

Fishing one by one, Maldives Style

By **MOHAMED SHAINEE**

MINISTER OF FISHERIES, REPUBLIC OF MALDIVES



MOHAMED SHAINEE holds a PhD in offshore fish cage design from NTNU, Norway and a Masters in Marine Management from Dalhousie University, Canada along with a BEng. (Hons) degree in Marine Technology from the University of Plymouth. He has over 10 years' experience in the technical, business and management aspects of fisheries and marine resources in the Maldives and has worked as a national and international consultant on environmental projects. He previously served as Managing Director of the Maldives Industrial Fisheries Company.

With agriculture and fisheries such a major component of the Maldivian economy, what are the main achievements you seek to fulfill in this coming five year term as minister overseeing these sectors?

During this term, my vision for the agriculture sector is to increase domestic production and improve food security through efficient management and value addition. We have limited land for agricultural production; hence we need to manage it more efficiently to sustain and diversify agriculture production and value addition. To achieve this, I believe we need to engage the talent and the vibrant energy of the youth into the sector; create better managed, financially viable agribusinesses by undertaking technologically and environmentally sound agricultural practices.

In fisheries, my vision is to exhaust the entire catch in value addition rather than selling them in the frozen-whole form as we currently do. A broader vision is to increase the value and competitiveness of Pole and Line Skipjack and Handline Yellowfin and Bigeye Tuna in the international market place. An emerging national development and sustainable management strategy for the fisheries sector is also to transform the sector by using modern technology which will create an impetus for youth employment and expand opportunities within the fisheries sector, particularly for youth to emerge as entrepreneurs and vessel owners. Furthermore, establishing a mariculture industry to diversify the economy; by establishing a hatchery that can provide fingerlings for youth, women and cooperatives to expand their livelihoods.

I would like to see both the sectors to be sturdy enough to withstand short-term external shocks, such as fluctuations in the international markets.

What strategies does your ministry intend to implement to ensure the long-term sustainability of the fisheries sector?

Historical facts attest that the Maldives have been catching fish one by one using pole and line and hand line methods for centuries. Pole and line skipjack fishery of the Maldives is known to be one of the most sustainable fishery practiced around the globe as endorsed by Greenpeace. The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) has certified the Maldivian pole and

line fishery for its environmentally friendly practices. Our hand line fishery is under assessment for the MSC certification.

From the ordinary citizen to the government, none of us would want to introduce unsustainable practices in the Maldives. The Government has strengthened the Monitoring, Control and Surveillance mechanisms to ensure the sustainability and the traceability of our products.

Being a low-lying island state, the Maldives is vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change. What do you see as the threats of climate change to the fishing industry? Is the ministry taking any steps to counter them?

More than 89 per cent of our GDP is based on natural resources especially marine resources. Hence, any changes in the climate will have an adverse impact on the fisheries in terms of the availability of the bait and the catchability of the tuna resources, as well as the implications of these to the livelihood of the fishermen.

The skipjack tuna pole and line fishery harvests tuna when they come to the surface to feed on the bait thrown by the fishermen. With global warming, the increased sea surface temperature affects the schooling of the tuna schools at the upper layers of the ocean, making it difficult to fish with pole and line gear.

Furthermore, we have seen that coral reefs were damaged by the elevated temperatures in 1998. The bleaching of coral reefs was recorded down to depths of about 30m as a result of water temperatures of approximately 35°C during the period April to June, 1998. Shallow reefs lost almost 90 per cent of their live coral cover. Some associated bait species have disappeared from our reef systems during this period however, we have slowly now seen the recovery of species. Our livelihoods are dependent on healthy reef system for sustainable fisheries and tourism.

Small Island Developing States (SIDS) like the Maldives have to adapt to climate change and mitigate the impacts of it. The government has introduced an income insurance scheme for both fisheries and agriculture, where one of the aims is to support and incentivise the farmers and fishermen to sustain in the industry in times of such natural disasters or low income during climatic episodes, in addition to financial compensation provided by these schemes.

What is the fishing sector looking for from foreign investors, and which segments are of most interest?

Maldives would like to diversify its economy by developing the aquaculture industry. The pristine waters are ideal to start an aquaculture industry.

Aquaculture is a growing industry worldwide, but the lack of investment and technology has put Maldives far behind in aquaculture compared to our neighbouring countries in Asia. The government is providing incentives for investors by cutting down the tax on the importation of aquaculture equipment and materials, and the leasing of potential islands for long term.

The government is also open for all kind of investment in agriculture, including production and value addition. The government is keen to have proposals where new technology and new varieties of products adaptable to the Maldivian environment are introduced. The government in general has a very investor-friendly attitude.

What are the main countries to which the Maldives exports its fish via the state enterprise MIFCO and what are the main challenges facing exporters of fish products?

The Maldives main export market has been Thailand for frozen skipjack tuna and European Union countries for fresh or chilled yellowfin tuna. The main problem for the Maldivian processors is that we have to compete with processors who process tuna sourced from unsustainable practices.

At the end of the day, the prices offered in the market do not differentiate much between tuna sourced from sustainable and unsustainable practices. Where sustainability is recognised, we feel that socio-economic aspect of it is hardly acknowledged.

The President has appealed to the British High Commissioner to impress upon the EU the importance of extending GSP plus facilities to the Maldives again. How optimistic are you of a positive response from Brussels?

We remain optimistic. Even though, we have been promoted to a developing country status, being a Small Island Developing State (SIDS) we are very vulnerable. More than 80 per cent of our land area is less than 1 metre above sea level.

We are very vulnerable to natural disasters and climatic variations. Demography and economy of scale restrict us from feasible competitive domestic production in many areas. I believe the being a SIDS, the European Union should listen to our case and extend the GSP plus facilities to the Maldives.

How are plans going to develop a new airport in the north of the country to speed up shipment of fresh fish products?

Tuna, especially yellowfin tuna are harvested throughout the Maldives. The transportation cost is immense when the fishermen have to travel several miles to offload their fish to factories within the vicinity of an international airport. With the development of the Ihavan Project in the north, potential businesses will be established creating new job opportunities which will be a huge boost to the economy.

What more can be done to help the Maldives supply itself with a greater amount of fruit and vegetables?

Maldives has the potential to increase its horticultural production and achieve self-sufficiency in crops such as papaya, banana, pumpkin, chilies, watermelon, etc. To achieve this we are creating opportunities for credit, linkages to market, assistance in value-addition of products and building technical capacity to use technologically advanced systems to diversify their production.

We are also ensuring that farmers have fair market prices by encouraging the setting up of cooperative societies, empowering the cooperatives with the necessary training in business management and farmers' training courses on addressing diseases etc; and access to credit through loans at lower interest rates. Furthermore, we are training farmers to adapt to climate-smart agriculture and to ensure that they are able to earn a minimum wage of not less than 8,000 Rufiya (approximately US\$520).

How much training is available to encourage younger people to come into the fishing and agricultural sectors and to use new, more sustainable methods?

Training is conducted to produce quality value-added products, best practices in fish handling, setting up community-based cooperatives, and longline training specially focused to attract the youth into the new developing fishery. In association with the government, the Maldives Fishermen's Association has also initiated skipper-training programmes. It is still in a very early stage and we hope it could be further developed. We hope that a lot of the younger generation will join the fishing industry. There is also a degree programme offered by the Maldives National University on environmental management as well.

Annually we reach about 1000 farmers through our training and extension programs. We also create opportunities for overseas training and exposure visits to encourage youth participation and create awareness on better farming practices.

Fishermen catch tuna one by one, using a pole, line and a hook, meaning that no other marine life is caught in the process