

Speech by Ambassador Mohamed Sahnoun to launch Initiatives of Change Ethiopia as an official organisation, at the headquarters of the Africa Union, Addis Ababa, 16 October 2009

I am delighted to be in Addis Ababa for the launch of *Initiatives of Change* Ethiopia. I lived in Addis for nine years when I served as Deputy Secretary-General of the OAU, and came to love this city very much. Ethiopia became in fact my second home.

So I welcome you all to my second home.

My years in the OAU were filled with work to answer the problems confronting newly independent countries, in our continent. We worked to end apartheid in South Africa. We mobilized ourselves to free the remaining countries under colonial rule.

So I have lived close to many of the pains and triumphs of our continent.

There is much to be grateful for. We have seen the end of colonial rule. We have seen growing prosperity in some countries. We have seen peace come to countries at war, and countries where democracy is flourishing.

But there is also much that is painful and shameful. We see still bad governance, and leaders who cling to power despite losing elections, greed and corruption in the extraction of resources such as oil and diamonds...

Yes Africa is exploited by the rich world. The colonial legacy has left us with serious problems. The Western world and the Eastern world come to us for our resources, and often take them corruptly. They dump their refuse on our shores, leaving us with serious environmental problems. We have not yet been able to prevent this, or even to obtain fair, equitable terms for our trade with the rich world. So we do not have the resources to offer a minimum of social security to our people.

How do we change this situation? What idea is strong enough to persuade the wealthy and powerful to act justly towards those who have less wealth and power?

I am here to launch *Initiatives of Change* Ethiopia. I have been President of *Initiatives of Change International*, and I believe that its approach offers a basis on which we Africans can help build a free, just and prosperous Africa and make our contribution to building a free, just and prosperous world.

Initiatives of Change works to rouse consciences. Everyone, rich and poor, has a conscience, telling us the difference between right and wrong. All social advance depends on a heightening of conscience. Some people have deadened their conscience, and exploit others. But their consciences can come to life again. They can discover the satisfaction of putting right past wrongs and living to build a better world.

Anyone can start to treat others as they should be treated, and the effect of that can be dramatic. Moral strength is a powerful agent of constructive change.

Initiatives of Change calls on us to build this moral strength, by the way we live. As Mahatma Gandhi said, 'Be the change you want to see in the world.' We cannot cure corruption while we are dishonest. We cannot bring unity to our communities or countries while we allow ourselves to hate. We cannot enable our people to flourish if we are greedy.

On the other hand, leaders of integrity bring unity to their countries, and prosperity to their people. They are the people who will rouse consciences in the rich world, and advance justice across the world. Nelson Mandela, through his integrity, won wide support, enabling a democratic South Africa to be launched in a way that is overcoming the racial divides, and is bringing growing prosperity to its people. We need many more like him.

Let us work for this, starting in our own situations. The problems we face across the world are vast. The recent economic crisis plunged another 75 million people below the hunger threshold, bringing the estimated number of undernourished people worldwide to over a billion. Over 5 million have died of hunger this year alone.

And this has been caused not just by the financial crisis but also by climate change. When I was carrying out my mission in the horn of Africa, as Special Representative of the Secretary General of the United Nations, it became clear that I was witnessing a series of conflicts and crises whose deep causes were not really political. Countries such as Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea were so deeply affected by drought, erosion and desertification that up to 70% of the soil had lost its green cover. This has led to significant movements of population and an unstable sociological situation worsened indeed by poor governance. According to UNEP, in Darfur, 16 of the 20 driest years on record have occurred since 1972. And recurring droughts initiate competition between farmers and pastoralists. This is a re-edition of the Abel and Cain confrontation mentioned in the Bible.

Through my career, I have increasingly become involved in these environmental challenges. I was a member of the World Commission on Environment and Development [Brundtland Commission] in the 1980s, which conceived the concept of sustainable development, and later Senior Adviser to the Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. I have also taken leadership in developing the Earth Charter.

I have done so because I believe this is one of the most urgent threats we face today. Unless we change our ways, 40% of the world's remaining forests will disappear by the year 2050, and a large part of that will be in Africa. This deforestation followed by overgrazing and poor farming practice will result in serious competition for resources. All these developments will continue to compel people to move in large numbers as "environmental refugees", potentially destabilizing many areas and straining relations between countries and regions, including between developed and developing countries.

Africa's forests help the world to breathe, and we must preserve them for the sake of us all. Unless we can limit global warming, we will create a world where heat, drought, sea-levels and famine increase dramatically; hundreds of millions of people will be forced to

move, and millions will die. We need to work together towards answering this situation. We need a new level of international cooperation.

That is not an impossible dream. The international concern over global warming offers an opportunity for another leap forward. We saw the 'Asian miracle' in the 1980s. Why not the 'African miracle' in the 2010s? We cannot do it alone, but we need to take the lead. If we demonstrate our determination to advance our continent through sustainable development, and help maintain the health of the planet, others will be inspired or shamed into giving the support we need.

Africa has a great gift to give to the world – the gift of humanity. Africans are interested in people. Any worthwhile development must aim to improve the lives of specific people, and Africa can help the world guard against grandiose plans of social engineering by keeping the focus on people.

Initiatives of Change calls on every African to play their part in building healthy communities, where wealth is shared equitably, where problems are resolved peacefully, and development is sustainable. Let us work to revive and extend multilateral solidarity in a globalising world. Let us develop and root the ethical values needed to live in a just and charitable society.

Let us work for good governance, nationally and internationally. This requires from political leadership everywhere as well as from international institutions, civil society, business communities, and all of us, a constant awareness of the possibility of sociological breakdowns in many fragile areas. These breakdowns, induced by underdevelopment and climate change, are worsened further by the absence of the rule of law, of human rights, and of transparency. Bad governance and the wide scale deterioration of the political and economic situation in our societies can produce very rapidly a decay of moral values and civic sense. The result leads us to what we call failed States – look at the tragedy of Somalia.

In response to this need, last year I launched the Caux Forum for Human Security at the *Initiatives of Change* conference centre in Switzerland. Last year and this, we brought together more than 300 people active in human security at all levels from diplomats to field workers. Africa has made a substantial contribution to the discussions. Participants from some African countries have described their work to restore peace and heal the impact of severe internal conflict. This has given hope and new ideas to participants from other war-torn countries.

The Caux Forum for Human Security aims to encourage governments and civil societies to work together to create a model of global cooperation that could help mankind avoid escalating conflict and move towards a world of genuine equality.

African countries have submitted what is called, NEPAD. The New Partnership for African Development provides distinctive prospects for African countries to work together in a huge task of turning the tide against the current misfortunes of the continent. The goal of this initiative is an economic rescue plan directed towards the promotion of sustainable development as well as strengthening conflict prevention.

What is vital for the success of this initiative is the support of the developed world, the International Financial Institutions and the private sector. So let us mobilize our efforts to help the African Union and the African countries to achieve this goal.

Initiatives of Change in Ethiopia can make its contribution in conveying this important message, through Initiatives of Change International, to the International civil society.

We are aware that this can only be established if we are deeply open to the message of love, which the spiritual guides have passed on to us throughout the ages. In order to combat demons we need respect, consideration and understanding. Ultimately, this is the real creative source of peace and development.

The message of Love reminds us that we cannot just defend that which is relative to us or only seek short-term compromise through international conferences. Instead, we can find a sincere and profound respect of each other, leading to true reconciliation between cultures and religions. Then we will realise that we are all in the same boat! And that all together, really together, we can map out our course through the storm and through those heavy clouds that herald tempestuous times.

Thank you for your attention.