

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

NATIONAL RESEARCH FOUNDATION REPUBLIC OF MALDIVES, MINISTRY OF COMMUNICATION, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Proposed Structure, Priorities and Activities

The creation and effective operation of the proposed National Research Foundation (NRF) is an essential component in the Science and Technology (S&T) Masterplan's vision of how research can benefit the social and economic condition of the citizens of the Republic of Maldives. The S&T Masterplan appropriately focused attention on the technologies by which information is stored, retrieved and disseminated and significant progress is already underway on these activities. However, an information system is only as valuable as the content it has to disseminate and utilise. To be of use for social and economic development, information must be accurate, relevant, understandable, timely, and cost-effective. To assure that Government, the private sector, and individuals have such improved information about social, cultural and economic conditions in the Maldives, the S&T Masterplan proposed that Government should create, within the Ministry of Communication, Science and Technology (MCST), a National Research Foundation, with a dedicated share of Government revenue and procedures for recruiting private sector and individual contributions, to encourage and finance a substantial expansion of research on policy issues. While Government funding would be through the MCST, private funds would be solicited to extend the resource base of the Foundation and to encourage greater responsiveness to private sector research interests.

The MCST would provide the Director and secretariat for the NRF. The members of the Governing Board and Technical Review Panels of the NRF would be selected from the research community of the nation. These would be voluntary and part-time positions; membership on the Governing Board is envisioned as including a balance of public and private sector participation.

The S&T Masterplan suggested four areas for initial research grants:

- An Innovation and Technology Transfer Fund – To permit Maldivians to discover new applications of existing science and technology and to adapt emerging technologies to the specific, and often unique, needs of the nation.
- Presidential Research Grants – A set of special topics identified as of urgent and immediate need (the goal here would be for effective response to current policy issues and to establish a basis for longer term research that might be continued under the NRF or some other financing programme).
- Young Researcher Awards – Special funding for Maldivians (age 35 and under) who have returned from training and wish to continue or extend their previous research (a priority might be assigned to candidates who focused on Maldivian topics -- or ones relevant to Maldivian development -- in their degree research activities).

- Unsolicited Grants – Most major research funding agencies reserve a portion of their financial awards for topics proposed by researchers themselves (often these are subjects the NRF staff themselves may not be familiar with but that could have great relevance for development in the Maldives).

The physical facilities and equipment requirements should be minimal under the proposed operational structure of the NRF. There would be no new requirements for space or equipment beyond that already proposed for development of the MCST. A budget for meetings of the NRF Governing Board or Technical Review Panels and for travel and the award programmes could be financed from the NRF's dedicated share of the National budget. Similarly, the human resource requirements for the NRF will be modest. The secretariat of the NRF would be quite small, consisting initially of a part-time Director, two professional support staff and a half-time accountant.

Among the critical policy prerequisites to creation and implementation of the NRF is the need to make the decision to dedicate an assured share of Government budget to S&T research. This is a difficult thing to ask at a time when Maldives faces so many competing demands for its budget resources. However, such funding is essential for long-term planning by the NRF and its sponsored researchers. If Maldives is to take its place among the modern economies of the new century, this investment will have to be made. Given the employment demands of the next decade, and the uncertainties inherent in the Tourism and Fishery Sectors, a program of both strengthening these sectors while broadening Maldives' economic base and improving its social conditions through research is absolutely essential.

The proposed implementation schedule from the S&T Masterplan calls for creation of the NRF in late 2002; this will be followed by appointment of the NRF Director and study visits to be made to selected regional research and research funding organisations. It is suggested that funding be initiated at the relatively modest level of .2% of Government revenue. The initial research topics should be selected in early 2003 and a first round of research awards made in 2003-2004. Assuming successful initiation of the NRF activities, funding might increase to .4% of Government revenue during 2003-2004. A second call for proposals and a second round of funding would occur during that fiscal year. Subsequently, funding should continue to increase by .02% each year until it reaches the fixed level of 1.0% of Government revenue.

The ultimate beneficiaries of the NRF will not be solely the Government agencies, the private sector firms, or even the researchers themselves. The true beneficiaries will be the Maldivian people who will have access to better quality and lower cost goods and services, enhanced job opportunities, improved health, housing, and transportation, and a more secure and prosperous life based on respect and protection of the Nation's traditional fisheries and tourism sectors and insightful development of clean and safe technologies and industries for the future. The NRF, properly designed and implemented, has the potential to greatly improve Maldives' sustainable economic base while simultaneously enhancing the social conditions of its people. All Maldivians, men and women, young and old, in Male' and throughout the archipelago, have the opportunity to benefit from a strengthened base of relevant research information. Strengthening that information base and increasing its relevance will be a major responsibility of the new National Research Foundation.