

# Adding value to a premium product

## INTERVIEW WITH DR IBRAHIM DIDI

MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE AND FISHERIES, MALDIVES



### IBRAHIM DIDI

was born into a fishing community and trained as an orthodontist, but joined the government elected in 2008 to take up one of the most challenging portfolios in the cabinet. Dr Didi has travelled to every corner of the country in his capacity as Minister to learn of the sector's needs. In the historical presidential election of 2008, he held the key post of the MDP Alliance's presidential candidate Mohamed Nasheed's chief spokesperson. Currently, he is an active member of the MDP's National Executive Council and the National Council.

### Can you tell us about the new government's vision for this sector and the role of the ministry in implementing policy?

One of this government's major objectives is to increase fishing's contribution to the economy by up to 25 per cent from the current 10 per cent, while at the same time getting the best price for our product on behalf of our fishermen. That said, our approach is one of sustainable development on behalf of future generations.

Our mission is also to provide food security for the islands by providing small-and medium-scale farmers and fishermen with appropriate funding to develop the agricultural and fisheries sector. We will also make sure that foreign investment goes directly to the sector without commissions to intermediaries. Sector growth will depend on generation of local value-added, long-term export potential, reduction of exposure to potentially low margin and volatile markets, and return on investment.

### What can be done to further develop the lucrative EU market?

The government plans to position Maldives fish products as a premium brand to Western markets, stressing the environmentally-friendly fishing methods practised by local fishermen. We catch our tuna one by one, using pole and line. We process the fish in a unique way. We need to maximise this to our advantage.

Maldivian fish exports should get a better price in the West where sustainability and conservation is valued. At present, Maldivian fishermen who use responsible fishing methods get the same price as products from countries that use environmentally unsafe methods such as net fishing.

The government-run Maldives Industrial Fisheries Company (MIFCO) plans to introduce new products to the EU market with the pole-and-line fishing logo. The company's products for foreign brands already carry dolphin-friendly certification. In the future, fish products will be marketed more specifically with the logo One-by-One: The Maldivian Way. Maldives is also a member of Friend of the Sea, an environment NGO which offers the main seafood certification scheme in the world.

Transport is also a big issue. We need to provide fishing vessels with the means to keep their catch refrigerated until it is put aboard air transport. We also plan to develop a new airport in the north of the country to speed up shipment of fresh fish products.

### What opportunities are there for foreign investors in fisheries?

In line with the privatisation plans set by the government, MIFCO has been earmarked for substantial restructuring. This will involve a joint venture agreement at the island's two main cannery plants. The sector can be much more profitable if we add value to our products, rather than exporting mainly unprocessed fish.

With calm lagoons, constant temperature and an abundance of feed, there are opportunities for cage farming in Maldives. Our sheltered lagoons and consistently warm waters are ideally suited for aquaculture. Additionally, many of the atolls are sparsely populated and not affected by tourism. The market for aquaculture products worldwide is increasing rapidly, and the price for such products has risen over the past few years.

### What plans do you have to develop the agricultural sector?

Agriculture only contributes about 6 per cent of GDP. This is due to the poor soil and scarceness of arable land in the islands, agriculture is limited to only a few crops. There are two major potential markets for horticultural products, the tourist islands and supermarkets in the capital city of Malé. We need to identify new products and technologies to increase productivity, better delivery of support services and market information, and access to credit.

In the past, islands were leased out on a short-term basis for tourism. This did not allow local communities to benefit. Often they were not developed. This is a waste of a natural resource. The new government's policy is to go for longer leases, and to encourage agricultural activities. We have already identified 150 islands for development in the near future. These are open to international investors. We want to encourage smallholders but we are also interested in private sector operations at an industrial level through foreign funding.

### Will training be available for local people to help them develop the fisheries and agricultural sector?

Training is one of the most important issues to bring young people into the sectors. In June 2009, we opened the Maldives Fisheries Training Centre.

Fishing methods have undergone tremendous changes, and to develop the fisheries sector further, the Maldives needs to acquire modern technology, skills, and the science of fishing. **F**