

## A Deep Investigation on the Impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on Maldives

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### Abstract

The Belt and Road Initiative, specifically including the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, is a Chinese national project whose goal is to maintain an open world economic system, advance regional cooperation, and strengthen the worldwide communication. As one of the first countries joining the Belt and Road Initiative, Maldives has embraced positive changes and benefited a lot from the project. Therefore, this investigation is conducted to go deep into the life of Maldivians and understand their true feelings towards the changes brought by the Belt and Road Initiative in recent years. This research chooses the Maalhos Islands, Maldives as the investigation destination and collects research data through interviews to local residents. This investigation covers aspects of the Maldivian society, including the economy, education, health-care, etc. The ultimate goal is to figure out the changes brought by the Belt and Road Initiative to the Maldivian people, review the past and look to the further development.

### Keywords

Maldives, the Maalhos Islands, the Belt and Road Initiative, Social Investigation.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The Belt and Road Initiative

The Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, together referred to as the Belt and Road Initiative, was proposed by the Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013. The initiative has attracted the attention of the whole world and received positive responses from the international community since its proposal. As the largest developing country and the world's second largest economy, China pursues a cooperative regional development and promotes communication between civilizations through the practice of the Belt and Road Initiative. In 2015, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank was founded under the background of the initiative to promote the regional economic integration and development. With the support of the initiative, hydro-power stations and high-speed rails have been constructed in Pakistan, Laos and Indonesia respectively. Up to now, many countries have benefited from the initiative in almost all aspects of their society, and the impact will definitely be expanded in the future.

### 1.2. The Maldives

Strung across the Indian Ocean, the Maldives is the flattest country on the planet with no natural land higher than 2.3 meters above sea level. Given the splendid beauty of natural environment,

there is no doubt that tourism is the principal industry in Maldives. However, from the perspective of long-term development, Maldives has to diversify its development on the basis of its advantageous tourism. The Maldives is one of the first countries to join the Belt and Road Initiative, and its economic development has been greatly supported by China and the initiative. In September 2018, the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge, which is also the first cross-sea bridge in the Maldives, opened to traffic. Connecting the capital Male and the neighboring Hulhule Island where the main international airport of Maldives is located, the two-km bridge makes it possible for locals and tourists to transfer between the two islands within five minutes. The mutually beneficial cooperation brings convenience to Maldivians and makes a great contribution to the development of the Maldivian economy. The Maalhos Islands, 200 km away from the capital city Male, is chosen as the destination of this investigation. Through the in-depth interview, the research endeavors to figure out the actual impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on the Maldives and its people.

### 1.3. Research Plan

The investigation is carried out in the Maalhos Islands from July 14th to 20th, 2019. A certain number of local residents are invited to attend the one-to-one interviews of this research. Interviewees are supposed to cover a comparatively wide range of fields so as to make the investigation more comprehensive. The research questions asked in the interviews are mainly related to the Belt and Road Initiative and their social life, and the interviews are focused on the perceptions of Maldivian people towards the initiative and the true feelings of their daily life. The research analysis and discussion are made based on the answers received in the interviews and the personal observation of the research group. Through this investigation, the research group endeavors to gain a whole picture of the Maldivian society and witness the achievements having been made in the Maldives with the support of the Belt and Road Initiative.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Data Collection

The investigation is made through one-to-one interviews, and prepared questions are to be asked to know what the Maldivian people think about their society. In order to secure the pervasiveness of the research, the interviewees invited to the investigation covers various positions including managers, retirees, unemployed people, etc. The interviewee list is shown in Table 1 as follows.

### 2.2. Investigation Questions

The interviews are conducted based on the following questions prepared but not limited in those topics.

- Have you ever heard of the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road?
- \*What economic effect did it bring here?
- \*What education effect did it bring here?
- \*What transportation effect did it bring here?
- Have you ever heard of the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge?
- Have you or your friends ever crossed the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge?
- Have you ever heard of the welfare housing?
- \*Did you or your friends get welfare housing?
- What changes do you want to have in your life?
- What's your understanding of the Belt and Road Initiative?
- What kind of help do you think Maldives can get from China?

**Table 1.** Interviewee List

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Position</b>
Mario	38	Male	Hotel Manager & Diving Coach
Aslam	32	Male	Hotel Manager (The guide of this investigation)
Abdul Gadwdhir Suwof	53	Male	Shop Owner (Retired teacher)
Haneerf	42	Male	Hotel Operator
Sham	47	Female	Unemployed (Making ropes for local people)
Rameez	45	Male	Speed Boat Captain
Aslan	32	Male	Hotel Manager & Diving Coach
Areef	41	Male	School Leader
Nizar	53	Female	Shop Owner (With two kids)
Aisathath Saneeha	31	Female	Housewife
Nazim	30	Male	Unemployed
Haneerf's sister	37	Female	Private Care

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1. The Cooperation between China and Maldives

There are eleven interviews conducted in this research, and the social situations and problems of the Maalhos Islands are observed through the investigation. As the Belt and Road Initiative is the main focus of this research, the China-Maldives cooperation and the perception of the Maldivian people towards it are frequently presented in the interviews. China and Maldives have a long history of collaboration as Maldives is an active member of the ancient Silk Road. The Maldives is well-positioned in the Indian Ocean and plays a vital strategic role in the international ocean transportation. Therefore, China and Maldives can be mutually benefited from the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.

According to the answers received in the interviews, ten out of eleven interviewees at least have a basic understanding of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, all of the interviewees have heard the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge, and 91% of them know the welfare housing. The China-Maldives Friendship Bridge, completed in September 2018, is one of the most significant and symbolic achievements of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road in Maldives. All of the interviewees hold the belief that the bridge would undoubtedly bring great convenience to their daily life. Although some of the local residents may not know the exact name of the initiative, the actual efficiency and development brought by the project can make them feel its great impact. China is playing an important role in promoting the transformation and upgrading of the Maldivian economy and improving the living condition of the Maldivian people. They have benefited a lot from the strong cooperative relationship between China and Maldives, and 80%

of the interviewees hope that the friendship can be kept and further strengthened. All of them believe that the friendship can bring positive effects on the islands and secure them a bright future.

### **3.2. The Development of Economy**

The Maldives is the smallest country in Asia and the largest coral island country in the world. Before 1972, fishing was its main economic pillar, and tourism gradually dominated after that year. According to the interviews, 90% of the tourists in the Maldives are from European countries before 2006; however in recent years, China has already replaced the Europe as the main source of tourists for the Maldives, and their tourism products have also been adjusted to meet the Chinese market. However, due to the single economic structure, the Maldives' economic growth has slowed down and fluctuated with natural disasters and financial crises in the past decade. Currently, the Maldivian government is actively seeking economic transformation to promote a diversified economic development.

Since Maldives joined the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, increasing number of Chinese tourists have been to the Maldives for holidays, and the Maldivian people can therefore earn more money from tourism. According to the answers received in interviews, it is learned that there are nearly 650 residents on the Maalhos Islands, and the breadwinners are mainly the men. The China-Maldives cooperation also brings a number of employment opportunities to the Maldivian people. According to the investigation, 75% of the working people on the Maalhos Islands are devoted themselves in the local tourism, and the rest of them do fishing or operate speed boats. However, generally speaking, the average salary of the working people in the Maalhos Islands is between 300 to 400 dollars per month, and only some of them can earn over 1000 dollars.

In a long run, the tourism is not enough for improving the living conditions of the Maldivian people substantially. With the support of the Belt and Road Initiative, Maldives is seeking for a diversified development of economy; for example, Seychelles and Mauritius are actively promoting the growth of banking, manufacturing, and communication industry together with tourism. It is definitely a delightful attempt and start for the Maldivian economy, and the living standards of their people can be greatly benefited in a foreseeable future. Interviewees in this investigation also feel excited about the changes and opportunities brought by China, they firmly believe that the collaboration of China and Maldives can bring long-term positive effects to their national development and their social lives. For instance, the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge is a marvellous accomplishment not only providing great convenience for the people but also making the development of transportation and logistics industry possible in the Maldives. The development of economy and the lifting of people's living standards can always carry out at the same time. The Maldives with blessed natural resources have an incomparable potential to be developed as a tourism-characterized diversified economy. Within the Belt and Road Initiative, China and Maldives would have numerous opportunities to explore more programs so as to boost the economic development and secure their people a better life with a joint effort.

### **3.3. The Problem of Healthcare**

The healthcare is one of the most important aspects closely related to people's life; however, the medical situation in the Maalhos Islands is unsatisfactory. According to the investigation, 91% of the local people want to improve the healthcare service in the Maalhos Islands. The medical level is relatively poor, and the environment is also not that desirable. There is only one doctor and two nurses in the local hospital with twelve medical staffs. When an emergency occurs, there is nothing can be done but to send patients to Male, the capital city, for a better treatment. The poor medical situation in the Maalhos Island is totally out of our anticipation, and the medical facilities and healthcare personnel there are seriously insufficient. The

healthcare is the primary need for the local people in their everyday life; however, unfortunately, such a basic need fails to be met in the Maalhos Islands presently. This very finding makes us turn our investigation focus from the Grand National project to the fundamental needs of Maldivian people. It should be realized that the economic growth of a nation serves the well-being of their people, which is the ultimate goal of development. What the Belt and Road Initiative can bring to the healthcare in the Maldives should be considered.

The Belt and Road Initiative has drawn the attention of the whole world, and grand projects like the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge can make the international community re-recognize the Maldives not only as a tourist attraction. Thanks to the convenience brought by the bridge as well as other infrastructure construction, increasing number of people all over the world may visit the Maldives and gain an even more comprehensive understanding of the islands. During this process, some standing social problems like the healthcare condition would be observed and hopefully be handled through cooperation. Some medical experts and facilities could be sent to help the development of healthcare in Maldives. The Belt and Road Initiative is a great start for the Maldives in seeking and carrying out international cooperation, and the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge has demonstrated its potential of social development. Therefore, we certainly have plenty of reasons to believe that healthcare quality would be improved in the future. However, at the same time, it is of great importance for the Maldives to cultivate their own talents to solve those social problems confronting them, which is the most direct and effective way to facilitate the development of Maldives.

### **3.4. The Shortage of Education**

When it comes to the discussion of education, there are ten out of the eleven interviews thinking that the education level should be improved. At present, the education for students from grade one to ten is free in Maldives, but there are only a few good teachers in those schools. Most of education resources are in the capital, Male; therefore, all families tend to send their kids to Male or abroad if the economic condition permits. The very fact in Maldives is that not all families can afford the fees of education, which makes it difficult for the Maldives to develop itself from a tourism-oriented country to a diversified economy.

According to the interview, the local education and its economy are lower than the average level of the whole country. Even though the education in the Maalhos Islands is free from the first to tenth grade, if they want to acquire higher education, they have to go to Male or choose to study abroad. The interviewees tell us that the Maldivian government has paid high attention on the improvement of education for decades and also invested a lot of money in it, but the present situation is still not that positive. The previous efforts made by the government are mainly on the preschool and middle school education, while the high-level is solely practiced in a limited number of islands. The higher education, represented by the Maldives National University, is only practiced in the capital, while the other islands do not have the higher education resources. For instance, kids in Maalhos can only attend schools from the first to tenth grade, and their further education is not secured by the government. After graduation from high school, the teenagers have to decide whether to continue their study in the future. Some students from low-paid families may have to choose to find a job and make money. The overall education level in Maldives should be improved as fast as possible since the education is about the future of the islands.

The Belt and Road Initiative is aimed at making the countries develop collaboratively; therefore, the cooperation should not only be focused on the present but more importantly on the future. The improvement of education level can make it possible for the Maldivian people to have more human resources so as to develop their country much more rapidly. With the support of the Belt and Road Initiative, the Maldivian students may have more opportunities to attend the universities in China for higher education. Chinese scholars can also go to the Maldives to



present short-term courses for the Maldivian students and bring education experience to the islands. It is firmly believed that the China-Maldives cooperation in higher education could have fruitful outcomes.

#### 4. Conclusion

Through the social investigation in the Maalhos Islands for seven days, the research group has known the Maldivian general social condition and the impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on the Maldives. According to the answers received in the interviews, the living standard and education quality are the main concerns of the local residents in the Maalhos Islands. They feel delighted for the effects brought by the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road in the economy, education, and more importantly, their living standard. The economic effect brought by the initiative is not limited to the international trade but also reflected on its pillar industry, tourism. The cooperation within the initiative can attract more tourists from China and many other countries to visit the Maldives, and its tourism can be further boosted. The economic development primarily driven by the tourism ought to be the fundamental step for the national development.

After a week of investigation, the research group is deeply aware that there is still much space left for the development in many aspects of their social lives. The health-care and education are two of the most important fields which need improving. As far as the health-care is concerned, the medical facilities and personnel are the first step to be moved, and it requires the supports from China as well as other countries within the initiative. For the education, advanced education system and education model should be built, and high quality teachers and education resources are also needed. With higher education, the Maldivian people can develop other industries like engineering and transportation in the Maldives besides tourism so as to bring their own economy to a much higher level. A large number of outstanding Maldivian talents could make inestimable values for the whole islands, and the Maldives would embrace a bright future.

As for this investigation, the sample size of the interview is not enough for the research of this topic, but it shows the overall social situation of the Maldives accurately. This survey is conducted from the perspective of the impacts brought by the Belt and Road Initiative, which is subject worthy of further study. Our research group genuinely hope that the Belt and Road Initiative can bring China and the Maldives to a new height in overseas cooperation.

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