

Panel Discussion following NY Premiere of the film ON THE EDGE ANTARCTICA

I am honored to be here today, celebrating the Earth Day.

I wish to thank the organisers - GFDD/ FUNGLOBE, UNEP, Earth Day Network and the Permanent Mission of Dominican Republic to the United Nations.

Many congratulations to the Director and the Production team of the On the Edge, Antarctica. It is such a powerful message, so creatively presented to convey the message of climate change. How fragile the earth is, raise eyebrows on where we are heading towards, and questions what can we do to revert this process and protect the earth.

There's so much I can relate to where I come from, the Maldives. Maldives is very much like Antarctica. A microscopic laboratory, a perfect example of climate change – effects that we see as a day-to-day activity by everyone. We see it happening constantly. More floods, coastal erosion, coral bleaching, sea-level rise, depletion of fish stocks, changes in rainfall patterns, water shortages, high incidence of vector-borne diseases, so and so forth.

Frontline

All these indicators are clear that the Maldives is at the frontline of the climate change impacts. Our livelihood, health, and homes are being directly threatened by this problem. These irreversible changes threaten everyone. But they will hit us hardest. And they will hit us first.

Let me go into some vital statistics.

- An archipelago of 1200 Islands with a geographical territory of 99 % sea and a mere 1% land.
- Over 80% of the total land area less than 1 m above MSL
- 44% of the settlement footprints of all islands are within 100 m of coastline.
- 42% of the population and 47% of all housing structures being within 100 m of coastline.

DEVELOPMENT

The impacts of climate change are felt by all and particularly the poor. Climate change is not merely an additional vulnerability, but rather is the root cause of new vulnerabilities within my nation. Never before have we seen our homes destroyed, our corals bleached, or our fish stocks so depleted. As a child, I have no memories of any of such devastation to our islands.

Emerging Vulnerabilities

We are no longer only discussing changes in a distant future. The urgency of this problem urges us to address the current impacts that climate change has on the most vulnerable States on this planet.

Housing - Half of our housing structures are within 100 meters of the coastline. Over the past couple years, more than 90 islands have been flooded at least once, and 37 islands have started to flood at least once a year.

Saline Aquifers - The freshwater lenses of many islands have been eroded and the recent floods have resulted in the salinization of ground water leading to greater water scarcity in rural communities. Wells that were once used for the daily household chores such as cooking, cleaning, bathing, and so forth are no longer utilized. The islands that have been affected are also no longer able to produce agriculture as soil salinity levels have made it unfeasible.

Threaten human health and nutrition - All these factors together with coral bleaching, flooding, and water salinity problems, constantly threaten human health and security.

While we have worked hard to eradicate diseases such as malaria and polio, there have been high incidents of climate sensitive diseases in the country such as dengue fever.

The vulnerability to climate change-related health risks is further compounded by local characteristics such as the high level of malnutrition in children, accessibility and quality of healthcare, high population congestion and low-income levels.

Erosion

The beaches make up 5% of our total land area, and 97 percent of inhabited islands and almost half the resorts in the country have reported beach erosion. Due to this continued erosion, beach replenishment is only a temporary remedy while coastal protection measures are often prohibitively expensive for many of our smaller islands. When it comes to the protection of our two largest industries, tourism and fisheries, such solutions may not be available.

Biodiversity

The Maldivian coral reef system supports over 1 thousand species of fish, 36 species of sponges, 420 species of corals, 20 species of sharks, 7 species of dolphins, as well as turtles and other marine life.

Yet these beautiful corals and tropical fish are highly sensitive to changes in temperature. Due to minor fluctuations in the sea surface temperature, coral bleaching and depletion of fish have become an issue of huge concern for the Maldivians.

Tourism

Tourism is currently the mainstay of the Maldivian economy. Providing more than 28% of our GDP, but also up to 70% of the foreign exchange within the country. Loss of biodiversity and coastal erosion directly impact our largest industry. With the resort infrastructure investment exceeding a billion USD, any loss or under-utilization of this infrastructure due to climate change would devastate the Maldivian economy.

Fishing

Our second largest industry, in Fisheries, is also directly impacted by Climate Change in reductions we have seen in regional fish stocks. Local fish consumption exceeds 50,000 metric tons each year, and many local communities are dependent on the industry as their sole source of income and food security. While our traditional and eco-friendly method of pole and line fishing has been used since time immemorial, in recent years, the annual catch by fishermen has steadily decreased with many fishermen going into bankruptcy due to unfruitful voyages.

NATIONAL RESPONSE

Our response to climate change is simple. To lead the way. To mitigate the effects of climate change through following a low carbon emissions path and the creation of a national biosphere reserve. Further Maldives will adapt, creating coastal protection infrastructure, while advocating for Global Change.

Energy Security

Yet even now, our contribution to global greenhouse gas emissions are negligible. However, Maldives currently relies heavily on fossil fuel, spending 35% of its national GDP on energy. As part of the Maldives plan on Energy Security, the Government is moving toward greater reliance on solar energy, and the eventual phasing out of fossil fuels. Investing in renewable energy is the biggest business opportunity of our generation.

National Biosphere Reserve

Yet in order to protect as much of our world as is possible for future generations, the Maldives has determined to expand our UNESCO biosphere reserve from one atoll, to the entire nation.

Unfortunately, being the example of change is not enough. In order to survive, the Maldives will need to adapt to the changing realities of the world.

Coastal Protection

Tetrapods are used to secure the lagoon around the capital of the Maldives, to ensure its protection from increasing storm surges, currents, and potential tsunamis. However, while Government is looking to expand this system to some of the larger islands, at a cost of \$50 million dollars per island, expanding it to rural islands are not fiscally feasible.

COST OF FAILURE

Yet our response to Climate Change can only go so far. Climate Change is an existential threat to the Maldives. For the Maldives, tackling climate change is not only an issue that drives the country's foreign and developmental policy, but it is also a necessity for the country's security and territorial integrity.

Global Action

With the rising sea levels, it is only a matter of time before the nation itself is submerged. If we forget the present and all the problems we face today, there is still the issue of tomorrow. Is world ready to accept the thought of a State without a territory? Is the world ready to accommodate a new designation of climate refugees?

As a nation-facing submersion, a people facing national-eviction, and a culture facing disintegration; every aspect that would define the Maldivian nation is put in jeopardy by climate change. The Government of Maldives is currently spending more than 27% of its national budget on building resilience to combat effects of climate change. There is no question that this is a long-term security threat for the Maldives, and many other low-lying nations.

Paradise Lost

Today, the issue of climate change is more than environment, more than science, and more than politics. It is fundamentally a human issue as it threatens human prosperity. It is already interfering with human rights, including the right to life, the right to take part in cultural life, and the right to use and enjoy property. We must now begin to acknowledge that this is fundamentally an issue of international security and stability as well. We are interconnected, and what affects the low, will affect the high.