

‘Ensure that everyone benefits from economic gains’

Interview with
Maged Abdelaziz,
UN special
adviser on Africa

In May 2012, Maged Abdelaziz was appointed as the UN's new special adviser on Africa, at the level of under-secretary-general. As head of the Office of the Special Adviser on Africa (OSAA), he is in charge of advocating for African development internationally and helping coordinate the efforts of UN agencies and departments in support of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), the African Union's continental plan for political, economic and social advancement. Although new to his post, he is no stranger to the global community's interaction with Africa. As part of a long diplomatic career on behalf of his native Egypt, he was that country's permanent representative to the UN in New York for the seven years just prior to his most recent appointment, and in that capacity served as vice-president of the UN General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council, among other duties. As OSAA prepared for new General Assembly debates on Africa in October, he shared some of his thoughts with *Africa Renewal*.

Africa Renewal What are some of the greatest challenges in trying to get the international community to deal with Africa on its own terms, according to the continent's own priorities?



Maged Abdelaziz We are seeing the remnants of the economic and financial crisis and its impact on development activities. As NEPAD is built not on aid but on partnership between Africa and the donor communities, African countries would expect more investment, more industrialization and thus more employment, more social integration and more social and economic coherence. But unfortunately, there is a lack of funds on this front and a decline in the percentage of aid.

A lot of commitments have been made. But there is lack of implementation. If you take it back to the

UN Special Adviser on Africa Maged Abdelaziz: Mobilizing more financial resources from within African countries is a major goal of the African Union.

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2005 Alberta summit [of the Group of Eight industrialized countries], up to now only 25 per cent of the G-8 Action Plan on Africa has been implemented. Of \$65 billion that was going to be used for investment in Africa [annually], only about \$23 billion has been delivered.

How to deal with these challenges is to try to integrate Africa's priorities, as defined in the thematic areas of

NEPAD, into the economic and social and security priorities of the United Nations. The chance for that is coming, because we are starting to shape the post-2015 development agenda [2015 being the end of the target period for the Millennium Development Goals]. And we played a significant role as OSAA in supporting African negotiators in Rio [at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development] to try to achieve the maximum of what they could achieve out of the unified African position.

AR NEPAD's focus is not just on aid, but also investment and trade. Yet the decline in aid, in the wake of the financial crisis in the US and Europe, has nevertheless been a blow. In that situation, what can African countries do to better mobilize their own resources, and to better manage what they have by combating corruption and stemming the flow of African funds abroad?

MA Well, in order for Africa to use its money better, it should have the money first. The concentration, as you say, of NEPAD is not on aid. It is on trade, investment and industrialization. And through these we can have better employment, better health care, better services and other things. Mobilizing resources from within African countries has been one of the major targets of the African Union, which has established a high-level panel on the mobilization of resources in African countries.

You need good governance at the same time. There are some African countries that have 5 per cent or 6 per cent or even 8 per cent growth. But this growth does not trickle down to the population, and the people who are below the poverty line are increasing more and more. So if you look at it from up there, you see that a country may be growing, doing among the best economic performance, but if you look at how this is affecting the socio-economic structure of the country, it comes at



the level of certain people and stops there.

This happened in my country, in Egypt, where we had about 5 per cent or 6 per cent growth a year. But those who benefited were only the business-people who controlled the economy at the top. At the same time, we had 40 per cent of the people below the poverty line. Governance should be strengthened to ensure that everybody benefits from the economic gains that are coming.

And corruption. There is a high-level panel established by the African Union on combating corruption and ensuring that there are no kickbacks and no funds that should be going outside of the country. But that also requires some commitment at the international level, from the big economic powers. Because most of those moneys that are being smuggled out of African countries are going to bigger economies, they are not going to smaller economies.

Also to assist African countries, control over natural resources is very important. Most African countries export natural resources as raw material, and then re-import them at five or six times the price. If we can use natural resources for the benefit of Africa — that multiplying the price six times is

Nigerians throng outdoor market in Lagos: To avoid political and social tensions, the benefits of economic growth must reach ordinary Africans.

 Reuters / Juda Ngwenya

for the benefit of the African people — then we will be doing better in African resource mobilization.

AR You've alluded to the Arab Spring and the tensions that can be caused by poverty amid high economic growth rates. The other side of the Arab Spring was dissatisfaction with the lack of political inclusion, limits to democracy and political repression. Do you think the events in the north of the continent have been a wake-up call to the remaining authoritarian regimes in sub-Saharan Africa?

MA It is definitely a wake-up call to everybody. Not only for the autocrats in Africa. It is a wake-up call for all autocratic regimes. There is a political aspect to it and there is an economic aspect. The political aspect is that if you stay in power for a long time, there could be a negative impact. The economic part is that as long as people are not happy economically, they are going to revolt. And if you combine both together, then you have big revolutions, as you had in North Africa. Yes, it is a wake-up call. 