



## Maldives under the Burden of Drugs

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### Background

We are in dire need of better understanding the nature and extent of the impact of drug abuse in the Maldives and only through this understanding will we be able to make the decisions to identify appropriate strategies to combat the problem of drug abuse in the Maldives.

Although drug use is deemed to be the biggest obstacle to social development in the country and has been affecting every level of society for several years, as a nation we are finding it difficult to address this issue effectively. Since all consecutive government have only shown limited interest on this issue, the systems in place to counter it has deteriorated to the point of non-function.

The rise in drug abuse has also been fuelled by poor employment prospects, overcrowding on the islands and boredom among the youth. Peer pressure and social acceptance also play a major part in escalating drug use, some citizens we have come across on our travels throughout the country have come to believe that drug use is fast becoming the Maldivian number one recreational activity. Narcotics are easily smuggled into the Maldives as it is spread over 1,192 islands clustered into 20 atolls which are close to international sea lanes.

Historical documents reveal that travellers who visited the Maldives in the 16th century observed Opium being used inside the royal palaces. Moreover, in the 18th century, Indian traders introduced Cannabis to the country and in 1972, with the advent of tourism in the country, most people started smoking Marijuana. 'Brown sugar', the low-grade heroin that is prevalent in the country, was introduced after

the mass arrests of Marijuana users in the early 90s. The first drug law of Maldives passed in 1977 criminalized drug use, filling our jails beyond capacity and disrupting many lives in the process. Young people who were caught experimenting were thrown in jail where segregation was non-existent, most of them returned as hardened criminals or ended up becoming addicted.

The new drug law passed in 2012 decriminalized drug use and also established a drug court with the clear mandate for ease of access to treatment and rehabilitation. The drug court functions extremely well but because of the lack of support services there still remains a huge back log of cases and the rate of relapse after treatment is very high. There is just one treatment centre and two detoxification centres which are mostly full; there is no national strategy or policy for prevention. Current statistics show us that the age of initiation for drug use is rapidly declining; synthetic drugs are flooding the capital and islands of our Nation, day by day the drug trafficking and distribution are becoming bolder and stronger.

We have actually called for an evidence-based national drug policy. We believe that a policy will give the nation a strategic directive to work together, a coordinated and planned effort. Without a policy we are like a boat lost at sea, drifting without any destination. There are so many strategies and interventions that have shown impressive results in other countries and are based on scientific research. Basically, we need to stop trying to address drug use and addiction by using our personal ideologies and instead, try to address them through evidence based interventions.