

ROUNDTABLE ON SUSTAINABILITY FROM THE MALDIVES TO THE WORLD

Brussels, Friday 18th of June 2021

As we figure out how our future world will look like, it is important that we do not lose a sense of perspective, in reference to the all-important 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, which, if achieved, will provide a prosperous life for everybody, and ensure the health of our planet. No country can achieve them alone, a combined effort and international solidarity and teamwork is key.

We need fresh and innovative ideas as we adapt to new circumstances, and this hybrid roundtable contributed to this, sharing inputs, ideas and expertise to build a better world, a world we want to leave behind to our children and grandchildren.

The timing of this event is critical – countries across the world are busy devising plans for inclusive, sustainable recovery, and later this year we will have the COP26 Climate Summit in Glasgow. The SDGs, therefore, are more relevant than ever.

Therefore, the central question becomes how to ensure that all stakeholders – government, the private sector, business, civil society, entrepreneurs, youth, academia – join forces. Together, we need to identify challenges, harmonize efforts, set priorities, align actions, form coherent policy responses, and mobilise financial resources for sustainable development.



H.E. Dr. Aishath Ali, Minister of Education of the Maldives

In 2015, the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was agreed by the world leaders at the 70th session of the UN General Assembly. By 2010, The Maldives had already achieved five out of the eight Millennium Developmental Goals (MDGs), making the Maldives South Asia's only MDG+ country.

This was made possible by the high value the Maldives government places on investing in education, and now offers free education for all children in the Maldives between the ages of four and 18. Over the past few years, the Maldives have shown progress and remarkable improvements in our SDG education indicators. SDG 4 is the all-important education goal. The first target under this goal is to ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education, leading to relevant and effective learning environments. In the Maldives, the universalisation of primary education was achieved in 2002, nearly two decades ago, with no significant gender

disparity. The completion rate for primary is near a hundred percent. The transition rate from primary to secondary is almost universal.

In 2020, 98.4 percent of students completed their lower secondary education. Although the enrolment at the higher secondary level has increased over time, the net enrolment rate is still low and the completion rate of higher secondary remains below the regional benchmark, which is 48.8 percent. And there are concerns about the quality of school education at the higher levels.

Achieving the indicators of access to equitable and quality education was given legal imperative with the ratification of the First Education Act in November 2020, which will become effective in August 2021. It mandates free, equitable and quality education to all the students from ages 4 to 16. Furthermore, in the Maldives, two years of early childhood education have been made compulsory and available for free in all inhabited islands across the country.

SDG 4 also calls to ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university education. The new Education Act mandates inclusion of technical vocational education in the mainstream curriculum within the general education system. Hence, a technical vocational strategy is being developed to strengthen the mechanism and increase participation.

SDG target 4 aims to substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills for employment, decent jobs, entrepreneurship.

The most recent household income and expenditure survey shows that among youth, 51 percent of both men and women have used computers and 70 percent have used internet. To this end, an ICT Master Plan has been developed by the Ministry of Education targeting 100 percent ICT literacy among students.

While these are steps in the right direction, much work still needs to be done. Concepts of anti-bullying, democratic values and gender equality needs to be woven into the fabric of everyday school experiences and make the curriculum relevant to the everyday needs of our communities.

In our quest to build and upgrade inclusive, safe learning environment, all the schools have been provided with electricity, safe drinking water, and single-sex, basic sanitation facilities. Those schools have become more inclusive spaces. There are significant variations across the country and the retention of quality teachers remain is major issues in higher education system.

To address this teacher shortage, the government aims to raise the social status of teachers by raising remuneration and expanding the opportunities for professional development.



H.E. Abdulla Mausoom, Minister of Tourism of the Maldives

The Maldives is a sustainable development destination. As we move towards SDGs, the main focus is on making sure that tourism is accessible to everybody.

The government of the Maldives has decided to take tourism to the people: tourism will be taken to all the inhabited islands. The main idea is to make sure that tourism benefits are given to the common people and linking tourism to the island economies: fishermen, farmers, craftsmen, performing artists, will all have a role to play in tourism and will benefit directly from it.

While doing so, we are developing the domestic transport network that will make the living very feasible for the island communities: new domestic transport systems are being established through air networks and sea links, and also in bigger islands improved roads will enable good transport.

One major area that we are also focusing is on empowering women, engaging women in tourism. We aim to give ownership of tourism products to women, and also have women in employment. The Ministry of Tourism is conducting consultations and having engagements with all the local councils. We hope that the increased female presence in local councils, in addition to the women development committees in each island, will be able to really get a meaningful engagement from women to tourism.

Then of course, tourism in the Maldives is very much environmentally friendly. It is in the interest of the industry that the environment stays good and the “reduce, reuse, recycle” concept will be implemented throughout the planning, development and management of all the tourism facilities. Most of the new tourism products that we are now announcing carries a very high value for renewable energy commitment. I think Maldives will stand out as a good example of that.

We have one specific social problem, where women and men who work in the resorts live far away from their families. The government’s focus is on ensuring a greater work-life balance. Most of the resorts will have a system of enabling Maldivians who work in these resorts to go back to their family once their duty is done.

Lastly, I should make a reference to climate change. I think there is mixed debate as to what is happening with the global warming. One thing is sure, global warming is really damaging our coral reefs. But as to whether global warming and resulting sea-level rise will let the Maldives go down, I think scientists are very optimistic that the Maldives will stay afloat because that is the way our islands are formed.



H.E. Aminath Shauna, Minister of Environment, Climate Change & Technology of the Maldives

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global shock like no other and with far reaching consequences to every aspect of our lives. We must also not forget that climate change is still an ever-present problem for us all. The science is very clear, the evidence is there. The world's climate system is undergoing an exponential change and the consequences therefore will also be catastrophic, not just on small island states.

Over the past years over 90 percent of the islands have reported flooding annually and 97 percent of the islands are experiencing severe erosion. This is catastrophic as nearly 50 percent of all our housing structures are also within just a hundred meters from the shoreline. And it is not just our homes and infrastructure that is in jeopardy, but all economic wellbeing is also severely threatened.

Therefore, we really understand the importance of building resilience while also achieving sustainable development. We have to carry both out in parallel and we do not have much time left, unfortunately. And this is why for us addressing climate change is not just a matter of environment it also becomes a human rights question as well, because if you think about the motives and the impacts of climate change it almost feels like the more, this will be uninhabitable before the sea level rise, which might result in complete inundation of the island nation as well.

We are talking about access to clean water. We are talking about access to resources and food security. These are issues that really matters to our existence, our survival. A few weeks ago, President Solih ratified the Climate Emergency Act, which calls for a framework to work towards achieving net zero emissions by 2030 with the support of the international community. We no longer want to just be victims of climate change, we also want to be victors. Want to say if a country like the Maldives can do it, the entire world can do it as well.

We hope that larger countries will commit to more ambitious targets to bring down global emissions and we reach 1.5 degrees in the upcoming climate change negotiations. It is time for us to come together and ensure that we really can make a difference in terms of bringing change. If we can really fix the ozone hole, why can't we fix what is happening with global climate change and rising temperatures?

Despite the challenges we face, let us not forget that the Maldives contribute only 0.003% of global greenhouse gas emissions. We are really determined to show leadership and continue to advocate for more effective and bold climate actions to address the climate emergency that we face while the impacts of climate change are heightened, especially for vulnerable island nations, such as ours. No nation is really immune from this anymore.



H.E. Prof. Ameenah Gurib-Fakim

6th President & First Female President of the Republic of Mauritius

As a small island state, Mauritius shares common issues with the Maldives - in particular climate change. Our countries have hardly contributed to greenhouse gas emissions, yet we bear the brunt of global warming.

Furthermore, the Maldives face the existential threat of sea level rise, and many islands are set to disappear in the not-so-distant future. We are all already seeing the rise of the waters and erosion is becoming a serious issue. The other challenges that we face are warming oceans and the acidification of the oceans impacting coral reefs.

All important decisions concerning climate change are taken globally, but actions must be taken at local level. We all have something to contribute to the future we want. In terms of international collaboration, we need to seek North-South exchanges. We will not be able to drive this from our side, because climate change is a global issue which calls for a global solution.

This is why we need to flag in the multilateral cooperation and collaboration and sharing of best practices (for instance in the blue economy) which is highly important at this stage. I am very pleased that the Maldives will be heading the UN General Assembly, and I think they will be able to share some of our concern and also prompt more action and more collaboration at that level.

In the end, optimism should reign supreme. We have to turn around and bend the arc of these challenges to our own benefit and to make it work for ourselves.



Cornelia von Wülfing Mamaga Akosua I. Paramountqueen of SASADU Areas, Volta Region, Ghana

I started working in South Africa, then Eastern & Western Africa. Finally, I ended up for business reasons in Ghana in 1998. And I decided very early on that I should do projects there for the benefit of the people.

Europeans are often earning much money in African countries, but many of them do not give anything back. So, it was in my early African years, during the 1980s, that I decided to give something back.

In my opinion, it should be an obligation. If you do business in the country and you are benefiting economically, then you should find a way to give back. African countries should oblige the companies coming in, that a certain percentage of the profit - apart from the taxes - must go back to the people living there and positively impact education and healthcare systems, for example.

At the moment, we are doing handicraft and fabric production. We are recycling glass and turning it into bracelets and jewellery which we sell in Europe. We recycle garbage and produce energy in small-scale projects, which is possible for any community. It is not really a huge investment. And the money goes directly back into the projects where people are employed.



Lorenzo De' Medici Philanthropist, Artist & Founder of Medici Bank International

The Maldives have been an example to the world for the past 50 years – even with limited resources, we must respect their way of preserving their environment, they deserve recognition for this. In the Maldives, there would be no tourism without safeguarding the natural environment.

I work with different developers around the world that are building the sustainable cities. And there are issues that people do not really talk about. We repeatedly speak about renewable energy, and we speak a lot about solar. But what will happen in 10, 20, 50 years when all those solar plants age, how do we recycle them so that they do not become another environmental problem? We need to plan not only thinking about today, but having a longer time-span in mind. It is very fashionable to say that we need to be green. But we need to think carefully about what 'being green' means, what does 'green' give us and how much will what we do now cost our children's generation in the future.



Marco Alba Business Development for Diplomatic World Institute

There are technologies that are evolving, so the good news is that innovation is stepping in. There are small-step technologies and there are big-step technologies. Especially in the energy sector, there are technologies right now that can be used to lessen nitrogen pollution and reduce emission of toxic particles. At the same time, building up more sustainable future energy solutions that can be solar or hydrogen, to name a few. Further, why not sometimes solving two problems at the same time? Such as waste-to-energy solutions: on the one hand waste removal, which is a big problem for many communities, governments, and populations; and generate electricity on the other.

I think the good news is that there is plenty of innovation going on and that we should have a focus on aligning the interests of the populations, of the policymakers, investors, businessmen, and to try to find the correct mix in order to be more sustainable on the long run by applying small steps and working on the big steps.



Jean-Francois Desjacques Advisor to UHNWI Families and Luxury Hospitality Expert

What I hear is there is plenty of potential interesting innovation. Having said that, innovation is one thing, consciousness is another. While I think that our generation has maybe destroyed the world, we have a new generation that, in its way of life, through its behaviour, is more protective of the environment. We see, for example, less and less people around the world using cars. So, we have maybe a chance to save the planet.

There are ways to do it. There are risks of flooding, but there are maybe technologies to tackle this. Venice, for example, is still standing today. And the other thing I would like to mention is that I was in Dubai 30 years ago and I realised that Dubai is a city that has popped up from the sand. There was nobody but shippers, sea farers and pearl diggers about 50 years ago. And look at Dubai today, a hub of innovation and business.

Well, just like Dubai popped up from the sand, why cannot we have a country popping up from the sea?

VOICES FROM THE MALEDIVES

'Sustainable development is the pathway for a better future. Plant a tree if you can, reduce waste and think green. We are the investors for a better tomorrow. Let us appreciate nature by giving our time, our dedication and our love to this beautiful earth.'



**Fathimath Shadiya, Head of Department of Environment and Natural Science,
Maldives National University**

'About 30 years ago, at the Rio Earth Summit, world leaders agreed to apply the precautionary principle, yet the greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise. Today it is a fact that human induced global warming has placed us in this climate emergency. Sea levels are rising, and we are at the brink of completely losing our coral reefs. Every bit of warming is directly linked to our ability to survive. We share the same planet with the same atmosphere and ocean. It is time to work in solidarity, ensuring that no one is left behind. We have no time to lose'.



Aisha Niyaz, Sustainability Consultant

'The key aim of the 17 ambitious goals is to leave no one behind. We could only achieve the true meaning of it by including the unheard, side-lined and marginalized communities. It is crucial for the youth to take voices and actions further and prove that we are not the leaders of the future; we surely can be the leaders of the present. We are talking about our future and the future of our children. We are in a climate crisis, and we have 9 years to achieve these goals, and we definitely have a lot to do!'



**Afa Hussain: Environmental Advocate. Founder of youth led environment movement
“BeLeaf Maldives”, Youth Ambassador of Earth Day Network South Asia.**

‘In building back better, we must commit to do things differently. To do that, we need to make women part of the policy-making process. Economic policies should be made in an inclusive manner, where voices of women from both rural and urban areas are heard’.



**Shafeea Riza, Co-Chairperson, Family Legal Clinic
(NGO providing legal aid to domestic violence survivors and other vulnerable women)**

‘The contemporary Maldivian society is filled with eclectic and enthusiastic young people, that do not standby witness to the destruction of our ecosystem and discrimination based on gender. We must accommodate and work with these voices for a truly sustainable future.’



Zayan Ismail, member, Uthema (Women's right NGO)

‘My main aim in life is to lessen the challenges faced by people with disabilities by giving them accessibility, to fight for gender equality and women's rights. I want to prove to people that being a blind person, does not stop you from achieving greatness in life.’



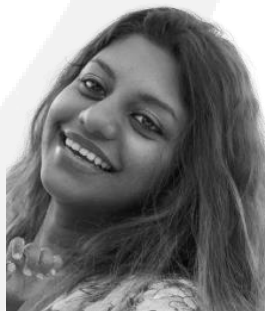
Fathimath Ibrahim, Board Member, Blind Association of Maldives

'Maldives is one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change, we cannot wait, our communities are already suffering. While Transparency Maldives recognizes the work of the relevant authorities to address the effects of climate change, we notice that in the process of this climate work, we are seeing that the authorities often forget to collaborate and work together. Many times, we have seen centralized policies and limited participation of the public and the beneficiaries. Such decisions have left our communities more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. This is why we need to ensure people's voices remain in the heart of the conversation, and transparency and accountability is the topmost priority of the government in the process of achieving the sustainable development goals'.



Shaziya Ali, Grants and outreach manager, Transparency Maldives

'Sustainability helps us to align economic, social and environmental goals which, in the past, we thought was not possible. The sustainable development goals and the lessons from the pandemic provide us the guidance that we need to build a resilient future. We know what needs to be done. It's time we roll them into action'.



Raniya Sobir, Researcher & Technical Consultant on SDGs Implementation

All photos: Embassy of Maldives, Diplomatic World, Prof. Ameenah Gurib-Fakim, Lorenzo De' Medici, Cornelia von Wülffing



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