

Kofi Annan 1938-2018

A Tribute by Richard Jolly and Carlos Fortin

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Kofi Annan, one of the greatest UN Secretary Generals, died after a short illness on August 18th. Although never having visited IDS, several of us had the privilege of interacting with him, experiencing first hand his principled, modest and forthright leadership and admiring his range of concerns and achievements. These are too many to mention here but to me the Millennium Declaration and its accompanying report, “We the Peoples-the role of the UN in the 21st century” signed and with much drafted by Annan himself, stand out as exceptional for its vision, specifics and the clarity of its links with underlying UN and international values.

While Kofi Annan’s UN trajectory was essentially in the diplomatic and political fields, he was absolutely convinced that development was an unavoidable prerequisite of political stability and the advancement of human rights. This is evident in his 2005 Report to the General Assembly on the implementation of the 2000 Millennium Declaration, entitled “In Larger Freedom” and comprising main sections on “Freedom from Want”, “Freedom from Fear”, Freedom to Live in Dignity “ and “Strengthening the United Nations”. Carlos Fortin personally had a glimpse of Kofi Annan’s deep concern with development when, as Officer-in-Charge of UNCTAD, he involved Carlos in a discussion about the choice of a new UNCTAD Secretary-General to succeed Rubens Ricupero. It was obvious to Carlos that he regarded this as a most important decision, deserving his full personal attention.

An anecdote in this connection illustrates a second point, namely Kofi Annan’s modesty and personal touch. During a recess of a meeting of UN Chief Executives Board in 2005, Carlos was chatting with Robert Orr, his Special Adviser, when Kofi approached them quietly and said something like: “I don’t want to interrupt but when you have a moment, Carlos, could we have a word?” What struck Carlos was that there he was, the UN Secretary-General sounding almost apologetic for breaking into a conversation of two of his staff. Needless to say, Carlos immediately took his leave of Bob Orr and walked away with the Secretary-General, who wanted to let Carlos know about the imminent appointment of Supachai Panitchpakdi as the new UNCTAD Secretary-General.

Kofi Annan was always a strong supporter of the UN Intellectual History Project (UNIHP) and of the Human Development Report. In our interview with him for the UN history project he talked about organizing the Millennium Summit. “To have 150 heads of states, governments and kings here under one roof was quite an achievement. Then they participated, for the first time, in roundtables, where they talked among themselves, without aides, without assistants”.

Kofi Annan brought long and wide experience of the UN to his leadership as Secretary General, more than any of his predecessors. He joined the UN system as an administrative officer in WHO, later serving with the Economic Commission of Africa in Addis Ababa, the UN Emergency Force in Ismailia and then the UN High Commission for Refugees in Geneva. Before becoming Secretary General, he was under-secretary general for peacekeeping. This range of UN experience greatly added to his skills as leader of the UN. He never lost his personal touch, never standing on his dignity and remembering the names of so many of his colleagues. He was firm in his international leadership, deeply committed to human rights, to ensuring a fuller place for Africa in the global community and to the UN’s whole mission.

Richard Jolly and Carlos Fortin