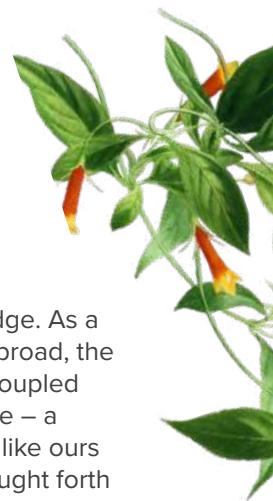


# SOWING THE GOOD SEEDS



**“Farming and farmers are our lifeblood, as much is fishing. Don’t you agree? I want my children to realize this. We sow these seeds to earn, and to feed ourselves the goodness that come from our good earth,” says Zameer.**



The atmosphere is quiet, save for the gentle swaying of banana leaves in the wide, verdant plot. The field seemed to stretch out for miles, with occasional black netting separating different types of plants. Dull purple specks are visible in between a canopy of low-lying plants as aubergines grow from them – perfect to mature in the hot and warm climes of Laamu Atoll in Southern Maldives.

Amidst the greenery and sweltering heat, stands Abdulla Zameer, gently watering his plants. Working on his plot of farmland has become a daily rite of passage for Zameer, a 31-year-old chef and contract farmer from Laamu Fonadhoo island.

For as long as he can remember, farming has made Zameer happy inside; his interest having been sparked at a tender age by his father who was a farmer himself. It began when he used to accompany his father to the family farm and continued into his adulthood, eventually resulting in Zameer taking care of the farm as his father fell ill. Zameer hopes this trend will continue, and this love of farming is something which he eventually hopes to pass onto his young children as well.

COVID-19 left the Maldives at a precarious edge. As a country which imports 90% of its food from abroad, the reality of food scarcity hit the country hard. Coupled with the ever-present threat of climate change – a constant for low-lying, archipelagic countries like ours – and the escalating economic problems brought forth by the pandemic, building community and climate resilience became a key tenet of the Government. This is something in which UNDP, as a development partner, readily assisted in.

The contract and community urban farming component under the SEEDS (Sustainable Empowerment for Development of SMEs) project – funded by the Government of Japan – is one such endeavour. The SEEDS project promotes sustainable agriculture that increases productivity and production, food security, and maintains ecosystems, while helping farmers learn new ways to manage the risks that they face due to climate change.

As part of the process of learning how to manage these risks, small-scale farmers – in particular women, youth, and people with disabilities – are supported through secure and equal access to productive resources, knowledge, markets, and opportunities

for value addition. Supported by UNDP Maldives, the contract and community urban farming of the SEEDS project are implemented with Agro National Corporation (AgroNat) and Housing Development Corporation (HDC) respectively.

“For me, contract farming is more effective than regular farming. You can get access to local markets more easily; and also, receive assistance at the beginning which can be very helpful,” explains Zameer. “It benefits both farmers and communities. Farmers can have a guaranteed income while locals can buy fresh produce at reasonable rates.”

Contract farming is also a means to empower different groups in the society and give them the opportunity make their mark in meaningful ways, specifically in the economic sphere. This is especially important in the Maldivian agricultural industry, where women and youth are significantly underrepresented.



*Photography by*  
AISHATH AZHEENA / UNDP MALDIVES

Standing in the community urban farming garden in Hulhumalé City, Zulfa Ali and her husband describe their farming plans. Their plot – which is already teeming with different varieties of flora, both in pots and in the ground – was awarded to their disabled son under the urban farming component of the SEEDS project. It is one of 11 plots (out of 16) given to persons with disabilities, women, and youth.

A *Dhivehi beysveriya* (traditional medicine practitioner) with her own clinic, Zulfa is well-versed in the different medicinal uses of plants, sometimes using remedies made from her own home-grown garden. Although growing more medicinal herbs is something Zulfa is interested in, her main goal from community urban

farming is to cultivate organic produce to promote healthy eating.

“I don’t think any food is more beneficial than fruits and vegetables grown by ourselves, from our own hands,” says Zulfa. “From this urban garden, I want to grow more nutritious produce. I think there is a really good chance to get a sustainable source of income from it, while also providing wholesome food for my family,” she adds.

Zameer and Zulfa are proof of a new sprouting of farmers in the country.

**“I can see changes. I can have a good business. I am thinking about all sorts of ideas. I know I can grow food and earn money and get things my child needs. And I think about production. It’s a different mindset,” says Zulfa.**

