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## No Higher Ground

*For Maldives Environment Minister Aminath Shauna, fighting climate change is an existential battle*

**MALDIVES IS A COUNTRY** that lives and dies by the ocean that surrounds its 1,200 islands. The nation has built an economy on drawing tourists to its crystal blue waters. But the same waters, rising because of climate change, also continually threaten its population.

Aminath Shauna, the nation's minister of environment, climate change and technology, is working on a holistic approach to help island communities adapt to the ravages of climate change while trying to show that even small island states can contribute to the reduction of greenhouse gases.

In this interview with F&D's Adam Behsudi, Shauna discusses how a country on the front lines of climate change is adapting and surviving.

**F&D: What is at stake for Maldives when it comes to climate change?**

**AS:** The right question is what is *not* at stake. The Maldives is one of the most low-lying nations in the world, and for us climate change is an existential threat. There's no higher ground we can run to. It's really just us, the islands, and the sea. Eighty percent of our islands are less than a meter above sea level. Over 90 percent of the islands report flooding annually. Ninety-seven percent are reporting shoreline erosion, and 64 percent of the islands experience severe erosion. Fifty percent of all our housing structures are within just 100 meters of the coastline. So most really cannot withstand tidal floods, let alone tsunamis. Really, everything is at stake.

**F&D: What measures has the government taken to fight the effects of climate change?**

**AS:** Almost all 187 inhabited islands in the Maldives have infrastructure that protects them from tidal swells and beach erosion—hard engineering solutions that have been developed over a span of 20–25 years. All the islands have a harbor, shoreline protection—and most of them have erosion prevention measures. The first barrier of protection is obviously the coral reefs. Building the resilience and protecting the health of coral reefs has really been at the forefront of government policies.

However, the approach that our government has taken is a holistic one. We believe that building resilience of the entire community is necessary. Changing how we manage our waste and generate power are critical in terms of adaptation. We have introduced a net zero policy to shift our economy from running on diesel to basically running on sunshine, which we have in abundance. We have also introduced a single-use-plastic phaseout by 2023, which is already being implemented. We can clean up our act and stop the open burning of garbage on the islands. We are currently working on two major waste management projects with the Asian Development Bank and other development partners and another with the World Bank to build world-class waste management centers. Our government has a target of protecting 20 percent of our ocean resources by 2030—so we can better protect our reefs, our mangroves, and other biologically important areas. So we're thinking of it as a very holistic approach rather than just hard engineering solutions.

**F&D: What role can a small island state like Maldives play in the global effort to decrease emissions and prevent global warming from increasing?**

Aerial view of Malé, Maldives' capital.



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**AS:** Just yesterday we celebrated the Maldives reaching a target of phasing out its chlorofluorocarbons 10 years before the deadline in the Montreal Protocol. Yes, we are a very small country and our greenhouse gases are negligible, as is our contribution to climate change. But we want to show that if the Maldives can do it, why can't the rest of the world? We are not here to tell a story that we're just victims. We are also willing to lead by example.

**F&D: When it comes to financing adaptation measures, how has the pandemic hindered efforts?**

**AS:** Twenty-eight percent of our GDP is directly related to the tourism industry. Sixty percent of our foreign exchange receipts come from tourism. The pandemic really stopped the source of income for over 30,000 people who are directly employed in the tourism sector and many others who indirectly benefit from the tourism industry. Fishing is the second largest economic activity, and during the pandemic, we had no way of exporting. We really had no money. At the same time, we had to spend so much on health care.

What we had allocated in any other year for things like providing water to islands during the dry period, urgent erosion, and some adaptation measures—all of this money was allocated for health care and urgent economic relief and stimulus. Restrictions on movement and lockdowns generated a whole lot of waste as well. In a country already struggling with lack of proper waste management resources, this exacerbated an

environmental problem at a national level. A lot of the funds from multilateral organizations and our development partners that were allocated to us to address climate change and environmental issues were immediately redirected for the provision of urgent medical care supplies. Although we all want to build back better, it has been quite a challenge because of this reallocation of resources.

**F&D: What is the best way to help smaller countries finance climate change measures?**

**AS:** It's important for countries on the front line to have easier access to financial instruments and funds. We have very few projects that are under global climate funds because it is difficult to access these funds owing to the bureaucracy in the development of projects that qualify.

When I was previously in government, we were working to justify to one of the multilateral organizations that a harbor on an island was absolutely needed to prevent erosion, prevent coastal flooding, and protect the island from tidal swells. We were asked whether the harbor was economic infrastructure and how could we prove that erosion was caused by climate change. In countries like the Maldives, we don't have research-based organizations with data that go back 20 or 30 years to show that this particular island is eroding because of climate change.

We don't have time to wait until a project goes through different phases and different board approvals. If we did, there would be no island left! More direct access to global climate funds would really help us address urgent issues.

**F&D: What inspires you on a daily basis to shape policies that will help your country?**

**AS:** Because the Maldives is such a small country, change is really possible. This is what keeps me going. Seeing our island communities live so peacefully with nature, with their beaches, with their coral reefs. We depend so heavily on fisheries and tourism; we have no option but to protect and preserve the beauty of this country.

When I lived in the United States, I visited quite a few national parks. I could see what conservation and protection can do for a country in terms of tourism. What the United States has been able to do for its national parks, we could do here in the Maldives as well. **FD**

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*