

## A Champion for Development, Security, and Human Rights

An interview with Kofi Annan

**K**OFI A. ANNAN was the seventh secretary-general of the United Nations, serving two terms from 1997 to 2006, and was the first to emerge from the ranks of United Nations staff. In 2001 Annan and the United Nations were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, the citation praising his leadership for “bringing new life to the organization.”

Since leaving the United Nations, Annan has continued to work for better policies to meet the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable, with a strong emphasis on Africa. Through the Kofi Annan Foundation, he remains active in mediation and conflict resolution activities, and is a strong advocate for good governance, the rule of law and human rights. In early 2008 Annan led the African Union’s Panel of Eminent African Personalities, which negotiated a peaceful resolution to Kenya’s political crisis following disputed elections in 2007.

Annan is the Li Ka Shing Professor at Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore. He is also chairman of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), the Africa Progress Panel (APP), and an active member of The Elders. Annan is a board member, patron, and fellow of a number of organizations and universities, including the United Nations Foundation.

**IE:** How did your personal experience as an international student studying at Macalaster College in Minnesota, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva, Switzerland, influence your personal philosophy and career?

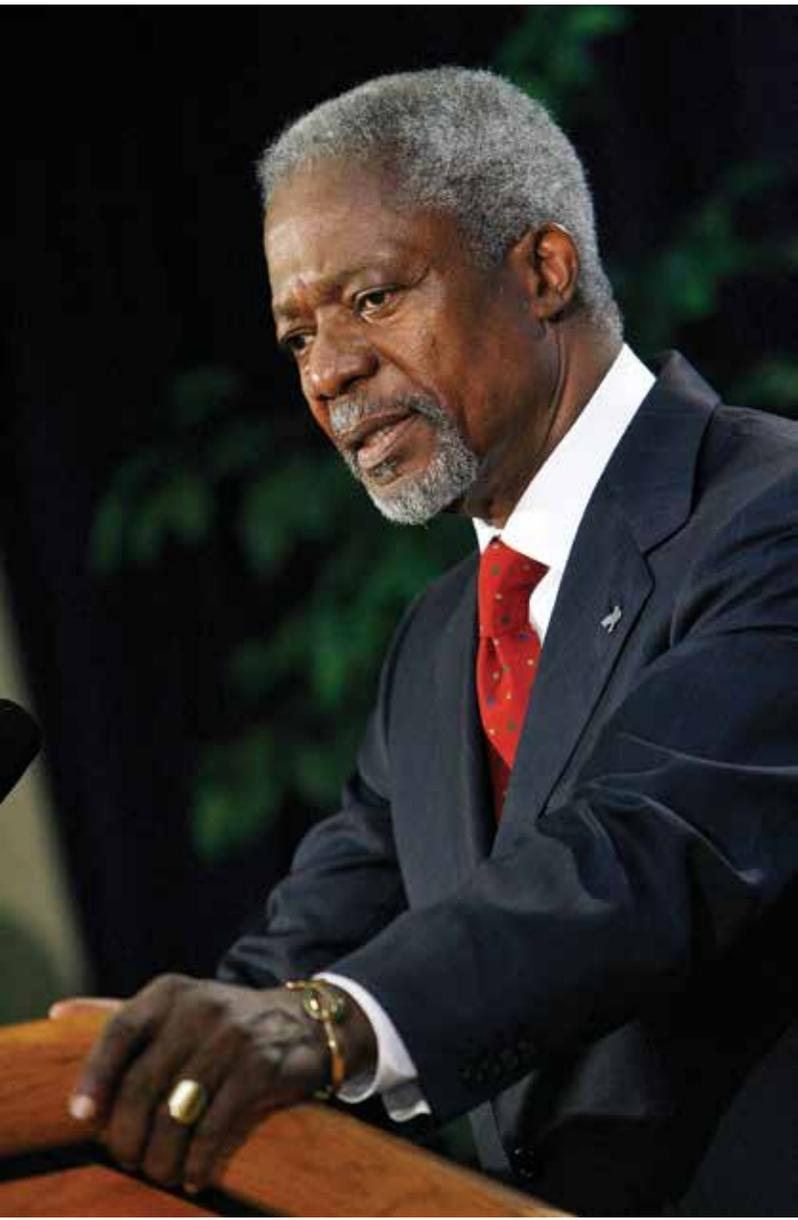
**ANNAN:** By my early twenties I was fortunate enough to have studied on three continents: Africa, Europe, and the United States. These experiences broadened my mind. They allowed me to understand and respect other cultures.

Having grown up in Ghana, I had never experienced winter. So when I went to Minnesota and the temperatures began to drop, my classmates at Macalaster recommended that I get ear muffs. I thought they looked silly and chose to ignore their advice... until it got so cold I had the feeling my ears were going to freeze and fall off.

The lesson I took away from that experience was never to walk into a situation believing you know better than the natives. Keep an open mind. You have to listen and look at how they do things. Otherwise you can make some very serious mistakes.

**IE:** What was your proudest accomplishment when you served as secretary-general of the United Nations?

**ANNAN:** The Millennium Summit of 2000. It was a watershed moment in international affairs: for the first time in history, the world’s most powerful leaders chose to focus on the needs of the poorest. They embraced an ambitious framework to improve the conditions of the poor around the world, which became the Millennium Development Goals. Those goals have spurred countries to make huge strides and have been embraced by a wide range of



**Kofi A. Annan, seventh secretary-general of the United Nations**

development agencies. I think part of their success lay in the fact that they were simple, concrete, and measurable.

The target of reducing extreme poverty by half has been reached five years ahead of the 2015 deadline, as has the target of halving the proportion of people who lack dependable access to improved sources of drinking water. Conditions for more than 200 million people living in slums have been improved—double the target. Primary school enrollment of girls equals that of boys, and we have seen accelerating progress in reducing child and maternal mortality.

Eradicating extreme poverty is not just an end in itself: it is the first step toward sustainable development and progress in general, for a hungry man is not a free man. He cannot focus on anything else but securing his next meal.

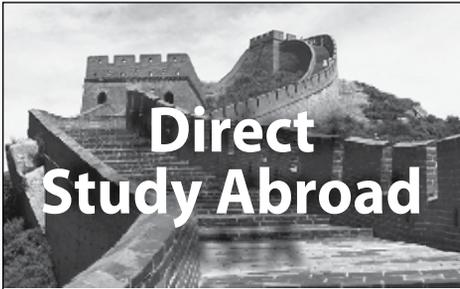
**IE: Along with the United Nations, in 2001, you received the Nobel Peace Prize for efforts such as founding the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria. Why was starting this fund important to you personally?**

**ANNAN:** I remember visiting a hospital patient one day who I knew was going to die. The medication to save her existed, but she was too poor to afford it. She represented the plight of many people. It is morally indefensible to allow the situation to persist, and I wanted to do something about it.

Disease, like war, is not only a product of underdevelopment. It is also one of the biggest obstacles preventing our societies from developing as they should. That is especially true of HIV/AIDS, which takes its biggest toll among young adults—the most productive age group—and with the main responsibility for rearing the next generation. That is why AIDS has become not only the primary cause of death on the African continent, but our biggest development challenge. That is why I made the battle against it my personal priority.

At the beginning, the level of global concern about HIV/AIDS fell far short of the vast scale of the suffering caused and threatened by the disease. We recognized that power for change resides in far more places than just the corridors of presidential palaces and parliaments, and we worked to create a global alliance from the ground up. By 2001 HIV/AIDS was suddenly receiving a level of public attention and funding it had never enjoyed before.

**IE: As a Global Fellow at Columbia University and the Li Ka Shing Professor at the Lew Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore since 2009, you have taught students from various backgrounds. What kind of courses do you teach and what do you think are your most important lessons that you impart through them?**



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**ANNAN:** I have taught courses on governance and human rights. The most important lesson I have sought to impart through my courses is the interdependent nature of the world. I have also tried to give my students an understanding that there is an economic basis to conflict and that by fighting poverty one can promote security and reinforce stability.

I also want young people to understand that you don't have to be secretary-general of the UN to make a difference. They must look around and see what they can do in their own communities. That was already true when I was a student, but it is even truer today, when civil society has so much more say in politics and an opportunity to contribute through the internet and social media.

**IE: You have been known to be a supporter of women's rights, particularly in Africa and the Middle East. Why are rights for women so important in today's society?**

**ANNAN:** No society can fulfill its potential without protecting and respecting the rights of women and using their many talents. As secretary-general, I could tell the difference in the quality of discussions and decisions if women were absent from the table. Women bring a different understanding to world issues, and are perhaps more caring.

Study after study has taught us that there is no tool for development more effective than the education of girls and the empowerment of women. When women are fully involved, the benefits can be seen immediately: families are healthier; they are better fed; their income, savings, and reinvestment go up. And what is true of families is true of communities and, eventually, whole countries.

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**IE: The Kofi Annan Foundation has three main areas—peace and security; sustainable development; and human rights—to help promote better global governance and strengthen the capacities of people worldwide. These causes are very important to the higher education community as well. How can universities, faculty, and students contribute to a more peaceful, sustainable, and fairer world with human rights for all?**

**ANNAN:** There can be no long-term security without development; and there can be no long-term development without security; no society can remain prosperous for long without respect for human rights and the rule of law. This is what we have to teach our students and future leaders.

Education is the catalyst for progress, in every society, in every family. Most of us can point to a teacher who changed our lives. In my case there can be no doubt that that teacher was Francis Bartels. I can remember his tireless efforts to broaden our horizons, to open our eyes, speak our minds, and engage with the issues of the day and the world at large while never forgetting the traditions and values of our own society.

We desperately need a spirit of discovery, creativity, and optimism to be harnessed beyond lecture theatres. The tools needed to confront the many challenges of today require strong partnerships among universities, institutes, and industries. Universities must be tasked with developing research evidence that open up new opportunities for industries. As secretary-general I commissioned a study from the InterAcademy Council that led to a concept of a "Uniquely African Green Revolution." The concept is based on pro-

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moting modern and sustainable agriculture with emphasis on improved seeds, integrated soil fertility, and water management practices for small-scale farmers in Africa. The conclusions and recommendations from the study still remain an inspiration for many organizations involved in improving agriculture in Africa. In the fight against hunger, as well as on other issues, universities and institutes have a critical role to play through research and technology development.

Equally important is for universities to produce skilled individuals who reflect the priorities of global issues. Vocational training offers significant benefits in preparing individuals for specialised skills. With changing demographics and the expanded use of technology, vocational training is also important in retraining individuals.

**IE: From February through August last year you served as the UN-Arab League Joint Special Representative for Syria to help find a resolution to the conflict there. What do you think needs to be done to find a resolution in Syria?**

**ANNAN:** The crisis in Syria has been ongoing for almost two years now. The quest for a military solution has led to about 60,000 deaths. I believe the only solution in Syria is a political settlement; the sooner people realize this, the better.

The main players gathered in Geneva in June 2012 and issued a communiqué that laid out the steps ahead: We must stop the fighting and move toward a transitional unity government in Syria composed of people from the present government and opposition groups on the basis of mutual consent.

It is critical for the Security Council to be unified and speak with one voice, while maintaining pressure on the parties involved to find a settlement along these lines. At the end of the day though, it is for the people of Syria to come to a political agreement about what future they want. **IE**

*Annan will address the NAFSA Annual Conference in St. Louis Missouri on Tuesday, May 28, 2013. The plenary is sponsored by Webster University.*

**ELAINA LOVELAND** is the editor-in-chief of IE.