

From Foreign Labour Dependency to Sustainable Workforce Localisation: a Structured Integrative Review and Six-Pillar Framework for the Maldives Tourism Industry

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ABSTRACT

Although tourism is key to the Maldivian economy, it does not provide much employment for the locals. In fact, much of the employment at resorts depends on foreign labour. This article investigates the continuing reliance and how workforce localisation can be implemented without compromising service quality, productivity, or tourism competitiveness. A methodical integrative review was conducted using peer-reviewed literature on Maldivian tourism, workforce localisation, migrant labour, hospitality employment, and human capital development, drawn from DOI-verified sources. The review was supplemented with recent evidence from Maldivian government institutions (e.g., Ministry of Youth and Sports; Ministry of Economic Development; Ministry of Tourism) and worldwide organisations (e.g., International Organisation for Migration; United Nations Development Programme). This review is an explicitly integrative review rather than a PRISMA systematic review; that is, analytical relevance, source quality, and contextual transferability are prioritised over claims of exhaustive database coverage. The synthesis identifies six interdependent conditions that influence localisation: workforce planning; skills development; employer readiness; employment attractiveness; inclusive participation; and responsible foreign labour. The above conditions create a six-pillar framework that redefines the meaning of localisation from replacing expatriates with numbers to progressively developing domestic capacity. According to the Analysis, six pillars should not be separate policy initiatives but rather, digitalisation, productivity improvements, mentoring and succession planning should work across them. This article offers a Maldives-specific conceptual framework that connects the development of human capital, organisations' reliance on external labour, institutional coordination, and labour market incentives. The report suggests that performance against localisation should be assessed against a set of benchmarks: retention, occupational progression, leadership succession, gender and youth participation, competency development and productivity, and the local share of employment.

Keywords: foreign labour dependency; workforce localisation; tourism employment; human capital; Maldives; migrant labour; resort industry

1. INTRODUCTION

An internationally acclaimed tourism economy has evolved in the Maldives, focused on a dispersed resort model. As the sector is responsible for the generation of foreign exchange besides enhancing employment and demand across transport, construction, food supply and other services, its labour demand has always outstripped the capacity of domestic labour in various occupations. The irregularity of tourism operations has resulted in the inclusion of migrant and expatriate labour as a structural rather than a temporary response to shortfalls (Shakeela & Cooper, 2009; Shiyar et al., 2023).

The worker shortage is revealed in official workforce numbers. In 2022, the Maldives Bureau of Statistics reported a total employment of 55874 in tourist resorts, of whom 59% comprises foreign nationals and 41% Maldivians. Women held just 11% of the resort employment in the Maldives. According to MBS, 2024a, the overall employment of Maldivian was only 2%. A World Bank study of the labour market later found that almost 66% of resort island workers were non-Maldivian (World Bank, 2025a). The valuations are not measured in the same way; they arise from different reporting contexts. Nonetheless, both indicate that foreign workers are clearly entrenched in resort operations.

Employer preference is not enough for this depended. The resident population is small and geographically dispersed in the Maldives. Moreover, there are resort islands whose workers must live away from home. There are also members of the community who work in the resort industry. Other challenges facing the Resort Sector include uneven participation of women, competition from public sector employment, shortage of specialized skills and high service standards of the industry.

The problem is this systemic. The ongoing lack of sufficiently strong pipelines for domestic engagement related to various occupations imposes inertia on the uptake of domestic workers, which can further reinforce dependence on the recruitment of overseas talent (Scheyvens, 2011; Shiyar et al., 2023).

The question has become more pertinent due to the growth of tourism. The World Bank projected that the tourist arrivals will reach 2.25 million in 2025, a 9.8% growth over 2024. But tourism performance in early 2026 was weakened by some external disruptions. As expansion continues (2026), the pressure on the supply of labour increases in importance, which means that rather than headcount growth, the pressure is for productivity and occupational upgrading and long-run talent.

Typically, the goal of workforce localisation is to substitute expatriates or foreign workers with citizens. The Maldives are being presented with too limited an angle. Workers may lose their jobs abruptly because domestic capacity has yet to develop sufficiently. Also, quotas that are poorly conceived may instil formal compliance but no retention or advancement, nor leadership succession. Subsequent comparative studies of localisation reveal that quotas yield better outcomes if accompanied by education, training, organisational commitment and career development systems (Al-Asfour & Khan, 2014; Darwish et al., 2023). Rather than being a sustainable proposition, the question thus is whether Maldivians can enter, remain and progress in tourism careers while firms retain access to international expertise where genuine shortages exist. The policy's focus now changes from citizenship-based replacement to capability-based localisation.

Only the Maldives has researched the important causes of this issue. Dependence on expatriates in the tourism, education, employment regulation, employer practices, and strategies for localisations (Najeeb & Barrett, 2019; Shakeela & Cooper, 2009; Shakeela et al., 2012; Shiyar et al., 2023). Despite this, these streams are rarely drawn together within a single framework linking labour demand to skills formation, organisational capability, employment attractiveness, inclusion, and governance of migrant labour. This fragmentation creates confusion in differentiating between policies designed to raise local numbers on a temporary basis to those which create sustainable local capability.

This paper presents a systematic integrative review and conceptual synthesis of empirical literature. A Model To Localise Your Workforce Sustainably. The tourism sector contributes highly to the Maldivian economy. The workforce planning, training, employer readiness and attractiveness, participation and responsible management of foreign labour are mutually reinforcing conditions set within the framework. The recommendations on digitalisation, improvement of productivity, mentoring, knowledge transfer and leadership succession should be treated as cross-cutting enablers and not interventions to be pursued in isolation.

The analysis is guided by three research questions: (RQ1) What Structural, human-capital, organisational and institutional factors sustain foreign labour dependency in Maldivian tourism? What can be the mechanisms for increasing the recruitment, retention and career progression of Maldivians while sustaining tourism productivity and quality of services? How can we integrate these elements and mechanisms into a theory-informed framework for sustainable workforce localisation?

2. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Foreign Labour Dependency and Strategic Localisation

When an industry has to continuously recruit workers from abroad for normal operation in a wide range of occupations, it is referred to as foreign labour dependency. There should be a distinction between the common use and the global talent. The specialist expatriate professionals can use their expertise, language competencies, management experience and knowledge transfer to help tourism. The strategic Importance of dependency arises when employers rely on continuous external recruitment to maintain required staffing or capability levels, and when domestic pipelines are too weak to reduce dependency over time. It covers both the subscribe and broader socio-economic factors, which can reduce employers' dependency without making it strategic. The operationalisation mentioned aligns with the tourism labour-mobility and Maldives localisation ones that consider migrant labour as both a response to shortages and a potential source of structural dependence when domestic supply remains constrained (see Ahmad & Scott, 2021; Salazar, 2020; Shiyar et al., 2023).

An investigation into tourism labour mobility explains the agricultural migrants living in seasonal sites. Migrant workers may fill labour shortages when local workers are unavailable or unwilling to accept certain wage rates, hours, status conditions or mobility requirements. However, the social sustainability of that arrangement will depend on the quality of employment, integration and fair treatment (Salazar, 2020). According to Ahmad & Scott (2021), international workers bring not only skills and flexibility to hotel employers, but also incur costs and management difficulties related to visas, accommodation, adjustment and diversity. Thus, the relevant policy problem for the Maldives is whether foreign workers should exist, but rather where dependency actually reflects a genuine shortage and where it reflects remediable weaknesses in domestic capability or employment design.

A comparative localisation study also comes to a conclusion. When nationalisation policies are accompanied by education, recruitment, training and organisational systems, they are likely to be more successful than those geared merely to quotas. Evidence from the tourism sector indicates that effective localising occurs because organisational commitment, employee development, and career opportunities are more important than the legal designation of positions for citizens (Alkathiri et al., 2021). With caution, it is possible to apply these lessons to

the Maldives. This is because the small population, island location and resort structure make total replacement not realistic but also not necessarily desirable. To remain able to access foreign supply chains when domestic ones are lacking, but avoid over dependence on these chains.

2.2 Integrated Theoretical Lens

No single theory adequately explains the Maldivian workforce problem. Four complementary lenses are therefore used. Human Capital Theory explains why education, training and workplace learning increase the productive capability of individuals and the value of domestic labour supply (Becker, 1964). Resource Dependency Theory explains why firms continue to source critical labour externally when the domestic environment cannot reliably supply the skills, experience or staffing levels required for operations (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Institutional Theory directs attention to regulation, government policy, education systems, professional norms and the gap that can emerge between formal localisation requirements and organisational practice (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Najeib & Barrett, 2019). Finally, labour-market segmentation and occupational-choice perspectives help explain differences in reservation wages, mobility, job preferences, and the concentration of local and migrant workers across occupational segments (Doeringer & Piore, 1971).

The value of combining these perspectives lies in the level of explanation they provide. Human capital investment can increase local capabilities, but its impact will be limited if tourism jobs remain unattractive. Institutional pressure can require local recruitment, but employers may decouple formal compliance from substantive development if retention is weak or skills are unavailable. Firms may continue to rely on expatriates because external labour reduces uncertainty in hard-to-fill roles, while labour market conditions shape whether Maldivians enter and remain in those roles. These mechanisms follow the complementary expectations of Human Capital, Resource Dependency, Institutional and labour-market perspectives (Becker, 1964; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Doeringer & Piore, 1971; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). The six-pillar framework developed later in the paper translates these theoretical mechanisms into a coherent workforce strategy.

Table 1. Theoretical lenses and relevance to the six-pillar framework

Theoretical lens	Primary explanatory mechanism	Framework relevance
Human Capital Theory	Skills and experience are productive assets that can be developed through education, training and workplace learning.	Skills development; employer readiness; leadership succession.
Resource Dependency Theory	Organisations source critical resources externally when reliable domestic supply is insufficient.	Workforce planning; responsible foreign labour management; knowledge transfer.
Institutional Theory	Policy, regulation, norms and inter-organisational arrangements shape organisational responses and compliance.	Workforce planning; employer readiness; government-industry-education coordination.
Labour-market segmentation and occupational choice	Workers and jobs are unevenly distributed by wage, status, mobility requirements, conditions and career expectations.	Employment attractiveness; inclusive participation; occupation-level localisation priorities.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Review Design

This research employed a structured, integrated literature review method with a conceptual synthesis. Integrative reviews are appropriate in cases where the research problem calls for the critique and synthesis of heterogeneous evidence with a view to generating new conceptual understanding or frameworks, instead of a pooled effect estimate (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005). In this article, the evidence base is built from peer-reviewed studies, labour market statistics, policy documents and institutional reports, because the research objective is to bring together fragmented accounts of foreign labour dependency and workforce localisation. The review is not a PRISMA systematic review as its aim is to analytically integrate rather than comprehensively cover a database. Thus, there is no reporting of any numerical screening-flow counts, nor is any claim made as to this review being a complete census of any and all potentially relevant publications.

The revised evidence search was undertaken in September 2026. Peer-reviewed literature was identified through DOI-verified scholarly discovery searches, targeted publisher and journal searches, and backward reference checking from directly relevant Maldives studies. Current country evidence was retrieved from the Maldives Bureau of Statistics, the Ministry of Tourism, the World Bank, and the OECD. Priority was given to Maldives-

specific research. Comparative studies were included when they addressed mechanisms with plausible transferability to the Maldivian context, such as workforce localisation, migrant labour, hospitality retention, tourism job quality, gender segregation, HRM capability or automation.

3.2 Evidence Selection and Quality Criteria

Table 2. Structured integrative review protocol

Element	Approach
Purpose	Explain persistent foreign labour dependency and integrate evidence into a Maldives-specific localisation framework.
Academic evidence	DOI-verified, peer-reviewed tourism, hospitality, HRM, labour-migration and localisation research identified through scholarly discovery and publisher platforms.
Country and policy evidence	Official statistics and reports from MBS, the Ministry of Tourism, the World Bank, and the OECD are used for the current workforce, gender, policy, and tourism context.
Time emphasis	2009-2026 for applied tourism/workforce literature; earlier foundational theoretical works retained where necessary.
Inclusion	English-language sources with direct relevance to the Maldives or clear conceptual transferability; transparent authorship/source; substantive evidence on labour supply, skills, recruitment, retention, inclusion, governance, or localisation.
Exclusion	Duplicate references; unverifiable claims; promotional material; unsupported opinion; sources without meaningful workforce relevance; withdrawn or superseded evidence where stronger sources were available.
Quality checks	Authority of the source, methodological transparency, contextual relevance, currency of statistics, consistency with other evidence, and clarity about whether findings are empirical, conceptual, or policy-based.
Synthesis	Iterative thematic coding of constraints and enabling mechanisms, followed by conceptual consolidation into six pillars and cross-cutting enablers.

3.3 Analytical Synthesis

The examination took place in two phases. Initially, the analysis of the evidence was conducted with respect to recurring explanatory variables such as domestic labour supply, geography and mobility, education and skills, attractiveness and retention in employment, organisational HR capability, gender and youth participation, coordination between institutions, service-quality needs, and migrant-labour management. Evidence to the contrary was retained where it qualified a simple localisation narrative, especially evidence showing that foreign labour can be economically necessary and organisationally beneficial when genuine shortages exist. The focus on comparison rather than on descriptive listing is consistent with the integrative review methodology (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005).

Furthermore, categories were combined into higher-order mechanisms on which governments, employers, and education and training institutions can act. This led to the creation of six pillars in total: workforce planning, skills development, employer readiness, employment attractiveness, inclusive participation and responsible foreign labour management. The architectural design is conceptual. It identifies relationships thought to be theoretically and empirically plausible and does not claim statistical verification. According to Torraco (2005), the prominence of themes is determined by reasons for inclusion and fit with the context, as well as by recurrences rather than frequency counts, in keeping with the generative aim of integrative reviews that seek to develop new frameworks from representative evidence.

4. FINDINGS: THEMATIC SYNTHESIS

4.1 Structural Labour Supply, Geography and Workforce Planning

The first finding is that foreign labour dependency is partly structural. A relatively small national workforce must supply labour to tourism, public administration and other sectors while the tourism industry expands across

geographically dispersed islands. The resort model creates an additional spatial constraint because many employees must live at or near their workplace rather than commute from their home island. Past studies of the Maldives have identified the combination of small-island geography, availability of expatriates and restricted local labour supply as a constant HR issue (Shakeela & Cooper, 2009). Shiyar et al. (2023), similarly, report that distance from population centres, local availability and resort living arrangements affect recruitment and localisation.

These circumstances render a uniform national localisation goal as a weak planning tool. The scarcity by profession, island place, and skillset differs. Difficulty in filling a role at a remote resort is quite clear. Malé and other well-connected atolls have no issue in this regard. The evidence from the Maldives labour market and resorts indicates that workforce constraints vary by occupation, location, and availability. While improving local labour supply is important, they should not be considered homogeneous (MBS, 2024b; Shiyar et al., 2023). Workforce planning requires labour-demand forecasting by occupation and location. It should set out three categories of positions: positions for which there are already Maldivians qualified but recruitment/retention is weak; positions for which the necessary skills can be developed locally within a realistic period; and positions for which international recruitment is likely to continue to be necessary. This distinction is key to avoiding both under-localisation and unrealistic substitution.

4.2 Human-Capital and Skills Alignment

Continually misapplication of skills is the second mechanism in view. Academic education alone does not generate the technical, service, digital, supervisory and managerial capabilities required by Maldivian resorts. Shakeela et al. 2012 found that education is important for employability, but it is not necessarily suited to local employment opportunities in the Maldives. Shiyar et al. (2023) also note shortages in experience, qualifications, and job-ready competencies and highlight the need for internships, graduate programmes, and experiential learning.

This does not simply imply a heightened influx of graduates in tourism. Training must link to experience with shortage occupations and the competencies employers use to select and promote people. The human capital project of the World Bank in the Maldives expressed the same message, which is a better alignment between education and labour market demand and a better use of skills across the economy. This implies combining formal education with supervised workplace learning, apprenticeships, industry certification, digital competencies, and pathways from operational roles into technical and management roles for tourism.

The problem of informal employment is dynamic and, unfortunately, not new. Digitalisation, revenue management, data analytics, artificial intelligence, smart facilities and sustainability management are changing the capability mix required by tourism firms. Countries are increasingly implementing policies to enhance tourism management and improve the personalised provision of services (known as smart destination policies). Digitalisation is an important policy ingredient, and in this regard, artificial intelligence (AI) has great potential. Training workers only for current routine tasks, localisation strategies risk reproducing future skills gaps.

4.3 Employment Attractiveness, Retention and Career Progression

The third finding, that labour supply cannot be disentangled from job quality, is significant. Tourism and hospitality jobs have long been difficult to recruit and retain people for. This is due to long or irregular hours, a lack of career visibility for some roles, emotional labour, and their perception as low-status jobs (Leung & Ladkin, 2024; Robinson et al., 2019). In the Maldives, general issues combine with resort-specific factors (living arrangements, separation from family, competition with others).

Recruitment strategies may be affected by employer assumptions that expatriate employees are more likely to take up existing schedules or stay on the job at resorts. Nonetheless, this does not imply a difference in work ethic between nationalities. Scholarly work in tourism and migrant labour suggests that employment patterns may reflect arrangements for mobility, alternatives, wages, family commitments and mobility requirements within the context of migration rather than fixed attributes of national groups (Ahmad & Scott, 2021; Salazar, 2020; Shiyar, Khamis, and Srikantharajoo, 2023). Employer perceptions must not be treated as objective attributes. A more pertinent question is: What employment conditions would make careers in tourism attractive enough for Maldivians to join and remain in?

It is important for a career to progress. The concentration of local employees in junior positions, while most technical, supervisory and managerial roles remain in foreign hands, will lead to growth in headcount localisation without much capability transfer. Attraction and retention improve when employees see credible development, recognition, and progression pathways, according to comparative tourism research (Plaikner et al., 2023). In the Maldives, a sustainable localisation metric should therefore include retention, promotion, occupational upgrading and succession readiness, rather than local employment share alone.

4.4 Employer Readiness and Organisational Capability

The fourth finding pertains to the organisation rather than the worker. There is variation among employers in their ability and desire to develop local talent. Inclusion of Maldivians to meet a target does not equal building the systems for a sustainable localisation project. Effective localisation on the part of personnel is based on a well-thought-out plan that incorporates competent HR functions, intensive and structured onboarding mentoring, supervisor capability, open promotion criteria, training budget delivery, a retention system, and succession planning. Studies on similar environments and Maldives-specific evidence indicate that these HR systems need to be implemented to develop and retain national employees, rather than merely meeting recruitment targets (Darwish et al., 2023; Shiyar et al., 2023).

This important distinction is supported by evidence from the Maldives. While resorts meet employment legislation, such compliance is not necessarily representative of practical workforce management. Najeeb and Barrett (2019) categorize the approaches that resorts take towards employment legislation as compliance and decoupling. As per Shiyar et al. (2023), practical mechanisms involve Localisation internships, graduate management programmes, mentoring, partnerships with education providers, and succession planning. Research in comparative HRM shows that the results for localisation significantly depend on recruitment-training practices for local employees rather than policy demands (Darwish et al., 2023).

The business case for training is affected by employer readiness. The high rate of turnover and a poor development system causes companies to be reluctant in investing locally. Hospitality research documents this tension (8 words) Due to rapid turnover rates, employers may hesitate to invest in training. Nonetheless, training, career advancement, salary and work-life conditions all contribute to lower turnover intentions (Santhanam et al., 2021), and we know that. The cyclical influence of the firm's choice relative to the available talent pool can constrain their options to expatriate recruitment, for such international recruits appear to offer them a relatively more predictable short-term staffing option. Disrupting the cycle and allocating investment risks requires a joint investment effort. Shared investment by employers is needed to invest in and retain current workers in more credible practices. Public policy and education providers need to invest in reducing the cost and uncertainty in supplying job-ready talent.

4.5 Inclusive Participation: Women, Youth and Island Communities

The fifth finding is that participation in tourism work is locally contingent on practical realities. According to the survey of resorts being conducted in 2022, the female representation at the resorts is very low. Maldivian women make up only a small fraction of total employment in the resorts (MBS, 2024a). The Maldives has significant gender gaps regarding women's employment, safety and mobility. A World Bank study published in 2025 analyses the constraints women in the Maldives face in getting jobs. Findings show that the family, as well as mobility, safety and structural constraints, play a major role in women not being able to join the workforce. Employment at resorts raises these issues for the same reason. Work may require staying away from home or travelling between islands.

Gender disparity in tourism jobs is not confined to the Maldives. Hutchings et al. (2020) document both the horizontal and vertical segregation of women within tourism work across the economy, including their under-representation in managerial jobs and concentration in lower-paid or less secure occupations. Studies in small-island settings have shown that mobility and domestic chores can result in overlooked gendered effects in national labour planning (Lama, 2018). The CINEFORUM investigation into the involvement of women in rural tourism also reveals a connection between participation, market opportunity, and sustainable tourism development (Tiwari & Mohanty, 2020).

Localisation that is inclusive thus needs more than recruitment campaigns. Actions that could be taken, depending on how feasible they are. A safer transport system and accommodation that is family-friendly, flexible or hybrid arrangements for relevant functions, pathways for women into technical and leadership roles, outreach that goes beyond male and better transitions for young people from education to employment. The Maldives have put in place measures to mitigate documented mobility, safety, family-responsibility and geographic barriers to participation (Lama, 2018; World Bank, 2025b). When almost all of us play a role, we can rapidly reframe the domestic economy.

4.6 Institutional Coordination and Responsible Foreign Labour Management

The localisation process involves insight and decisions from multiple institutions. Labour policy, education, and training are not forms of government policy; others are government policy, developed and implemented through various kinds of public-private partnerships. Evidence from the Maldives indicates that the presence of formal employment regulations and tourism development objectives does not guarantee their systematic application in organisational behaviour. Hence, coordination is required across policy, education and the employers (MoT, 2023; Najeeb Barrett, 2019). The disenfranchisement of these actors follows a pattern. First, the institutions are turning

out people for an occupation that the employers do not value. Then employers are recruiting internationally because job-ready locals are unavailable. Finally, the localisation targets are more on numbers and less on progression.

As outlined in the Maldives' Fifth Tourism Master Plan, digitalisation, industry linkages, and human resource development would be key components of development (Ministry of Tourism, 2023). A policy problem is implementation across institutional boundaries. The recent work on tourism policy in CINEFORUM also notes that structural frameworks are useful when they link the evolution of policy to stakeholder engagement and implementation, and not when policy documents are treated as the final word. Kumar et al. 2026 Coordinating demand forecasting, curriculum design, apprenticeships, placement, immigration policy, employer incentives and outcome monitoring is critical for the Maldives' workforce.

Management of foreign labour is a responsible process, coordinated with localisation, not the other way around. Migrant and expatriate workers are crucial in the face of a genuine shortage. Employing only an economic rationale, research on tourism labour mobility warns against regarding migrant labour merely as an economic input and highlights that the employment conditions of migrant labour, as well as social sustainability, are part of the destination's sustainable process (Salazar, 2020). Management responsible thus requires transparent recruitment, fair conditions, appropriate protection for workers, justification for shortages in specific roles, and structured knowledge transfer when expatriates are in positions earmarked for future localisation.

Table 3. Evidence synthesis and implications for localisation

Theme	Indicative evidence	Implication
Structural supply and geography	MBS (2024a, 2024b); Shakeela & Cooper (2009); Shiyar et al. (2023).	Use occupation- and location-specific demand forecasting rather than uniform headcount targets.
Skills alignment	Shakeela et al. (2012); Shiyar et al. (2023); World Bank (2024); OECD (2026).	Link education, TVET and workplace learning directly to shortage occupations and emerging digital skills.
Attractiveness and retention	Robinson et al. (2019); Leung & Ladkin (2024); Plaikner et al. (2023).	Treat job quality, career visibility and retention as core localisation conditions.
Employer readiness	Najeeb & Barrett (2019). Darwish et al. (2023); Shiyar et al. (2023).	Assess organisational capability to train, mentor, retain and promote, not recruitment alone.
Inclusive participation	MBS (2024a); Hutchings et al. (2020); World Bank (2025b); Lama (2018).	Remove barriers to mobility, safety, and progression for women, youth, and island communities.
Foreign labour and coordination	Ministry of Tourism (2023); Salazar (2020); World Bank (2025a).	Retain international labour where shortages are genuine while strengthening governance and knowledge transfer.

5. Six-Pillar Framework for Sustainable Workforce Localisation

The thematic synthesis provides a framework whereby six mutually reinforcing capabilities will result in the sustainable localisation of production. The framework does not assume equal contribution from every pillar in each resort or occupation. Contrary to the claim, the framework does not specialise in forecasting a continued reliance on foreign labour. Rather, it facilitates a diagnostic evaluation of this dependency. The model also distinguishes between localisation and the full removal of foreign workers. The position aligns with both comparative localisation research and Maldives-specific research, showing that domestic capability development and ongoing access to foreign talent can co-exist in cases of genuine shortages (Al-Asfour & Khan, 2014; Shiyar et al., 2023). International recruitment that is done properly and systematically will still go well when localised, where this recruitment addresses proven shortages and supports rather than substitutes for long-term domestic capability development.

Six-Pillar Framework for Sustainable Workforce Localisation

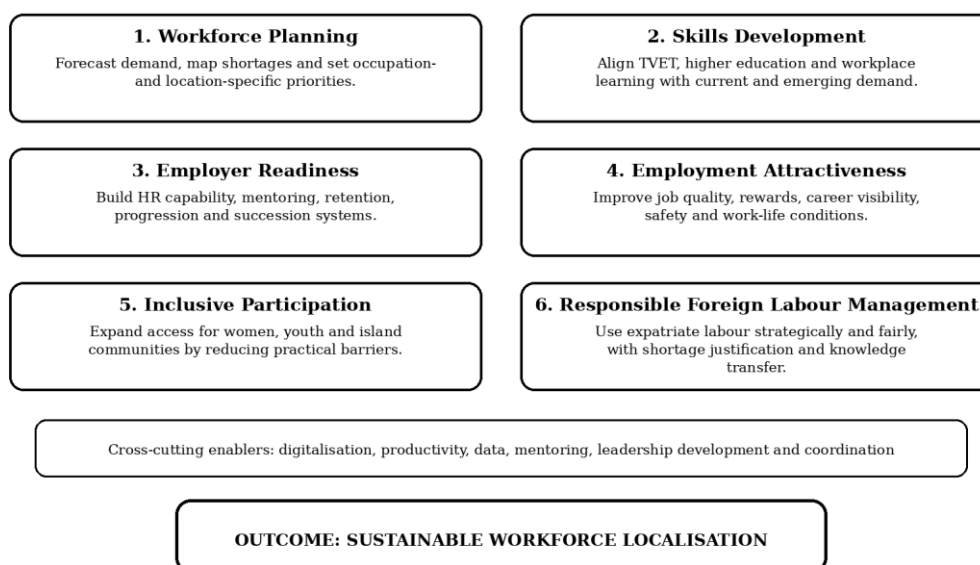


Figure 1. Six-pillar framework for sustainable workforce localisation in the Maldives tourism industry.

5.1 Workforce Planning

Workforce planning is key to recognising localisation potential, staged capability development, and the ongoing necessity of external recruitment. Occupational, skill, and geographic data should be combined with demand forecasts. Vacancy duration, reliance on expatriates by occupation, expected demand, local applicants' availability and period to achieve competency are useful indicators. This method, which focuses mainly on the industry's occupation and location, was informed by evidence from the Maldives, which showed that the availability of labour and the geography of the resort location affect localisation prospects (MBS, 2024b; Shiyar et al., 2023). Planning should also account for anticipated technology-driven changes in job design rather than extrapolating from current staffing ratios (OECD, 2026).

5.2 Skills Development

The process of developing skills enables people to use their labour-market potential. In identifying shortage occupations, training ought to have priority and be developed by employers, aligned with competency standards and assessment. TVET, Higher Education, Apprenticeships, Internships, Professional Certification, and Structured Workplace Learning should form an interconnected pathway rather than separate programmes. Evidence from human capital in the Maldives and research demonstrates a stronger alignment between education and practical learning and labour market demand (Shakeela et al., 2012; Shiyar et al., 2023; World Bank, 2024). Therefore, it is necessary to measure the success of training in terms of competency attainment, placement, retention and progression and not just enrolment.

5.3 Employer Readiness

The term "employer readiness" refers to the organisational capacity to recruit, develop and retain Maldivians. The components of retention strategies include HR capability, supervisor support, mentoring, clarity of promotion criteria, succession planning, training investment, and retention practices. If employers lack the means to convert recruitment into career development, localisation requirements will remain superficial. Research carried out in resorts in the Maldives and research into comparative localisation suggest that treating HR capability, employee development and retention systems as substantive components of localisation is a better approach than assuming that formal recruitment targets are sufficient (Darwish et al., 2023; Najeeb & Barrett, 2019; Shiyar et al., 2023). Localisation targets do not mean that management on-boarded faster than the speed of light to change.

5.4 Employment Attractiveness

The appeal of tourism jobs in Malaysia is based on the workers' perspective. Pay is important, but so are timing, accommodation, safety, connectivity, culture, recognition, fairness and visibility. Study after study shows that job quality (career visibility, work-life conditions, employer attractiveness) is consistently linked to recruitment and

retention in the tourism workforce (Leung & Ladkin, 2024; Plaikner et al., 2023; Robinson et al., 2019; Santhanam et al., 2021). Resort jobs must compete with other job options available within the Maldives. Improving attractiveness can help lessen the discrepancy between local workers' formal availability and their willingness to enter and stay in tourism.

5.5 Inclusive Participation

By overcoming obstacles that prevent or discourage women, youth, and communities outside major labour centres from participating, inclusive participation can grow the domestic workforce. We need to focus on practical constraints related to mobility, safety, care, access to training, occupational segregation, and progression, rather than treating low participation as evidence of low interest. Research conducted in the Maldives and the tourism literature show that mobility, household responsibilities, and job segregation can shape women's access to employment in tourism and the advancement of women (Hutchings et al., 2020; Lama, 2018; World Bank, 2025b). Flexible and digitised working arrangements, when permitted by the job design, may allow greater access to certain tourism functions.

5.6 Responsible Foreign Labour Management

Responsible management of foreign workers acknowledges that expatriate workers will be a part of Maldivian tourism. The aim is to differentiate essential international recruitment from avoidable structural dependency. Recruiting, fair job conditions, evidence for real shortages and, according to necessity, mentorship or knowledge-transfer agreements for employer and regulator use. Research on tourism labour mobility and localisation supports the potential to combine not treat migrant-labour governance as fair and planned domestic capability development as incompatible (Ahmad & Scott, 2021; Salazar, 2020; Shiyar et al., 2023). By implementing a scheduled succession timeframe, skilled expatriates can prepare the designated Maldivian successors without losing operational benefits.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 From Numerical Localisation to Capability-Based Localisation

The framework's main claim is that local headcount is a partial measure of localisation. A resort can boost the number of Maldivian employees while retaining reliance on expatriates for technical, supervisory and managerial expertise. The Maldives research identifies exactly this concern: localisation entails not just increasing local participation but also enhancing experience, career development, and progression into higher-skilled roles (Shiyar et al., 2023). A business may achieve respectable progress with a large foreign workforce if Maldivians enter shortage occupations, progress through competency pathways, stay longer, and advance to roles previously filled by overseas recruitment. As much as there is localised delivery, the quality of localisation also matters.

Such a differentiation can help reconcile the apparent tension between localisation and competitiveness. The Maldives competes on the quality of service, the destination's reputation, and operational reliability. Tearing up experienced foreign labour faster than local workers can replace is a downer. Resource Dependency Theory tends to predict ongoing sourcing from third parties when a resource becomes critical and in short supply. On the other hand, Human Capital Theory suggests that such dependence may diminish as domestic capability builds up. Our job in policy is to manage that transition deliberately rather than simply assume that quotas by themselves will cause it.

The Institutional Theory explains why formal localisation requirements may yield varying outcomes. According to Najeeb and Barrett (2019), Maldivian resort studies illustrate how organisations can strategically respond to employment regulation, including forms of decoupling. A capability-based approach minimises incentives for mere surface-level compliance by establishing connections between targets and outcomes across training, retention, progression, and succession. This creates a more credible basis for distinguishing between employers that are genuinely developing local talent and those that meet only minimum numerical requirements.

6.2 Technology and Productivity as Cross-Cutting Enablers

We cannot spend our days and nights thinking that today's present moment is all that is. Forecasting can be aided by Digital workforce systems; skill learning can be expanded by Online and simulation-based learning; Turnover patterns can be identified by HR analytics; Digital platforms can support recruitment; and Remote or hybrid work can broaden participation in activities that do not require constant resort presence. Studies on tourism have highlighted that digitalisation, artificial intelligence, and automation are technologies that will not only upgrade tasks and increase operational efficiency but also require changes in workforce skills to carry out work (Ivanov, 2024; OECD, 2026).

According to a recent OECD tourism analysis, digitalisation and AI could lead to more efficient operations, improved management and services in tourism. But there will need to be adequate skills and policy support

(OECD, 2026). According to Ivanov (2024), robots, artificial intelligence, and service automation can substitute for, enhance or transform tourism labour rather than simply eliminate jobs. For the Maldives, the goal here is productivity-enhancing growth. In the areas of data, digital operations, smart facilities, revenue management and technology-enabled guest experience, higher-value roles are being created, and pressure is being removed from repetitive or administrative tasks.

It is better to adopt this stance than to assume that one Maldivian worker must replace one expatriate worker. Workforce localisation necessitates planning for future work design. If technology makes productivity easier, the sector may grow without duplicating the existing employment structure, while Maldivians can prepare for more skilled jobs. According to tourism productivity and digitalisation research, it is supported that linking technology adoption with human capital development is beneficial, as productivity gains depend partly on workforce skills and organisational capability, as stated by Dwyer and the OECD in 2026. The policy risk which digital transformation will outpace domestic skills development and create another form of dependency on foreign technology professionals. The initiation of Pillars 1 and 2 should therefore embed digital capability.

6.3 Local Leadership, Knowledge Transfer and Succession

Another cross-cutting mechanism is leadership succession. Operational roles localisation does not change the location of capability or decision-making. Resorts need to identify roles at their establishments where Maldivians can progress into supervisory, technical, managerial and executive roles and create staged development plans with clearly defined competence thresholds. Studies conducted to localise Maldives-specific and comparative findings point to mentoring, graduate development, career planning and succession mechanisms as evident routes through which national employees may be moved to higher-level roles (Darwish et al., 2023; Shiyar et al., 2023). Honing of talents through coaching, acting assignments, cross-departmental exposure, and management development programmes can shape a good employee before their formal promotion.

The coordination of knowledge transfer is effective in creating a planned approach in which only a few expatriates hold scarce responsibilities or expertise. Instead of seeing this relationship as a zero-sum replacement, an international manager or technical specialist experienced in the industry can mentor a named Maldivian successor over an agreed period. Research on workforce localisation shows that knowledge transfer, mentoring, and structured development are ways in which external competence can contribute to the formation of national capability (Darwish et al., 2023; Shiyar et al., 2023). This method preserves continuity of service and transforms imported expertise into local human capital. The departure of the expatriate is not the measure of success, but rather the successor's preparedness and reduced future dependence on external recruitment for the same capability.

6.4 Theoretical Contribution

The framework's theoretical contribution involves linking four levels of explanation that are usually disconnected from one another. Different theories explain external recruitment practices. The Human Capital Theory explains capability accumulation; Resource Dependency Theory explains why organisations persist with external recruitment; Institutional Theory explains the effects and limitations of policy pressure; and labour-market segmentation and occupational-choice perspectives explain availability and preferences. These mechanisms are involved in an integrated model for a six-pillar approach. Foreign labour dependency is thus understood as an equilibrium brought about by the interaction of supply, demand, organisational, and institutional conditions. Sustainable localisation is a process of changing that equilibrium through several mechanisms simultaneously, rather than treating any single constraint as the cause.

7. POLICY AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The government must prioritise translating aggregate localisation targets into occupation-level workforce intelligence. A dashboard for the national tourism workforce could include demand forecasts, job vacancy durations, expat concentration, training pipelines, local applicants, and male/female participation and progression outcomes. This proposal draws on existing evidence from the Maldives showing considerable variation in workforce participation, and on a policy calling for strengthened human resource development and labour market alignment (MBS, 2024b; Ministry of Tourism, 2023; World Bank, 2024). This data would enable policy to differentiate between genuine shortage occupations and occupations where domestic recruitment or retention could reasonably improve. We can adjust immigration and localisation policy based on evidence rather than broad employment categorisation.

For employers, this framework means focusing less on recruitment and more on talent development. All resorts should demonstrate how local employees are recruited, trained, mentored, assessed, retained and prepared for progression. To strengthen employer readiness, it is recommended to establish minimum standards for internships and apprenticeships, train supervisors, publish progression criteria and succession plans for key roles, and regularly analyse the reasons Maldivians leave. The evidence for localisation and hospitality parallels findings

that structured HRM, career development, and retention practices lead to stronger workforce outcomes (Darwish et al., 2023; Santhanam et al., 2021; Shiyar et al., 2023). The business case should centre on reduced vacancy risk, stronger retention, a stronger internal talent pipeline, and lower long-term reliance on emergency international recruitment.

Demand alignment is the primary requirement for educational/training institutions. The needs of employers should inform curricula and short-course development, and be updated with technology changes. Employers should jointly design work-based learning, including competency outcomes and feedback on placement performance. According to research and policy evidence from the Maldives, we need stronger education-industry alignment and practical learning and skills development that respond directly to labour-market demand (Shakeela et al., 2012; Shiyar et al., 2023; World Bank, 2024). Simply having a rising number of graduates doesn't automatically mean the skills gap has closed.

This paper proposes a National Tourism Talent Development Cycle as an implementation instrument. The Maldivian government doesn't already have a programme like this; it is a conceptual policy proposal developed in the present study. It involves a cycle of five connected stages: (1) forecast demand for labour and identify shortage occupations; (2) prioritise occupations for immediate, staged or longer-term localisation; (3) fund targeted education, apprenticeships and professional development; (4) place participants into structured pathways with mentoring in workplace; and (5) monitor retention, competency attainment, promotion and succession outcomes to update next forecast cycle. The training process doesn't go out of touch with the actual labour market.

Table 4. Suggested implementation priorities and localisation indicators

Actor	Priority actions	Indicative indicators
Government/sect or bodies	Occupation-level forecasting; shortage classification; coordinated policy; transparent labour data.	Local/foreign share by occupation; vacancy duration; shortage list; female/youth participation; progression rates.
Tourism employers	Structured recruitment, mentoring, retention, career pathways and succession.	Local retention, promotion, training completion, succession readiness, turnover reasons, internal fill rate.
Education / TVET providers	Employer-led competency standards; apprenticeships; digital and technical skills; placement feedback.	Placement rate, competency assessment, employer satisfaction, and job retention after 6-12 months.
Migrant-labour governance	Target genuine shortages; protect workers; plan knowledge transfer where localisation is intended.	Shortage justification; compliance; mentoring arrangements; successful handover in targeted roles.

8. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There are four principal limitations of this review. Initially, the integrative review is not a comprehensive systematic review, meaning it does not claim to provide complete coverage of all databases or to meet PRISMA screening counts. Furthermore, peer-reviewed literature specific to the Maldives remains limited, so official statistics and institutional reports should be used with caution. Next, there is comparative localisation evidence from contexts such as Gulf economies and other tourism labour markets; while these studies illustrate mechanisms, they cannot be assumed to transfer unchanged to the Maldives.

Fourth, this article has not subjected the six-pillar framework to statistical validation, although it was conceptually synthesised. In the future, primary data from resorts, hotels, guesthouses, safari ships and other tourism companies should be tested on the framework. Researchers could measure the values of each pillar and test how employer readiness, job attractiveness, skills alignment, and institutional support predict reliance on expatriate labour, local retention, and occupational progression. Multilevel designs will be extremely useful because workforce outcomes are influenced simultaneously by employees, organisations, islands, and national policy.

Qualitative work should look into variations in employer and employee understandings of localisation, including why Maldivians leave resort jobs, how women negotiate mobility and accommodation issues, and how expatriate employees engage in mentoring and knowledge transfer. Longitudinal research could observe local employees through apprenticeship, placement and promotion to see whether development pathways have durable effects. Subsequent studies should also investigate whether digitalisation actually leads to lower labour dependency or transfers dependency to other technical occupations.

9. CONCLUSION

The contribution of foreign labour to Maldivian tourism has been significant. The problem with the policy problem is not the foreign worker but the continued, avoidable dependency, where domestic capacity could have been

developed. According to the authors' review of the evidence, dependency comes from interacting constraints, and in addition, the labour pool is small and spread out. The mismatch of skills makes resort mobility more necessary. Some other constraints are that the attractiveness of jobs is spread, retaining employees isn't easy, varying employers' willingness and low women's participation in jobs in the resorts. Ultimately, the most significant constraints are the disjointed coordination between labour demand, education, and policy.

This complexity is addressed by this framework, which has six pillars. Workforce planning helps identify where localisation activities are realistically feasible; skills development develops the capability; employer readiness leads to recruitment for development and retention; employment attractiveness positively impacts entry and persistence; inclusive participation expands the effectively available domestic labour pool; and responsible management of foreign labour assures access to the required skills and contributes to knowledge transfer.

The pillars include digitalisation, productivity enhancement, and leadership succession.

The primary shift is from numeric localising to capacity localising. The progress on employment of Maldivians should be measured not only in percentage terms but also in retention, competency attainment and movement into skilled and technical roles, promotion, succession to leadership positions, participation by women and youth and organisational productivity. In this manner, the Maldives can increase domestic participation without perceiving foreign labour as an adversary or diminishing the service standards upon which the tourism economy relies

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