

ENGLISH TRANSCRIPT OF FRONTIER DIALOGUES PODCAST EPISODE 12: FAAM FOUNDATION WITH MOHAMED ZUBAIR

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This week on Frontier Dialogues - we have with us, Mohamed Zubair (Zubair) on behalf of FAAM Foundation, recipient of UNDP and the Global Environment Facility (GEF) Small Grants Program (SGP) fund.

Zubair is the principal of Kihaadhoo School. However, on the island of Kihaadhoo and in Baa Atoll he is equally well-known for his passion and commitment for finding innovative and sustainable solutions to the development challenges of his community.

The island of Kihaadhoo is one of the most agriculturally productive islands in Baa Atoll. However, like elsewhere in the Maldives, farmers are heavily reliant on chemical inputs. This has led to a number of issues including the contamination of the freshwater lens, soil degradation etc. The GEF funded project that FAAM Foundation is currently working on aims to minimize the use of harmful chemical fertilizers in agriculture through the introduction of alternative farming methods such as hydroponics and the application of organic input. This is primarily done through training and demonstration activities including training and exposure visits for awareness raising and capacity building; establishment of model farms using hydroponics and organic inputs as well as experimenting with the use of kitchen waste to make compost. While the project targets the entire population of Kihaadhoo, a special priority is given to female farmers as a way of recognizing and overcoming some of the challenges that limit women from growing their subsistence agricultural activities into commercial farming.

In this episode Zubair shares more about this project as well the importance of making a shift to more nature friendly ways of farming.

His message is simple - We need to think of long-term consequences over short term benefits; convincing farmers to change their ways is not easy; He and his organisation remains steadfast in their efforts to educate and empower farmers to do what is right for nature and for all of us in the long run.

Mohamed Zubair (MZ), was interviewed for the podcast by Khady Hamid (KH)

KH: Assalam Alaikum Zubair.

MZ: W'alaikum Assalam.

KH: How are you?

MZ: I am good, god-willing.

KH: Thank you so much for agreeing to take part in this episode of Frontier Dialogues. Shall we start with a quick introduction?

MZ: By profession, I work in the education sector. Currently, I am the principal of the Kihaadhoo School. In addition to that, I have been involved in a number of different community-based initiatives. In this regard, I also work for an NGO, FAAM Foundation.

KH: You mentioned FAAM Foundation. Could you tell us a little bit more FAAM Foundation and its beginnings?

MZ: FAAM Foundation was registered in 2012. Since then we have been working mainly in the area of agriculture but have also worked in a number of other areas as well. Since I was a student, I have been involved in various organisations, including school based organisations as well as a number of community-based NGOs on the island. This experience is what encouraged me to register an organisation. In registering FAAM Foundation, we wanted to narrow down the scope and focus of our activities. In this regard, we decided to focus on agriculture.

KH: Speaking of agriculture, could you explain to our listeners what is the situation of agriculture and farming in the Maldives and how it was affected by the pandemic?

MZ: In the Maldives on average, most islands are very small- with the exception of a few islands such as Thodoo and Kaashidhoo. So, agriculture is practiced in a number of different ways.

In some islands such as ours - farming is practiced on a very small land area. In terms of methods, what we see usually is a heavy reliance on chemical inputs such as chemical fertilizers and pesticides. With COVID-19 there was a difficulty in getting some of the inputs needed for farming as well as challenges with selling agricultural produce with the closure of resorts and such. I had the opportunity to visit some islands such as Thodoo and Kaashidhoo in the pandemic, and I noticed these difficulties on both of these islands as well. If one is to comment on the methods used in the Maldives, we are still very dependent on imported inputs such as chemical fertilizers and pesticides. It is very rarely that we use compost made from organic waste on the island as an agricultural input.

KH: FAAM Foundation is very active in the area of agriculture. Even now you are implementing a project on Kihaadhoo, funded through the UNDP's Global Environment Facility. Could you tell our listeners a little bit more about that project?

MZ: There are two main focuses of this project that we are implementing with assistance from the GEF SGP. One area is introducing alternative farming approaches and the other focus is introducing composting. So far, we have conducted training for farmers on hydroponics farming. This was a seven-day training conducted by a professional from the Ministry of Agriculture. Following that we gave hydroponics systems to 15 of the trained individuals for experimentation. We also have put in place a number of compost barrels close to the waste management center to use kitchen waste to make compost. We haven't started using these barrels yet. In addition to this - we have conducted a number of training and demonstration activities for both students and farmers. Some of the activities have slowed down a bit due to

COVID-19. We also conducted an exposure visit with farmers to Soneva Fushi, since Soneva Fushi uses organic methods on their farms.

KH: Could you tell us a little bit more about the various target groups of your activities?

MZ: Even in designing the project, we wanted to focus on gender equality and prioritized improving opportunities for women in farming. All 15 hydroponics systems were given to women, since a lot of women don't usually get the time to work on fields. However, the training was targeted to both men and women. In addition to that we have also targeted activities for school children. Overall, the project targets the entire population on the island. Prior to the month of Ramadan, we had given agricultural inputs such as seeds to 30 farmers on the island. We believe that the entire island will benefit from these activities.

KH: Any closing comments, before we conclude?

MZ: I want to emphasize that we need to think about the consequences of the use of chemical fertilizers and chemical pesticides. Even though the use of such inputs can give us short term benefits, it has consequences for the future, including contamination of the water lens and land degradation. Most of us only think about the short-term benefits. Even farmers focus on producing what they can within a short period of time, in any way that they can. However, the impact of such thinking is far reaching into the future and not so positive. It is not easy to convince farmers to change their ways - however I do believe that if we can educate farmers on the consequences of these actions and raise awareness it will be possible to change their mentality as well.

KH: Thank you Zubair, for participating in our program as well as for all the good work that you are doing.

MZ: Thank you for giving us this opportunity.