

ENGLISH TRANSCRIPT OF FRONTIER DIALOGUES PODCAST EPISODE 23: ABDULLA SHAFEEU (ABO)

The United Nations (UN) has marked 2021 as the International Year of the Creative Economy for Sustainable Development. That's why today we start a five episodes series that focuses on creativity and innovation in problem-solving. You will enjoy five talks with inspiring and creative Maldivian people building back better through art, technology, and cleverness. Each episode will be released weekly. This unique series will have dialogues in Dhivehi and English. Enjoy it, and today we have a special guest. Abdulla Shafeeu (AS), founder of Vaahaka.com¹ This Frontier Dialogue will be hosted in Dhivehi by Hussain Rasheed (HR), UNDP Maldives Accelerator Lab's Head of Experimentation. However, you'll find the English translation below.

HR: Assalam Alaikum, Abo, how are you?

AS (Abo): I am good. Thank you so much for the opportunity to share my story and experience with the listeners of the podcast.

HR: Thank you so much for agreeing to take part in this episode of Frontier Dialogues. So, shall we start with a brief introduction, tell us a bit about yourself and your journey and experience of creating and developing the www.vaahaka.com platform?

AS (Abo): My name is Abdulla Shafeeu and people usually know me as Abo. I have been working in designing in the media industry for around seven years. My expertise is in writing and journalism. The idea to create Vaahaka.com was also very much related to my involvement in media, journalism, and writing. The website was co-created by me and my brother in 2011. Back then, there were few opportunities for aspiring local writers to publish their stories in online newspapers and therefore the prime reason for developing Vaahaka.com was to provide these writers a platform in which they can publish their stories. Writers emailed their stories and then we publish them. After a brief break, in 2017 the website was relaunched with a new concept allowing writers to log in, publish their stories and also communicate online with other writers on the platform, akin to how many social media platforms work. The new concept envisioned the journey of Vaahaka.com where the platform is conceptualized as a bridge that facilitates growth opportunities for the writers through publishing deals, writing for movies and local newspapers. More than 200 people registered in the week following the launch of the website and this number has now increased to around 2,200 with more than 20 stories being published daily. As of today, more than 6000 stories have been published and the cover pages of all these stories were designed by our design team. Moreover, six stories have been published in print.

HR: You have succinctly captured the journey of Vaahaka.com and undoubtedly, the experience you shared will serve as valuable learnings for aspiring innovators who want to venture into similar fields. Now, can you share your thoughts on how this platform contributes to reviving the local language?

¹ Vaahaka is a local word meaning story.

AS (Abo): The website uses only Dhivehi (local language) and everything available on the website is also in Dhivehi. We also did an experiment when we first launched the website, the aim of which was to change the unhealthy perspectives towards reading local stories. The habit or hobby of reading local stories, especially among men, was frowned upon, which was also reflected in conversations and comments on social media platforms like Facebook. Accordingly, we thoughtfully curated the cover pages and story titles to improve the overall presentation of the stories and increase the appeal to the audience. It was sort of a marketing tool. Additionally, we posted short synopses of stories in English on Facebook as a promotional activity. This was something that we did not really want to do, but we felt it would be a good initial step to lure an audience that reads English stories to read Dhivehi stories. The result of these attempts/experiments was an increase in popularity of Dhivehi stories, and I would say that any argument that disregards the popularity of Dhivehi stories is unwarranted given the high number of hits for Vaahaka.com. Also, it is noteworthy that Dhivehi stories published in online newspapers get the highest number of hits.

HR: Once again you have shared interesting aspects of vahaka.com especially the positive changes that we are witnessing in society as a result of your initiatives to heighten interest in Dhivehi stories. Can you speak about the contribution of creative people and culture to society, especially in inspiring innovation and driving the economy?

AS (Abo): If I am asked about the contribution of creative people to Maldivian society, the first aspect I would highlight is the diverse nature of the creative population. As such, anyone who belongs to this category has an important role to play in the culture of the country. For example, if we consider an area like Maldivian histories, the stories that have been passed on to generations are a result of the work by writers or poets. Therefore, I believe that the contributions of creative people are important to pass on our culture from one generation to another generation. Even if we consider designers, they have an important role in imagining the vision or an idea through their involvement in different activities ranging from minor involvements to mega infrastructure projects. As the Maldives is seeing an emergence of local creative culture and the changes associated with this phenomenon, I would say that the role of designers or creative people in this arena becomes more prominent. Similarly, compared with the past, designers have ample opportunities to contribute to the culture through their involvement and work. Likewise, local writers have an important contribution to make in terms of passing on the stories of today to future generations through their writing in various media like books or websites. Therefore, I strongly believe that creative people have a very important role in the Maldivian society.

HR: You have highlighted useful insights about the role of the contribution of creative people to Maldivian culture and society in general. It is undeniable that local writers have an important contribution to make in terms of passing on the stories of today to future generations through their work in various media like books or websites. The next question is based around Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Leave No One Behind (LNOB) agenda. Now please tell us how your work contributes to the achievement of the SDG agenda and LNOB?

AS (Abo): In answer to that question, I would like to talk about a 'success story' of Vaahaka.com. The launch of the vaahaka.com website created the opportunity for people from all walks of life and based anywhere in the country to publish their stories. Most of them published their stories as a hobby or as a way to showcase their talent to the public. During the early days, writers did not have much expectation other than exposure. This particular 'success story' that I want to share is about Mariyam Hussain, a female writer based in HDh. Kulhudhuffushi². She is a mother of two and a housewife and started to write as a hobby. She wrote a serialized story of 67 episodes which gained immense popularity and a lot of people wanted to contact her. Her story received a high number of hits and she had a huge fan base and also a Facebook page was created by her fans which also became very popular. This is just one story and some of the writers who started to publish on vaahak.com have succeeded in securing opportunities to write for local films. As far as Leave No One Behind (LNOB) agenda, I believe that the whole concept of vaahak.com is very much aligned with the LNOB agenda in the sense that it opened up opportunities for aspiring writers who were looking for a way to showcase their writing talent. We did not approach people and request them to write for the website, instead, people from all walks of life and any part of the country can register and publish their stories. The high number of active registered writers demonstrates the wide reach and the equitable nature of the opportunity provided by the vaahak.com.

HR: As you have highlighted, Vaahaka.com is proving to be an effective platform for aspiring local writers who have been looking for an opportunity to publish their stories and also for anyone interested in writing or reading stories. If you were a policymaker, what policy would you first implement to foster the country's creative economy?

AS (Abo): The topic of creative economy-related policies is a common debate in our casual chats with people who work in the creative industry over coffee. I believe that policies fostering the country's creative economy shall first consider the education system of the country. Reminiscing my time in school, I do not remember being introduced or enlightened about the ample scope of the creative industry and opportunities for designers in the Maldives as well as globally. In other words, we are not made aware of the career prospects in the creative industry in the education system. I think the first step to foster the creative industry is to work out ways in which students could be made aware of the career prospects of the creative industry and various fields for specialization in the industry like arts, music, creative writing. Even now, if we ask a question to a student about his or her future career prospects, we rarely hear them expressing the desire to work in a creative sector. We can change this and if students are assisted towards realizing their creative potentials would result in more students choosing to venture into the creative industry after their education which will also increase healthy competition in the Maldivian creative industry in the future. Education policies to facilitate such changes will contribute towards building a unique creative industry in the Maldives. I would say that currently, the creative industry in the country is not small, however, if more people actively join the industry, it will also create more jobs. Therefore, acknowledgment of the need to bring these changes to the education system

² An inhabited city in the north of the country with a population of more than 10,000 people.

and ensuring that future education policies are aligned towards increasing the awareness of the creative industry among students are important to foster the country's creative industry. In my view, If I were a policymaker, I would implement a policy along these lines.

HR: Once again thank you so much for your time and what you have shared. We wish all the success and prosperity for vaahaka.com.

AS (Abo): Thank you so much for the opportunity to share my story and experience in this episode of Frontier Dialogues.