

THE SIXTH GEF ASSEMBLY
PRESIDENT HEINE PLENARY KEYNOTE STATEMENT
June 27, 2018, Da Nang, Viet Nam

Prime Minister
President Bachelet
Ministers
Excellencies
Madame Naoko Ishii
Distinguished delegates
Ladies and gentlemen

It is my great honor to be with you this morning and to have the opportunity to address the Global Environment Facility's Sixth Assembly.

I would like to congratulate the government of Vietnam for hosting this globally significant conference. Thank you very much for the generous hospitality and warm welcome that you have extended to us all.

I am also honored to speak to you today as an elected female leader of an independent Pacific Island nation. As well, I am very proud to be joined here in Danang by so many women leaders working for the environment, including President Bachelet and Ms. Ishii. And I also give thought and recognition to so many other inspiring women around the world, many of whom are present here today.

Much progress has been achieved, but as we know, women everywhere still face everyday disadvantages. We have to keep working for gender responsive government policies and programs; decision making and leadership; economic empowerment; ending violence against women, and ensuring effective education and sexual reproductive health services.

I believe that as we empower women, we will be unlocking new potential to tackle environmental challenges. GEF has long put important emphasis on gender, but this point still merits being highlighted up front.

Ladies and gentlemen, Excellencies

As many of you know, the Marshall Islands is one of the world's lowest-lying island nations. We grapple with an existential threat in the face of the growing global environmental crisis.

To us, this Assembly is an engine room of hope. You are at the forefront of efforts to overcome this crisis.

Since 1992, approximately 18 billion dollars of grants have been issued by GEF to project in over 170 countries, and constitutes perhaps the most impressive single contribution to safeguarding the environment.

Thousands of protected areas have been created, the integrity of hundreds of millions of hectares of land safeguarded, and support was made possible to critical watersheds around the world.

The work of GEF supporting developing countries with nationally-led emission reduction efforts and protection for millions of people vulnerable to climate change has saved lives and improved our chances for survival. GEF's contributions to addressing chemicals and pollutants played a pivotal role in paving the way for a recovery of the ozone layer.

As we look to implementing GEF7, I am confident that the GEF will continue to have an impressive impact.

With my own and other countries futures at risk, I count on you all to infuse your work with a Marshallese sense of perspective as you move into this conference's critical thematic sessions. I am sure you will set GEF7 on track to surpass even the high achievements of the past.

Ladies and gentlemen, Excellencies,

As many of you will be familiar, the Marshall Islands has known existential threats of an environmental nature before.

Indeed, the nuclear testing program during our colonial period made parts of our nation uninhabitable for a virtually indefinite period of time. Healthy and thriving communities were displaced never to return, and thousands have suffered appalling diseases as a result.

This extreme plight has in large measure driven our resolve to champion the environment, and never let humans devastate our lands, oceans and atmosphere again.

As we all know, this is a challenging task both nationally and internationally.

At home on the Blue Pacific Continent, we have an ingrained dependency on the oceans. This is especially so in the outer islands of the Marshall Islands where the subsistence life styles of our peoples are dependent on the sea for their protein. The fish from our lagoons and sea shells forms an important component of our diet, and,

indeed, for many communities, the Oceans are the only source of protein that is available. Under our recently adopted National Ocean Policy we therefore committed to ensuring our resilience for generations to come in the face of global ocean challenges.

Such a sentiment was also acknowledged when the Marshall Islands declared its national waters in their entirety a sanctuary for sharks. Commercial fishing of all sharks is prohibited in our seas, which span nearly four times the extent of the US state of California.

This was a measure strongly supported from the heights of government to the most local level among communities, and it shows what can be accomplished when unity exists. That is why we are now eager to go a step further and begin exploring wider ocean conservation zones in a similar way to other nations, such as the Seychelles, as an effort to boost the economy while relieving national debt.

We are also taking action to bolster “Blue Economy” to our national bottom line. We applied, for instance, a 3% “Blue Fee” on annual fisheries revenues. Those funds support our conservation management plans, the Reimaanlok, which means looking into the future.

We have also applied hard catch limits through the Purse Seine Vessel Day Scheme. This was only possible because of co-operation between the Parties to the Nauru Agreement. The value of Day Scheme returns to this Agreement have increased from \$60 million in 2010 to around \$500 million in 2016 and underscores the proposition that, with the right instruments, and, with greater clarity to fishing rights, it is possible to transform the fishery.

It also teaches us how much more can be accomplished for the environment when we all work together.

And yet, despite all such efforts, as an atoll nation, we are at the forefront of the ocean pollution crisis.

Put simply, a whole Marshallese generation might grow up without access to safe and swimmable water. Our ocean-reliant diet also predisposes us disproportionately to sea-based food chain contaminations.

Here again, we have taken initiative, for instance, imposing a total ban plastic bags and styrofoam. But our small Pacific country cannot solve such a systemic problem without a concerted global effort.

I was therefore glad to join G7 Leaders at the recent Summit in Canada to find ways to address its impacts on island countries. Political support is growing, even if we have a long way to go.

We have all already benefited from GEF's focus on persistent organic pollutants, and I believe GEF can play a vital role in helping us to mobilise for the transformational change needed in the time ahead.

We should neither shy away from global cooperation to achieve change.

As many of you will be aware, the Marshall Islands co-founded the High Ambition Coalition in the lead-up to the COP21 Paris Climate Conference, and we continue to convene the Coalition. Our late former Minister Tony DeBrum led our efforts through that Coalition at Paris to help broker a universal agreement that gave hope to even the most threatened nations. His leadership was also crucial in RMI joining the Climate Vulnerable Forum which acted as a champion of the 1.5 degrees goal in Paris.

We have continued Tony's fighting spirit since Paris to secure ambitious outcomes across a variety of fora working together with others, including at ICAO, with the Kigali Amendment, and most recently at the IMO this April. Setting an absolute cap on international shipping emissions for the first time was a historic achievement. We hope for more action in time, but this was a good start.

In such endeavors, we learned that even the most challenging global differences can be overcome.

Like many others, we are also working hard to match our international engagements at the national level.

Under our 2025 climate target, we have committed to a 32 percent reduction in emissions compared to 2010 levels, and we have already committed to bringing forward a new and more ambitious 2030 target ahead of 2020. We now need every country to step up the ambition of their own NDCs if we are to stay within the 1.5 degrees Celsius temperature limit we set in Paris.

We have, moreover, created a range of national structures, and are currently developing our 2050 Climate Strategy covering both mitigation and adaptation. We are developing legislation in support of this, including a national Electricity/Energy Roadmap that will reduce our dependence on diesel fuels.

We are doing our share to stay below 1.5 degrees even though our contribution to global warming is infinitesimal.

We might consider that no effort is too small when so much is at stake. No matter how big or small you are, a difference can be made.

As developing countries move forward, we all look forward to GEF's assistance in building truly sustainable national capacity and to provide opportunities for our national and regional experts through employment, internships and participation in reviews such as STAP, as well as project development and implementation.

Notwithstanding the resources required for the effective achievement of the Paris Agreement and the 2030 Agenda is enormous. While small countries like mine are showing leadership through ambitious mitigation targets, the support, financial and otherwise, required to make this happens cannot be over emphasized.

We are very hopeful for the changes that renewable energy can bring once we overcome the challenges to get there. As islands in particular, we look forward to energizing some of the world's most remote off-grid locations, making electricity viable when it hasn't been possible before.

That will make a tremendous difference to the quality of life of so many Marshallese. The same will be possible all over the world.

Before closing, I would like to announce one further effort that the Marshall Islands will be taking, together with the 48-members of the Climate Vulnerable Forum, who represent a significant number of the countries most threatened by climate change. The CVF was founded in 2009 to champion climate action and help raise the voice of the world's most vulnerable countries.

As some of you may be aware, my country will shortly assume the chairmanship of this body following the tenure of Ethiopia. And I am announcing today that during our chairmanship we will convene a Leaders' Summit of the CVF, together with other Leaders, on 22 November.

This was called for by the Forum and its "V20" Finance Ministers in 2016 and 2017. We believe it is a crucial step for helping to renew political momentum and awareness for urgently needed action to enable the vulnerable to survive and thrive.

Our Summit will be convened entirely online as a "Virtual Summit", showcasing our intentions to work in new and innovative ways, and to build broader coalitions across society for the change we need.

I am grateful to the GEF for offering to screen our Summit announcement video to you here today. As such, I am pleased to leave you with some images of my and other Forum member countries.

Again, I was very pleased to join you here. And the vulnerable nations will be pleased for you to join us on 22 November.

Kommol tata—thank you.