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### Ahmad Alhendawi. Africa Renewal

Ahmad Alhendawi was appointed in January as the UN Secretary-General's envoy on youth who will be the voice of young people all over the world. In his Five-Year Agenda, the Secretary-General recognized "working with and for women and young people" as one of his priorities. At 29, Mr. Alhendawi already has a rich background as a youth advocate and activist. Before joining the UN he served as a youth policy advisor for the World Bank-funded programme on institutional development in the Arab League, with headquarters in Cairo, Egypt. He had also been a team leader for a youth project in Iraq and worked with the UN Population Fund and many other organizations and governments on youth issues. In this interview with Africa Renewal's Kingsley Ighobor on Mr. Alhendawi's second day in office, the youth envoy talks about his new role, his hopes for young people in Africa and the rest of the world, and his hobbies.

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**Africa Renewal: You have just been appointed the Secretary-General's envoy on youth. What will be your role?**

**Ahmad Alhendawi:** An envoy is someone who takes a message and promotes it. To be the Secretary-General's envoy requires taking his message and promoting it among the youth around the world, to allow them to better understand what the UN does. But it's not a PR [public relations] job. It's also about the youth's involvement in the work of the UN. It's a two-way communication. It's creating momentum for youth issues at the international level; trying to harmonise the work of the different UN agencies to deliver as one at the national level; to work with youth organizations, bringing them more visibility and having them recognised as partners.

**What key messages are you taking from the Secretary-General [SG] to the youth?**

I think it's very clear what the SG wants. He has outlined priority areas to focus on: employment, education, human rights, citizenship, political inclusion, entrepreneurship—all are highlighted in the SG's plan of action for his second term.

**How do you intend to deliver these messages?**

By deploying all the methods we can deploy. Remember that the UN does not lack mechanisms to deliver these messages. There are programmes and entities that are doing great work already. I will just add my bit and repackage their work in a way that will be more readable and understandable to the youth. Yes, conferences, workshops, by using the social media and so on. I am now consulting the agencies and young people to try to find out what else we can do.

**What would you like to achieve by the time your assignment is over?**

We are in a world that is very young. The most youthful societies are in developing countries. This gives us an extra challenge and opportunity to help in their development efforts. My big success will be to promote the World Programme of Action for Youth. This programme was created in 1995 by the General Assembly and defines 15 priority areas to guide the work of member states and UN agencies for youth. In this context, Mr. Ban Ki-moon highlighted five areas - employment, entrepreneurship, education including sexual and reproductive health, political inclusion, citizenship and protection of rights - to accelerate the implementation of the World Programme of Action for Youth. Moreover I would like to bring youth issues to the centre of development agenda and promote the role of youth as equal partners in developing their societies.

**Africa has the youngest population in the world, and unemployment among the youth is high. How concerned are you about this?**

I would like to look at it in a different way. Just look at the young people who were born in 2000, when MDGs [Millennium Development Goals] were formulated. From 2000 to today, literacy rates have increased in Africa from 58% to 66.6% for young girls, from 72% to 78% for boys. This generation has witnessed improvements in health and in enrolment in schools. If we continue with this trend, the hope is that post-MDGs will continue to serve African youth. So we are on the right track. Today I checked with MY World [the UN global survey for a better world] data to see what African youth are saying. The first priority for them is solid education; of course the survey is ongoing. The second priority is better access to health-care systems.

**You will agree that when people get educated they expect to get jobs.**

Youth employment is definitely important. There have to be multi-sectoral partnerships. It has to be collective efforts involving governments, private sector, civil society and others. I think Africa is about to find the right formula for dealing with youth unemployment.

**What is the right formula?**

I am seeing developments happening since 2000 to today. I am not under-estimating the challenges. We also have very good lessons learned. We need to think strategically and critically so that the post-MDGs development agenda meets the demands of African youth and youth around the world.

**In developing the post-MDGs development framework, what level of youth participation do you expect?**

Youth participation is extremely important. I will tell you why. Times and the world have changed dramatically since the MDGs were formulated a decade ago. You cannot do the same development agenda the way we did it in the nineties. Now we have a different world where civil societies are stronger and youth are demanding more participation. We spent the last years asking youth and civil societies to catch up with the MDGs; now they have an opportunity to set a new development agenda. Participation leads to ownership. High-level panels, thematic consultations, MY World 2015, all these consultations are happening to reflect the views of the youth.

**How would you assess the current level of young people's involvement in politics in Africa?**

If the largest voting population are young people, then they have to get involved in politics. First you have to promote an enabling environment. You need to have youth-friendly laws that promote human rights, youth rights. The legal frameworks have to support youth participation. We have to look at mechanisms for youth participation in politics. It's not just about political parties and government; it's about local councils, about municipalities, about all the different levels of government. When young people can influence daily policy decisions at all levels, that's a great example. We need to provide funding for African youth who can take initiatives to engage in civil society and politics.

**You lived in Egypt so you must be familiar with the Arab Spring. What lessons can the youth, and even the political elites, learn from that experience?**

That our governments should be cautious and understand that young people should be engaged in politics. When they are frustrated and marginalized, they will have a sense of hopelessness and become difficult to deal with. The challenge is to move them from the protest mind-set to the political mind-set.

**You are very active on social media. What would be your advice on the responsible use of social media?**

I am hesitant to provide any advice on how people can use the social media because social media reflects what happens in real life. If you do not have healthy dialogues in the society, that will be reflected in the social media. From the Arab Spring, we can see that social media have transformative powers.

**Would you rather have young people use social media to effect positive social change?**

I see this happening. Young people have great ability to filter ideas and correct anomalies. The use of the social media is positive, for me. However, I want to see social media connecting people from Africa with those in Asia, Europe, Middle East, etc. This is not happening a lot. If we promote structural initiatives between lawyers, entrepreneurs, others, it will help young people in different parts of the world. We are currently using it to evaluate MDGs and set a new development agenda.

**How could we reach the hundreds of millions who have no access to the Internet, who are not active on social media platforms?**

I think this is a very valid concern. This should encourage us to find ways to reach these people. That is why I say there must be consultations, for example having a focus group discussion is always important. Because it gives everyone the opportunity to speak freely at the table.

**What's your message to young people around the world?**

I will just say, do you know why it is called the UN? Because its mandate is to unite nations based on human rights, development, peace and security. It is also about promoting young people's work for the betterment of their families, communities and for the world we want future generations to inherit. The UN may not always accommodate the needs of everyone but the UN needs the young people now more than ever.

**Do you have many friends and links with youth groups in Africa?**

Yes I do. I am very passionate about young people in Africa and the dynamics in that continent. I look forward to my first official visit to Africa. Young people in Africa live in interesting times in which they can help in transforming their societies. If I am a young African I would be proud to be born at this time—opportunity to serve, to see great developments happening. There is a great human potential, human capital and great natural resources in Africa, but for me, Africa's greatest assets are the young people.

**What are your hobbies?**

I am a good reader. I play basketball.

**What kinds of books?**

I am more into history and politics and enjoy novels. I like sports—basketball and soccer. I like the Barcelona football club and Manchester United.

**Tags:** [Africa](#), [youth](#), [Interview](#), [Envoy](#), [United Nations](#)