

Hafa 'adai

Iakwe in jibon nan aolep

Moktata ikonaan kamoolol Irooj jemed woj ilan kon mour im men otemjej

Good morning to everybody

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, and they

It is a privilege to be here today. And I mean privilege because while the opportunities are rising for people of marginalised and vulnerable communities to speak themselves, tell their stories. The reach and the local, national, and global action that we need, not want, but need, is still a 2 meter above sea level too little to make the radical changes our homes needs. 2 meter being the average height for islands in the Marshall Islands.

Today's theme is Purpose Beyond Profit; The Greater Good of Business. This is a deadline that has been burdening my 22 year old shoulder since I learned of it during a conference in New York a few months ago. It was a Norwegian scientist who study the Arctic laying out what will be my agenda in these upcoming years. And I hope, and I pray it will be your agenda as well. 1.5 degree celsius threshold, the number that the Marshall Islands along with other Pacific nations who are at the forefront of climate change, despite contributing the least to this climate crisis, fought valiantly for to be in the Paris Climate agreement. We are at 1.3 degree celsius now. Late Marshallese Ambassador for Climate Change Tony deBrum shared with me in the premises of the COP21 in Paris back in 2015 that while 1.5 degree was a victory for communities like ours, climate impact on us will remain. But it was a number that we were able to draw a consensus with the bigger and more influential countries. The scientist shared that if we continue business as usual, emitting emissions as we are, we only have 11 years left. 2050 which was the lifeline of my home, predicted to be uninhabitable and under water, has now become 20 years shorter and 11 years sooner. That is the deadline, 11 years, that I burden onto you as respective leaders in your professional field of work and as respective members of your local communities to partake in your responsibilities on this fight for global justice.

The drawback is immense. The Marshall Islands can no longer afford to focus on mitigation but needs to focus its zeal on adaptation. We are looking to expanding and raising the land. How we go about that? I am unsure as we have neither the funds nor the expertise, to undertake such a daunting but necessary task.

Although it has been 5 years since I lived in Majuro, my home island, those 16 years I lived there are as vivid as Guam's heat bearing down on us on a bright sunny day. Meaning I still remember our seawall being pummeled with great force by angry waves that climbed over the seawall and in undignified but understandable manner,

wash over my Jimma, Bubu, and Mama's graves. Baba now lays in peace in Majuro's soil. His resting grounds now disturb by the rising water. One more to protect.

I was angry and hurt by my ocean friend whom I confided my deepest of secrets and sorrows during our many talk sessions on the reef I frequented which led to my Jimma calling me crazy. The wound of disrespect is still so fresh. I remember fighting and crying at Bubu to let me go so I can stay with Jimma during one of the king tide seasons. Jimma wanted us to go get a hotel room which was farther into the land and he would stay behind to take care protect our house. The fear of coming back to an uncertain tomorrow and finding Jimma taken by the waves and drowning choked me and I fought. I was not going to be a coward like Bubu and my siblings. I was going to stay behind with Jimma and protect him against the great tides. I remember our house getting flooded, which was something I thought impossible considering our house was raised above the ground. It was 3 in the morning, I was woken up by an excavator truck dragging its digger across the street to haul sands from the seashores, making sand walls to help prevent the waves from coming in. An activity that continued throughout the night until midday when the waves settled down because that sand wall kept sliding down with the water. I picked up the blanket my siblings and I shared to sleep on the floor onto the baskets along with our school supplies. The next day we had to go to the Mormon church to sleep at as our homes were now a risk for us. The hopelessness I felt that night looking back to our house in the dark shadows, no lights on because no life was buzzing around. I remember my prayer as I looked up into the sky with tears swimming in my eyes, but refusing to come down because I needed to show a strong front to my siblings. "God is this it? Is this practice? Is this how it will feel like when we have to leave? What about they who rest in peace? Is my last visit to them coming up soon? Goodbye has never been so painful." I later scolded myself for giving up already. Because instead of saying if, I said when. Because that is my goal. For our existence to center around if, and not when. As bittersweet as it is. I remember people coming to our house to fill up their 1 gallon because we had a drought that was longer than the previous one and water was rationed by the government.

The irrational fear that overwhelmed me at 16 when I moved away to finish high school in Germany. You see, I won a full scholarship. But during these drought and king tide seasons, my family, I cried and prayed for their safety. Our house had no access to the internet so staying in touch was difficult. Once I could not reach them for about two months.

Two days ago, I was taken on a drive to the south of Guam where I saw similar stories painted on the coastlines of this vivacious island. Malesso, please forgive me for my pronunciation, its coastlines eroded by the water. Because it is low lying, the water floods into the road and people who live here have to be relocated into higher

grounds or shelters whenever there is flooding. At Talofofo Bay, my friend, a local of Guam shared in amazement that just two years ago, the water was farther from the shore and where water now covered, it was just sand. We often use our grandparents as examples of the drastic change they had seen within their lifetime, but here is an example of scary changes that are happening within our youths lifetime. Within my lifetime.

We talk of the differences that sets each generation apart. The Gen Z, Millennials, Baby Boomers. But this is our common ground. That all of us in this room, one way or another, had seen great change in their environment. And however way we rationalise it, we all know that something, anything must be done to minimize the effects. If you do not know and still do not know, please refresh what I have shared earlier. What is happening, not just in my backyard, but also in your backyard. I will give you 11 seconds (count) because this 11 year deadline we have will pass by just. Like. that. I will reiterate again. Something, anything must be done to minimize the effects.

Yesterday I was blessed to go to John F Kennedy High School, Island Girl Power, and Center for Island Sustainability. Seeing some blank faces on the students as they did not know about how dire the situation is or that their neighboring islands were facing severe effects, emboldened me to want to change that. I was asked what they could do as youths. Visiting a thrift store and their center where they empowered youths of Guam on various social issues, teaching them skills such as gardening and nutritional benefits of these plants that not only makes them sustainable, but also makes their home island sustainable. Hearing diverse projects people my age along with their colleagues and mentors were initiating. Some of them being greenhouse gardening, doing fieldwork and surveys on the breeding of green sea turtles, making one of their buildings to be energy efficient, competitions all over CNMI amongst schools for their students to come up with projects that will help save the corals or gardening. And I thought wow. There it is. Grassroot initiatives. Actions are already being done. The scale might be small but it is a start.

That scale needs to be bigger so the reach can be farther and stronger. And you in this room, as captains in business, local governments, private sectors, this is where you step in. Because the capital and established connections lies with you and these initiatives need that capital and established connections. The narrative goes that youths will be inheriting the land and are our future leaders. I beg to differ. Youths will not be inheriting the land because we are already living the land. All the actions that are being done by your youths and youths globally, always mobilising, exemplifies a leader. We will not be future leaders because we are already present leaders. Who look up to you for mentorship and guidance just like you did and probably still do.

The students asked what they can do and I wished this question was rephrased and directed to all of us in this room. What can you do? With 95% of food imported to Guam, typhoon will become a frequent occurrence due to global warming, the chances of ships and planes coming into Guam is next to nothing. Guam will suffer. Businesses as usual will suffer. Heat borne diseases like dengue fever which has been spiking up due to global warming, Marshall Islands having to call a state of emergency due to a dengue outbreak. A ban to travel to the outer islands where they have little capacity, was enacted in order to control the outbreak. The same can happen to Guam which will affect the tourism industry. This time instead of a giant fish eating the shores of Guam, it is the ocean doing so. Your legend speaks of the women of Guam getting together, cutting their long hair, weaving a net and used it to catch the fish in order to save Guam. What can you do?

We got to this point of crisis because actions that should have been taken were not. Hence you will need to be held accountable. Invest in these NGO's that give your youths the tools to be seasoned survivors and warriors. Invest in renewable energy, reforestation, energy-efficient products and change it so that all the energy you and your business is using, comes from that. The job is tedious but we do not have the luxury and privilege of time to be catering to inconveniences. You reap what you sow. As a whole, you will be saving money which you can then use for more ambitious plans for initiatives you would like to act upon to be more sustainable and environmentally friendly. Aim for carbon neutrality. It is your moral and ethical responsibility to do so. Because the climate crisis we are facing now, is a social injustice. Those most impacted by climate change are marginalised communities like people of colour, working families, or people who are not cisgendered. They are people who are often kicked out of their houses or live by and near polluted areas due to a nearby factory and whatnot. Look into the streets and under the bridges of Guam. If there is flooding, heat waves, or typhoons, it is they who will be affected directly. Everything is interconnected. The renewable energy you will be investing in, makes it accessible for vulnerable communities who do not have the means or the resources to access such.

It will not be a give and give transaction for you. It will be a give and take. As leaders in economics, you know businesses study and take into account how their customers consume. For many years now, many companies have been actively greenwashing. In very visible ways. For example, changing their logo designs. The colours went from red and black to green and yellow because that signifies the earth. It is a marketing strategy to showcase that they have become responsible producers. But that is not always the case. For example Exxon. They had a campaign which made their products look more environmentally friendly to their investors and consumers, when it is exactly their act of burning fossil fuel that exacerbates the climate crisis. The

state of Massachusetts has now gone forth and sued Exxon for their misleading attempt. Some just really want to start all over again. What is seen now is more and more are starting to take ethical actions in how they acquire and make their products. Things they invest and should invest in. They have seen the shift in consumer behavior. More and more are asking where their products are coming from. Are they ethically sourced? Are they environmentally friendly? It's taking action in a different form. Consumers are making their demands known. This is what they expect from you.

People like you in this room have a big influence on the behavior of the public. You are a brand. What you invest in matters and your customers see that too. Taking an action sends a message to them that you will be responsible producers just like they are being responsible consumers.

There is only so much I can say about this as I am not an expert but I do know that these are some things you can do. Private sectors are so often left out of the discussion and accountability and I say no. We all need to work together. 11 years is our deadline. That is our purpose beyond profit. Because livelihood is now threatened. The next line, the greater good of business. Not for business. Jobs that will be lost due to switching to renewable energy can be replaced by ones for renewable energy. Even more can be created but this time the flow is kept within the society which in turn helps the greater fight. The people become more resilient. The greater good of business will be to help the people and aligning their values to more environmentally friendly means.

Now I will recite a poem I had written, I Grew, Giant:

Into the horizons we marched
Children with skinny, gangly limbs
Each tiny step on the reef
That comes out of hiding
During low tide
A warrior determination our ancestors
Would have sang their praises for

For our home
For our country
Us little warriors will save
Each of us with corals in our hands

Spread out into a long horizontal line
Our front to the roaring waves
Our back to our lamooran
Our land
We put the corals into the shallow water
And we went to get more

Grow little ones
Grow corals
We tell them
We read that corals grew towards the sun
Grow little ones
Be the giant we need you to be
In the wildly adventurous minds of a child
They would grow to be giants
Giant barriers for our home

Day after day
We would go to the ocean side
Our horizon
Check all the corals

Have they grown?
Little hands picking them up
“Hmmm this seems bigger. Yes we are saved.”

Each year, we saw the corals less
The waves grew bigger
My uncle's house got torn down
They ran out with their screeching baby
Their belongings swallowed by the ocean

The day our smiles cracked
Our seawalls cracked
Savaged down to broken pieces of hope and fear

Our hope crumbled down with our fortress
Our fear rose with each rising wave
Night after night
With each high tide

But people forget,
the media turns a blind eye too
That in a state of anger, fear, and panic
People act
We do not flee
We act
We will not flee
We will act

Because
with each rising wave
Is our rising resilience
And sense of urgency
For justice
For home
For us

Marshall Islands
The weeping home to
67 nuclear bombs
Marshall Islands
So damn strong
Absorbing each blow by blow by blow by blow by blow by blow
Marshallese, us,
Learned to live,
To live with the dire impacts
Our DNA riddled with poison
To be passed onto our children and their children
Lands were lost
People never to return

Displaced

Marshall Islands

Home to a dome suffocating with nuclear waste
That leaks day by day into the land
To the rising water

But we lived, we are surviving
Most importantly, we stayed

We stayed

Let history repeat itself
Pillaged by nature angered by
Humanity's lack of morals
Misplaced sense of responsibility
Greed to take more than they deserve
You, higher ups, blinded by your wants
Jimma told me, "Selina your needs will last you a lifetime. Your wants....
Will not."
So tread carefully

No, it is not in 2040, 2050
No
Yesterdays and
Today
Now is what I need you to respond to

I've seen bones of loved ones
Spilling out of broken graves
Torned by the angry waves

Nightmares haunt me at night
And follows me throughout the day
The terror I feel

Act now

I stand here
Naij jutak ijin
For my people, my home
Nan armej ro ao, nan ijo jiku

Our corals never grew to be the giant we needed them to be
To protect us from the rising water
But I did
To 5'3

The giant to protect my home from the waves of deniers
And work hand in hand with those fighting for our planet

Together, each of us
Like the tiny corals my friends and I put out in a horizontal line
Near the outer reef
Grow tall
To stay
To be giants for our planet