For Small Island States, THE WAY FORWARD IS TOGETHER

by JEFFREY SALIM WAHEED

The time has come to resolidify the global consensus needed on climate change. The time has come for us to once again recommit to this global agenda and take ambitious, urgent action towards addressing climate change to ensure prosperity for all.



In defiance of cynicism, scepticism, and environmental radicalism, the world came together – unified to adopt the Paris Agreement in 2015. Every nation on the planet heeded the call to action, agreeing to a goal of 2˚C for the heating of the planet above pre-industrial standards, and aspiring to a goal of 1.5˚C. We acknowledged that even a 1.5˚C world, will see dramatic global changes, including to coastal protection, biodiversity, water supply, human security, food security, and livelihoods. We also acknowledged that we must take steps to address the changes we will see in the world around us that result from climate change.

However, since 2015, we have seen the world splintered and our unity shattered. In acquiescence to fear, we have allowed ourselves to look inwards, and to retreat from our unified mandate to reinforce global solutions to this global problem. The climate summit at COP26 in Glasgow, UK, provides an opportunity to turn the tide; reunify once more around the common good in favour of a more prosperous future.

At Paris, we accepted one fundamental truth: that we are in this together. In the lead up to and through this agreement, it was one of the greatest honours of my life to have helped Chair the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) – the political extension of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) around the world. AOSIS is a coalition of 44 small island and low-lying coastal developing states that negotiate as a bloc at the United Nations on climate change, sustainable development and oceans issues. Founded in 1990, it was the first group of nation states dedicated to the environment, even holding an 'Earth Summit' the year following its founding. Three decades of advocacy on behalf of the world's most vulnerable, has given a voice to the voiceless on a global stage, and have revolutionized the way in which we approach conservation and climate change.

Through this negotiating block, my colleagues from across the broad spectrum of island states and our allies elaborated a vision for an interconnected world, where we all move as one. Where we recognized the challenges we faced, the failings in the existing systems, and the danger faced - not only by islands and low-lying states, but by every nation and peoples across the planet. We helped the world to understand that the danger that could result from inaction was one that was shared. Over the course of three decades, we galvanized the people of the world to chart a path, united in strength for a brighter tomorrow. We took the two-decade old mantra of sustainable development, that we "leave no one behind," recognizing the inextricable links between climate change and sustainable development and turned it into the rallying cry for climate action. And we created a near universal regime in the Paris Agreement.

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Under the leadership of the conservative UK Government's Presidency at COP26, and in union with allies from around the world, the time has come to resolidify the global consensus needed on climate change. The time has come for us to once again recommit to this global agenda and take ambitious, urgent action towards addressing climate change to ensure prosperity for all.



Jeffrey Salim Waheed

Maldivian key former diplomat responsible for realizing current global environmental and sustainable development frameworks. President of the SEAS Institute. @JSWaheed

A Strong First Step

The UK, President of COP26, recently announced their Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) or target for reducing greenhouse gas emissions in the lead up to the climate conference. With a target of having net-zero emissions by 2050, the UK also aims to reduce emissions by 68% from 1990 levels by 2030. This is an increase of 15% from its initial pledge of 53% made in 2016. The UK was among the first developed nations to set a target that is consistent with the ambitions agreed to in the Paris Agreement.

Following the UK's retreat from the European Union, COP26 provides an opportunity to reaffirm a measure of global leadership. As host, the UK needed to send a strong signal to the world that the Paris Agreement was on firm footing, and they rose to the occasion in the announcement of their revised, significantly more ambitious NDC pledge.

Around the world, developing nations are rising to the occasion as well. The world's biggest emitter, China, has made an ambitious pledge to attain net-zero emissions by 2060, while committing

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to reduce emissions by 55% by 2030. With developing countries and emerging economies taking big steps towards the reduction of emissions, the world is looking towards developed nations for greater leadership at COP26.

The EU has come a long way towards being recognized as a global leader for climate action and looks to be taking measures to implement an ambitious NDC. However, much of the world also now looks once more to the United States, and towards the Biden administration for their NDC pledge.

Though the United States formally withdrew from the Paris Agreement on 4 November 2020, the Biden administration has committed to acceding to it once again. The acceptance of the United States once more will elevate the agreement into one that is universally accepted by the global community, and together with an ambitious NDC pledge, will revitalize the process once more.

Ambitiously revised pledges to reduce emissions are a big part of the equation for COP26. However, much needs to be done to create a conducive environment for all nations of the world to effectively address climate change. Ensuring that adequate financial flows are available, and that the world's international financial institutions are ready and able to direct these flows effectively to developing nations, will play a large role in their ability to build resilience and curb emissions in a coordinated and sustainable manner.

For the first time since the Paris Agreement was adopted, there is potential for the world to come together again and cement a regime that has a holistic approach towards achieving the vision proposed at Paris. Once again, the world has the opportunity to take advantage of a universal regime that can galvanize greater collective action by nations and stakeholders, confident in the knowledge that they are not making these commitments alone. When we work together for our planet, the potential for success is exponentially increased. It is essential however, that stakeholders beyond nation states are integrated into the process.

Sustainable Climate Action

Coming from the Maldives, the lowest lying country on earth with 80% of its land only 1 meter above sea level, it is particularly evident that efforts towards achieving climate action at COP26 need to be sustainable, working hand in hand with both public and private sector stakeholders alike to revolutionize environmental climate action and ensure a higher level of coordination among relevant stakeholders in moving forward.

The time has come to recognize that climate change goes hand in hand with development, and the linkages between the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), both negotiated by my AOSIS teams and adopted in 2015, provide a pathway for all the nations and peoples of our planet. Having personally written compromise language in 12 of the 17 SDGs, it is hard to separate the holistic nature of that framework from the urgent needs presented by the efforts on climate action. Though SDG13 specifically calls for climate action, nations like the Maldives have long known that every aspect of our national development including housing, health, tourism, energy, and livelihoods are fundamentally connected to the issue of climate change. The linkages between climate change, oceans, and sustainable development are more evident today than ever before and can no longer be regarded in silos. Climate action therefore, cannot be approached in isolation from development, but is rather inherently complementary to existing developmental efforts, and we in turn must take tangible steps to better integrate our climate action into our development and economic growth models.

Leveraging resilience building measures, to work in tandem with private sector stakeholders must be a priority at COP26.

In the case of the Maldives, like in many other island nations across the globe, the biggest single industrial sector is tourism. For us, both directly and indirectly, it accounts for more than 70% of our gross national income. And the Maldives, like many other countries, is an import heavy nation with over 90% of our consumables coming from abroad. The only way to sustain this spending is to generate foreign currency reserves through the tourism industry. But such high reliance on a single sector presents a vulnerability in itself. However, the only way to move beyond this limitation, is to leverage that industry to grow others over the course of the next few decades and build resilience to external shocks. If the year 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us anything, it is that we are inherently reliant on the global economy and that our resilience is fundamentally tied to our neighbour nations.

Beyond our primary avenue for economic diversification, Tourism represents the very lifeblood of our economy, and is inherently tied to the environment. Every one of our private sector stakeholders have strong incentives towards conservation; given their industry's reliance on the biodiversity and marine life of tourist islands, as well as the stability of the islands themselves due to increased climate-induced coastal erosion. Tourism islands are the same as the 187 other islands in the Maldives inhabited by Maldivians. We are a people dedicated to developing our islands, growing our economy, and increasing opportunities for all; but that dedication can only be fructified on the tree of a climate conscious development policy. We can only improve the standard of living for all Maldivians, while meeting our development targets, through protecting the environment and meeting our objectives on climate action. Regardless of the locality, it is increasingly clear that meeting environmental targets must support development objectives.

By working together for our planet, we can ensure that nations, especially those that are most vulnerable, are able to build resilience and are supported by multiple sectors both within their domestic economies and the global marketplace. For nations like the Maldives, it is clear that we cannot do everything at once. Market forces need to be taken into account, and our prospects must be adjusted to what can be absorbed by the global economy. A particularly difficult factor to reconcile with our climate objectives are the emissions associated with air travel. Despite COVID-19 and a horrible year for travel, the World Travel Awards recognized Maldives as the world's leading travel destination. Being the most exclusive tourist destination in the world, the Maldives enjoys more than a million tourists annually, and must therefore also be conscious and consider the emissions associated with these visitors and ensure that this travel is conducted in an environmentally responsible manner that protects our islands for future generations while materially improving the lives of our citizens today.

Though the Maldives contributes a negligible amount of carbon emissions when compared to the global scale, we remain committed to addressing emissions on the whole. We remain committed to moving in the same direction, as per available support, and in favour of ensuring the highest collective aspirations of the global community.

In the most vulnerable nations, like the Maldives, resilience building is a key component to addressing climate challenges, and is a key indicator for the private sector regarding safe investment climates. Given that there is already a 1.1˚C rise in global temperatures since 1880, there is a need to act swiftly and decisively, to provide holistic solutions that mobilize private sector investments. In the case of the Maldives, the private sector is already mobilizing to fortify infrastructure, adhering to stringent development standards, and leveraging private capital to protect natural resources and adapt to the changing climate. Leveraging the same for large public investments, necessitates a more conducive financial environment in the public sphere as well. Even in order to fortify infrastructure works like sea walls, ports, airports, bridges, and roads, public funds need to be mobilized.

This is exactly why the global community of nations must begin to meet their commitments under existing climate agreements, especially in generating the finances necessary to fund the Green Climate Fund. The world agreed that from this year onward, it would raise $100 billion USD annually, dedicated to mitigation and adaptation across the globe. Without public sector contributions to adaptation measures along the lines of resilience building, raising private sector support will remain challenging. Given the reality that in a best case scenario, we aim to live in a world that is 1.5˚C hotter, there is a requirement for crucial support to adaptation projects, especially those that inspire private sector support. Our only way forward, is to build today, for the rising tides and extreme weather events of tomorrow.

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Ambition at COP26

Our global prosperity is reliant on ambitious targets being set in countries' NDCs. Among them, net-zero emissions goals for the year 2050 must be prominent. Creating the necessary frameworks and ensuring support is in place to achieve these ambitious goals must be a priority. Therefore, this must necessarily translate to tangible efforts to include the private sector and mobilize international efforts. Galvanizing the support from a universally accepted regime on climate change, we must ensure the world undertakes new investments in lower carbon production, ensuring that supply chains become more efficient and less wasteful. The global economy, whether its stakeholders believe it or not, is already dependent on a sustainable climate change regime.

At the COP26 climate summit in Glasgow, our responsibility to highlight a way forward, with all nations working in tandem towards building resilience, is of paramount importance. There needs to be high level political commitment to the Paris Agreement, not only from political leaders, but from multilateral agencies of the UN, from International Financial Institutions, and from non-governmental and private sector stakeholders. We need a political commitment and a plan on how to effectively support the implementation of NDCs, and a clear strategy towards mobilizing resources for the Green Climate Fund with predictable support for adaptation financing and resilience building.

By COP26, every nation on the planet will have committed to this undertaking. By November 2021, we will be committed to creating a prosperous future for all mankind. But the work will just be beginning.

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