Mayors’ Panel: Safe, Inclusive, Resilient and Sustainable City – policies, actions and practices

Honorable Mayors! Leaders of Cities.   
Good Afternoon! I’m delighted to be here.

Overpopulation, climate change, mass migration… the situation of my city has never been more complicated.

From the sky, it looks like an entire city is adrift in the Indian Ocean. A forest of tower-blocks rise above the emerald-colored water while just a handful of trees poke through the canopy of concrete.

For those living in Malé City, the overcrowded capital of the Maldives, there is no choice but to build upwards.

Caged by the sea, we have no more land to spread onto, yet the city’s population has soared by nearly 52% since 2006. The last census in 2014 counted 158,000 people crammed into the city’s 2.2 sq miles (5.7 sq km) of space, and officials say the figure has since grown further.

When people think of the Maldives, it is usually of a beautiful paradise with crystal clear lagoons and white sand beaches. Malé is very different. We have very limited space and life is tough.

Space is such a premium in Malé that pavements are often less than three feet wide, forcing pedestrians to walk in single file, while many streets have no sidewalk at all.

Malé City, is emblematic of modern-day land issues: A small, increasingly urbanising space with a skyrocketing population

Rents have risen exorbitantly and, in some of the poorest areas, up to 40 people are crammed into buildings with just 250 sq feet (23.2 sq metres)

With so many people living under each other’s’ feet, crime, drugs and domestic violence have risen alarmingly while the city frequently runs out of water. An entirely new island has risen out of the sea from the city’s garbage.

In the early 90s the tallest buildings in the city were only two storeys high. Now the average height is 10 storeys and some are 25 storeys high. People are coming to Male’ City because it is where the health, education and jobs are, but overpopulation is leading to many socioeconomic problems.

With such a huge migration rate, Demands keep on increasing. we need Housing, we need schools, we need roads,places to park, and space for pastime and leisure activities.

Malé City cannot keep growing indefinitely. We are bound by the ocean that surrounds us, The small land that is habitable faces challenges just like other crowded cities and growing populations. Almost all the lagoons in Greater Male’ Area have been reclaimed to pave way for land to build extensions of Male’ City.

Rising sea levels due to climate change are likely to put further pressure on our packed city. Islands like ours are particularly vulnerable to loss of land due to climate change.

Male’ is just two meters above sea level, and we already have sea swells during the monsoon each year but climate change is going to make that worse.

Believe me, every day we live on SOS.

Access to amenities like healthcare, education and jobs have long drawn rural populations across the country into Male’ City. Almost half of the country’s population now live in Male’ putting a huge strain on our relatively small patch of land.

As a country, Maldives maybe famed for the natural beauty. But in the cramped conditions of Malé City, nature has been squeezed almost completely out. On top of all the other challenges we’ve already gone through, eco-friendliness is yet another bullet to add to the list.

Twenty years ago we still had a lot of trees. Now they have almost all been chopped down to make way for buildings.

City living requires careful planning. It is a dream of most people to live a comfortable urban life with proper shelter, clean running water, sanitation, proper waste disposal, clean air to breath, and enjoy nature.   
Unfortunately, Cities like Male’, are blighted by unfitting infrastructure.

So, as we approach towards achieving SDG 11, along with national corporations, we as a city have been able to do some work.

Just ten minutes away, and frequent ferries, a small island- Villimale’ is the quieter side of Male’ city. The island is graced with greenery and everything that nature has to gift. Eco-friendly policies are intact and enforced in the island and is the Garden island of Male’ City.

To overcome the land shortage of Male’, An artificial island-HulhuMale’ has been built on a reclaimed land in the nearest lagoon. It is a modern city extension to address Housing, Industrial and commercial requirements of Male’ City. National plans are ruled for the development of this city in two phases. Major issues of Male’ like, Housing, Electricity, Water, etc,is being addressed in this island. Unlike Male’, Hulhumale’ is being developed as a sustainable environment friendly neighborhood. And has all the features of a modern city.

To promote environment friendly vehicles, import duty rates for motorized vehicles has been increased. And zero duty for electrically operated vehicles have been implemented. Motorized vehicles are banned in VilliMale’. Public Transport has been introduced in Hulhumale’ via bus, and In Villimale’ we have battery operated buggies.

With the recently built SinaMale’ Bridge, Connection has been made from Male’ to the Airport island Hulhule’, and Hulhumale’. The Greater Male’ City Public Transport Network is now established with sea and land links which still needs to be Further improved for more efficiency, reliability and environmental sustainability. Furthermore, there are plans to connect all islands of Greater Male’

Some areas and roads in Male’ and Hulhumale’ has been declared as pedestrian only zones.   
  
Waste management has been a huge burden for years, but today, few Incinerators have been installed in the garbage island-Thilafushi, and approximately 20 tonnes of waste can be incinerated daily. Recyclable waste is segregated and exported. Burning of waste has been completely stopped. We still have plans to further develop the project and practice environment friendly methods.

During the past few years, Political instability in our country has been a barrier towards achieving the SDG 11 and other Goals. unplanned projects and improper implementation has given us few hiccups.   
  
However, after the recent Presidential elections, the new government has pledged several policies towards a blue economy, and an environment friendly, Decentralized system. This would enable local governments to freely work together with the citizens in regional development and achieve globally agreed urban agendas like SDG 11.   
  
I believe that SDG11 and other goals can be easily accomplished when cities like us engage with multiple stakeholders to develop policies that promote sustainability and inclusive and safe communities. It is up to us, as humans to make this world a livable place for all. As, Gandhi said, be the change you wish to see in this world.   
  
Thank you! And let us, be the change.