groups and to encourage community dialogue in resolving disputes over resources, boundaries, or social tensions. Local councils and CSOs can pre-emptively assess conflict risks and implement preventive measures before tensions escalate. Given expertise in the area, CSOs can contribute to the capacity building of council members and local leaders in conflict resolution, negotiation, and cultural sensitivity, as well as provide toolkits for councils to handle conflicts effectively at the community level. As CSOs are perceived as unbiased and impartial parties, local councils can gain their support inworking with aggrieved community groups, as well as conducting peacebuilding activities.

**Example:** The Berghof Foundation is active in peacebuilding and conflict transformation in conflict zones worldwide, focusing on long-term solutions that address root causes and foster sustainable peace through cohesive peacebuilding strategies. Local governments partner with Berghof to analyse the root causes of conflict and develop tailored peacebuilding strategies, design or reform local policies to make them more inclusive and conflict-sensitive, and to mediate conflicts between ethnic groups, political factions, or other stakeholders. Berghof facilitates dialogue processes involving government officials, community leaders, and marginalized groups to

address local disputes and trains local government officials, police, and community leaders in conflict resolution, negotiation, and nonviolent communication. They also run joint campaigns promoting tolerance, coexistence, and nonviolent conflict resolution.

- 10. Fostering Civic Participation:** Local councils can seek the support of CSOs in organizing public forums to engage citizens in policy discussions and decision-making. CSOs can conduct civic education programs and train community members on participatory governance, and facilitate citizen involvement in budgeting processes, ensuring that community priorities are reflected in public spending. Local councils can partner with CSOs to set up feedback mechanisms such as suggestion boxes, surveys, or digital platforms to collect citizen input, and explore innovative avenues such as apps and websites where citizens can voice opinions, report issues, and access information. CSOs can also assist in promoting e-governance tools that make participation more accessible, especially for marginalized groups. Local councils can also work with CSOs in introducing volunteer initiatives to engage citizens in community improvement projects.

**Example:** CIVICUS works globally to strengthen citizen participation, promoting democracy, civic freedoms, and public involvement in decision-making. Local governments often collaborate with CIVICUS to design and implement participatory governance models and to develop resources and tools to encourage engagement with community groups. Through initiatives like the CIVICUS Monitor, the organization helps local governments understand the status of civic space in their regions. This data can guide policymaking, ensuring accountability and responsiveness to citizen needs.

- 11. Social and Cultural Engagement:** Local councils can work with CSOs to organize cultural events, support art programs, and promote initiatives that celebrate and foster a sense of shared identity to preserve cultural heritage, promote social inclusion, and foster mutual respect among diverse communities. Through joint campaigns, CSOs and local governments can raise awareness about social and cultural issues such as cultural diversity, heritage conservation, and social justice

**Example:** The Aga Khan Foundation focuses on preserving cultural heritage, particularly in marginalized and diverse communities, and social cohesion in regions with rich historical heritage, including Central and South Asia, East Africa, and the Middle East. The foundation supports local governments in identifying and conserving cultural landmarks, historic sites, and traditions that hold significance to local communities. This includes restoring architectural heritage, such as mosques, forts, and ancient buildings, ensuring they are preserved for future generations and training government officials, CSOs, and community members on cultural and historical conservation. Through community involvement, AKF and local governments ensure that cultural heritage projects reflect the needs and values of the local population. Local governments and AKF promote cultural tourism, encouraging sustainable tourism practices that benefit local economies while preserving cultural identity.

12. **Informal Groups:** Following the global COVID-19 crisis, there has been a rise in the establishment of informal groups with representation of diverse sectors, including state institutions, CSOs, media, technical experts, and corporate bodies.

During and post-COVID-19, there has been an emergence of informal groups that contribute to the work of local and central governments in attending to socioeconomic, health, and environmental issues. IBAMA was initiated by the then Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Protection and continued by current the Ministry of Family and Social Development.

IBAMA consists of representatives from island or city councils, WDCs, the Ministry of Family and Social Development, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, the Maldives Police Service, and the Department of Juvenile Justice. Some islands have also included representation of local CSOs.

Fuvahmulah City, with the leadership of Fuvahmulah City Council, proved to be exemplary in IBAMA set up and operation. Vaavu Atoll Council President Shujau Ali expressed similar sentiments, noting state institutions gained synergy and better coordination in addressing issues, and local councils were able to make better use of resources at their disposal through the joint mechanism of IBAMA.

## Areas of Engagement for Successful Collaboration Between Local Councils and CSOs

To address shared community needs, CSOs and local councils worldwide have formed partnerships in various areas, ranging from urban planning and social activities to capacity building and regulation. The following are examples of effective collaboration between CSOs and councils, highlighting global best practices and how they can inform similar partnerships in the Maldives.

### 1. Planning Procedures

CSOs play a crucial role in helping councils develop inclusive, community-focused plans that address social, economic, and environmental needs. Areas for collaboration include:

**Land Use Plans:** CSOs can provide valuable insights on sustainable land use, advocating for community needs, environmental conservation, and climate resilience, all essential in the Maldives given its vulnerability to rising sea levels and other climate risks.

**Participatory Budgeting (Brazil):**

In Brazilian municipalities, participatory budgeting initiatives invite CSOs and community members to influence budget allocations, enhancing transparency and alignment with public priorities. In the Maldives, this model could help councils integrate CSO input on land use, island development, and women's empowerment plans.

Island Development Plans: By working together, CSOs and councils can ensure that infrastructure and economic development projects align with community priorities, balancing local resource limitations and livelihood needs.

**Gender-Responsive Planning (Sweden):**

In Sweden, councils work with CSOs to ensure urban planning is sensitive to gender needs, prioritizing safety and accessibility in public spaces. This approach could guide Maldivian councils to develop plans that consider the unique needs of women, youth, and vulnerable groups.

Women Empowerment Plans: CSOs with expertise in gender issues can work with councils to create skill development initiatives, support female entrepreneurship, and address gender-based violence, helping create inclusive spaces where women are empowered to contribute actively to community life.

## **2. Community Activities**

Collaborative community activities between local councils and CSOs can foster a strong sense of unity, civic engagement, and environmental responsibility.

These activities include:

Social and Cultural Events: CSOs can organize social gatherings, cultural events, and religious celebrations that build social cohesion and encourage community involvement.

**Intergenerational Programs (Canada):**

In Canada, CSOs and councils collaborate on programs that bring youth and elderly populations together in meaningful ways, addressing social isolation and strengthening intergenerational ties. Maldivian councils and CSOs could adapt this model to foster engagement across all age groups in activities that benefit the community.

Environmental Initiatives: Beach clean-ups, recycling programs, and conservation efforts can promote environmental awareness and involve the community in protecting local ecosystems. CSOs bring specialized environmental knowledge, while councils can support logistics.

**“Adopt a Spot” Environmental Stewardship (New Zealand):**

In New Zealand, CSOs adopt specific natural areas to manage and preserve, which could be adapted to the Maldivian context, allowing local organizations to care for beaches, coral reefs, or mangrove areas.

Training Programs and Sports Tournaments: Jointly organized training sessions in leadership, entrepreneurship, and environmental conservation can build community skills. Sports tournaments and recreational activities can encourage youth participation and promote health and wellness.

### 3. Capacity Building

CSOs bring specialized expertise in governance, social justice, and environmental protection that can strengthen council capacities in areas like monitoring, governance, and community support.

**Monitoring Political Processes:** Councils can assist CSOs in monitoring local political activities, promoting transparency, accountability, and democratic engagement within communities.

#### Social Audits (India):

In India, social audits conducted by CSOs and councils monitor government projects, ensuring they serve community needs. In the Maldives, social audits could be implemented for public development projects, promoting transparency.

**Countering Misinformation and Accessing Information:** CSOs can work with councils to dispel misinformation within communities, providing accurate information channels and helping citizens access reliable resources.

**Engaging in Environmental Governance:** Councils and CSOs can collaborate to address environmental issues through capacity building, enabling communities to make informed decisions on conservation, waste management, and adaptation to climate change.

#### Community-Based Disaster Preparedness (Japan):

In Japan, councils and CSOs collaborate to train communities in disaster preparedness, resilience, and emergency response. This model could be adapted in the Maldives, equipping communities with critical skills to prepare for natural disasters.

### 4. Decentralized CSO Regulation

The decentralization of CSO regulation to local councils has proven effective in other regions, empowering councils to monitor and support CSOs based on local priorities.

**Local Regulation and Monitoring:** Councils can take responsibility for ensuring that CSOs operate within local regulations, fostering community accountability and transparency.

#### Local CSO Accreditation (Kenya):

Kenyan local governments conduct CSO accreditation to assess capacity and accountability, a model that could be useful for Maldivian councils aiming to support and monitor trusted CSOs within their communities.

**Building Council Capacity for CSO Engagement:** Local councils can develop training programs for council members and staff to effectively engage, monitor, and support CSOs, fostering responsive governance structures connected to CSO activities and community needs.

#### Community Advisory Committees (Australia):

In Australia, community advisory committees representing CSOs help shape council policies. This model could help institutionalize CSO participation in Maldivian councils, creating a formal mechanism for CSOs to advise on local governance.

## Civil Society's Role in Public Finance Management (PFM)

Public Finance Management (PFM) alludes to how governments mobilize, manage, and utilize public funds to deliver services and achieve development goals, while ensuring efficiency, transparency, and accountability. This encompasses creating budgets, managing debts, and collecting taxes, and directing funds to priority sectors, such as health, education, and infrastructure projects.

According to the World Bank's report *Mainstreaming Citizen Engagement in Public Finance Management for Better Results*, there has been a rise in citizen and civil society engagement in PFM processes, especially following particular developments as the Code of Good Practices on Fiscal Transparency from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1998, Open Government Partnership (OGP) by the World Bank in 2011, and the Strategic Framework for Mainstreaming Citizen Engagement in World Bank Group Operations in 2014.

The World Bank report notes greater engagement of the public in fiscal law and policy design, budgeting and auditing, results in greater efficiency and effectiveness, while curbing corruption. It cites the example of Mexico, where the government involved citizens in expenditure policy design for the education sector, the Education Reform Program, which promotes public participation at every stage of program design and implementation and aims to improve infrastructure and equipment in the most vulnerable schools throughout Mexico. Under the program, citizens decide how to invest federal funds to develop their schools, and citizens take part in subproject implementation in schools, with results indicating public participation is achieving cost-effectiveness for public investments in these vulnerable schools and can be a measure to fight the poverty gap.

One approach that local councils can adopt is the introduction of a Citizens Budget which is a nontechnical summary of the executive budget and is aimed at encouraging discussion and dialogue in the community. New Zealand annually issues its CB "Budget at a Glance," which provides an overview of all budget information and key highlights of the year.

Governments often utilize Public Expenditure and Financial Accountability (PEFA) Assessment as a tool to assess how well a government is managing its finances, ensuring transparency, accountability, and efficiency in public spending. PEFA Assessments pave the way to introduce PFM reform strategies and serves as an effective entry point for engagement of CSOs

The Maldives first carried out a PEFA Assessment in 2009, and the Maldives PFM Systems Strengthening Project was launched in 2014. In light of the PEFA assessments conducted over the years, the Public Financial Management Reform Strategy was developed. The PFM Reform Strategy 2022-2026 for the Maldives focuses on improving fiscal discipline, debt sustainability, and efficient resource management to align with national priorities. There is emphasis on enhancing tax revenue, strengthening fiscal risk and debt management, improving budget execution, and promoting accountability through transparency and external audits.

With regard to local governance, the PFM Reform Strategy focuses on enhancing accountability, financial transparency, and operational efficiency. The key recommendations include conducting a PEFA assessment for local governments to identify areas for reform and developing a strategy paper based on PEFA findings, outlining reform priorities and solutions for identified gaps, and revising the Decentralization Act to facilitate the needed reforms to strengthen local government financial management, improve service delivery, and enhance fiscal autonomy while ensuring alignment with national policies.

Following the recommendations of the PFM Reform Strategy, local councils are well positioned to engage with civil society to strengthen PFM at the local governance level. This can be undertaken using tools as those highlighted below.

## **1. Budget Analysis and Monitoring Tools**

- Open Budget Index (OBI): A tool by the International Budget Partnership (IBP) that assesses the transparency and openness of government budgets.
- Budget Monitoring Frameworks: Civil society can analyse national and local budgets to track allocations and spending, ensuring alignment with priorities like health, education, or poverty reduction.
- Citizen Budgets: Simplified versions of government budgets that CSOs can create and disseminate for public understanding

## **2. Expenditure Tracking Tools**

- Public Expenditure Tracking Surveys (PETS): Used to trace the flow of public resources from central governments to service delivery units like schools or health centres to detect leakages or inefficiencies.
- Social Audits: Localized processes where communities verify if public resources are reaching intended beneficiaries.

## **3. Participatory Budgeting Platforms**

- Participatory budgeting empowers citizens to engage directly in allocating public resources. Civil society can facilitate these processes by organizing communities, gathering input, and ensuring inclusivity.

## **4. Performance Assessment Tools**

- Public Expenditure and Financial Accountability (PEFA): CSOs can utilize PEFA reports to identify gaps in government financial management and advocate for reforms.
- Service Delivery Surveys: CSOs can evaluate how efficiently resources are translating into public services like healthcare, water, and education.

## **5. Digital Tools for Transparency and Accountability**

- Government Budget Portals and Dashboards: Civil society can use publicly available budget and expenditure portals to monitor spending. Examples include platforms for electronic government procurement (e-GP).
- Open Data Tools: Tools like Open Spending and K-Monitor enable CSOs to analyse and visualize public financial data.

## **6. Fiscal Transparency Advocacy Tools**

- Fiscal Responsibility Scorecards: CSOs can develop scorecards or indicators to assess how well governments adhere to fiscal responsibility laws or budget commitments.
- Shadow Budgets: Civil society can prepare alternative budgets to propose more equitable or efficient allocation of resources.

## 7. Auditing and Oversight Tools

- Independent Budget Analysis: CSOs can scrutinize audit reports published by national Audit Offices or Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs).
- Follow-up Mechanisms: Civil society can track whether governments implement recommendations from audit reports or public accounts committees.

## 8. Community Engagement and Awareness Tools

- Citizen Report Cards (CRCs): Surveys that collect feedback from citizens on the quality of public services and expenditures.
- Town Halls and Focus Groups: Civil society can facilitate direct engagement between citizens and government representatives on financial management issues.

## 9. Debt and Procurement Monitoring Tools

- Debt Transparency Dashboards: CSOs can analyse and publish information on public debt, ensuring governments adhere to debt sustainability frameworks.
- Procurement Monitoring: Monitoring government procurement systems to ensure fair, transparent, and cost-effective use of resources.

## 10. Technology-Based Solutions

- Mobile Apps and New Technology: Apps that enable citizens to report service delivery failures or corruption, and new technology such as blockchain that can track public expenditure in real time

The Participatory Budgeting (PB) model in Porto Alegre, Brazil, has been replicated in cities worldwide as an effective tool for inclusive and accountable governance. Porto Alegre faced widespread social inequality, poor infrastructure, and limited transparency in the use of public resources. With the introduction of participatory budgeting, citizens were empowered, especially marginalized communities, to participate in budgeting decisions and determine priorities such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure. The process led to much success, such as near-universal access to clean water, expanded schools, and enhanced infrastructure.

The PB process is funded and led by the local government of Porto Alegre, as is done in other cities that have adopted the practice. Citizens participate in a series of open, deliberative meetings and to discuss community issues and determine spending priorities. The Porto Alegre model includes a combination of regional forums and city-wide meetings, the former of which are open to all citizens and the latter to elected delegates. Decisions made by citizens during the PB cycle directly inform the allocation of that year's budget. This process has increased responsiveness to community needs and curbed corruption.

## **Section 3: Piloting CSO Engagement by Local Councils**

# Local Council CSO Engagement Implementation Checklist

## A. Planning and Preparation

Tasks required to create a conducive environment for implementing CSO engagement initiatives

### 1. Conduct Stakeholder Analysis

Identify Local CSOs

- Map active CSOs within the community
- Map nationwide CSOs operating locally
- Document CSOs from diverse interest areas
- Note current lack of proactive engagement
- Identify possible collaborations

Assess Alignment

- Evaluate each CSO's goals
- Assess alignment with council's plans
- Document relevant program areas
- Review potential for better results through partnerships
- Map areas for program design and implementation

Establish Contact Points

- Designate contact persons within the council
- Build staff capacity for CSO engagement
- Review current procedures for collaboration
- Identify cumbersome procedures
- Create convenient, accessible processes
- Streamline services for CSO engagement

### 2. Establish Clear Engagement Objectives

Define Purpose

- Identify specific goals for CSO engagement, such as:
  - Enhancing participatory governance
  - Community awareness initiatives
  - Special needs participation
  - Service development
- Align objectives with CSO partnerships
- Set targets for program tracking

Set Clear Expectations

- Prioritize clarity in engagement
- Outline roles and responsibilities
- Define expected contributions from:
  - Council
  - CSOs

- ❑ Prepare for MoU development

#### Determine Engagement Formats

- ❑ Plan workshops for focus groups
- ❑ Plan larger community workshops
- ❑ Organize consultations
- ❑ Design collaborative projects-
- ❑ Schedule public forums
- ❑ Plan joint research initiatives

### 3. Develop Communication Strategy

#### Maintain Open Channels

- ❑ Create regular email updates
- ❑ Develop newsletters
- ❑ Establish online portal
- ❑ Keep CSOs informed of:
  - ❑ Council activities
  - ❑ Council decisions
  - ❑ Opportunities for input
- ❑ Update council websites
- ❑ Maintain social media platforms

#### Plan Inclusive Dialogue

- ❑ Design workshops
- ❑ Organize roundtable discussions
- ❑ Ensure open, two-way communication
- ❑ Include vulnerable groups
- ❑ Create accessible forums

#### Establish Feedback Mechanisms

- ❑ Set up feedback portals
- ❑ Create surveys
- ❑ Develop comment forms
- ❑ Enable CSO input channels
- ❑ Create response systems

## **B. Processes and Practices**

Specific tasks for the effective implementation of CSO engagement initiatives

### 1. Create Engagement Mechanisms

#### Public Consultations and Forums

- ❑ Organize regular consultations
- ❑ Schedule town halls
- ❑ Plan community forums
- ❑ Include CSO input gathering

- ❑ Ensure community member participation
- ❑ Include CSOs in:
  - ❑ Annual workplans
  - ❑ Budget preparation
  - ❑ Development planning
  - ❑ Land use planning

#### Form Collaborative Working Groups

- ❑ Create issue-specific groups
- ❑ Include council members
- ❑ Include CSO representatives
- ❑ Include relevant stakeholders
- ❑ Address local issues collaboratively

#### Establish Advisory Committees

- ❑ Create committees with CSO representation
- ❑ Include input on:
  - ❑ Policies
  - ❑ Budget allocations
  - ❑ Project planning
- ❑ Ensure representation of all stakeholders

## 2. Implement Trust-Building Measures

#### Engage in Decision Making

- ❑ Include CSOs in program planning
- ❑ Include CSOs in budget allocation
- ❑ Include CSOs in resource allocation
- ❑ Involve CSOs in project implementation
- ❑ Ensure needs-based programming

#### Encourage CSO Collaboration

- ❑ Facilitate CSO-to-CSO partnerships
- ❑ Support collaborative projects
- ❑ Enable resource sharing
- ❑ Create collaboration platforms
- ❑ Foster community benefit focus

#### Maintain Transparency

- ❑ Keep CSOs informed of:
  - ❑ Decision-making processes
  - ❑ Project outcomes
  - ❑ Implementation challenges
- ❑ Ensure accountability
- ❑ Provide regular updates

### Recognize Contributions

- ❑ Acknowledge CSO work publicly
- ❑ Organize recognition events
- ❑ Create council publications
- ❑ Foster goodwill
- ❑ Build greater commitment

## 3. Establish Joint Planning and Decision-Making

### Implement Participatory Budgeting

- ❑ Include CSOs in budget discussions
- ❑ Enable input on resource allocation
- ❑ Focus on community projects
- ❑ Include social services planning
- ❑ Ensure wider representation
- ❑ Include vulnerable groups

### Design Shared Projects

- ❑ Co-create projects with CSOs
- ❑ Address shared goals
- ❑ Ensure collaborative planning
- ❑ Strengthen commitment
- ❑ Increase community relevance
- ❑ Build CSO ownership

### Develop Inclusive Policies

- ❑ Engage CSOs in policymaking
- ❑ Reflect community priorities
- ❑ Include community values
- ❑ Use crowdsourced platforms
- ❑ Enable policy input sharing

## 4. Utilize Innovation

### Establish Innovation Mechanisms

- ❑ Create community innovation labs
- ❑ Set up incubation centres
- ❑ Partner with institutions
- ❑ Develop pilot projects

### Implement Data Collection

- ❑ Design citizen data programs
- ❑ Include diverse sectors:
  - ❑ Education
  - ❑ Health
  - ❑ Local economy
  - ❑ Vulnerable groups

## C. Follow-Up and Review

Tasks for ensuring initiative sustainability through monitoring and evaluation

### 1. Monitor and Evaluate Partnership

Set Measurable Outcomes

- ❑ Define clear success indicators for engagement
- ❑ Assess whether objectives are met through:
  - ❑ Community satisfaction measurements
  - ❑ Project completion tracking
  - ❑ Service improvement metrics
- ❑ Implement community score sheets and report cards for:
  - ❑ Overall council performance
  - ❑ Specific projects
- ❑ Develop surveys and feedback forms

Conduct Regular Reviews

- ❑ Schedule periodic partnership reviews
- ❑ Discuss successes, challenges, and areas for improvement
- ❑ Implement real-time feedback tools for:
  - ❑ Timely adjustments
  - ❑ Transparent decision-making processes

### 2. Ensure Sustainability

Formalize Partnerships

- ❑ Develop MOUs with key CSOs
- ❑ Clarify collaboration terms
- ❑ Establish long-term frameworks

Build Capacity

- ❑ Support CSO skill development in:
  - ❑ Project management
  - ❑ Policy advocacy
  - ❑ Community engagement
- ❑ Implement skills transfer programs
- ❑ Create exchange opportunities

Secure Resources

- ❑ Allocate engagement budget
- ❑ Support consultation activities
- ❑ Fund joint initiatives
- ❑ Enable co-funding opportunities
- ❑ Demonstrate council commitment

### 3. Address Common Challenges

- ❑ Resource Constraints
  - ❑ Identify funding limitations
  - ❑ Address resource constraints

- ❑ Develop creative solutions
- ❑ Enable resource sharing

#### Trust and Confidence

- ❑ Address communication gaps
- ❑ Ensure transparency
- ❑ Build mutual understanding
- ❑ Maintain professional relationships

#### Political Division

- ❑ Manage community rifts
- ❑ Address perception issues
- ❑ Maintain neutral stance
- ❑ Focus on community benefit

#### Technical Capacity

- ❑ Address skill gaps
- ❑ Provide necessary support
- ❑ Enable knowledge transfer
- ❑ Build sustainable capacity

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Note: Adapt implementation based on local context and available resources while maintaining core engagement principles.

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## List of Interviews

Interview with Advocacy Director of Eco-care, Maeed Mohamed Zahir

Interview with CEO and Chairperson of Diabetes Society of Maldives, Aishath Shiruhana

Interview with the Chairperson of the Cancer Society of Maldives, Juwayriya Saeed

Interview with Governance Manager of Transparency Maldives, Azza Mohamed

Interview with Mayor of Kulhudhuffushi City Council, Mohamed Athif

Interview with Secretary General of Kulhudhuffushi City Council, Abdulla Adam

Interview with Mayor of Fuvahmulah City, Ismail Rafeeq

Interview with Vaavu Atoll Council President, Shujau Ali

Interview with Baa Kihaadhoo Island Council President, Hussain Shafiu

Interview with Noonu Kudafari Island Council President, Ali Shameem Mohamed

Interview with Consultant on IBAMA Project, Fathimath Shehezinee

Interview with Chairperson of Hope for Women, Ahmed Anwar

Interview with former President of the Maldives Red Crescent, Ali Nashid



