



## Friends of Maldives

### Substance Abuse Report

July 20<sup>th</sup> to August 9<sup>th</sup> 2009

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#### Background to this report

This report is based on a three week visit to the Maldives during July/ August 2009. The visit included one week in Malé and two weeks in the Gaafu Dhaalu Atoll. Over this period of time visits were made to many health facilities, government departments and NGO organizations. Every opportunity was taken to discuss the issue of substance abuse with health workers, government officials, private individuals, young people and substance abusers themselves. The visit included four different islands Thinadhoo, Madaveli, Nadellaa and Vaadhoo as well as the capital, Malé.

The therapeutic facilities designed for the specific care of people with substance abuse problems in their lives are based in and around Malé. For this reason the following facilities were visited:

Maldives Ministry of Health  
Methadone treatment clinic  
De-tox centre (Viligilli Island)  
Rehabilitation Therapeutic Community (Himmafushi Island)  
Journey (NGO 'Recovery Community' run by and for recovering addicts)  
SWAD (Society for Woman Against Drugs and NGO of women concerned about the drug issue in the Maldives)

## Outline findings

There is a series of consistent messages that appear to be inescapable:

- The problem use of illicit substances is a major problem throughout the Maldives. Although the use of illicit drugs is concentrated on young people this problem affects just about every family throughout the Republic.
- Action will need to be taken on several fronts if the problem is to be tackled successfully. This includes: firm handling of the supply side of illicit drugs; the creation of a considerable number of job opportunities and career pathways for young people; development of treatment and rehabilitation services on a significantly increased scale. Work will need to be done at a community level to counter some of the stigma attached to drug use within the family and increase awareness of ways that support can be given to young people.
- The new government has a unique opportunity to start to tackle this problem in a meaningful way. For the first time there seems to be the political will to face up to the challenges that are posed by this enormous, growing problem within society. There will have to be new, tougher laws that are effective against drug dealers and the major importers of heroin and other illegal substances. Without the implementation of these laws against drug dealers no other action against drugs can be effective.
- Although 'everyone' in each community knows who the drug dealers and drug barons are, very little (or no) action has previously been taken against them. The law seems weak and flawed in this regard and people feel reluctant to inform on the drug dealers and any knowledge they have of the supply chain because they are aware that no effective action will be taken against the dealers... and they are naturally in fear of reprisals.
- It is easy to import illicit drugs into a country with so many small, uninhabited islands and a large volume of sea traffic.
- The drugs supply business has become a major economic activity within the islands and is accompanied by the concomitant issues of pervasive corruption and the growth of violence and intimidation.
- A previously peaceful environment has become contaminated by endemic violence on the streets for the first time in living memory.
- The majority of criminal activity on the islands is associated with acquisitive crime perpetrated by drug users in order to finance their habit. Surveys of the prison population reveal that almost the entire prison population has a relationship with the use of illicit drugs in some way.
- Punitive sentences for drug users, rather than therapeutic activities to aid recovery, have been the norm in the past.
- Young, disaffected people are being continually targeted by drug dealers in Malé and on all the other islands. Often the drug dealers use incentives and inducements for school age children. Drugs may be offered free at the initial stages and be available at specially organized parties etc.
- Young people may be attracted to the prospect of drug use because it seems 'grown up' and adventurous, but also because they perceive that there are

limited opportunities for employment or career development for people in the Maldives as they grow up.

- Poly drug use is almost the norm for drug users. Most will be taking a mixture including brown (contaminated) heroin, benzodiazepines (frequently Ketamine) and whatever else they can get their hands on.
- The attitude towards problem drug users within the family can create difficulties. Many families, certainly in the past, dealt with this problem by rejecting the young person feeling that this situation might cause shame on the family. There is some evidence that this prevalent attitude is changing and more families are now prepared to support the young person going through a turbulent time.
- The health service is in place to help people who have problems of drug use if they become ill or require treatment in some way... but does not routinely offer help for the underlying drug issues.
- The health service workforce has not been trained or equipped to tackle problems of drug use.
- The few facilities that have been established for treatment and support of problem drug use are not adequate to tackle the scale of the problem; in Malé or on the other islands.

On the positive side it appears that some of the problems associated with the use of illicit drugs in other countries is not (yet) a major feature of drug use in the Maldives:

- Although injecting opiates is a problem most young people appear to prefer to smoke (chase) the heroin.
- HIV and AIDS does not appear to have taken hold within the drug using community to date
- Hepatitis similarly does not appear to be a major problem to date

### NGOs (Journey and SWAD)

- Suffer from chronic lack of funds, low levels of support from official agencies and limited capacity to help the large numbers of illicit drug users throughout the islands.
- Looking for funding is enormously time-consuming and energy sapping for these NGOs. Uncertainty of continued finance hampers their activities and restricts the range of their work. Serious consideration should be given for government funding of their core activities on a sustained basis.
- These agencies contain the experts in drug addiction. These NGOs are trying to work on many different levels ranging from attempts to influence government policy to support and help for individual users and their families and friends.
- Their staff and group members are requesting further training in counseling

### Methadone clinic

- This is a pilot project – currently 45 addicts are engaged with the service.

- Evaluation is awaited, but some good outcomes are envisaged
- Further training for staff has been requested, especially if the service is to be developed further with greater numbers and in different geographical regions

#### De-tox unit

- Recently opened so no outcomes (positive or negative) to date.
- Small capacity (max 15 people?) will not be able to cope with demand even when fully operational
- Staff have requested further training

#### Rehabilitation unit

- This is a long established, therapeutic community unit, but outcome measures are not available. People are not followed up after discharge.
- Are the right people chosen for rehabilitation? Do some people choose to spend time in 'rehabilitation' rather than prison and without more positive motivation?
- After discharge people have difficulty finding employment or further training etc. because of the taint on their record.
- Currently no half-way house has been established to help ease people back into the community and remain drug free.
- Members of the community predict difficulties after their discharge from the therapeutic community as they have to stay in Malé for a year(?) and sign in every day. This is problematic for people from the other islands. Even people who have done well in the rehabilitation phase are very vulnerable at this time to relapse.
- This is a comparatively expensive unit to run and administer...
- Staff turnover is quite high, particularly at some of the lower grades. The counselors have received only rudimentary training and the unit has requested further training and staff development opportunities.

#### A role for Friends of Maldives to facilitate specialist placements?

The purpose of this visit to the Maldives has been to explore possibilities for future volunteer health worker placements from the United Kingdom through the auspices of Friends of the Maldives (FOM).

Following discussion with Hussain Zamir (Health Ministry consultant on drug abuse problems) as well as workers in NGOs (Journeys and SWAD), doctors in the methadone

clinic and visits to the drug detox centre and the drug rehabilitation facility the following possible specialist placements have been suggested:

- Strategic and policy advisor(s) to work with current decision makers at a senior level. How can this major health and social problem best be tackled with limited resources? Which services should be developed throughout the islands? What can be learnt from the experience of dealing with this problem in other countries? Are there external sources of finance or other resources that could be mobilized to help the problem in the Maldives?
- Training of drug counselors and health workers to work within all the existing drug facilities. NGOs need support and specialist help to assist training programs for local people and the families of drug users as well as workers in the projects.
- Community work training specific to drug use issues: to develop programs for community workers currently employed in the health and social services and NGOs to develop their role in relation to problem drug use. Developing educational material to counter negative stereotypes of drug users in the wider community. Work with schools to develop health education material and curriculum planning to include discussion around this issue.

#### **A final note:**

Throughout our visit to the Maldives a paradox has been apparent... there is a high level of unemployment, particularly amongst young people, but there is also a lot of work to be done at all levels and within every community. In addition many jobs that could be done by people from the Maldives are currently filled by expatriates. It is our opinion that unless and until this paradox is addressed, and young people can find pathways to productive lives in the future, taking drugs may continue to represent an attractive alternative.

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