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The Vienna Interviews: Kofi Annan

As Secretary-General from 1997 to 2006, Kofi Annan reinvigorated the United Nations with major humanitarian principles such as the responsibility to protect, the Millennium Development Goals and the business and human rights agenda. He spoke to the IBA Director of Content, James Lewis, about current and future challenges in these areas and the implications of the war in Syria, 9/11 and the financial crisis.

### **Watch video (/Conferences/141657284.aspx)**

**James Lewis:** When the United Nations Charter was drafted, it was in the name of 'We The Peoples'. And, as I understand it, your goal as Secretary-General was to reclaim the UN for the people, through principles like responsibility to protect, the Millennium Development Goals [MDGs] and the business and human rights agenda. But I wanted to start by asking you whether, regrettably, inaction over Syria has irretrievably damaged the principle of responsibility to protect.

**Kofi Annan:** I wouldn't say that. I would say that responsibility to protect is now a major norm and it will take time to really take root. One cannot intervene in every situation. And I think the Syrian situation is a particularly difficult one and doesn't lend itself, necessarily, to the kind of intervention that we saw in responsibility to protect. But the pressure is still there, whether you do it under the responsibility to protect or under moral and legal obligations to protect people who are trapped in this situation to try and end the war. The international community of the countries concerned have an obligation to make an effort. And as you will recall, I, myself, was one of the envoys [to Syria] at the beginning.

And people asked me, why are you taking it on? It's an impossible situation. When you see women and children being killed the way they were, and when you can anticipate the way the crisis was likely to evolve, and engulf the whole region, you cannot refuse. When you are asked to help, you have to go out and do whatever you can. If you were to ask me the most successful example of the concept of responsibility to protect, I would say it was Kenya. Not because I was involved. And after the 2007/2008 elections the parties turned on each other. In the end, they killed 1,300 people and 650,000 people were uprooted from their homes. Handled badly, it could have been another Rwanda.

I was asked to go in with a mandate from the African Union, but supported by everybody, the UN, the European Union, the Russians, the Americans, everybody was there. I went in with Graça Machel, the wife of Mandela, and former President Mkapa of Tanzania. And we were able, with the support of everyone, to bring the situation under control. The question of military intervention was not even raised. So the responsibility to protect implies using all the means – political, economic and diplomatic pressure – to bring a situation under control. And in the extreme, use force, put force to the service of peace, if it becomes necessary. But one has to be very careful and be sure that the force you are going to use is not going to do more harm than good. This is the critical judgement one has to make before one resorts to use of force.

**JL:** It's very good to hear that there is still a hope for the principle of responsibility to protect. It's a very important principle.

**KA:** Absolutely.

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**JL:** A humanitarian principle. Coming back to Syria, and what we learned and what the outcomes can be – will it force change on the UN? Will the Security Council now have to reform after four double vetoes?

**KA:** Syria apart, the Security Council is today a bit anachronistic. It reflects the geopolitical realities of 1945. The world has changed and it's changing very fast. And the UN has to change and adapt and move with the world. Today you have emerging powers who are also demanding their place at the table. It is unreasonable to expect a country like India, with the size of its population, to be satisfied with the current Security Council arrangements. You have countries like Indonesia, South Africa, Brazil, Japan, some would even say Germany, asking 'why are we outside this circle?'

My own view is that the Security Council has to reform. As Secretary-General, I tried very hard and put forward concrete proposals for reform. We did not succeed. But I don't think we have any choice but to reform or the primacy of the Council will be challenged as we will be challenged by the emerging powers as we move forward, in the sense that if they are not going to be allowed to play a role and they are not at the table, and they consider the Council and the structures outdated, why would they continue to embrace what the Council says?

So my sense is not only should we reform the Council, but it is essential. Particularly if we want cooperation from the emerging powers, those who have a privileged position on the Council today, the permanent members, have to think hard and deep about how much power they are prepared to give up to make the participation of the newcomers necessary, to get their cooperation over time. If they don't, we are going to see challenges and competition, destructive competition, if we are not careful.

And we've seen a bit of this at the financial level, when the IMF could not reform to bring China on board. There are certain banking infrastructures and all this, almost going their own route. I doubt if the reform had been allowed, that we would see that development.

**JL:** You mentioned that you've put forward concrete reform proposals. Are you able to share those with us?

**KA:** Yes, absolutely. I felt, when I was there, that we should create additional permanent seats without veto. Ideally, you would want to take the veto away from those who have it, so that we don't have the situation where a permanent member can block action without putting forward an alternative, and it paralyses the whole Council and the international community. So I had suggested they create additional six permanent seats, with a couple of rotational seats. And those permanent seats would have gone to some of the countries I have mentioned.

But the regions would have had to vote for them. The Africans would have had two permanent seats, but there were three countries vying for it – Egypt, Nigeria and South Africa. But that would have been sorted out. Brazil saw itself as a natural for Latin America. India thought it could represent the Asian region. Japan, a second contributor to the organisation, also felt it had a right to be there, and Germany, given its role in Europe. And then one would have had three additional rotational seats, two-year seats, which would have been added.

So you come to a council of about 24, 25 members, in an organisation of 193, probably eventually 200, that's not too exaggerated. But it would have been much more representative, much more democratic, and therefore would have gained a greater legitimacy. But we failed.

**" My own view is that the Security Council has to reform. As Secretary-General, I tried very hard and put forward concrete proposals for reform**

**JL:** I could keep asking you about that, but I want to move on and ask you about the MDGs. I interviewed one of your deputies at the UN, Mark Malloch Brown. He spoke about how important the optimistic mood around 2000 and the introduction of the MDGs was. It was after the fall of the Berlin Wall. It was pre-Iraq, it was pre-9/11, pre-Syria, before the financial crisis. Now the question is whether you feel that the lack of optimism, if you like, and the fundamental focus on security issues, might undermine the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as they come into force, or indeed just eclipse them?

**KA:** It's a very good question. We were lucky at the time of the MDGs. There was optimism towards the turn of the millennium. And we used the accident of calendar very effectively to motivate and get people to do things. Today, the difficulties are that we have a difficult economic environment, and growth is not what it should be. We have

conflicts around us, from the Middle East to Africa, to Asia and Afghanistan. When people feel prosperous and economically stable, they are much more generous and open and receptive to new ideas. And particularly ideas that require them to give; that ask them to do something.

When times are hard, and they are focused on themselves or their communities, it's much more difficult. And, of course, as you also point out, this whole security issue and suspicion of the other makes it difficult for people to relax and reach out. But this is where it becomes important that with these new SDGs, it's not just the governments. It's not just the countries of the south; it's the global demand.



**Migrants wait to cross the Slovenia-Austria border in Sentilj, Slovenia, 27 October 2015. REUTERS/Srdjan Zivulovic.**

We hope the private sector will play a role. We hope the governments themselves will go back home and begin to implement it. The SDGs are much more complicated, much more complex.

**JL:** There's more of them!

**KA:** More of them, actually, than the MDGs, which were straightforward and simple, and we designed it that way. We put it in simple language that a man or woman in the street in Delhi or Bogota or Accra will understand. And demand that their leaders implement it.

**JL:** Bringing it back to the people.

**KA:** Getting the UN back to the people, and getting them involved. And we have had some successes. I mean, absolute poverty has been halved and in fact we did it five years ahead of schedule. It is going to be much tougher with the SDGs. But having embraced it, I hope they'll go out and fight for it.

**JL:** Halving poverty was a success, largely because of Asia. But I could ask you about Africa, which is a bit more patchy. What I do want to ask you about is the eighth MDG, which is a partnership for development, ostensibly about getting the rich to help the poor. And there were problems with that. And I'm just wondering if you've got views on what needs to happen in the SDGs to surmount those issues.

**KA:** Yes, I think there were problems with that. Lots of promises were made. As I've kept telling them, only promises that are kept are promises that matter. You don't bring people around, year after year, and make more promises that you don't keep. And I think there has been a mental shift, the developing countries realising they cannot develop their countries with development aid. They have to rely on their own resources and their own abilities. And therefore it's also opened up to private sector and private investment, which some were not at all receptive to in the past.

And so there's a new dynamic. For example, we were talking yesterday and the question of transparency came up. I was in London, talking to the British Prime Minister and ministers when they were chairing the G7, about the need to work together to ensure transparency, to try and stop the illicit flows coming out of Africa. Not only were they not paying taxes, but the governments were not seeing any of the investments that they thought were going to give them returns.

By coincidence, this was also an issue on the agenda when they discovered that some of the big companies were not paying taxes, and they were shifting headquarters around to avoid paying taxes. So there was a coincidence of interest. And we decided to work together, and I saw in the *Financial Times* today that they've come up with a proposal on how to tackle the illicit flows.

**JL:** The OECD's pushing very hard through BEPS and you would welcome that, as the tax havens issue is a major problem.

**KA:** Yes. And I'd been with them and they even talked about preparing a cadre that will go out and help. What will they call them – 'inspectors without borders'. So I'm very happy to see that development. What is important is that both sides have a role to play. I would want to see a situation where the companies would publish their figures, that we came into Country A and we paid X amount to that government. And the government confirms it and tells its people what it's doing with the money.

**JL:** Yes, transparency is a great astringent.

**KA:** It's a powerful tool.

**JL:** I'm going to move on again and finish off by asking about business and human rights. You've brought us on to the next question quite beautifully because you emphasise the three pillars, if you like, of security, development, rule of law and human rights, and that they're fundamentally important, but mutually reinforcing. Now, people would probably be aware of what the role might be for states, NGOs, individuals, but less clear on the role you envisage for businesses, corporations, their advisers, the banks, accountants, the law firms. So perhaps you can speak on that a little bit.

**KA:** I think it's extremely important for businesses to realise that they have influence and power in the community. They can influence policy makers. They can influence direction of development. They can take on issues and projects that are beneficial to the community, that strengthen and help develop the community, and it's also in their interest. Companies can only prosper in vibrant, healthy communities. Nor can companies expect their ventures to be successful in a failed society or in a failed community. And so I would urge them to be bold, to sometimes engage the government.

**" There's a new dynamic... I was in London, talking to the British Prime Minister...about the need to work together to ensure transparency, to stop illicit flows coming out of Africa**

When I went to Kenya, I met with all the NGOs, and I met the business groups and the religious leaders. And the business group shared something with me. They said: 'we, in this room, represent 85 per cent of the GDP of the country. We all have Plan Bs, and our Plan Bs are not very good for the country. It's either close down, downsize, or relocate.' So I said, if you control 85 per cent of the GDP, that is power. That is influence. How did you use that influence? What discussions did you have with the government? When did you go in and tell them they are heading the wrong way? It's going to lead to a situation where we may need to close down and throw people out of work, and that is not what you want. And make suggestions... nothing of that.

By the time I left, they had arranged to have a monthly meeting with the Prime Minister to discuss these issues and what they could do. So they have influence, they have power, that they should use.

**JL:** Excellent. I've got one final question just to round off on this issue. You've worked very closely with Professor John Ruggie, he's been very important in the MDGs and developing the business and human rights framework of 'protect, respect, and remedy'. I just wanted to ask you whether you feel that that framework has got the traction that you would have wanted. If so, what are the positive examples? And if not, what do business and corporations need to be doing to improve?

**KA:** I think it was important we moved on to the principles and from the discussions I have had, even before I came here, companies find the principles very helpful. They are clear, and they give them something to hang their hat on as one begins to develop these areas. And, in fact, several of the speakers refer to this and they said that, after discussing it with their board and their companies, in the end, it was the principles that saved them or gave them the way out. And therefore, it has been successful in that end.

Any plan or proposal that allows people to see the way through the maze and how to resolve the issue and get to the other end is helpful. Obviously it's going to develop over time. We're going to have to capture the experience and improve it as we go along. And, in fact, the companies may even teach us – and John Ruggie – some of the things that we hadn't even thought would come up.

So it has to be a dynamic relationship. And I'm pleased with where we are and the way it's evolving.

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