

National Symposium on the

Right to Information

17 - 18 August 2026

Summary Report and
Recommendations



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List of Abbreviations

ACC	Anti-Corruption Commission	MINDCo	Maldives Information and Digital Company
AIM Project	Accountability and Integrity Matters Project	MIRA	Maldives Inland Revenue Authority
AGO	Attorney General's Office	MNDF	Maldives National Defence Force
BML	Bank of Maldives	MP	Member of Parliament
CMDA	Capital Market Development Authority	OGP	Open Government Partnership
CSO	Civil Society Organisation	PCB	Privatisation and Corporatisation Board
EC	Elections Commission	RTI	Right to Information
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency	RTI Act	Right to Information Act (1/2014)
EU	European Union	SAP	Strategic Action Plan
GIS	Geographic Information System	SNS	Satark Nagrik Sangathan
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation	SOE	State-Owned Enterprise
HRCM	Human Rights Commission of the Maldives	STELCO	State Electric Company
ICO	Information Commissioner's Office	STO	State Trading Organisation
IO / IOs	Information Officer	UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
MAPD	Maldives Association of Persons with Disabilities	URA	Utility Regulatory Authority
MDS	Maldives Digital Services	WCAG	Web Content Accessibility Guidelines

Executive Summary

The first National Right to Information (RTI) Symposium 2026, jointly convened by the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) and UNDP Maldives from 17 to 18 August 2026 in Malé, marked a defining milestone in the Maldives' democratic governance journey. Bringing together 120 participants on Day 1 and 89 participants on Day 2, representing government ministries, independent oversight bodies, local island and city councils, state-owned enterprises, civil society platforms, independent media, and Right to Information activist and advocates, the symposium established the largest multi-stakeholder platform dedicated to the right to information in the nation's history.

Key Milestones

The symposium served as the launchpad for two core strategic instruments designed to modernize the national transparency framework: the ICO Strategic Action Plan (2026–2031), establishing a five-year institutional roadmap to shift public administration toward a proactive model of "transparency by default"; and the new digital RTI Training E-Modules hosted on the government's centralized Kiyeveni portal to deliver standardized, accessible training on RTI across dispersed atolls.

Systemic Gaps

The symposium convened key public, private, and civic actors to deliberate on digital governance, corporate transparency, municipal council compliance, and citizen-seeker perspectives, delivering a frank, evidence-based diagnosis of the systemic gaps currently limiting access to information across the Maldives. The main gaps identified include:

- Entry-level administrative staff are routinely designated as Information Officers without the managerial seniority or executive authority to enforce disclosure, yet they bear personal legal liability and fines under the RTI Act if compliance fails.
- Underutilization of proactive disclosures within a culture of reactive "request-and-respond", despite evidence that proactive publication of high-demand datasets dramatically reduces requests for information resulting in routine administrative workloads.
- Persons with disabilities face systemic barriers to independently access public records due to inaccessible systems and media formats, limited awareness on their right to information and related processes, and insufficient sensitization among public agencies and service providers on disability inclusion and accessibility requirements

Strategic Recommendations

The symposium culminated in the formulation of key strategic recommendations directed at executive, legislative, and oversight bodies to bridge the national implementation gap:

- **Elevate the Seniority of Information Officers:** Regulations should be amended to allow public authorities to designate Information Officers at the management level to ensure sufficient authority to fulfill disclosure mandates
- **Transition Penal Liability from Staff to Entities:** The Right to Information Act should be amended to shift personal legal penalties and fines for non-compliance from individual junior officers onto the non-compliant organizations as corporate entities
- **Enforce the Minimum Proactive Disclosure Standard:** Promote strict enforcement of the mandatory proactive disclosure standards such that all public authorities meet the minimum proactive disclosure required of them by the law at the least.
- **Support a Formal Information Officers' Association:** Development partners, CSOs, and public authorities should support the formation of a dedicated IOs' Association to protect IO's, facilitate peer learning, and represent IO interests at the national policy level.
- **Mandate Web Accessibility Standards Across Public Websites, Portals and Digital Platforms:** Maldives Digital Services is recommended to expedite the process of establishing a Digital Accessibility Standards in compliance with WCAG 2.1 AA web accessibility standards.
- **Professionalize and Train Sign Language Interpreters:** The state must allocate dedicated annual budgets to systematically train, accredit, and employ professional sign language interpreters across state institutions
- **Promote Stakeholder Consultation & Public Awareness on Digital Governance:** The People's Majlis, Attorney General's Office, and executive authorities must prioritize transparent stakeholder consultations and nationwide public awareness campaigns to clarify the operational implications of the draft Data Protection, Digital Identity, Cybersecurity, and Maldives Data Exchange Bills, ensuring these laws meaningfully engage vulnerable groups, safeguard user privacy, and enshrine the "Once Only" principle.
- **Engage Senior Political Leadership to Shift Mindsets:** Future transparency summits must actively involve ministers and senior political representatives to secure the top-down commitment to promote a culture of proactive disclosure and transparency by default model.

Symposium Overview

For the first time in the Maldives, the right to information came centre stage, not as a legal formality, but as a living, contested, and increasingly powerful tool in the hands of citizens, institutions, and civil society. The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) and UNDP Maldives convened the inaugural National RTI Symposium 2026 in Malé on 17-18 August 2026, bringing together a cross-section of Maldivian governance and society to take stock of where the country stands on transparency and chart a more ambitious course forward. The event was supported by key development partners, including the European Union-funded Accountability and Integrity Matters (AIM) Project and the "Strengthening Open Governance, Anti-corruption and Gender Justice in Maldives project made possible through the contributions from Denmark, Luxembourg, and the Republic of Korea via the UNDP Funding Windows.

The scale of multi-sectoral engagement during the event reflects the critical mass of buy-in necessary for systemic reform. A total of 169 individuals registered for the symposium from across the public and private sectors, with physical logs tracking an actual attendance of 120 participants on Day 1 and 89 participants on Day 2. The symposium also benefited from the active participation of 36 expert facilitators, moderators, and speakers representing government ministries, city and island councils, SOEs, independent oversight bodies, civil society organisations, independent journalists, RTI activists, advocates and international RTI experts. The everyday citizen as an information seeker, community member and accountability advocate remained the central focus of the symposium's deliberations.

Over the course of the two-day programme, the symposium's agenda was structured around the strategic, technical, and social dimensions of information access. Day 1 focused on institutional and policy frameworks, beginning with the formal launch of the ICO Strategic Action Plan and continuing with technical sessions on citizen-centric unified public services, digital governance, and privacy and data protection legislation. Day 1 also featured critical debates on state-owned enterprise accountability, sub-national local council compliance, and the frontline realities of Information Officers. Day 2 transitioned to civic empowerment and social inclusion, commencing with the launch of the new digital RTI Training E-Modules, followed by presentations on open government challenges and international best practices. The final sessions of the symposium focused on addressing accessibility barriers faced by persons with disabilities, the role of media and civil society organisations in promoting transparency and access to information, and firsthand testimonies from citizens seeking information.

Programme Highlights & Key Strategic Discussions

The National RTI Symposium 2026 was structured to facilitate a direct dialogue between oversight bodies, executive agencies, sub-national governments, civil society platforms, and citizen information seekers. The proceedings of the two-day programme are captured below.

Opening Session: Keynote Address & Welcome Ceremony

The symposium commenced with welcome remarks from the Information Commissioner of the Maldives, Uz. Ahmed Ahid Rasheed. Reflecting on his tenure since taking office in September 2021, he celebrated that open hearings have become the norm, digital filing has been streamlined via the Mahoali Portal, and formal requests have increased exponentially. He asserted that this increase in RTI requests "is not just a statistic, but a signal. It tells us that public confidence in the RTI system is growing".

However, he confronted ongoing systemic pushback directly: "Successive governments have treated RTI as, at best, an administrative inconvenience." Rejecting arguments raised by some leading state officials that the right is abused by the public and creates an unnecessary administrative burden, he countered:

The right to information is a constitutional right. It is not a favour granted by governments to citizens. It is a right that citizens hold, and that governments are obligated to uphold. The volume of RTI requests is not evidence of abuse. It is evidence of a citizenry that is engaged, that is watching, and that believes accountability is possible.

He added that when officials characterise the right as a burden, "what they are really describing is the discomfort of accountability. But that discomfort belongs to the institution – not to the citizen who asked the questions."

In closing, he expressed gratitude to development partners, civil society organisations, the media, and everyday advocates "who kept filing requests, kept appealing, kept pushing, even when the system pushed back. He shared his 2031 vision where citizens on the smallest islands can easily obtain information, where senior citizens are not left behind by digital portals, where persons with disabilities do not have to ask twice, and where "the institutions of this country have come to understand, genuinely, that transparency is not a vulnerability. It is the foundation of public trust."

Following the welcome remarks, Ms. Swati Mehta, Regional Lead for Asia and the Pacific at the Open Government Partnership (OGP), delivered the keynote address. Ms. Mehta emphasised that access to information is the heart of open government. She noted that when citizens can freely access and use public records, they are empowered to participate in decision-making, hold state institutions accountable, and build trust in governance. She commended the Maldives' progress, characterising it as a practical demonstration of how the Right to Information can serve as a foundation for more open, responsive, and trustworthy governance.

The opening session concluded with a Vote of Thanks by Mr. Adnan Cheema, Resident Representative of UNDP Maldives. Mr. Cheema expressed gratitude to the ICO for its leadership and recognised the European Union for its support through the Accountability and Integrity Matters (AIM) Project, which enabled the development of the ICO's Strategic Action Plan. He also acknowledged the contributions of Denmark, Luxembourg, and the Republic of Korea through the UNDP Funding Windows to strengthen open, transparent, and inclusive governance. Mr. Cheema highlighted that the symposium was a critical platform to bridge the "implementation gap" between legal mandates specifically the Right to Information Act (1/2014) and the daily information management practices of state institutions, ensuring that transparency moves from a legal requirement to a functional reality for every citizen across the islands.

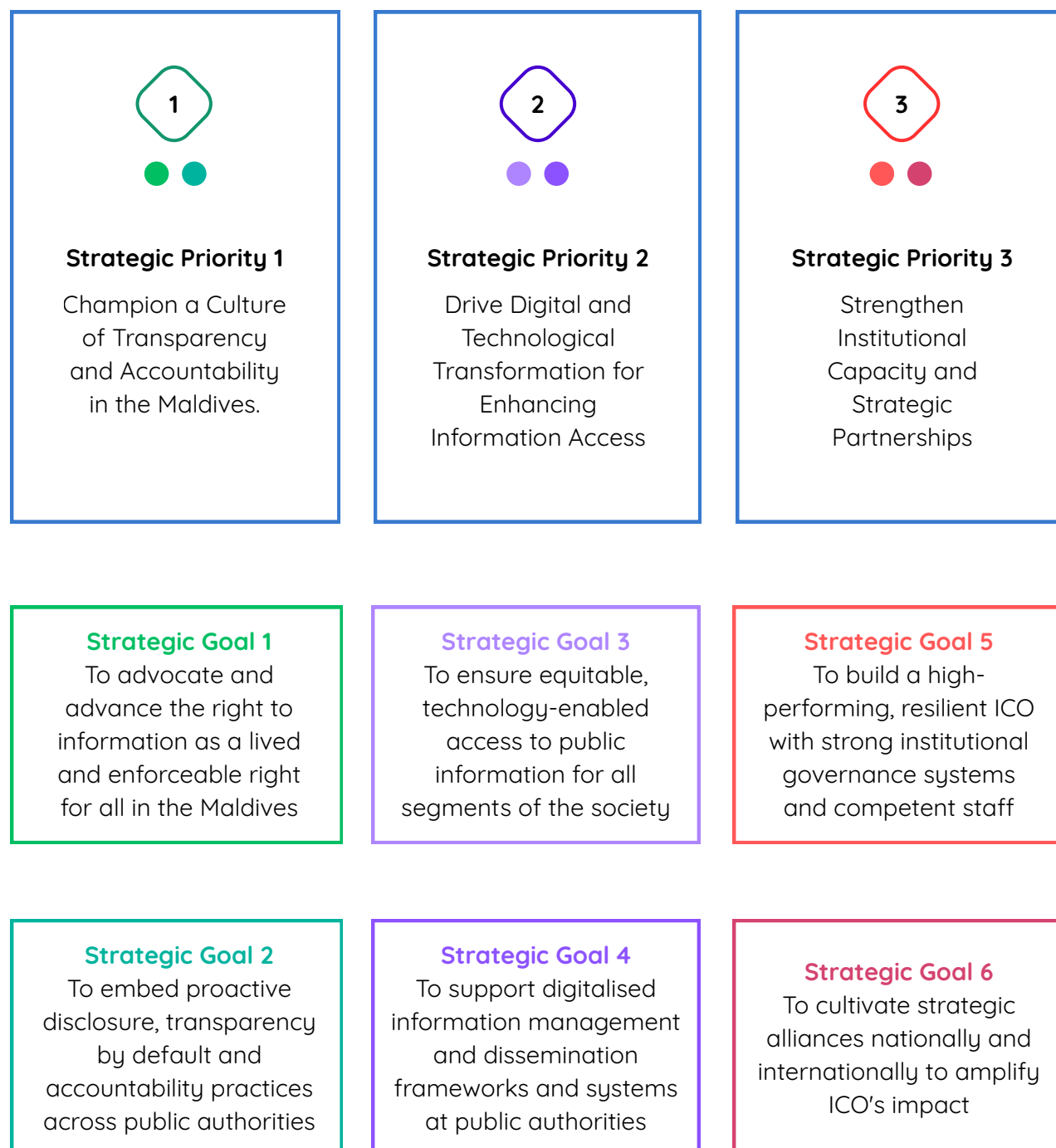
Launch: ICO Strategic Action Plan (2026–2031)

The centrepiece milestone of the Day 1 opening was the formal launch of the Information Commissioner's Office Strategic Action Plan (SAP) 2026–2031. The SAP, the first of its kind for the Commission, was designed as a comprehensive, evidence-based roadmap to address the recommendations in the 2025 Capacity Needs Assessment of the Commission. The assessment revealed that while the Maldives possesses a strong legal mandate, ranking 20th strongest globally on the Global Right to Information Rating by the Centre for Law and Democracy, its practical implementation score stood at an overall 56%. This baseline performance was dragged down by institutional measures, reactive disclosure, and a low proactive disclosure rate of 39% across monitored public bodies.

Against this context, the plan is guided by a core vision of "a nation where a culture of transparency and open access to public information empowers everyone". Its mission is to uphold and enforce the right to information by ensuring compliance under the RTI Act by all public authorities, promoting transparency and accountability, and enabling timely access to information. The execution of this mission is anchored by eight core values:

Independence	Integrity	Accountability	Transparency
Objectivity	Equity	Professionalism	Competitiveness

The plan establishes three Strategic Priorities (Pillars) supported by six Strategic Goals:



The Future of Public Services

Presenter



Aminath Ahlaam
MINDCo

MINDCo introduced the digital service-delivery component of Government Maldives 2.0 (Pillar 6: Citizen-Centric and Business-Oriented Services). Currently, government services are "fragmented by default," forcing citizens to navigate multiple portals and repeatedly submit identical physical documents to different state bodies. To resolve this, MINDCo outlined a roadmap to consolidate ministries, local councils, and SOE utility services into a single, unified digital platform by 2027. The implementation of the roadmap will strive to adhere to three non-negotiable service delivery standards:

- **Consistency:** Uniform interface styling and Dhivehi/English terminology across every public agency.
- **Quality:** Single service quality standards, regardless of the delivering institution.
- **Accessibility:** Seamless usability for all citizens, specifically including elderly and digitally unconfident users

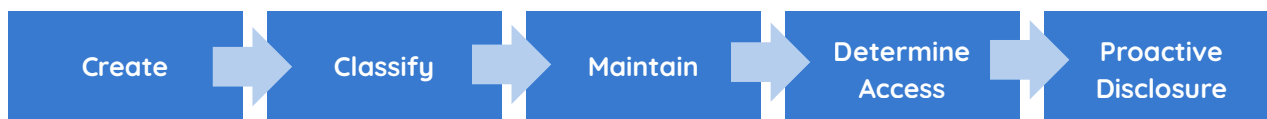
Digital Governance, Information Management and RTI

Presenter

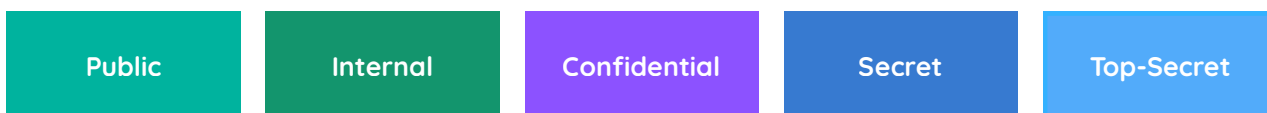


Hussain Shifau
Maldives Digital
Services

MDS detailed the technical governance and legislative framework supporting the Maldives 2.0 digital transition. Highlighting that at present, public sector proactive disclosure stands at an insufficient 47%, MDS argued that RTI should not be treated as a standalone administrative response mechanism; instead, RTI is simply the end of a structured, six-stage information management lifecycle:



To protect individual privacy while driving transparency, MDS proposed a standardised five-level administrative classification protocol: Public, Internal, Confidential, Secret, and Top-Secret.



Document classification will be cataloged via public metadata registries so that citizens can immediately identify which state entity holds the specific records they seek, eliminating administrative runarounds.

RTI and Governance of State-Owned Enterprises

Moderator



Usaidh Asadhulla
Privatization and
Corporatization Board

Panelists



Mohamed Nizar
Privatization and
Corporatization Board



Azza Ahmed
Transparency Maldives



Aminath Mohamed
Capital Market
Development Authority



Yoosuf Shah
State Trading
Organization Plc



Ahmed Iqudham
Fenaka Corporation
Limited

The panel analyzed the application of the RTI Act to SOEs, examining the balance between commercial competitiveness and public accountability. Panelists debated how the RTI Act's disclosure exemptions apply to commercial entities. STO's representative explained that they apply a dual-principal cushion test when processing sensitive requests: (1) [Would disclosure grant a competitor an unfair advantage?](#) and (2) [Would disclosure increase public utility?](#) Accordingly, STO favors disclosure if a high public utility is demonstrated even if commercial sensitivity is present.

The discussions maintained that compliance must be driven through regulatory integration rather than relying solely on ad-hoc requests. PCB and CMDA outlined plans to incorporate strict RTI compliance indicators directly into the Corporate Governance Transparency Index and the Corporate Governance Code. Fenaka Corporation highlighted its initiatives to proactively compile and publish construction and project datasets, recognizing that proactive disclosure is the most effective way to manage heavy request volumes.

Information Officers in Action

Moderator



Ameen Faisal
Former IO of
High Court

Panelists



Fathimath Shaba Bagir
Elections
Commission



Azza Abdul Azeez
National Social
Protection Agency



Shukrana Mohamed
Ministry of Tourism and
Civil Aviation

Frontline Information Officers (IOs) shared their daily operational realities, highlighting successful digitization initiatives and substantial administrative challenges. Panelists demonstrated how proactive disclosure dramatically reduces administrative burdens. EC revealed that its internal culture underwent a major shift after its first public hearing before the Information Commissioner in 2019 regarding political party registry ownership. This experience prompted the EC to proactively digitize and publish all election-cycle, registration, and financial expenditure datasets on its website, leading to a decline in incoming requests. The Ministry of Tourism reported that it faced a high volume of requests for lagoon and island lease acquisition costs. By compiling this data and publishing it proactively, the ministry significantly reduced its RTI workload.

The panel exposed a critical systemic vulnerability: state institutions frequently designate junior, entry-level administrative staff as IOs. These junior staff have no decision-making authority, and are frequently instructed by supervisors to withhold information, yet are the ones held legally responsible and personally fined under the RTI Act if compliance fails.

To protect frontline officers, the panel strongly endorsed a floor proposal raised by the Information Officer of HRCM to establish a formal Information Officers' Association/Union to provide legal protection and advocate for IO appointments to be made at senior managerial level.

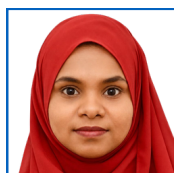
Local Councils and RTI

Moderator



Aiman Rasheed
Maldives Local Councils
Association

Panelists



Fathimath Sana
M. Mulaku
Council



Ibrahim Mohamed
F. Magoodhoo
Council



Abdulla Adam
Kulhudhuffushi City
Council

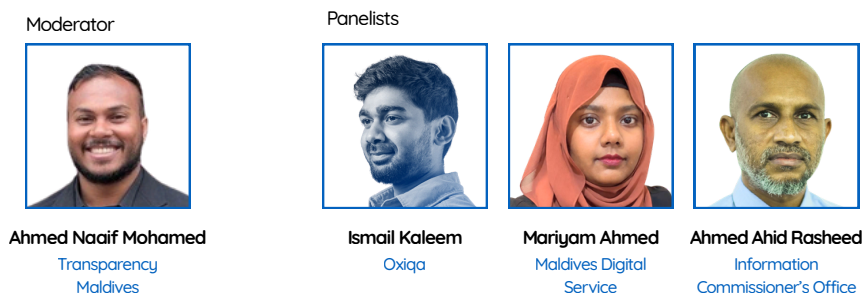
This session examined RTI implementation at the sub-national level, bringing together island and city council representatives to share both their achievements and the structural pressures they navigate daily. The discussion revealed a paradox at the heart of local governance: councils are often among the most motivated public authorities to disclose information as their proximity to communities makes public trust an operational necessity. Yet, they remain among the most under-resourced institutions in the RTI ecosystem.

F. Magoodhoo Council and M. Mulaku Council highlighted the administrative strain created by rapid and uncoordinated changes to national legislation and policy. When central government introduces new acts or amends existing frameworks without adequate implementation guidance, it is island councils with small teams and limited legal capacity, that absorb the operational consequences. Both councils noted a persistent dependency on centralised state bodies for basic information and policy clarification, which slows disclosure and creates gaps in compliance.

Kulhudhuffushi City Council shared its experience managing an exceptionally high volume of RTI requests received in a single day, a pressure test that the council navigated by deploying a shared cloud-drive model to centralise and streamline document access. This approach, developed out of necessity, has since become a model of operational resilience and was highlighted as a replicable solution for other councils facing similar surges.

Panelists echoed that civil society actors are critical and often underacknowledged partners in helping councils sustain public disclosure portals, particularly where institutional capacity is thin.

Privacy and Personal Data Protection



The panel examined the proposed Personal Data Protection Bill, focusing on its compliance models and the decision to house the data privacy mandate within ICO. The moderator introduced the tension between the constitutional right to privacy and the administrative convenience of centralized digital databases. Oxiqa Maldives raised critical questions regarding data sovereignty, arguing that utilising foreign cloud-hosting infrastructure without robust local statutory controls could compromise the security of citizens' personal data. A key takeaway of the discussions is that housing privacy and transparency mandates within the same oversight body (the ICO) requires careful institutional design to manage potential conflicts of interest.

Launch: RTI E-Modules

Day 2 opened with the formal launch of the new digital RTI Training E-Modules, self-paced learning resource open to both public officials and members of the general public which can be accessed through Kiyeveni portal.

Under Section 40 of the Right to Information Act, the Information Commissioner is legally mandated to train IOs, Review Committees, and public authority staff across all state institutions. Given the operational challenges of delivering standard training across more than 900 state institutions geographically dispersed across the atolls with limited staff and financial resources, the ICO developed a suite of digital RTI Training E-Modules in partnership with UNDP Maldives through the EU-funded AIM Project. The curriculum consists of nine core thematic modules:



To ensure inclusive access in line with universal design principles, the modules integrate interactive digital tools such as videos, animations, quizzes, guides, and reading materials alongside specialized accessibility features including voice narration, subtitles, and professional sign language interpretation.

Open Government Challenges

Presenters



Swati Mehta
Open Government
Partnerships



Nahuza Hassan
Kulhudhuffushi City
Council



Ismail Rafeeq
Fuvahmulah City
Council



Asma Saleem
Secretariat of the
People's Majlis



Aimon Latheef
Information
Commissioner's Office

This session opened with an introduction by OGP highlighting the 10 core policy areas identified by them to strengthen open, responsive governance. These included access to information, anti-corruption, civic space, climate and environment, digital governance, fiscal openness, gender and inclusion, justice, media freedom, and public participation. Following this global framing, the session showcased ongoing and upcoming local initiatives demonstrating transparency leadership and open government practices across four distinct institutional cases:

Case 1: Local Governance and Transparency | Kulhudhuffushi City Council

The council outlined its proactive approach to open governance. Kulhudhuffushi was one of the first six institutions to successfully meet the proactive disclosure requirements of the RTI Act. The council's methodology integrates participatory budgeting consultations, live-streaming of official council meetings, and mandatory public consultations in major project designs. To advance its OGP commitments, the council pledged three standalone commitments focused on Fiscal Openness and Public Participation.

First, "From Disclosure to Meaningful Fiscal Transparency," which aims to consolidate fragmented, difficult-to-use financial and procurement data into searchable, filterable public portals. Second, "Institutionalised Public Consultations," standardising procedures to guarantee meaningful participation and remove barriers for women, youth, and persons with disabilities. Under its digitalisation agenda, the council has deployed the Kunbuti Portal, digitalizing 33 municipal services with automated backend functions to transition toward a paperless council.

During the public Q&A, citizens requested the implementation of sign language interpretation at the council's help desk and asked for a structured framework to help smaller, under-resourced island councils replicate these digital solutions.

Case 2: Smart City Integration | Fuvahmulah City Council

Fuvahmulah's showcase focused on utilising technology for environmental and municipal accountability. Citizens on the floor questioned how Fuvahmulah's smart-city masterplans are being integrated with local community needs. Specifically, the council highlighted efforts to deploy natural island movement tracking technology to monitor the natural, seasonal physical movements of the island, with plans to release this data as open-source material for future research and public use. The council also noted collaborations with environmental and sustainability experts to provide technical support for these localized ecological and planning initiatives.

Case 3: Legislative Accessibility | Secretariat of the People's Majlis

The Secretariat focused on bridging the legislative communication gap with citizens. Public feedback during the session emphasised that while legislative drafts are compiled, laws and regulations remain structurally inaccessible to persons with disabilities. The Majlis discussed the development of accessible legal formats to ensure that marginalized groups are not legally blinded. Furthermore, citizens called for a binding, timely two-way communication channel to ensure that public feedback on drafted bills is systematically reviewed and responded to by lawmakers.

Case 4: Oversight and Accessibility | Information Commissioner's Office

The ICO highlighted its direct strategic OGP commitments to address gaps identified in the RTI Implementation Assessment, which showed a low proactive disclosure rate of 39% and major usability barriers across the commission's existing platforms. The ICO committed to upgrading the Mahoali Portal to comply with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 AA standards, removing user-experience barriers for individuals with visual or motor impairments. Additionally, the ICO pledged to develop comprehensive digital accessibility guidelines for public authorities. To transform proactive compliance monitoring, the ICO committed to launching a public-facing compliance monitoring application with a WCAG 2.1 AA compliant real-time dashboard, allowing citizens and oversight bodies to track individual public authorities' compliance with legal disclosure mandates.

International RTI Experience

Moderator



Yasmeen Rasheed
UNDP Maldives

Panelists



Ahmed Ahid Rasheed
Information
Commissioner's Office



Swathi Mehta
Open Government
Partnership



Anjali Bhardwaj
Satark Nagrik
Sangathan



Amrita Johri
Satark Nagrik
Sangathan

The panel explored the practical realities of implementing RTI frameworks by bridging international best practices with local governance, focusing on what drives successful implementation, where structural barriers persist, and how emerging issues like digital transformation and privacy laws shape the future of transparency. Swathi Mehta highlighted the institutional and political factors that distinguish strong regional performers, emphasising how leading nations actively transition away from reactive, request-driven systems and toward the proactive disclosure of raw public datasets. Anjali Bhardwaj shared lessons from India's extensive RTI journey, explaining how the framework's relevance is sustained when it evolves from a state-granted legal mechanism into a citizen-owned grassroots campaign grounded in daily socioeconomic needs. The ICO reflected on the Maldives' context, discussing how the state has adapted regional practices and the vital role of international networks in building the credibility of local oversight commissions.

The panel identified the "implementation gap" as a core global challenge, where strong laws on paper face systemic bureaucratic resistance and capacity limits in practice. To overcome these bottlenecks, the speakers called for a shift toward "transparency by default," asserting that data protection bills should complement rather than shield public bodies from audit, and that international cooperation is essential to defend commission independence and share replicable models.

RTI and Persons with Disabilities

Moderator



Mohamed Mazin
Wellness Association
of Maldives

Panelists



Irushad Qasim
Maldives Association of
Persons with Disabilities



Fathimath Ibrahim
Disability Rights
Advocate



Mohamed Awwam
Maldives Deaf
Association

The panel delivered key unified messages to state institutions: "Accessibility is not just a ramp" and "Nothing about us without us".

Panelists exposed severe, multi-layered systemic barriers that exclude persons with disabilities from accessing basic public information and exercising independent citizenship with examples. For instance, blind and visually impaired citizens are unable to access information on the official Government Gazette as it routinely publishes flat, image-only PDF formats that screen-readers cannot convert into audio. Digital portals systematically fail to incorporate universal design. Visually and motor-impaired citizens are often forced to share their private eFaas login credentials and passwords with family members or helpers just to request basic services, creating a severe cybersecurity and personal privacy compromise.

The Maldives Deaf Association highlighted that government service forms and administrative documents are almost exclusively issued in written Dhivehi without accessible digital formats, English alternatives, or visual/sign-language interpretations. As many deaf citizens historically faced limited access to inclusive education and rely on Maldivian Sign Language, the reliance on rigid, text-heavy Dhivehi documentation creates an insurmountable language barrier. This challenge is compounded by an acute national shortage of sign language interpreters, with only two to three qualified professionals across the entire country. This severe shortage directly disrupts daily life, leaving deaf citizens unable to independently report crimes to the police, register a marriage in court, or navigate welfare systems, as state entities fail to employ interpreters and force individuals to locate and pay for their own. Furthermore, deaf citizens are frequently invited to national conferences as a token gesture of "inclusion," only to be left entirely in the dark because no sign language interpretation is provided.

The panel demanded the immediate, statutory enforcement of WCAG 2.1 standards, professional accreditation for sign language interpreters, and direct, statutory representation of persons with disabilities on public boards.

Media and CSOs Experience with RTI

Moderator



Ahmed Zaidhan
Sosal

Panelists



Mishal Mushahid
Project
Thimaaveshi



Sara Naseem
Transparency
Maldives



Saif Fathih
Maldives
Independent

This session brought together journalists and civil society practitioners to examine the friction between the legal right to information and the practical experience of trying to exercise it. Across each testimony, a consistent pattern emerged: RTI works, but only after resistance and the resistance is rarely legal in nature.

Project Thimaaveshi detailed how it deployed RTI as an environmental accountability tool, submitting targeted requests to retrieve technical data related to the Addu bridge project.

Despite a prolonged administrative process, the data retrieved enabled the organization to publish an environmental perception study that would otherwise have been impossible to substantiate. The case illustrated both the power of RTI as a civic instrument and the cost of using it.

The Maldives Independent offered a media perspective on a structural flaw in how RTI interacts with the news cycle. Public relations departments at state institutions have exploited the statutory 14-day response window to delay engagement with time-sensitive press inquiries. When journalists seek immediate comment on breaking stories, they are routinely redirected to the formal RTI process, effectively rendering stories obsolete by the time a response arrives. The outlet argued that this represents a misuse of the RTI framework that undermines both press freedom and public accountability.

Transparency Maldives and the broader panel identified a deeper cultural problem: a persistent institutional disposition toward secrecy, in which RTI requests are evaluated on the basis of political risk rather than legal obligation. Simple, uncontroversial requests are delayed or deflected not because exemptions apply, but because disclosure is perceived as administratively inconvenient or politically uncomfortable.

To bypass these bottlenecks, the panel called for a shift toward the proactive publication of raw, high-value datasets and the maintenance of a public log of already-released RTI answers to prevent duplicate requests.

Citizen Voices: Information Seekers' Experiences

Moderator



Afrah Ismail
Zero Waste
Maldives

Panelists



Tazkiya Ahmed Najeeb
Student



Nahudha Faiz
Journalist and Media
Professional



Amrita Johri
Satark Nagrik
Sangathan

In this session, everyday information seekers shared their firsthand experiences navigating administrative barriers across the Maldives. Tazkiya Ahmed Najeeb, an 18-year-old student, detailed her attempt to audit school budgets nationwide (2021–2026) using the digital RTI Dhombe tool, receiving only 31 complete responses while the remainder faced severe delays, omissions, or defensive interrogation by school officials regarding her research intent.

Journalist Nahudha Faiz described her ongoing struggle to retrieve the Maldives-Google Memorandum of Understanding, which has been met with evasive, political PR damage control rather than legal justification.

Bypassing domestic bottlenecks, Afrah Ismail explained how, after being denied environmental project records by the Maldives Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), he successfully filed a parallel request to the UK government, which had funded the project, to retrieve the files.

Amrita Johri of Satark Nagrik Sangathan (SNS) contextualised these local testimonies with lessons from India's grassroots transparency movement, demonstrating how linking RTIs to socioeconomic rights can expose corruption and force the correction of official state records. Johri highlighted how RTIs serve as an essential evidentiary anchor for structural litigation, citing a landmark case where internal Ministry of Finance warnings retrieved via RTI led the Supreme Court of India to strike down an anonymous political funding scheme as unconstitutional. Ultimately, Johri emphasised that uploading raw data is insufficient; true accountability requires a collaborative "transparency ecosystem" where analysts, journalists, and civil society translate complex datasets into actionable public narratives.

Despite persistent administrative resistance, the panel concluded that "denial of information is a powerful story in itself". The session demonstrated how a single, initially blocked RTI request regarding public expenditure successfully mobilised collective civic action, culminating in an active citizen-led e-petition to cut Member of Parliament's benefits in the Maldives.

RTI in Practice: Success Stories

The right to information is often discussed in abstract terms — as a legal principle, a governance standard, a compliance metric. Ahmed Aimon Latheef and Ahmed Afrah Ismail tied the right to information to everyday realities through four cases in which ordinary RTI requests produced extraordinary outcomes: state institutions compelled to act, communities given verified evidence to stand on, and public data transformed into tools that any citizen can use.

Black Smoke and Broken Silence: The STELCO Environmental Audit

The Catalyst

Residents living near the STELCO powerhouse in Male' City, located just 30 feet from a densely populated residential area, suffered from severe health issues (headaches, nausea, stress, and hearing loss) due to constant black smoke emissions and intense ground vibrations. Over several months, residents sent numerous letters to at least 8 state institutions seeking safety information but received a complete wall of silence and zero responses.

The RTI Action

Project Zinmaadhaaru drafted and submitted targeted RTI requests to numerous state authorities, based on the specific inquiries in those unanswered citizen letters.

The Outcome

The RTI successfully broke the silence, forcing a response and additional actions from all of the state institutions that did not initially respond to the citizens' letters. This included responses from the President's Office, several government ministries, and the People's Majlis. The Utility Regulatory Authority was prompted to conduct surveys and released official ground-level sound monitoring reports and a detailed monthly runtime log of STELCO's backup generators. The data proved that the area surrounding the STELCO generators were not fit for residents to live in. This empirical, state-verified dataset validated the community's health complaints, giving residents the concrete evidence needed to demand municipal relocation and environmental mitigation.

Hidden in Plain Sight: Malé's Broken Fire Safety Infrastructure

The Catalyst

Following concerns from industry experts regarding the operability of newly installed fire hydrants along 2 main roads of the capital Male' city, public safety concerns escalated regarding the city's fire protection infrastructure.

The RTI Action

Project Zinmaadhaaru submitted formal RTI requests to the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) and the Ministry of Defense to audit the exact locations, operational status, and maintenance logs of street-level fire hydrants across Male'.

The Outcome

The retrieved data showed that none of the installed street hydrants were functional at the time. This public exposure forced immediate municipal corrective action and the responses to a follow-up RTI request a year on from the initial request showed that significant work had since been done to ensure that all installed fire hydrants were operational.

Following the Green Money: RTI and Tourist Tax Accountability

The Catalyst

Citizens wanted to verify if the Green Tax collected from tourists was actually being spent on environmental protection and local utility infrastructure, as public concern grew over island-level waste management.

The RTI Action

Zero Waste Maldives drafted and submitted RTI requests to the Maldives Inland Revenue Authority (MIRA), and successfully retrieved the complete, raw Green Tax collection dataset broken down at the individual island and resort level.

The Product

Using this raw data, Zero Waste Maldives built Green Fund Watch, a public dashboard that maps collection returns against actual public expenditure reports. The dashboard allows any citizen to immediately see how much Green Tax their island generated versus how much money was disbursed back to local environmental projects.

Flying Blind: RTI and the Airport Planning Question

The Catalyst

Concerns were raised regarding the cross-subsidization and planning of domestic airport projects across multiple islands, with questions about geographic redundancy and environmental impact.

The RTI Action

Zero Waste Maldives used the RTI Act to retrieve the official planning, cost estimation sheets, and cross-subsidization tourism land allocation documents from the Ministry of National Planning, Housing, and Infrastructure.

The Outcome

The team built Airstripped, an interactive geographic information system (GIS) browser. The platform maps existing, planned, and announced domestic airports alongside resort locations. It provides a visual coverage reality check, showing overlap rings (at 15km, 25km, and 35km radii) to evaluate the planning efficiency and geographic necessity of new airport developments

The four case studies presented above are not exceptional outcomes they are demonstrations of what becomes possible when RTI functions as it was designed to. Residents secured environmental accountability. Communities uncovered a public safety failure. Citizens tracked how their tax contributions were spent. Planners were held to account for decisions affecting land, infrastructure, and the environment. In each case, the mechanism was the same: a formal request, a legal obligation to respond, and the transformative power of verified public information in the hands of people motivated to use it.



Symposium Feedback: What Participants Said

The symposium was exceptionally well received by attendees, with real-time Mentimeter survey data capturing high participant satisfaction, immediate learning outcomes, and actionable suggestions for legal and operational reform.

Participant ratings averaged 4.4 out of 5.0 across 31 respondents, on the extent to which the symposium deepened their understanding of RTI implementation in the Maldives as well as the degree to which it inspired them to use RTI as a tool for transparency and accountability. Key takeaways noted by participants included the importance of proactive disclosure, accessibility as a right and the Open Government Challenge, mirroring the symposium's core thematic priorities.

Participants were also invited to propose changes to the RTI Act. While several noted it as strong legislation, the most consistent calls were for IOs to be appointed at managerial level, to shift penalty liability from individual officers to institutions and introduce dedicated allowances and protections for IOs, and to mandate digital accessibility standards across all public authority portals. On the utility of the review committee stage in the RTI process, 24 out of 27 respondents (89%) agreed it serves as a necessary step before proceeding to a formal Information Commissioner hearing.

Suggestions for future events included greater involvement of senior political and government leadership, more citizen-led success stories, practical case study and group work formats, and hybrid or online participation options to extend reach to island communities across the atolls.

Strategic Recommendations and Next Steps

The following recommendations emerge directly from the discussions, panel sessions, and participant contributions at the National RTI Symposium 2026. They are intended to translate the symposium's key insights into concrete action, moving the Maldives' transparency agenda from legal obligation to everyday governance practice.

Recommendations for the Information Commissioner's Office

Elevate the seniority of Information Officers. Amend the regulations under the RTI Act to allow public authorities to designate IOs at the management level, and to ensure they have the institutional authority to fulfill requests without obstruction from supervisors.

Enforce the minimum proactive disclosure standard. Shift the compliance framework toward strict enforcement of the mandatory proactive disclosure checklist. At minimum, all public authorities should meet the minimum proactive disclosure required of them by law including the publication of budgets and expenditure reports, evaluated tender documents, public asset registries. This is to be accompanied by the publication of the index of previously released RTI responses.

Mandate web accessibility for all public websites, portals and digital platforms. Maldives Digital Service to publish a binding Digital Accessibility Standards with supporting guidelines requiring all official publications and portals to meet WCAG 2.1 AA standards including prohibition on image-only PDFs that are incompatible with screen readers and assistive technologies.

Protect information seekers from intimidation. Introduce regulatory protections explicitly prohibiting public officials from questioning or pressuring citizens about their reasons for submitting RTI requests.

Recommendations for Other RTI Actors

Establish a formal Information Officers' Association. Development partners and civil society should support the establishment a formal Information Officers' Association to provide frontline practitioners with collective representation, professional support, and safeguards against institutional pressures or retaliation, while promoting professional peer-to-peer capacity building, knowledge sharing, and professional solidarity.

Enhance Stakeholder Consultation & Public Awareness for Digital Governance Legislation. The People's Majlis should prioritize passing the Data Protection, Digital Identity, Cybersecurity, and Maldives Data Exchange Bills through inclusive consultations and national public awareness. Parliament must move beyond ad-hoc feedback to meaningfully engage technical experts, oversight bodies, civil society, as well as vulnerable groups such as women, older persons, and persons with disabilities to capture all who may be affected by these legislations. Concurrently, national campaigns should educate citizens on their data rights (access, correction, erasure, and objection) and clarify institutional compliance duties. Crucially, these laws must enshrine "Privacy by Design" and the "Once Only" principle, ending repetitive document demands and safeguarding citizen privacy.

Secure high-level political commitment to transparency. Engage ministers and senior leadership directly in future transparency initiatives. Institutional culture requires visible, top-down ownership, demonstrating that transparency is not a risk, but the foundation of public trust. This commitment should be reflected through clear leadership expectations, adequate resources, and consistent accountability for implementing transparency measures across government.

Annex 1: Agenda

Day 1 - 17 August 2026

08:45 – 09:00	Registration & Welcome Arrival and registration of all attendees
09:00 – 09:30	Opening Session Keynote Address Ms. Swati Mehta, Regional Lead for Asia and the Pacific at the Open Government Partnership
09:30 – 10:00	Launch: ICO Strategic Action Plan Formal launch of the Information Commissioner's Office Strategic Action Plan, with an overview of its goals and priorities
10:00 – 10:25	Refreshment Break
10:30 – 11:00	The Future of Public Services Overview of Maldives 2.0 initiatives to modernize public service delivery and strengthen citizen access to government services through digital transformation
11:05 – 12:05	Digital Governance, Information Management and RTI Digital governance policies and standards supporting information management, records management, and RTI implementation under Maldives 2.0
12:05 – 13:05	Lunch Break
13:10 – 13:55	RTI and Governance of State-Owned Enterprises RTI compliance and governance standards among state-owned enterprises and key findings from the Corporate Governance Transparency Index and RTI Implementation Assessments
14:00– 14:45	Information Officers in Action Success stories and innovative solutions adopted by Information Officers in addressing RTI implementation challenges
14:50 – 15:35	Local Councils and RTI RTI implementation at the local level, including success stories from local councils and the effects of recent decentralization changes on RTI compliance
15:40– 16:40	Privacy and Personal Data Protection The need for, and progress toward, a Privacy and Personal Data Protection Act in the Maldives

08:45 – 09:00	Registration & Welcome Arrival and registration of all attendees
09:00 – 09:30	Launch: RTI E-Modules Formal launch of the RTI Training E-Module, a new digital learning resource for state institutions.
09:30 – 10:30	Open Government Challenges Introduction to Open Government Challenges and their role in advancing accountability and public trust, with examples from various public institutions.
10:30 – 10:55	Refreshment Break
11:00 – 12:00	International RTI Experience International best practices in RTI implementation and the lessons most relevant to advancing access to information in the Maldives.
12:00 – 13:00	Lunch Break
13:05 – 14:05	RTI and Persons with Disabilities Challenges faced by persons with disabilities in accessing information from state institutions, and the practical standards and steps institutions can adopt to ensure information is accessible to all.
14:10 – 14:55	Media and CSOs Experience with RTI Media and CSOs role in advancing RTI and the challenges faced in accessing timely information.
15:00 – 16:00	Citizen Voices: Information Seekers' Experiences Everyday citizens' experiences navigating the RTI process, including common challenges in submitting RTI requests and how new tools developed for information seekers are changing the experience.
16:05 – 16:35	RTI in Practice: Success Stories Stories highlighting the real-world impact of RTI on people's lives and communities.

Annex 2: Participating Organizations and Agencies

The following organisations and institutions were represented by participants who attended the National RTI Symposium 2026 on 17-18 August 2026 in Malé.

Government, Oversight and Public Institutions

Anti-Corruption Commission	Maldives Pension Administration Office
Attorney General's Office	Maldives Post Limited
Bar Council of the Maldives	Maldives Transport and Contracting Company
Capital Market Development Authority	Ministry of Arts, Culture and Heritage
Department of Judicial Administration	Ministry of Economic Development, Transport and Trade
Elections Commission	Ministry of Finance and Public Enterprises
Environmental Regulatory Authority	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Family Court	Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation
Family Protection Authority	National Centre for Cultural Heritage
Fenaka Corporation Limited	National Institute of Education
Housing Development Finance Corporation	National Mental Health Department
Human Rights Commission of the Maldives	National Social Protection Agency
Judicial Service Commission	People's Majlis
Labour Relations Authority	Privatisation and Corporatisation Board (PCB)
Maldives Digital Services (MDS)	State Trading Organisation (STO)
Maldives Immigration	The President's Office
Maldives Innovation and Digital Company	Visit Maldives Corporation
Maldives Marine Research Institute	Waste Management Corporation Limited
Maldives National Skills Development Authority	

City and Island Councils

Aa. Ukulhas Council	Hdh. Makunudhoo Council
Addu City Council	Hdh. Nolvivaranfaru Council
B. Goidhoo Council	K. Dhiffushi Council
B. Kudarikilu Council	K. Guraidhoo Council
F. Magoodhoo Council	Kulhudhuffushi City Council
Fuvahmulah City Council	L. Fonadhoo Council
GDh. Madaveli Council	M. Mulaku Council
HA. Muraidhoo Council	Malé City Council
HA. Vashafaru Council	Maldives Local Councils Association
Hdh. Hanimaadhoo Council	R. Dhuvaafaru Council

Civil Society, Media and International Actors

Australian High Commission	SAFE NGO
Bank of Maldives Plc	Satark Nagrik Sangathan (SNS), India
Divehibahuge Academy	Small Island Geographic Society
Maldives Association of Persons with Disabilities	Sosal
Maldives Deaf Association	Transparency Maldives
Maldives Democratic Party	U.S. Embassy in Maldives
Maldives Independent	UNDP Maldives
Maldives National University	Wellness Association of Maldives
Open Government Partnership (OGP)	Westminster Foundation for Democracy
Oxiqa Maldives	Zero Waste Maldives
Project Thimaaveshi	Coalition for Open Governance

