The Maldives: Making Decentralizing Process a Dominant Strategy

By Srimal Fernando

Picture: Srimal Fernando (R at a discussion with Mr Yameen Mohamed, the President of Kaafu Guraidhoo, Vice President Mr Ibrahim Shaleez and Councilor at the Local; Government Authority Secretariat of the Guraidhoo Council situated in the Male’ Atoll

Ever since the dawn of Independence in the Maldives certain crucial questions about decentralization of administration units have pre occupied Maldivian citizens' thoughts.

Since then the Ministry of Provincial Affairs articulated the national vision for the development of islands in the late 70s, that remained intact till the Island development policy, procedures remained comprehensively revised under the Ministry of Atolls Administration (MOAA) to carry forward the idea.

In 2010 the Indian Ocean Island nation took a different approach by passing the Decentralization Act to set out 189 island councils, 19 atoll councils and two city councils. These patterns of change were particularly noticeable from “Haa Atoll ” in the Northern tip of the Maldives, to “Seenu Atoll” at the Southern end. The ratified Decentralization Act created an institutional basis through the Local Government Authority (LGA) to unwaveringly support the newly created administrative units in the Maldives.

Today the socio-economic achievements of the Maldivian islands are real. It is no more paper arrangement functioning through the local governance system. One could argue that per capita income rise of Maldivians to US$ $ 8,980 (2017) per annum is tightly linked to the facts surrounding this theme. There are four outcomes which are associated for the holistic development of islands and atolls in the South Asian island nation. Firstly the Maldives is now a brand name in the global tourism market. It is a top end market for the European, Chinese and for the Indians. Last year over 1.5 million tourist visited the nation. Most of the high end 146 island resorts are located near these 189 island administrative units. The tourist resort islands work closely with the island councils. One of the advantageous of tourism is that it generates more employment and revenues. Secondly Fisheries being one of the main livelihoods is dependent on tourism. Thirdly for instance small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the local islands generate revenue and depend on the flourishing tourism and fisheries industry. Fourthly the revenue generated from tourism sector, fisheries and SMEs create more funding for infrastructure. Quite clearly island politics in the Indian Ocean island nation are much more regionally oriented than Male or Addu City, politics. It is unfortunate but necessary to note that the political rivalry between certain political groups in some islands might have stalled few development projects.
To be sure the author went to several islands and Atolls on a useful information-gathering task to determine whether these stories were true.

The author had a in-depth discussion with the Councilors at the invitation of Mr Yameen Mohamed, the President of Kaafu Guraidhoo Council in the Male’ Atoll to assess the tangible benefits this decentralized process had brought towards Guraidhoo Islanders. President of Kaafu Guraidhoo Council said “As President of the Guraidhoo Council after serving two consecutive terms I got re-elected for the third time to serve Guraidhoo island “. “I have seen how the Island had developed” . Today we have developed a small fisheries habour and there are many guest houses and we have regular ferry services from our island to Male’. We as a local government authority along with the Guraidhoo Secretariat provide fast and efficient service to the Islanders”. Adding to this Vice President of the Kaafu Guraidhoo Council Mr Ibrahim Shaleez said “Our island is open for business and we will provide the most efficient local government facilities to our islanders and to the visitors” . As a result these trends in various islands suggest that the Decentralizing Policy has brought about significant concrete changes for the Maldivians.

In general infrastructure development is visible in most of the inhabited islands of the Maldives. There is a certain parallel here to the development of fisheries harbours seen in several Islands for the renewal of intra island connectivity and to boost tourism. On the basis of the Maldivian regional development experiences must be interpreted as an indication of increasing commercial activities, employment opportunities for the islanders. In several Atolls, the decentralization process along with the economic development activities goes hand in hand with the Local Government Authority (LGA) strategies which constitute a political response from the respective island councilors. Thus the common background of these islanders from North to southern end of Maldives covers a broad spectrum and has deep roots. In essence the decentralization practice in 200 inhabited islands extend preferences in different trading arrangements. Currently the nation has laid a solid legal foundation for improving economic standards of Islanders through the decentralization process. Through this policy there is a wider geographical scope for the Maldivians to encourage faster commercial activities within the Atolls.

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