

Dr. Talal Abu-Ghazaleh and the United Nations: Man of the Moment for the Digital Era

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When one thinks of the most committed and ardent supporters of the United Nations among world business leaders, the names of Dr. Talal Abu-Ghazaleh, together with those of Bill Gates and Ted Turner are the first ones that come to mind.

While Bill Gates and Ted Turner came to be known for creating philanthropic foundations in support of United Nations development goals, Dr. Abu-Ghazaleh is widely recognized and respected in the United Nations circles and around the world for dedicating his entire working life to the service of the World Organization. He has served with distinction in innumerable leadership positions of a large number of United Nations initiatives and institutions, in addition to providing consistent professional and financial support for its peace and development objectives.

In 1968, he was instrumental in setting up the United Nations Working Group on international Standards of Accounting and Reporting and was elected its first Chairman. In the years to follow, he led several UN bodies, worked closely with many UN agencies and played a leading role in the reform of the World Trade Organization.

I came to know Dr. Abu-Ghazaleh in the most fortunate circumstances some twenty years ago.

In the year 2000, as the dawn of the 21st century was ushering in a golden Digital Revolution, the United Nations Economic and Social Council saw an opportunity to harness the new, revolutionary information and communication technologies in the service of development and eradicating poverty from the world through a United Nations ICT Task Force.

I was charged by Secretary General Kofi Annan to constitute a high level, multi-stakeholder Task Force composed of leaders from governments, the private sector and civil society. It was fortunate that when approached, Dr. Abu- Ghazaleh accepted to serve as the Co-Chairman of the Task Force, although he was also serving, at that time, as the Chair of the International Chamber of Commerce Working Group on Information Technology.

There was no looking back for the following ten years. First, as the Co-Chair of the UN ICT Task Force and then, when he became the Chair of the UNGAID, set up in 2006 as the successor to the Task Force, Dr. Abu- Ghazaleh imbued these initiatives with his vision of building a brave new world with no one left behind, by providing universal and affordable access to information and knowledge to all citizens of the world.

Guided by its leadership, the UN ICT Task Force and UNGAID played a seminal, catalytic role in promoting multi-stakeholder partnerships to bring the benefits of mobile telephony and other digital technologies to the remotest corners of the developing world. It was, in no small measure, due to the world-wide dissemination of this digital revolution that the United Nations could claim, in 2015, significant success in achieving the Millennium Development Goals, including the central goal of reducing the proportion of people living in poverty in the world by half. Dr. Abu-Ghazaleh also provided the framework for the creation of the United Nations Working Group on Internet Governance in 2005.

More recently, Dr. Abu-Ghazaleh developed a partnership with UN-Habitat for the implementation of SDG11 on Sustainable Urbanization and was designated by UNWTO as Special Ambassador for Sustainable Tourism.

Personally, it has been my good fortune and great honor to have Dr. Abu- Ghazaleh as a guide and a real friend. I can say from personal knowledge and experience that he is a man of rare qualities who loves humanity, who foresees future trends and works tirelessly for human welfare in all its dimensions. But, above all, he is the Man of the Moment for this Digital Era.