

Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council
30x30 webinar

Tuesday 29 June
1330 - 1430 British Summer Time

Remarks by President Nasheed

Thank you for inviting me to make a few remarks at this important event.

It is always a pleasure to speak at a Commonwealth event.

And it is especially pleasing because the Maldives recently re-joined the Commonwealth.

It is also very pleasing to see Britain properly re-join the Commonwealth again, and give it the priority it deserves, after 45 years of neglect!

I would like to give a perspective today from the Maldives.

We are a middle-income country, made up of 2,000 tiny islands, located in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

The Maldives is made up of just 1% land and 99% water.

We like to think of ourselves not as a small island state, but a Big Ocean State.

Maldivian lives are intertwined with the ocean.

The ocean provides us with food.

Our diet revolves around tuna. We eat tuna for breakfast, lunch, teatime, and dinner!

And the ocean provides us with riches.

We export a lot of tuna to Europe, where we fetch a premium price.

And of course, people from around the world come to the Maldives on holiday, to experience our country's outstanding natural beauty.

That beauty revolves around the sea. In any postcard from the Maldives, you always have the sea in it.

In fact, it's difficult to take a picture in the Maldives and avoid having the sea in the background.

It is not just our turquoise lagoons or the deep blue that is beautiful.

Underwater is equally mesmerising: our huge coral reefs sustain most of the life in our seas.

And many tourists spend a small fortune to dive and snorkel our reefs.

But as we all know, the world's seas and oceans are in trouble.

The climate crisis is heating the oceans, killing coral reefs...

... while overfishing and plastic pollution are causing environmental problems.

Overfishing is causing fish stocks to collapse — including Indian Ocean tuna, which keeps Maldivian stomachs full.

What can be done about this?

To stop the seas getting hotter, and the oceans rising, we must stop polluting the air with greenhouse gas emissions.

It's really as simple as that.

I have long argued that all countries must commit to becoming carbon neutral.

I said this back in 2009.

And committed Maldives to carbon neutrality back then.

Everyone thought I was mad at the time.

But the idea seems to have caught on.

I've always believed that by becoming carbon neutral, we can also become rich.

This is a position that has sometimes stood at odds with environmentalists, especially rich environmentalists who usually live in the West.

Because there are two ways to attain carbon neutrality: we can go and live in the trees, renounce modernity and civilisation, and live off nuts and berries.

Or we can rapidly deploy lots of new technology, new ways of doing things, and build new, green infrastructure... and attain development and prosperity that way.

As any elected politician in the developing world will tell you, the second way is the only way to win elections.

Nobody is about to vote for more poverty.

Nowadays the fashionable term for carbon neutrality is 'net zero'.

And it is pleasing to see so many countries commit to this goal — even if some of those commitments are a long way off.

The US, EU, Japan, Korea, even China, now have net zero commitments.

This is a huge turnaround... and something that makes me feel hopeful about the world, and the world my children will inherit.

[pause]

Even if we manage to turn the corner on climate change, that still leaves the issue of the oceans.

Because overfishing, for example, is not caused by climate change.

Overfishing is caused by overfishing.

It is a worthy goal to try and protect large parts of the ocean.

But to my mind, this only deals with half of the problem.

Let's take the example of the Indian Ocean.

The Maldives has 17,000 pole and line fishermen, and just over 600 licensed fishing boats.

We catch 150,000 tonnes of tuna each year.

Some we eat, some we export.

Our tuna exports are worth over \$150 million per year.

And our tuna industry is among the world's most sustainable.

Why is this?

It is because we fish exclusively with pole and line, or hand line.

Nets are banned in the Maldives.

Our country has an EEZ the size of England. And in this vast territory — not one big net is used to catch fish.

And we don't allow long-lining, either.

Every single tuna, or reef fish, is caught with a rod and a hook.

One by one.

And for these reasons our fishery does not cause overfishing.

Pole and line fishing doesn't catch the entire school of tuna in one go.

We just catch some of them — allowing the others to breed and repopulate.

And there is zero by-catch.

Which is why Maldivian waters teems with marine life, such as dolphins, sharks, rays — and fish.

To my mind, the issue about marine protection, especially of fish stocks, is fundamentally about technology.

It is about the technology that is used.

The Indian Ocean tuna stock is not falling because of Maldivian pole and line boats.

The tuna stock is falling because France and Spain sail these huge factory ships into the Indian Ocean and scoop up all the fish in enormous nets.

Nets that would be banned, if they happened to stray into Maldivian waters.

These enormous boats are like monsters. Like industrial Godzillas.

And they eat anything that moves.

That is the root problem of overfishing in the Indian Ocean.

And even if we protect 30% of it - it won't change much.

Because if there are more fish in the sea, the Spanish and French fleets will just scoop them all up.

So to complement your 30x30 goal, I believe we need a second goal.

And that goal should be a ban on per seine fishing.

A global ban.

Just like we have banned poisonous pesticides on land. So we need to ban destructive technologies in the sea.

The French and Spanish fishermen should be taught how to fish like Maldivians.

We make good money on our fish.

And tens of thousands of Maldivians are employed in the business.

We don't have foreigners working on our boats.

Nor, thank God, any slaves.

The Maldivian fishing industry sustains Maldivian fishermen, and Maldivian fishing communities.

The European fishermen never used to use massive factory ships.

I don't understand why they cannot go back to artisanal fishing.

[pause]

Conservation, of course, is also very important.

In the Maldives, the Government is working with the Waitt Institute to create a nationwide Marine Spatial Plan.

Working with fishermen and local people, the idea is to work out which are the reefs, and parts of the sea, where we don't fish much.

Or the parts where baitfish breed and hatch.

So we work with local communities to identify the really important areas that need protecting to ensure local fish stocks remain healthy.

And we will protect these areas. Turn them into no-take zones.

And this will ensure we always have an abundance of fish for our people.

I think this sort of locally-led conservation is a good idea — good for the environment and good for the economy.

And if we can do this on a global scale, and help protect fish stocks around the world, all the better.

[pause]

The Maldives might be small.

But I hope we can set an example.

We have the world's most sustainable fisheries.

We are working to protect the key bits of our country, to ensure a bountiful supply of fish in future.

And we are also working hard to fight climate change.

I am very pleased that the Maldives has joined the net-zero club.

We aim to decarbonise our economy by 2030 - and shift from an economy based on diesel to one based on solar power.

And to better protect our seas, we have also just introduced a ban on many single use plastic items.

I hope these sorts of measures can ensure our seas remain healthy and abundant for my children, and their children.

Thank you for inviting me to give a perspective from the Indian Ocean.

I wish you well in your endeavours.

And I look forward to hearing the discussion.

ENDS