

A Circular Economy and Marine Litter Strategy for the Maldives small-island country

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The Republic of Maldives, is a small archipelagic state situated in the Indian Ocean, comprising of more than 1.000 islands. The first systematic efforts regarding waste management in Maldives begun only after the tsunami of 2004. Before that, no planning or other activities existed.

Waste management is now recognized as the most pressing environmental issue, owing to population growth, economic expansion, sharp increase in number of tourists and changes in lifestyle. A number of unique challenges are faced by the Maldives, and in this respect the country has nothing in common with other cases that typically rely on mainland solutions. In particular, all islands have a low height above sea level, a fact that makes landfill planning extremely difficult. As a result, waste has been usually disposed to open dumpsites in an unsystematic manner, usually on an island edge and adjacent to the sea. Because of absence of fencing, lightweight material eventually escapes to sea. In most cases, open burning is still practiced because of the limited site area and in order to reduce the volume. Overall, efficient waste management is compromised by the complex logistics associated with the sparsely populated remote islands and the lack of transfer to centralized facilities.

Nevertheless, a number of good practices have been practiced in pilot islands. Following a thorough awareness campaign (“Soneva Namoonaa initiative”), biowaste is separately collected and treated within the island, through simple composting plants. The compost is clean and is then utilized locally. The NGO Parley collects plastic materials from schools in all islands, segregates per fraction, and exports the compressed balls. Participation is significant but still, the voluntary recycling activity is funded by donors, due to absence of a local recycling market. Indeed, citizens are aware of the stress posed to sea environment by poor waste management, and want to observe tangible progress, especially towards prevention and reuse.

The national economy heavily relies on mass tourism and most of the goods are imported. Indeed, massive packaging quantities are daily produced from goods consumed in the resorts or otherwise placed on the national market. It is evident to visitors that Maldives suffers not only from ineffective waste management, but also from plastic - especially empty PET water bottles - pollution. Although the principle of Extended Producer’s Responsibility has been debated for many years, no concrete steps are in place to implement it. It is promising that production and sale of common single-use plastic (SUP) products is discontinued since 2022, as part of a gradual phaseout plan in the Maldives. This regards a valuable legal instrument, however further actions are needed to reduce plastic leakage into oceans and follow the growing international efforts and Conventions.

The Ministry of Environment, Climate Change and Technology is implementing the Maldives Clean Environment Project (MCEP), financed through grant aid from the World Bank. Part of MCEP is a Consultancy Assignment for the preparation of a new national Waste Management Strategy and a Marine Litter Action Plan. The national waste management policy (strategy) is currently under public consultation, whereas it is in line with the current Government’s ambitious Environment Strategic Action Plan.

This new National Policy on waste, incorporates international principles, Circular Economy models and UN Goals. The strategic document shall protect Maldives’ distinctive nature from marine and plastic pollution and shall sensitize local communities to move from a “throw-away” to a “zero-waste society”. The assessed priority waste streams regard municipal waste, as well as other relevant types such as waste from tourism sector, e-waste and healthcare waste.

The aim of this paper is first to present the existing waste management situation, characterized by a fast growing waste generation rate. It will then highlight the ambitious policy measures to strengthen integrated waste management. The specific circular economy practices, applicable to the island character of Maldives, will be shown. A variety of measures will be adopted to reduce the land- and sea-based sources of marine litter, now seriously threatening the sea environment.

Focus will be given to the presentation of the viable scenarios developed, for the onset of a mandatory EPR scheme and an associated legal act. The national market is orientated to imports and it is anticipated that implementation will be opposed by obliged parties. Other likely strong barriers regard the lack of knowledge on how an EPR schemes is functioning and the absence of private sector involvement in the waste sector. A phased application with formation of a national EPR Steering Committee and a transition period of not more than four years, will help to abate these barriers.

