

The Local Gaze: Social Inhibitors to Engagement in the Maldivian Tourism Industry

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Abstract

Advocators of tourism development in Small Island Developing States (SIDS) promote tourism in policy agendas on the grounds that it can enhance the lives of local people through the creation of employment and income streams. However, empirical research conducted in the Maldives, a SIDS in the Indian Ocean, highlighted an array of social, human resource, economic, institutional and religious factors that inhibit the participation of the local community in the Maldivian tourism labour market. This paper specifically examines the findings related to the social factors that were identified as: negative images of the industry, proximity to home and work, social isolation, parental influence, effect on family life while working away from home island, role of woman as mother, the lack of awareness of tourism jobs, social problems at workplace, disinterest in tourism employment, tourism industry being male dominated, and issues with safety and security at workplace. A number of these findings are discussed, as is the role of tourism operators and the government in addressing the social inhibitors to tourism employment in the Maldives.

Introduction

Tourism is recognised as a significant contributor for improving the economic livelihood of those people who live in tourism destination regions and precincts. This is especially the case in developing countries where other economic opportunities are limited. In Small Island Developing States (SIDS) for example, tourism is promoted by national and regional governments on the grounds that it can enhance the lives of local people through the creation of employment and in turn economic self sufficiency. Indeed, tourism is one industry which provides employment opportunities for disadvantaged groups such as low and unskilled workers and women.

It is against this background that increasing attention has been given to the potential and capacity of tourism as a tool for poverty alleviation (for example see: Ashe, 2005; UNWTO, 2010a). Yet very few studies have considered, from the perspective of local participants themselves, attitudes and perceptions towards employment in the tourism industries. For instance in the SIDS case of the Maldives there are very low rates of participation in the local tourism labour market despite rising unemployment and underemployment, particularly among women and youth (United Nations Development Group [UNDG], 2007). Although

tourism is the largest economic sector of the Maldives, contributing some 32.9% of GDP in 2007 and employing a large portion of the labour force, women are severely restricted from participating in this employment. Indeed, the proportion of women in paid employment is lowest in the tourism sector (UNDG, 2007).

Given this context, a study was undertaken to examine the various factors that impact on the attraction and retention of local people in tourism employment in the Maldives. This paper presents the results of one aspect of the broader study and identifies and discusses a myriad of social and cultural factors identified by participants as impacting on local participation in tourism employment. The role of tourism operators and the government in addressing these social inhibitors are also discussed. This study aims to address gaps in the literature regarding local employment in SIDS generally and more specifically in the context of the Maldives.

Literature Review

In defining SIDS, the Small Island Developing States Network (2009, p.2) states:

SIDS are small island and low-lying coastal countries that share similar sustainable development challenges, including small population, lack of resources, remoteness, susceptibility to natural disasters, excessive dependence on international trade and vulnerability to global developments. In addition, they suffer from lack of economies of scale, high transportation and communication costs, and costly public administration and infrastructure.

Given this context, for SIDS “tourism, offers the best chance for development in terms of creating growth and employment, generating foreign exchange and reducing poverty” (Croes, 2006:455). Consequently, tourism is often perceived as an attractive option for addressing underdevelopment, particularly as other economic alternatives are usually limited.

Arguably, employment is the primary avenue through which local communities in SIDS can directly benefit from tourism development. Indeed, empirical research suggests that tourism is a relatively ‘easy’ industry to access due to the low skill level, multiple job types and turbulent labour market which the industry represents (Szivas & Riley, 2009). The high reliance on tourism in many island destinations means that there is potential for significant proportions of the local population to be employed in the tourism sector. For instance,

according to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) (2004) tourism contributes some 15% to the Caribbean's GDP, accounts for 3 million jobs and represents 16% of total employment. Whereas other SIDS such as Seychelles, Aruba, Antigua and Barbuda have in excess of 50% employment in the tourism sector (WTTC, 2009).

Undoubtedly, tourism holds potential to bring economic progress to the local communities of SIDS (for example see: Narayan, Narayan, Prasad, & Prasad, 2010; Shareef, Hoti, & McAleer, 2008). At the same time, the negative impacts associated with tourism activity have overshadowed the potential of the sector to address unemployment and poverty alleviation. As Macleod (2004) identified, the negative impacts of tourism can be evident through social, economic, environmental and/or political factors. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, Macleod (2004) found that the destruction of social structures is a core negative social impact of tourism in small island destinations. The Maldives appears to be no exception.

Tourism in the Maldives

The Republic of Maldives, categorised as a SIDS and a Least Developed Country, is an independent archipelagic nation located south of the Indian sub-continent, straddling the equator. Only 194 of the 1,190 islands are inhabited by local people (Department of National Planning [DNP], 2010). Up until the late 1980s fishing was the key economic sector of this island nation. Agriculture, forestry and manufacturing industries have remained negligible. Tourism has thrived in the Maldives since its inception in 1972 with the opening of two resorts with 280 beds and 1,097 international tourist arrivals (Ministry of Tourism [MOT], 1998). Currently there are 97 islands which are exclusively developed as individual self-contained resorts on a 'one island-one resort' basis (Ministry of Tourism Arts and Culture [MTAC], 2010). Despite the global economic recession during the 2008-2009 period, in the second quarter of 2010, Maldives recorded 382,632 international tourist arrivals (MTAC, 2010). Further, the UNWTO (2010b) predicts that by the end of 2010, international tourist arrivals to the Maldives will increase by 17% on 2009 figures. This would amount to more than double the local population of the island nation.

The development of the Maldivian tourism industry is purported to be an example of 'successful' sustainable tourism development (for example see: Domroes, 2001; Inskip, 1991; MTAC, 2009a; MTPB, 2009). For instance, it has been suggested that the Maldives has "one of the most comprehensive planning and control systems used for tourism development"

(UNWTO, 2004:208). Yet while there are extensive laws and regulations in the Maldives for the protection and conservation of the natural environment (for example see: MOT, 1983, 1999a; 1999b), there are no laws or regulations regarding social sustainability aspects within the destination. For example, up until the last quarter of 2008 the only employment regulation in the Maldives was a labour regulation decreed to control the influx of expatriate labour in the national employment market. To-date there has been no legislation formulated to ensure equitable economic distributions and economic regulatory frameworks such as income tax.

This initial phase of tourism development in the Maldives demonstrated certain characteristics of the 'Circumstantial Alternative Tourism' state of tourism development as proposed by Weaver (2000). During this 'exploration stage' (Butler, 1980), there was also a lack of control of tourism affairs by the national government and no legal framework. This provided an environment of 'make hay while sun shines' for the private sector. According to the MOT (1998), the role of the Maldivian government during this first phase of tourism development was mainly the unintentional facilitation of land and more deliberate facilitation of air travel. However, as negative impacts of tourism emerged, during the 1980s the Maldivian government intervened and enacted laws to prohibit tourists from staying in locally inhabited islands other than Malé and in safari *dhonis*¹ as well as restricting the safari *dhoni*'s to certain zones of the country for travel. Special permits were required from MOT for tourists to visit inhabited islands.

Nevertheless, recognising tourism as the 'goose which lays the golden egg', these policies have radically changed. During the current fifth phase of tourism development, government has withdrawn policies with regard to restricting zones for travel and is now permitting safari *dhoni*'s to travel throughout the country. The 'one island-one resort' policy has also changed. The government has leased land from nine locally inhabited islands for hotel development and the reef of further seven locally inhabited islands for 'reef resort' development (MPND, 2008). Further, any locally inhabited island can also establish tourist guest house operations. This is due to the fact that the government has taken a more entrepreneurial role towards tourism, relying heavily on lease rent to balance government budget deficits. This also indicates a move towards the unsustainable mass tourism state of development as proposed by Weaver (2000).

¹ Locally known as safari *dhoni*, these are boats which provide accommodation, food and beverages, and normally are accompanied by a smaller vessel with diving facilities.

Further, the economic success story of the Maldives tourism is not translated into a fair distribution of socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders or to the provision of stable employment and income-earning opportunities for local communities (Saeed, 2007; Yahya, Parameswaran, Ahmed, & Sebastian, 2005). While tourism is the backbone of the Maldivian economy, contributing 27% to GDP, 29% to government revenue, and generating about 70% of the foreign currency earnings for the country in 2008 (MTAC, 2009b), there are heavy leakages due to foreign ownership, a high reliance on expatriate employees and imported goods. The main target markets of the Maldivian tourism industry are high spending long-haul travellers. However, as the country does not have agricultural or manufacturing industries of sufficient scale to meet the needs of international visitors, the industry relies heavily on imports. For example, the Maldives Customs Services (2010) records indicate that in 2008, Maldives imported US\$1.4 billion worth of products. Among other items, a large proportion of imports were made up of mineral products (27%), machinery and mechanical appliances; (19%) and vegetable products (6%).

In the Maldives, there is a dearth of statistical data regarding employment in the tourism industry. However, the WTTC (2010) estimates that in 2010, the travel and tourism sectors represent some 55% of the country's employment. From the current Maldivian population of just over 310,000, the economically active population (aged 15-64 years) in 2007 was just over 198,000. Although the country had an unemployment rate of 14% (DNP, 2009), by the end of 2008, Maldives had an expatriate workforce of nearly 81,000 (Ministry of Human Resources Youth and Sports, 2009). The majority of these were directly or indirectly employed in the tourism industry. Estimates suggest that approximately 53% of the tourism workforce is comprised of expatriates (Clique Associate Trainers and Consultants, 2007). A human resource situation analysis conducted by the MTCA in 2006 indicated that of those employed, 59% of expatriates were employed in managerial level jobs and just over half of the supervisory level positions were also staffed by expatriate employees (MTCA, 2008). In comparison, over half (57%) of the functional or front-line positions were staffed by local employees. Further this study also illustrated disparities between local and expatriate employees' income levels finding that the overall average salary of local employees was significantly lower than that of expatriate employees. While the managerial and administrative employees were the highest paid with an average monthly salary of US\$1,400 for expatriates, a local employee in the same position was paid US\$800. An expatriate

working in the clinic/health centre was paid an average monthly salary of US\$700, in comparison to US\$200 paid to a local employed in the same job (MTCA, 2008).

Although, the first Employment Bill has introduced the concept of a work contract, including minimum wages, number of working hours, work conditions and employee benefits, employees are yet to benefit from a full role out of this legislation. This is because many industry operators have not acted upon this legislation, prompting many resort employees around the country to go on a series of strikes demanding the legislation be enforced (Haveeru Daily Online, 2010). Furthermore, issues of discrimination and pay differential between local and expatriate employees (MTCA, 2008), in addition to issues of local employees being unjustly sacked, are becoming a common feature of employment in the tourism industry in the Maldives. In considering the more casual attitude of Maldivians towards employment, employees quitting or deserting also remains a widespread issue in the Maldivian tourism industry (MTCA, 2008).

It is acknowledged that economic distortions can take place geographically if tourism is concentrated in only one or a few areas of a country or region without corresponding development in other places (Cooper, Fletcher, Fyall, Gilbert, & Wanhill, 2008). Similarly, tourism also makes its own contribution to the economic imbalances in the Maldives, particularly in terms of regional disparities between Malé and the outer islands. For instance, there are widening discrepancies in income, access to social services, infrastructure and other opportunities, between Malé and the outer atolls (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2007; 2009; United Nations Development Program [UNDP], 2008). It is also argued that those atolls furthest away from tourism activities in the Maldives are not experiencing significant benefits from tourism (Tourism Concern, 2009; Yoosuf, 2008). Indeed, analysis of tourism development patterns in the Maldives demonstrates that a community approach to tourism development has remained a rather elusive concept.

Methodology

To address the research objective, a mixed methodological approach was adopted. Key stakeholders associated with employment in the Maldives tourism industry were deemed for this study to include: tourism industry managers, tourism educators and community representatives. A limitation of the data set is that employees, whether present or potential, were not able to be surveyed in the data collection due to logistical constraints associated

with the research design. However, the authors acknowledge that this is an aspect to address in future research.

Primary research utilising a mixed methodology (28 in-depth face-to-face interviews with tourism educators; eight focus groups with local community representatives; and, 74 survey questionnaires with resort managers) was undertaken in 2007 to examine the range of factors affecting the attraction and retention of local people in tourism employment in the Maldives. While the scope of this paper does not permit discussion of each of these aspects a number of issues and challenges regarding the participation and employment of local Maldivians in the tourism industry were highlighted. These included: social factors, human resource factors, economic factors, institutional factors and religious factors. The quantitative component of the research elicited further themes including: local employee's lack of vocational skills, lack of commitment to industry jobs, unavailability of skilled local employees including inadequate professional experience and lack of academic qualifications, as well as the local's negative images regarding employment in the tourism industry. This paper focuses specifically on the social factors identified in the research as affecting the attraction and retention of locals in tourism employment in the Maldives.

Due to the mixed methods, various data analysis techniques were employed. Data from the in-depth interviews and focus groups were transcribed, translated and analysed using content analysis. To reduce and transform the data into an accessible and understandable form, and to draw out various themes and patterns associated with the participants being studied (Berg, 2004), the transcripts were analysed and organised utilising the principles of content analysis. Researchers subscribing to the constructivist paradigm consider that data should be analysed through a process of induction, where the researcher constructs and reconstructs meaning in the data in relation to the research question. Data was coded using manifest and latent analysis. With regard to the focus group data, the notion of "collective inquiry" (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005:888) based on the objective of generalising findings in terms of the group was sought (Stewart, Shamdasini, & Rook, 2007). Hence, the content of the focus group discussions were analysed as a group rather than on an individual basis. For each of the qualitative data sets multiple responses were coded. Interview excerpts were assigned identifiers based on whether the respondent was a member of a focus group (FG) or undertook an in-depth interview (INT).

The quantitative data collected through the tourism industry survey questionnaires was analysed using the computer package, Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (*SPSS*, v15.0). In order to determine the internal consistency of the survey questionnaire a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient reliability analysis was conducted. This method shows an indication of the average correlation among all the items, in this case, of the research questionnaire's number of items presented on the Likert scale. Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for the tourism industry survey questionnaire was measured at 0.9. Therefore, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient is well above the 0.7 standard reliability as suggested by DeVellis (2003).

Results and Discussion

Given the previously outlined issues and challenges with local employment in the Maldives, the research specifically sought to identify those factors that affect the attraction and retention of local employees in the Maldivian tourism industry. As such, the questions posed to all three sets of study participants primarily centred on the attraction and retention of local employees in the tourism industry.

The narrow labour market and the lack of a skilled labour force were identified by the industry survey respondents as a key issue affecting the attraction and retention of local employees in the Maldivian tourism industry. Indeed, the vast majority of industry respondents agreed/strongly agreed that the local labour force in the Maldives lacked: the necessary vocational skills (80%); a commitment to employment in the industry (77%); professional experience (69%); and, the requisite academic qualifications (57%). A lack of employee commitment to the job was an issue identified as affecting the attraction and retention of local employees in the Maldivian tourism industry. However, industry respondents were less certain that the negative image of the tourism industry was a factor (23%).

Further insights on why there is difficulty in attracting and retaining local employees in the tourism industry was uncovered in the local community representative focus groups and tourism educator in-depth interviews. Social factors were salient in both the local community focus group discussions (88%, n=7), and tourism educator interviews (82%, n=23) as affecting the attraction and retention of local employees in the Maldivian tourism industry (Figure 1).

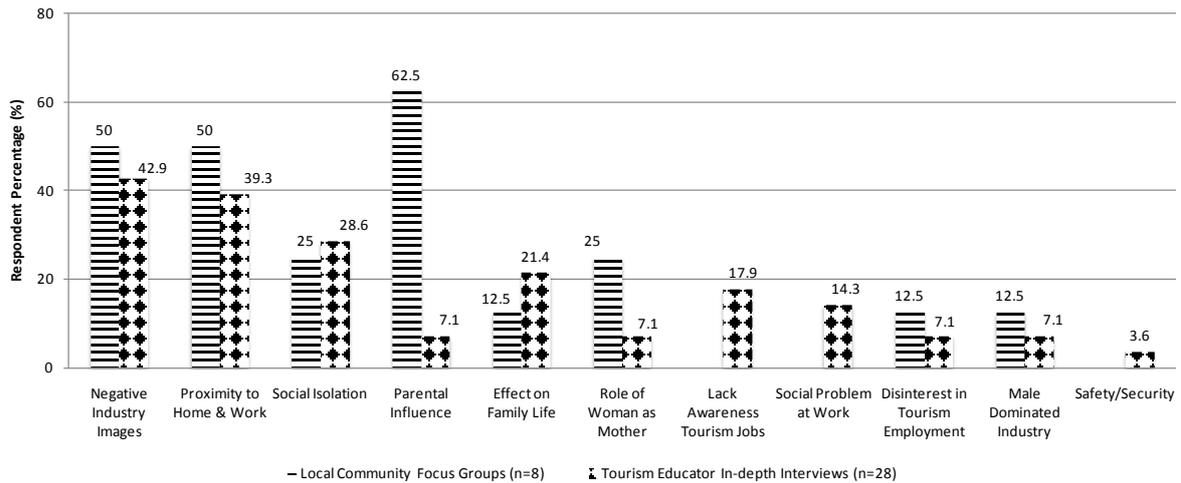


Figure 1: Issues Affecting Attraction & Retention of Local Employees: Social Factors
(Note: Multiple Responses Included)

The key themes that emerged from the research relating to social inhibitors to employment included: negative images of the industry, proximity to home and work, social isolation, parental influence, effect on family life while working away from home island, role of woman as mother, the lack of awareness of tourism jobs, social problems at workplace, disinterest in tourism employment, tourism industry being male dominated, and issues with safety and security at workplace (Figure 1). A discussion on the four most frequently cited themes are presented.

Negative Images of the Industry

The negative image of tourism (FG=50%; INT=43%) was identified as the primary social issue affecting the attraction and retention of local employees in the Maldivian tourism industry.

There is a problem with the image of industry. Tourism industry is seen as a threat - indirectly maybe, that only very bad people go there. It is seen as that anyone who goes to the tourist resort [to work] they would drink and booze (INT18).

Despite this perception held by the tourism educators and the local community focus groups, the industry survey indicated that from their perspective the negative images of the tourism industry was not a key issue affecting the attraction and retention of local people. Over a third (39%, n=29) of industry survey respondents disagreed that negative images of the tourism industry was an issue affecting the attraction and retention of local people in tourism employment in the Maldives. Conversely, only 23% (n=17) of industry survey respondents

considered the negative images of the tourism industry as an issue affecting the attraction and retention of local employees in the Maldivian tourism industry.

The negative image that has been created within the Maldivian tourism industry was also identified as related to the inherent nature of the industry, low wages and employee living conditions at resorts. This is compounded by the particularities of the Maldivian context such as the policy of enclave tourism which leads to social isolation and family separation. This has a negative impact on the socio-cultural fabric of families and communities. Additionally, there is a lack of awareness among locals as to what the tourism industry is all about, leading parents to dissuade their children from taking up a career in the Maldivian tourism industry.

The next thing is the awareness among us. To let a girl go to a resort to do a course or job is something that us parents don't want to do. That is because we are really not aware of the industry and we tend to believe what we hear (FG07);

No parent wants to send their daughter to the tourism industry. Perhaps because there are so many negative stories about it [tourism industry] as well...and also because they don't want to send them faraway place or to another island (FG04).

Proximity to Home and Work

Proximity to home and work was the second key social theme identified by half of the local community focus groups (50%, n=4), and by over a third tourism educators (39%, n=11).

I think the major problem is living away from family to do a job (FG03);

...so the problem is leaving the wife and family for such a long period of time. Especially when the young man gets a new baby they find it difficult to stay away from the family (FG01).

Similarly, tourism educators attested that this was a key issue.

I guess in the Maldives the other challenge is the distance. Here you can't just get on the motorbike and drive to work, or catch a public bus, there is no public transport system (INT04);

Another thing which might be worth looking at is the nature of the industry. We must keep in mind that the resorts in the Maldives are self contained islands, where there is no social environment for young people, and it's just work and sleep for them. They don't have means of transport where like say, when they are off duty they can go and have a social life, come to Malé or some other inhabited island and go back to work

the next day...it's just that they are living in the resorts away from their peers, their families. And young people of course they want a social life, so for them it is not all that important at that age to earn. So they don't see resorts as a very attractive employer (INT11).

Social Isolation

Social isolation, while working at a resort, was recognised by just over a quarter of tourism educators (29%, n=8), and a quarter of local community focus groups (25%, n=2). Emotional well being and work-life balance are crucial to an employee's intention to remain in a job (Cleveland, et al., 2007), and the current 'one island-one resort' policy can certainly be seen as a factor affecting the local labour market's participation in tourism. *"Our geography plays a big role in this. Because we are so far away from our homes, and working at a resort is very isolated"* (INT08); *"The men can't leave their wife and children for 2-3 years while they stay at the resort job"* (FG01).

In order for the tourism industry to be recognised as a real employment option, the industry operators need to establish an effective system whereby employees can work and at the same time participate in the social life within the community. The government also needs to consider the establishment of a reliable transport system within the tourism zones, to facilitate employees to commute between work and their home island. Undoubtedly, such a system also requires corporation of the industry operators.

Parental Influence

The vast majority of local community focus groups (63%, n=5), regarded parental influence as the overarching social issue affecting the attraction and retention of local employees in the Maldivian tourism industry. They also noted this to be a major influence on the low levels of female participation in the tourism industry (Figure 1). According to local community focus groups, parents do not want to send their daughters to work at a resort due to the isolated nature of the resort operations, and the parental desire to 'protect the reputation' of their daughters. *"Parents in all atolls, they don't send their daughters for work out of their home island. They fear about and care for the reputation and wellbeing of their daughters"* (FG04). In this context a tourism educator noted that *"Parents think that their children may be deviated in a different way if they work at a resort and they may not be under parental control, so these are all issues"* (INT21).

Recommendations and Conclusions

This research has found that despite the increased number of tourist arrivals and consequent increase in foreign exchange earnings, tourism development does not necessarily mean that it is developed in a manner which benefits all stakeholders. A fundamental requirement for the sustainability of tourism development is “providing socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders that are fairly distributed” (UNWTO, 2005:11). Indeed, viable and sustainable tourism development can only be successful when it serves the actual needs and demands of the destination’s population (Pappas, 2008). For this reason, local employment options are a crucial factor that contributes to the sustainable development of tourism in the SIDS.

Hence, to address the issues identified in this study, a number of strategies are suggested. First and foremost, the government should establish minimum wages, work conditions and workplace health and safety regulations to protect, and attract, the local labour market. To achieve this in practice, government intervention cannot be the only solution. Employers need to offer remuneration packages which reflect the cost of living standard in the country. The tourism industry itself needs to do more to attract and retain local employees. Increased education for industry regarding the efficiencies of retaining employees may also be an option to overcome these issues. Furthermore, both industry and government need to have a community approach to tourism development to ensure tourism is developed in a manner which benefits all stakeholders.

At the Millennium Summit in 2000, the international community, under the leadership of the United Nations, adopted the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the first of which is, by 2015, to halve the proportion of people living on less than US\$1 a day (United Nations [UN], 2000). The target indicator is to “make the goals of full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people, a central objective of our relevant national and international policies and our national development strategies” (UN, 2005:11). Similarly, the International Labour Organization (2008) recognises that realising full and productive employment and decent work for all, is the main route for people to escape poverty. The notion of ‘decent work’ recognises that only by giving people a decent job – not just any job – they get a chance to avoid and/or escape poverty. This is the core challenge for SIDS such as the Maldives. For tourism to legitimately contribute to the sustainable development objectives of the country, addressing the quality of employment in the sector must be a primary objective of government and the tourism industry itself.

This study of the Maldives has reinforced that the inherent nature of the tourism industry can make it an unattractive employment option and as such difficulty arises in attracting and retaining staff. High employee turnover, staff exiting the sector for employment in other industries, and people not even considering the sector as an employment option combines to reduce tourism's potential positive economic impacts on host communities. While this may force employers to seek expatriate labour or whether they choose to do so because of skill levels and experience, or indeed, the availability of cheaper labour, this situation will not contribute to sustainable development goals and objectives.

For sustainable tourism development to be successful in SIDS, it is imperative that the local labour market is engaged more successfully in the tourism industry. In order to sustain local employment within the Maldivian tourism industry human resource policies must address pay differentials and offer attractive remuneration packages such as health insurance to both expatriate and local employees. Furthermore, in order to improve the industry's image as an employer, there is a need for improved employee facilities and appropriate work conditions in accordance with national and international human rights standards. Further, education is a crucial component for local capacity building and is necessary for locals to be involved both in the tourism development process as well as in tourism employment (Moscardo, 2008). Disseminating information about the industry, providing career guidance and counselling could be important steps towards increasing support for the industry and, ultimately, stimulating local labour market participation.

The government has a primary role to play in ensuring that tourism is developed and managed based on the principles of sustainable development. As is clearly the case in the Maldives the underrepresentation of locals in tourism related employment is compromising the sustainability of the sector and as such tourism is not delivering the full range of positive impacts for the broader host community. Therefore, to legitimately address this issue, the piecemeal human resource policies of the past must be superseded by an appropriate legal and regulatory framework for the labour market addressing such aspects as work contracts, minimum wages, workplace health and safety regulations and employee protection. In the absence of such provisions in the Maldives, Butler's (1998: 28) statement resonates, "while some developments may have moved significantly towards sustainability, to claim that they are sustainable is clearly at best premature, and possibly completely inaccurate".

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