

INTERVIEW: ‘It’s time to work with young people, not just for young people,’ – outgoing UN Youth Envoy

10 February 2017 – In his second term in office, former United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon established the Office of the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth, subsequently appointing Mr. Ahmad Alhendawi of Jordan as his first-ever Envoy on Youth – the youngest senior official in the history of the Organization.

“I think with my appointment, the United Nations sent an important message that it’s time to work with young people, and not just for young people,” says Mr. Alhendawi, whose tenure as UN Envoy on Youth ends on 13 February 2017.

Mr. Alhendawi, who assumed his position on 17 January 2013, echoes the vision of former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon who, in establishing the Youth Envoy’s office, had identified working with and for young people as one of his top priorities.

The Envoy on Youth – who also acts as the adviser to and the representative of the Secretary-General on youth-related matters – was given the mandate to harmonize the UN system efforts on youth development, enhance the UN response to youth needs, advocate for addressing the development needs and rights of young people, as well as to bring the work of the United Nations with and for youth closer to them.

In an interview with UN News – recorded days before the end of his tenure as UN Envoy on Youth – Mr. Alhendawi says, “We cannot really achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or bring peace and prosperity to our world without engaging young people.”

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“Whether we are looking at development issues, peace and security, tackling Climate Change, on all these fronts we need to engage young people because they are capable, ready and very much able to do the heavy-lifting in implementing the SDGs,” adds the UN Envoy on Youth.

The following is the full transcript of the interview:

UN News: You’ve been Youth Envoy since 2013. You were the first-ever UN Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth. Looking back at the last four years, how do you evaluate your work with the largest generation of youth?

Ahmad Alhendawi: I think, with my appointment, the United Nations sent an

important message that it's time to work with young people, and not just for young people. When I was appointed as Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth I was only 27 years old. And at that time I was probably the youngest in the history of the UN to serve in a senior position at that age, and many people were skeptical about whether that was a good or bad move – some may have thought I was too young to lead or to take care of this important portfolio. But I think what we found out, is that the power of young people – and empowering them in leadership positions – will always pay off. And the UN sends that message to all member states around the world, that it's time to work with young people, by bringing young people in, and allowing them to craft decisions, and to also support their implementation. Looking back, I'm very proud of all the accomplishments we have made, particularly in engaging in drafting the SDGs and convening this amazing [recently concluded] Youth Forum at the United Nations for all member states and youth to come and debate development issues. Many around the world still think of youth as a problem; as a liability, and we don't share that view. We believe young people are an opportunity, and they are an asset for development, peace and prosperity to their countries. I think we are seeing that shift in paradigm where we see important normative gains happening within the human rights field, or issues related to employment, and some significant initiatives supporting youth on different fronts.

So my message to young people is: believe in our shared destiny, because this planet is at risk, and the challenges we are facing today cannot be tackled anymore within the border of one country, no matter what that country is

What's important to remember here is that some of these gains didn't always translate to improvements in young people's lives at the national level. We still have many challenges facing young people. Youth unemployment is still high – some 74 million young persons are still unemployed. Many young people around the world are challenged by what we see today from the increase of hate speech, absence of peace and security, and young people are still struggling to access opportunities. There are some places where there's systematic discrimination against young people. I'm very proud of the important progress we have made, but at the same time I'm very mindful that much more needs to be done, and this largest generation of young people cannot be left behind. I keep reminding everyone that nobody should be allowed to gamble with their future of this generation of young people, and the future generations as well. That's why the world has to unite for youth, and that's the model we adopted in our work from Day One: that we have to unite for youth and to bring the world together. We have to remember that what's at stake today is the future of this generation of young people, and the future of our planet and the future generations.

UN News: So what's your message to the youth around the world?

Ahmad Alhendawi: My message to youth in 2017 is that this is an important moment for them not to lose hope, and to stay determined that we could be the generation that could reverse Climate Change, and eradicate extreme poverty;

that's the vision of Agenda 2030. My vision to young people is to unite around the shared platform offered to us. It's a very exciting thing for our generation now; young people in this generation are fans of using shared platforms. It's all about shared platforms, whether it's a shared economic platform, where you access opportunities by sharing platforms, and I often think of the United Nations as a shared value platform, that's available to all of us to share this important value system – the universal values like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN Charter – that brings all nations together.



In March 2016 the UN Youth Envoy Ahmad Alhendawi discussed youth participation in the implementation of the SDGs with young leaders in Zambia. He also congratulated the Government of Zambia for the successful hosting of the 3rd Global Conference of Young Parliamentarians. The Envoy on Youth called on the Government of Zambia to expand on existing spaces for meaningful youth engagement in the implementation of the SDGs. He also discussed the urgency for more investments and empowerment of adolescent girls, where 42% of girls are married before the age of 18, pledging the UN Country Team to work with the Government to address this critical issue. Photo: UN Youth Envoy Flickr/ Jason J Mulikita



Young Leaders and Fellows meet at United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) where UN Youth Envoy Ahmad Alhendawi opened day-long workshops discussing the youth dimension in implementing the SDGs. The Population Fund engages young people in its work, and advocates for youth engagement in the work of others. The fund also provides support to adolescents and youth to build networks and organizations to advocate for their human rights. Photo: UN Youth Envoy Flickr



UN Youth Envoy Ahmad Alhendawi meets Libyan and Tunisian youth to motivate them to participate in the resolution of conflict and building social peace. According to the UN Support Mission in Libya, Ahmad Alhendawi discusses the importance of youth participation in finding solutions to the conflict in Libya, including Security Council Resolution 2250. The UN Youth Envoy said Mr. Martin Kobler, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Libya, had stressed the need to further promote the active participation of youth in the ongoing national dialogue and in the implementation of the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA). Photo: UN Youth Envoy Flickr



In August 2016, the UN Youth Envoy made an official visit to Nigeria to discuss youth development and youth issues. Photographed here, Ahmad Alhendawi inspects exhibits mounted by youth beneficiaries of enterprise empowerment. Young people meeting with the Envoy emphasized the need for further support in facilitating their participation in Nigeria's public life, as well as tackling health issues, HIV/AIDS and youth unemployment. Photo: UN

Youth Envoy Flickr



Ahmad Alhendawi and a delegation of UN youth experts concluded a five-day visit to China in the spring of 2016. Mr. Alhendawi met with several youth-led and youth-focused organizations, as well as city government officials encouraging stronger policies and programming for education, health, youth participation and employment. China has the second largest youth population in the world with 272 million young people aged 10-24.



In his visit to Uganda UN Youth Envoy underscored the importance of expediting the adoption of the country's national youth policy. UN Resident Coordinator, Ahunna Eziakonwa-Onochie, expressed the UN country team's interest in joining the Envoy's initiatives by establishing a youth advisory board for the UN country team. Photo: UN Youth Envoy Flickr



During the UN Youth Envoy's visit to Italy in October 2016, he talked about the issue of drug use among young people, noting "it is a real issue, and the way San Patrignano Recovery Community is tackling it, shows that when young people are given an opportunity, they can empower themselves and contribute to their communities." The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime World Drug Report – which provides a global overview as well as regional trends in drug use – shows, for example, that 17.9 per cent among the youth population, aged 12-17 years, reported using illicit substances in 2012. Out of the general population, aged 15-64, the corresponding figure was 5.2 per cent, and drug use was reported to be the highest among those in their late teens or twenties. Photo: UN Youth Envoy Flickr



During a Social Good Summit in New York, September 2016, the UN Youth Envoy Ahmad Alhendawi announced the launch of 'Young Leaders for the Sustainable Development Goals'. "Today I am pleased to join in welcoming the inaugural class of UN Young Leaders for the Sustainable Development Goals," said UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in a statement delivered by Mr. Alhendawi. "These 17 young change-makers are a testament to the ingenuity of youth and I congratulate them for their exceptional leadership and demonstrated commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals." Photo: Mashable



Soon the Youth Envoy will join the World Organization of the Scouts' Movement as their new Secretary-General. Alhendawi still is the youngest senior official in the history of the organization. He assumed his position on 17 January 2013 with a mandate to harmonize the UN system efforts on youth development, enhance the UN response to youth needs, advocate for addressing the development needs and rights of young people, as well as to bring the work of the United Nations with and for youth closer to them. Photo: UN Youth

My message to young people, as we use different platforms in all spheres of life, is for us to renew our faith and resolve to continue empowering and investing in this shared value system that has basically offered humanity this opportunity to come together for the first time in its history, so that we have something called universal values and international law, and UN agencies; this amazing system that links us together. Of course there are many people out there who will say “that doesn’t always work” – and I know it doesn’t always work – but we have to make it work, and we have to invest more. So my message to young people is: believe in our shared destiny, because this planet is at risk, and the challenges we are facing today cannot be tackled anymore within the border of one country, no matter what that country is. So we need to bridge the gaps, to connect people, and we need young people to believe in this message.

UN News: Your journey with youth will not end with the UN; you’ll certainly continue working with the youth and to advance youth issues, won’t you?

Ahmad Alhendawi: I’m moving from my position as Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth – it was a tremendous honour and privilege to serve in this position – to continue serving young people, as you rightly said, and I will be joining the World Organization of the Scouts’ Movement as the new Secretary-General. And from that position, I look forward to working with a peaceful army of 40 million scouts around the world, who are also very much excited to work in tandem with the United Nations in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Scout Movement is a very unique movement that has been offering generation after generation of young, committed individuals that have been supporting their countries and supporting themselves. So it’s a very exciting time to be able to transition to another place of service, where I will continue working with young people, but this time also working directly in getting the commitments we made in 2015 on Climate Change and Sustainable Development Goals translated, and continue to offer opportunities to young people. There is nothing parallel to my belief in this generation of young people, and I think we will be able to unlock their potential to truly be the generation that will get the job done. As I always say, I don’t want 14 years from now, to stand and pass on regrets to another generation. I think [with the SDGs] we do have a bold vision for the future, and we have absolutely no excuse to delay the implementation and to spare no efforts in implementing this vision.

UN News: How about your relationship with the UN?

Ahmad Alhendawi: It was interesting actually, when I went to the Secretary-General to inform him about my wish to take up this position of Secretary-General of the Scout Movement, he said – a very nice line – that “maybe the

UN will lose one, but we will win 40 million (members of the Scout Movement around the world) to work with the United Nations." I think the Scouts have always been there, and I am very committed – and once again I have always been telling young people that the United Nations is not only about carrying the UN badge or the UN passport. I think it is about subscribing to the values and commitments and the goals of the United Nations, and my commitment to those values and ideals will continue to be there. I very much look forward to working in tandem with the United Nations, because I am a big believer in this multi-lateral system, and I think, despite all the deficiencies that you might see, the only solution for us is to invest more in making this system work.