

ALAN DOSS

The man with a thousand stories

Alan Doss is President of the Kofi Annan Foundation. He spent decades in United Nations' peacekeeping, development and humanitarian operations. He is now based in Geneva and manages the daily operations of the Foundation.

Alan Doss is one of those people you could listen to for hours. He has enough anecdotes for a lifetime and it only takes one question to refresh his memory and fascinating stories begin to unfold. Fascinating! A word he uses often and one that describes his career quite accurately. Some people say life flows like a quiet river but this does not seem applicable to everyone and certainly not to him.

Two extraordinary mentors

Behind his career stand two extraordinary Africans, “two men with vision and human empathy”, Alan Doss says. The first one is Dr Bernard Chidzero, whom he worked for during his first mission in Kenya back in 1966. At that time, Dr Chidzero could not return to his home country of Zimbabwe because of the white regime that had declared unilateral independence. The second one is Kofi Annan himself, the former Secretary General of the United Nations and Peace Nobel Prize laureate. Both were an inspiration for him and strongly influenced his professional path. Still today, in his current role, he tries to convey the messages his mentors taught him.



The purpose of the Kofi Annan Foundation is “to work for political change to make the world a fairer and more peaceful place”, Alan Doss explains. Through his work, he aims to convey the founder’s values of tolerance, dialogue and diversity. He believes that the issues the world is currently facing, such as climate change, migration and poverty, are not new but require political conviction to enable change. The expertise and experience are available and the solutions need to be implemented. This is what the Foundation intends to do.

A “fortunate” start

As he was finishing university, it was time for him to think about his future. At barely 21 years old, he was certain of one thing: he wanted to do something useful and practical. “I was always very much interested in the world beyond my immediate circumstances. I was very fortunate to be selected as a UN

Association Volunteer from the UK to go to work in Nairobi at the UNDP office”, he recalls. Listening to him, it almost sounds like a coincidence, a path that life put before him. He stayed in Kenya for two years before heading to New York, where he landed a job at the UN HQ.

During his career, he has worked with many countries around the world. Among them, Kenya, Mauritius, Madagascar, Nigeria, Vietnam, China, Thailand, Sierra Leone, Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The list goes on. He returns from those places with as many stories as geographical and historical knowledge. The numerous projects he has been involved in cover a wide scope of political, economic, humanitarian and developmental issues.

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A “fascinating” journey

It would take an entire book to tell all his stories; the terrible drought devastating Niger in the 1970s, the fish ponds that were a legacy of the B-52 bombers in Vietnam, the people fleeing the massacres by the Khmers Rouges at the Thai border, the election of the first female president in Liberia. He witnessed them all. But one mission he remembers particularly well, were the 5 years he spent in China.

He arrived in Beijing in 1979 to negotiate the opening of a new UN office, accompanied by his 18 month old daughter

and pregnant wife Soheir. “We were a window to the outside world that had been closed since 1948”, he says of that initial UN presence in Beijing. Living conditions were indeed quite different from what they are now. He remembers that at that time, there was only one restaurant open to foreigners after 8pm on the “street of broken dreams”; a permit was needed to travel further than 20km outside the capital and only a few cities were open to westerners. One of the first projects the Chinese government asked for was the development of solar power and they are now the leaders in this sector. Alan Doss explains that small things, like the opening of a privately-owned restaurant, were a huge step in bringing China to where it is now.

The future of peace

As Alan Doss reminds us, peacebuilding covers multiple aspects. But one thing is certain, he says, we need to have a deep understanding of the roots of the problems the world is facing and only then can situations move forward. It is of course essential to deal with the consequences, which are often humanitarian, but it is just as important to look at the causes, which can often be political. Therefore, political support is the key in his opinion. “Progress is possible! It won’t be smooth and it won’t be always in a straight line. It will take many detours along the way and we just have to keep at it” he says. And no doubt he will.

Laurane Briguet