



Unravelling the Tourism-Conflict-Disaster Nexus in the Maldives



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Context

Total Area: 298 sq km

Terrain: flat, with white sandy beaches

Climate: Tropical; hot, humid; dry

Environmental issues: low elevation of islands makes them sensitive to sea level rise; depletion of freshwater aquifers threatens water supplies; coral reef bleaching

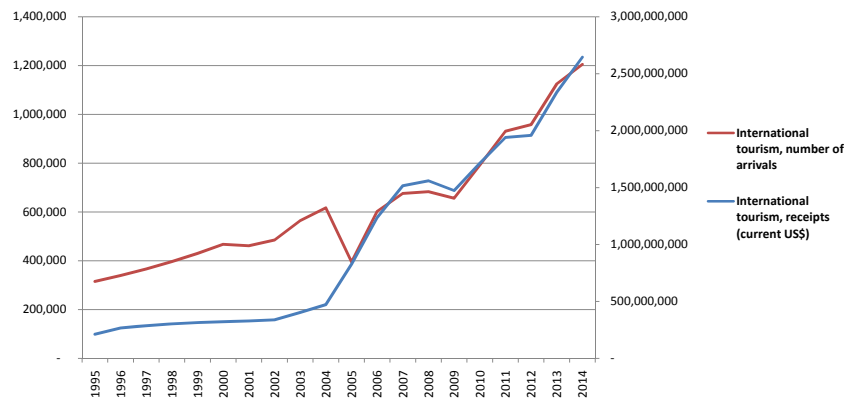
Total Population: 401,000 (Census 2014)

GDP (current US\$): 3,063,899,509

GDP growth (annual %): 6.5



- Pressure for higher economic growth has triggered a rapid expansion of tourism industry.



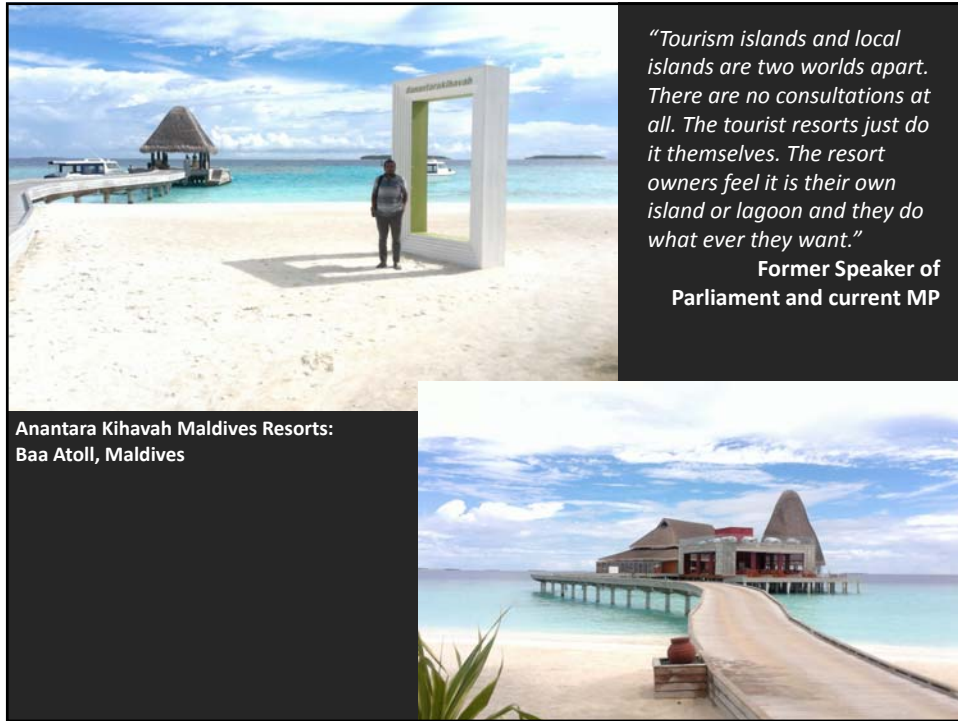
Source: World Bank and National Bureau of Statistics/Maldives

Research question

- *What types of environmental transformations have island communities and tourist resorts had to adapt to due to expansion of tourism industry?*

- Informed by political ecology perspective, **local island community voices**; their *participation* and *inclusiveness* in the development of tourism policy is central.

A convergence of tourism industry and community environmental and disaster plans is long overdue for successful implementation of building resilient island communities and sustainable tourism development.



“Tourism islands and local islands are two worlds apart. There are no consultations at all. The tourist resorts just do it themselves. The resort owners feel it is their own island or lagoon and they do what ever they want.”

Former Speaker of Parliament and current MP

Anantara Kihavah Maldives Resorts:
Baa Atoll, Maldives

Issues/conflict

- ***“Constructing piers for water bungalows and jetties and dredging harbours disrupts natural settings and processes of the lagoons and is a cause for increased erosion of the shoreline in many islands, thereby creating the need for building unattractive artificial coastal protection structures”.*** (MoT, 2005, p.15)
- ***“Removal of mature island vegetation for construction of infrastructure can generate environmental effects that can reduce protection of the island from increased wind speed as well as affect low vegetation types such as bushes and shrubs due to decreased shelter. Similarly, removal of coastal peripheral vegetation for construction of beach bars, jetties, piers and other coastal structures can lead to accelerated beach erosion and alteration of natural ecological succession of the island vegetation”.*** (MoT, 2005, p.15)
- **Loss of resource (lagoons and islands) access rights.**



Baa Atoll: *Khihadhoo Island*



A traditional fishing community but now dependent on small scale farming and indirect income from resort employment, due to the loss of access to lagoon for bait fish.



"We have no reliable opportunity to sell our products such as papaya and butternut, chillies to resort...they buy when they want and often we get rejected"

Khihadhoo farmer

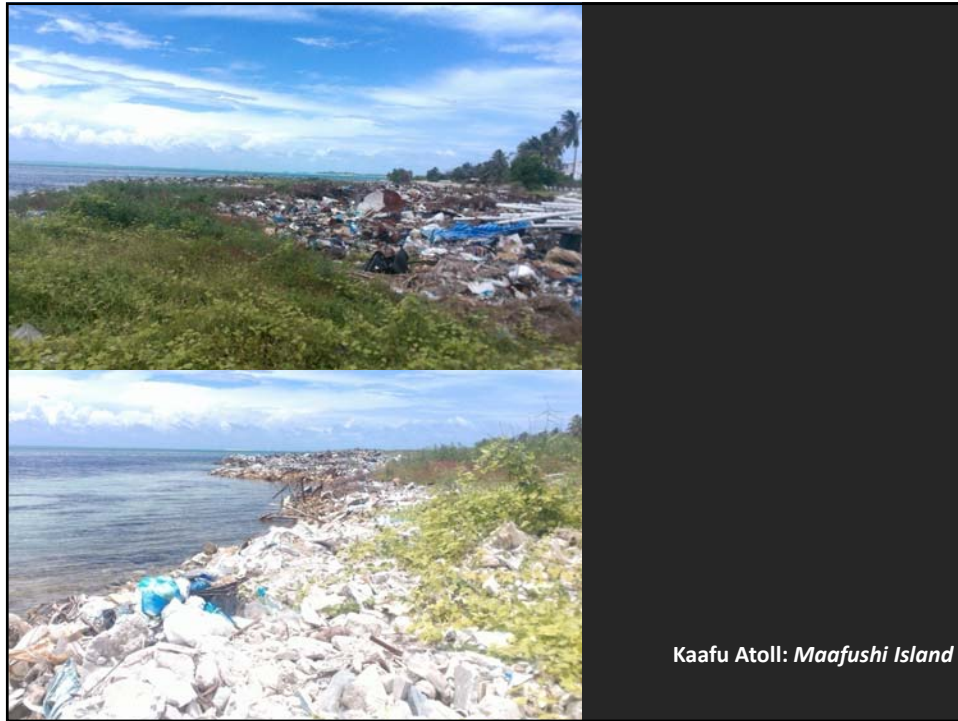
"..we depend on ground and rain water. Ground water is getting salty day by day...nothing much we can do...island councilors are helpless and government in Male' rarely ask us...."

Baa Atoll: Khihadhoo Island



Kaafu Atoll: Maafushi Island





- **Spatial boundaries of a tourist resort** are defined by a regulation made under the Maldives tourism law. It defines clear boundaries that **exclude local communities**.
- Reviewing key policy documents and based on interview data, it is understood this **demarcation of tourist resort boundaries within the lagoon area is artificial and does not take into account the importance of the social ecological system**.
- The tourism industry is based on the “sand, sun and lagoon” slogan; therefore profit maximisation and exploitative nature of the industry demands “enclave experience” that it is sold at a premium to the tourists with a deceptive concept of sustainable tourism.
- Thus current laws and planning reflect the concerns of elites and not the local community.

“The value of the lagoons did not felt by the Maldivians. Until the tourism industry was developed. Now only they are talking about its value. And now, but again there is a transformation of,.. I mean your understanding of value for money. ...

(Former Tourism Minister)

*“ We don’t realize how we are causing that damage and that is why ...**It’s not just global warming and sea level rise...** But when we destroy our reefs, that is going to cause damage to our islands We are not aware of it... And the regulations are there... **But this is one country we could say where we are very lacking in enforcing regulations...**”*

(Director, NGO)

Conclusion

- There is a clear evidence of **conflict between local island communities and tourism sector** policies and activities that are implemented. These conflicts are not restricted to economic, social and political aspects.
- **If these conflicts are not addressed in a inclusive manner in a participatory democratic environment, it can have serious environmental consequences** for the local communities.
- As a result it could lead to **further conflicts and marginalisation of local communities** in terms of economic, social and political aspects.

Questions?



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Reference

- MoT, M. o. T. (2005). *Environmental Guidelines for Tourist Resort Development and Operation in the Maldives* Maldives: Ministry of Tourism.