With budget advocacy support from the Global Health Advocacy Incubator (GHAI), the Government of the Maldives has made a historic investment in the human and technical resources that support its national civil registration, vital statistics and identity management (CRVSID) systems.

The additional budget allocation will be used to establish a cadre of official subnational registrars, upgrade information technology hardware and software and support a newly interoperable digitized system, improving the country’s ability to provide universal vital event registration and legal identity for its geographically dispersed population, and to collect and use critical public health data.

“Political will and government investment [in the Maldives’ CRVSID system] can significantly impact the nation’s development. Political support is crucial to address societal needs.”

— Aishath Rasheeda, Former Head of DNR and Deputy Minister of National Planning, Housing and Infrastructure
The Challenge

The Maldives’ Decentralization Act, passed in 2010, transferred significant government powers from the central level to atoll and island levels. However, Atoll Councils and Island Councils have struggled to secure adequate funds for their expanded authority and responsibilities, including for birth and death registration. As a result, atolls and islands have lacked officially authorized civil registrars and the required resources for carrying out registration functions. Limitations in terms of personnel, resources and training have contributed to inconsistent quality of information on the number of births and deaths, as well as causes of death. In the absence of accurate cause-of-death data, effective public health planning is difficult.

In addition, the recently developed digital birth and death registration platform in Maldives, called GEMEN, was not linked to any other population data systems in the country, including: marriage and divorce registration records, the national identity management system (NARES), registers for land and household records, immigration records, the work permit digital database, the national health insurance scheme and voter records. Systemic gaps and budget constraints prevented the Maldives from implementing desired improvements to its CRVS and ID systems.

GHAI’s Response

In mid-2022, GHAI began a partnership with the Maldives’ Department of National Registration (DNR) to advocate for the allocation of increased resources with key Parliamentary Committees, Cabinet members and the Ministry of Finance by showcasing the strength of the existing digitized registration system, GEMEN, and the benefits that universal birth and death registration brings to the Government of the Maldives for its broader development goals. GHAI supported DNR in making a case for allocating additional funds for three specific system advancements: (1) integrating population data systems, (2) designating a new cadre of subnational-level civil registrars and (3) procuring biometric devices to allow nationwide identify verification as part of the new digital ID system.

Landscape Analysis

GHAI’s support to DNR began with an assessment of opportunities to mobilize domestic resources for CRVSID system improvement and developing a budget advocacy strategy through a participatory process. A draft of GHAI’s Budget Advocacy Toolkit for CRVS Funding Sustainability was used to conduct landscape analysis, through which the need was identified for immediate funding to develop an integrated CRVSID system that can manage, verify and issue National Digital ID Cards while also registering all vital events through a single digital portal.

Advocacy Strategy

Between November and December 2022, GHAI and DNR co-created a strategy to be implemented in 2023 and formalized the partnership through a Memorandum of Understanding. The strategy focused on some of the key priorities that DNR had previously identified in the CRVSID business process.
mapping and legal review projects, including advocacy for funding to fully link GEMEN with other relevant population data systems.

**Pilot of Biometric Fingerprint Scanning Devices**

In February 2023, GHAI supported DNR to implement the strategy by advancing funds for procurement of 10 rapid biometric registration devices to demonstrate their utility and provided catalytic IT support to carry out the needed upgrades.

**Engagement of Key Decision-Makers**

DNR staff held advocacy meetings with key staff on the Budget Committee of the Peoples Majlis (Maldives Parliament) and with budgetary authorities within the Ministry of Finance to convince them to support greater domestic allocations to DNR, to enhance its civil registration services and to the National Digital ID Program, to ensure universal legal identity.

**Result**

DNR’s approved budget increased by US$491,535 from 2022 to 2024, representing a 54% increase. The budget of the Maldives’ Digital Identity program, which sits within the National Center for Information Technology, increased by US$268,980 during the same period.

In securing historic levels of public investment in key CRVSID priorities in 2024, DNR successfully achieved its goals to expand and decentralize the civil registration workforce and to overcome IT challenges that have inhibited the department’s effectiveness. With DNR leadership, GHAI technical support and pilot project funding, the Maldives’ Ministry of
Finance was convinced to allocate funding for the following priorities in its Approved Budget:

Establishment of 20 new permanent positions for atoll-level civil registrars who will perform critical vital event registration services for their jurisdictions. The Ministry of Finance also committed to allocating additional and sufficient funds to DNR in fiscal years 2025-2027 to appoint civil registrars on each inhabited island, bringing registration and ID management services even closer to the people. Because these posts are permanent, a recurrent budget will be allocated year after year for the registrars’ salaries.

New funding for needed IT software and hardware, including procurement of 210 fingerprint scanning devices for nationwide scale-up of biometric verification for the Maldives’ National Digital ID system, following the GHAI-funded pilot with 10 devices that successfully demonstrated the value of this technology.

These wins are attributable to the strong vision of DNR and the Ministry of National Planning, Housing and Infrastructure who persuaded key decision-makers in the People’s Majlis (Maldivian Parliament) and the Cabinet within the President’s Office to commit increased funding for CRVSID system improvement priorities, despite challenging fiscal circumstances in the country, by demonstrating strong proof-of-concept which was developed with GHAI technical assistance.

Lessons Learned

- Partnering with the right government stakeholders, and formalizing that partnership drives action and accountability for budget advocacy and provides role and scope clarity for joint efforts.
- Bringing a diverse set of stakeholders together for identification of priorities allows for more voices to be heard and for broad buy-in for the budget advocacy objective and strategy.
- Government focal departments like DNR who implement key public sector programs can be among the strongest and most effective advocates to the legislature and the ministry of finance for increased prioritization and allocation.
- Budgetary authorities are more likely to support funding proposals that are backed by real-world evidence on outcomes from pilot implementation and relevant, recent success stories from other settings.