

Storytelling with a Purpose: Youth Interview Series

Episode 1. Interview with Aya Chebbi

Transcript

Cairo Eubanks [00:00:10] Hello, and welcome to Storytelling with a Purpose, an international youth voices interview series created in collaboration with Bringing the Globe, the United Nations Department of Global Communications Civil Society Unit, and Pathways to Peace! This interview series is also an initiative of the United Nations Department of Global Communications Youth Steering Committee. My name is Cairo Eubanks and I'm the Youth Representative for New Future Foundation to the United Nations and Youth Steering Committee Member. It has been a privilege to spearhead this project and to also moderate our first episode where we have a very special guest to launch this program, Aya Chebbi, former Youth Envoy to the African Union and Founder & Chair of Nala Feminist Collective!

Because this is the first episode, we really need to lay down the foundation for Storytelling with a Purpose and to share our mission. Storytelling with a Purpose is a space for changemakers and storytellers to tell their stories about how they are creating change and solutions to problems we face in society. Our vision is to create a bridge to connect with people of all demographics, to share innovative ways to reach a sustainable future, which is in line with the United Nations 2030 Agenda. Here to represent the Department of Global Communications is Hawa Diallo, Chief of Civil Society for the Department of Global Communications Tower. You have the floor.

Hawa Diallo [00:01:45] Hello, everyone and thank you for that warm welcome! It's my pleasure to welcome all to *Storytelling with a Purpose Civil Society Youth Interview Series*. I can safely say that the United Nations Department of Global Communications values youth voices and that we are committed to uplifting these voices within civil society. Within the Department, civil society means the voices of people in the community, leaders, and citizens alike.

According to recent UN reports, compared to previous generations, young people today are the most highly-educated generation ever. In terms of opportunities in civil society, today youth have the chance to influence society in unprecedented ways, especially through their participation in decision-making and their keen abilities and facility in information and communication technologies.

In 2009, the Department of Global Communications established the Civil Society Youth Representatives Programme to serve as an advocacy platform to bring together young people, ages 18 to 32, working within and/or leading organizations that are in association with the Department and focused on issues on the agenda of the United Nations.

The creation of a Civil Society Youth Representatives Steering Committee, composed of youth and young professionals from non-for-profits organizations, followed with the purpose of ensuring youth guidance and participation in the department's youth advocacy and engagement efforts.

It is my pleasure to support the members of the Youth Interview Series Planning Committee, with Cairo Eubanks and Rinor Jani as Co-hosts for the work that they have done to make this first edition of the Youth Interview Series possible.

It is our intention to have this program serve as a vehicle to connect local and global communities to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and objectives. This is instrumental in creating a sustainable future for all where no one is left behind.

Thanks for tuning in. Enjoy! Now over to our Co-host, Cairo!

Cairo Eubanks [00:03:58] Thank you so much, Hawa. I would also like to welcome Rinor Jani of Pathways to Peace to speak briefly when I shared this idea and concept with him. Rinor was immediately on board and helped to progress this initiative to where it is now. Rinor, you have the floor.

Rinor Jani [00:04:18] “Hello Everyone! Thank you, Cairo for opening up the floor. It has been an honor to work with you on Storytelling With A Purpose so far. I was kindly asked to co-lead this new initiative to give other youth and young professionals an opportunity to share more about their impactful work and inspire others to make a difference in local and global communities. I’m really looking forward to seeing youth across the world share more about their impactful and life changing work. Ms. Aya Chebbi, it is a true honor to meet you and have you join us for our first interview series launch. I’ve been greatly inspired by your relentless work with African youth across the continent and Diaspora. With infinite gratitude, we are so grateful to have you join us today. I would like to share two quotes by Nelson Mandela:

- “As we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.”
- “What counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived. It is what difference we have made to the lives of others that will determine the significance of the life we lead.”

Thank you again and I kindly give the floor back to Cairo.”

Cairo Eubanks [00:05:43] Thank you so much. We are starting our interview series with monthly interviews with incredible guests like Aya! Our ultimate goal is to have a combination of monthly interviews and audio submissions from community members and students just like you who are passionate about taking action and want to share your story to inspire others! Today, we are featuring the story of an action storyteller named Aya Chebbi. Miss Aya Chebbi is a multi award-winning Pan African feminist. She rose to prominence as a voice for democracy and shot to global fame as a political blogger during the 2010-2011 Tunisia's revolution. She served as the first-ever African Youth Special Envoy on Youth and the youngest diplomat at the African Union Commission Chair Persons Cabinet. In her role, she met and advocated for over 30 heads of state and governments and to over 160 global leaders on the youth agenda in Africa and the Diaspora, which resulted in policy changes, continentally and globally, and an increase in youth appointments nationally. She has mobilized youth through the Silencing the Guns campaign, which is the African Union's largest youth campaign and main platform on youth peace and security agenda and her role. She has also widely mobilized young women, resulting in the first of its

kind Africa Young Women's Manifesto. She has curated the internationally acclaimed concept of intergenerational leadership and engaged millions of young people during the COVID-19 pandemic documented in the Africa Youth League policy paper. It is truly a pleasure to have you on our podcast and to be our first interviewee.

Aya Chebbi [00:07:38] Thank you both so much. And what a generous introduction, and congratulations on this initiative! I mean, when I saw it's youth-led. I couldn't help but accept to come on board and just join you for this exciting conversation. So thank you.

Cairo Eubanks [00:07:55] We can't wait to dig right into learning more about your story, what you are doing now, and just to inspire many of our listeners today. So the first question we have for you is: What is the story behind you becoming the African Union Youth Envoy, and how did this position or role change your life?

Aya Chebbi [00:08:17] Well, I mean, the position was not created when I started my activism, so it really came as something I think natural to me [and] the next step in what I [have been] doing [over] the past decade. I started activism during Tunisia's Revolution in 2010-2011, as you said at the start. From there, I started to travel across the continent and support youth-led movements. And I think especially for me as someone who comes from Tunisia and North Africa, which is usually disconnected from the continent, it was a long journey, right? It was a long journey to [truly] rally young people around a pan-African vision or a new pan-African vision. [This was] from this North African young woman who really believes that if we unite as a continent, we can really do miracles. And I think that really established a big constituency for me on the African continent. So when the call for the Youth Envoy came out, I thought, OK, this is a great platform to use and actually do something within the system. I think most young people are great at mobilization, great at organizing, great at campaigning, but usually [they are] out of the system. So we are in masses, in civil society, in social entrepreneurship, and other spaces. But when you can [look at] governing structures [and] inter-governmental spaces, we're not there yet. And I think it was more of a personal challenge to me. If I am really trying to challenge the status quo, trying to change governance as a young [leader] to be meeting the needs of youth rights, then I need to be within [the structure]. And I think that's how I decided to take up the challenge. But it was an open application. 700 young people applied from across Africa [were] shortlisted, and it was a long process. [It was] a panel of 14 people. [It was] scary. But in the end, I mean, I was appointed, and I was selected. And I'm very proud of the process because I think we lack transparent processes in inter-governmental spaces [as to] why or how youth get into leadership positions that they deserve. And I always tell young people the story that you can also get to a leadership position you deserve by merit. It doesn't have to be related to anything else. If you really put yourself forward and your vision out there and you really just climb the ladder because you want to serve. It's not a position for prestige or, you know, being a young diplomat or all of that. If you really are there to serve, if you have your mission and understand what you're here to do, these positions are just titles. It's just a platform, it's just a vehicle of change. So that's what was for me, the role of the Youth Envoy, and I hope I did some small changes during the two years of my mandate.

Cairo Eubanks [00:11:13] Well, judging by the body of work that you were able to create during your time as a Youth Envoy, I can safely say—I know I can speak for myself, but I'm sure that—Rinor and

many more would agree with me in saying that you really did create a lot of progress and development in this area. So, job well done. And I wanted to tell you that based on the interviews that I watched just to prepare for this exciting opportunity to speak with you, one thing that you really said that stood out to me is that we are "not the leaders of tomorrow, but we are the leaders of today." [You also shared that we should be] making sure that we are aware of the part of the power that we can harness today and not just wait until we have a few more years under our belt or more experience under our belt to take action. Instead, what we have can be sufficient to at least make a start. I wanted to ask you, was there anything that you wanted to say about what I just said in terms of that quote that you said in one of the interviews?

Aya Chebbi [00:12:20] Yeah, I mean, I said that a long, long time ago. I'm happy now that everyone is saying that we're not the leaders of tomorrow or the leaders, even the older guys in leadership are now saying, "You're not the leaders of tomorrow." So I think in discourse, that's great. But [what] I really meant is this concept of intergenerational co-leadership. There is a perception from, you know, the older generation that young people are this mass [of people] who take to the streets and who want change now and who want to take over leadership and disrupt. And there is this perception from young people that maybe we're not ready to lead. A lot of young people are very much not into politics, not into governance, but also perceive power as something that is corrupt and that is led by old men. And so really, the concept of intergenerational co-leadership is of seeing ourselves now as leaders in our own spaces, [as leaders] in our own right. It's not about one generation or the other. It's about us co-leading now. It's about us navigating the system and understanding the system, so that we can be able to transform it [and] digitalize it so [that] we can be able to really disrupt [it] on a mass scale. And disruption is not necessarily something you know, negative. We need change. We cannot run away from change. Every era has its own challenges, and we cannot come to a 21st-century education with 20th-century tools, right? So that idea of, you know, this dichotomy or this tension or crisis among generations of understanding leadership. I think it's what we need to break. So when we say we are the leaders of today, it means that we can be in Parliament, that we can be in boardrooms, that we can have a seat at the table. [We're not just to tick a box], but actually to contribute, to provide a solution, to execute. But it doesn't have to be over the youth space where the young people are doing their own thing, and then the decision-makers are doing their own thing. No, young people should be in every single space because we are affected by every single decision. So it doesn't make sense that any table doesn't have youth voices and youth decisions and youth ideas, and youth disruption. It's just the right thing to do. So I am really happy to see the past two years people are more receptive to this idea of co-leadership rather than, you know, all the youth taking to the streets and then the leadership is completely disconnected from the demands of young people. I think that's where we should heed across generations and as a collaboration.

Cairo Eubanks [00:14:58] Well, said! Thank you for sharing that, and the next question I have for you is what obstacles, if any, did you face and overcome while in the role of African Union Envoy?

Aya Chebbi [00:15:12] I think it's the challenges of the everyday young person, because people think that when you are, you know, when you have that kind of access because you have the highest position on youth, in the biggest intergovernmental institution in Africa. [They remember that the African Union has] 55 member states and [that is a] huge union. And then they think, "OK, that's it." [That they think then] have access and you can make the change. [They think] that you have decision power. But you know, the fact that you're young and you're female if you enter any room, already the challenges start! And that's

why I promote co-leadership, because I remember in many cases, I had to really rely on the elders in the room who believe in [the] youth agenda, who would champion the youth agenda to really carry me with them. I had a lot of meetings where doors were closed in my face. I had a lot of bilaterals where I wasn't allowed in. A lot of the gatekeepers who look at me and be like, "What is she doing here? How did she come here?" And when, you know, when they see how young you are...And it is the elders who believe in the youth agenda that, you know, it happened to me that in many cases, people would leave their seat at a panel or their seat at a meeting...And, you know, bring me in to sit there because others didn't recognize that it is important to have the Youth Envoy say what she has to say. Some didn't know that the Youth Envoy brings the tons and tons of consultations and papers we write and, you know, the engagement with young people that we have. So the challenges are endless [regardless of if] you are in a small organization or [the biggest] inter-governmental organization. [To some extent, the context is different between] the position of an intern or a position of Envoy. The degree of the challenge is different, but at the end of the day, it's about you being young. It's about your age and for you to earn, you know, the listening ears of the [elders] who see you just for your age (would require you to really show them the way). So I'm not here to prove anything. I'm going to just show you how you do it. And I think that's what I started to focus on when I saw that a lot of people just, you know, didn't accept you to see such a young person, you know, in these rooms. I mean most of my meetings have been full of old men at the table, you know? And so to challenge them and to explain to them why the hell you should care about your youthful population? Yeah. It [required] me to change my strategy and to understand also where they come from and how to really have that communication and that conversation. I think some of the other challenges we really face as young people besides access is really [lack of] action at the end. So you can talk as much as you want and you can, you know, make as many conferences as you want...as many consultations, as many of these forums, on these platforms. But at the end of the day, [it's toughest to] push for political will, especially on the youth agenda. A lot of people want to act on peace and security, want to act on what they think is the priority, right? But they don't connect all these issues. They don't think they are intersectional, that they all affect the youth agenda. The youth agenda actually should be central to everything. So I think that has been my biggest and toughest job: to actually make sure decision-makers start thinking intersectional[ly] and not think of their priorities as linear. You know, when you come and [you are] the new AU Chair of the Year and focus on one theme of the year, you need to understand that Silencing the Guns is [not just] about climate justice, it's about education. It's about corruption; it's about all of these things that young people [demand]; and then not think of youth issues as one separate topic. So I would say challenges are both in terms of advocacy but also just being seen as a young, young female who is there to disrupt things and shake things up. [laughs]

Because of my role as a Youth Envoy, Goal 17 (Partnership for the goals) [resonates with me] because every single goal is important and again, because of what I was trying to drive as intersectionality on the issues. Some issues are not linear. Events should not be linear. Policy should not be linear to one thing, because gender equality is definitely very much linked to climate justice and climate justice is very much linked to corruption. So I think that has been my role, [which is creating] partnership[s] for the goals and really bringing all these actors together on the same platform. Because at the end of the day, it's not every day that a young person will meet an EU commissioner, meet an Ambassador in Addis, meet a diplomat, or meet a youth minister--and really be able to have the opportunity to challenge them, really be able to voice their grievances. And I think that's the platform I tried to facilitate, which is bringing all these diverse actors and making sure that decision-makers are in the room listening to what young people have

to say. And [we have to evaluate the way that] we host spaces. [It's traditionally] very much top-down, became very much about written speeches. "You have two minutes. And this is it." No, don't box young people; let them express themselves because then [our presence] becomes a show. We're not running a show here. It's a dialogue. [If] we really want partnerships for the goal, we really need honest, intergenerational dialogues. And these dialogues shouldn't be restricted to this UN-ish way of doing things or an AU-ish way of doing things, or NGO-ish way of doing things. No, we need to have honest conversations, [open] the floor for young people to take a seat. [These are] some of the things that I'm really proud of doing. Before COVID, when you used to meet physically, [we used] to have these intergenerational dialogues done in a fishbowl style. [In these dialogues, we would] have decision-makers sit on a panel and I, a young person, [would] come to take the chair and I [would] challenge them and they [would] have to respond. Because they're sitting there from start to end, I also used to like to give many closing remarks to the high level instead of the opening [remarks]. They have to sit there and listen to the whole thing, and then they [would] have to interact with it. [When] you follow the protocol [in COVID] [it's] now in Zoom, someone sends a video, and that's it. No, that's not dialogue. That's not engagement. If we want to partner for the goals, we need an authentic, really intergenerational dialogue where young people can express themselves. But I have to say, the Goal for Gender Equality (SDG 5) is also the closest to my heart because, in my eyes, the youth movement and the women's feminist movement intersect in many ways. We can learn a lot from the feminist movement [and the] struggles and achievements in the youth movement. So I think of gender equality as more [what] we can learn for youth rights. We can achieve more by emerging with the gender agenda as well. I have also worked a lot on the Gender Equality Goal.

Cairo Eubanks [00:22:58] Thank you so much for sharing, and I will say that Sustainable Development Goal Number 17 was the one that I immediately thought of for you, so I was happy to [hear your answer]. That being said, I wanted to ask you [to expound upon] what you were sharing [about] the United Nations [for] the future. I'm thinking about the future. The United Nations will turn 120 [years old] in 2045. So we wanted to know: what is your vision to ensure that young people are fully integrated and can participate in the structures of the UN and other international platforms? And how can we use technology to ensure that young people are integrated and that their voices are amplified?

Aya Chebbi [00:23:44] Yes, absolutely. [We've] been very much heavily involved in the UN75 and the whole process of reviewing what the UN is, what the UN should be, and the future of the UN with youth. And I think, well, the progress we've made the past decade [is that] we've been fighting for [our voice]. The struggle of young people has been a struggle for voice; we don't feel like we're being heard, we don't feel listened to. We don't feel a lot of people are in many of these meetings. We feel [that] the inter-governmental spaces [are] closed. But I think now we need to move to [another strategy] because we managed to get you and your delegates. We managed to get you at different meetings, advisory structures, councils, and task forces. Now, what we need to really focus on is called leadership because it's not enough to have one Youth Envoy. It's not enough to have, you know, one office dealing with youth. It's not enough to have a youth strategy for each of the UN agencies. We need young people to be in masses within these structures. And if we say, you know, we need 50 or even more than 50 [Youth leaders], we have the right. It's a legitimate right because we are, you know, more than 50 percent of the world's population. So it makes total sense that we leave these institutions from all different levels of management and leadership. So I think [ideally] I'd like to see [more young faces] because I think with more young

people inside, we don't have to make a call for innovation, you know, to bring to the UN because innovation then comes [as a result of having youth], right? You see, all these UN programs are looking [for ideas] and something to really make a transformation. But if we make the UN full of change-makers inside, then we don't need to look outside for transformation. I think the UN has a lot to do [internally to] achieve and deliver its mission outside, because the UN is here to really deliver a peaceful, just, and equal world, right? But if [within the UN] young people feel excluded...we just came out of [the] Generation Equality Forum in Paris. And if you listen to the young people who [have been] part of the process for the past two years, they still feel excluded. They still feel they're not listened to. They still feel that they are stuck in a box. Their demands are not in the final negotiations. They're not sitting in those closed rooms. They need to sit [in these closed rooms]. There is a lot of transformation for us to do within the UN and build within the UN, and I think it can only happen with the innovative power of young people.

Cairo Eubanks [00:26:30] I could not agree with you more, and I believe that everyone on the Youth Steering Committee and all of those people who have been at the forefront (in terms of representing youth in their regions, countries or even their organizations) would definitely agree with you. And so we want to make sure that we are putting an asterisk there. We're emphasizing what you've shared with us and this idea of making sure that we are on the inside and that there is not only a seat at the table, but several seats at the table for different perspectives that [we as youth] may have. In the spirit of Nelson Mandela, we wanted to ask you: If Mandela were alive today, what message do you think he would share with youth around the world?

Aya Chebbi [00:27:18] I would hope Mandela would tell us that you're a badass generation. I mean, we did the revolution for God's sake! In the past decade, young people have been on the streets unafraid to demand their rights. They've been on the frontline of innovation. I mean, especially if Mandela was [alive] at the time of COVID, he would have told the global leaders to listen more to young people because young people have been on the front line of pandemic response, innovation, and community engagement. Yeah, Mandela would be looking up to this generation because it has a lot of potential. And I think he would spend more time talking to global leaders to make them listen, actually, because many of them failed us. And in this pandemic, [they are] still failing us and failing to understand how global solidarity is important. [They are still] failing to understand that we are a generation that wants a borderless world. Maybe that's why we migrated online: because it has no visa as it's borderless. It's a space where we can imagine [a new world]. Then we can, you know, innovate. We are a generation that wants e-governance [and] e-commerce. We are a generation that likes multicultural spaces of work. It's not a big deal for us. If we do our work online, go physically to an office, or we work with someone in my country or someone globally, [it's not a big deal] because we are so interconnected. Global leaders don't understand that yet. [They] don't understand that it is time for [us] to grasp diversity and to grasp the vision of this generation so [we] can contribute to it. Because at the end of the day, whoever is in power right now is contributing to our future. So we are the ones who need to decide that. [Global leaders'] contribution [are] welcome, but only if [they] really understand our vision. And I think what we need to make the global leaders [want and understand] that the future we want is about freedom. This is the future we want, whether it's a borderless world, an interconnected world, [or it's about] our individual and collective rights. It's about our own freedom to exist, to become whoever we want to be. And I think Mandela would [give us] such a message of freedom. He was a fighter for freedom, his country, his vision, [and] for the world. And so, I think the message of freedom would resonate with our generation.

Cairo Eubanks [00:29:54] ...A lot of the issues that have been brought up, as you wisely said in one of your recent interviews, the pandemic has really just exacerbated and [has] shown a lot and exposed some of the issues that already existed in terms of infrastructure that were needed to be already identified and actually put into place. But that being said, accountability is one of the key factors that we have been pushing here within the Steering Committee. I can see that you do that in your work as well. And as you were sharing about the Sustainable Development Goals, we do want to connect your story to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. For some people who have never heard of the Sustainable Development Goals or don't even know what SDGs are about, the United Nations created these to be an urgent call for action by all developing and developed countries and a global partnership. The Sustainable Development Goals range from poverty to partnerships to achieve the goals and focus on improving health and education, reducing inequalities, tackling climate change, and preserving our environment. And you can actually find out more information about the Sustainable Development Goals by visiting sdgs.un.org. You and I spoke about gender and gender equality, as well as global partnerships and global partnerships, [which is] SDG or Sustainable Development Goal number 17. [It's] this idea of having local, national, and global partnerships to achieve all of these 16 previous goals. [SDG 17 is] actually my favorite Sustainable Development Goal, because it's true, it really encompasses all areas of society. So with each story told, our goal is to link these ideas, innovations and solutions to the United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals. [Aya,] I have to say that your story is truly incredible and inspiring, and we're just incredibly honored to have you as our first guest on Storytelling with a purpose. We truly applaud all the work that you've done to be a catalyst for change. I mean, you are so humble for all of your work, the strength and resilience to get you to where you are now. Just applaud you for that. We want to thank you so much for being here.

Aya Chebbi [00:32:18] Thank you, thank you very much. And maybe because of today I love his quotes. "It always seems impossible until it's done," and I think nothing is impossible for our generation to do the next, you know, in 2030, we will look back and be like, "It's done?!"

Cairo Eubanks [00:32:35] You know you're right. It might feel like it's difficult now, but we realize that it just takes one step every time that we take a step towards the future that we have in mind. We'll look back and say, "Wait a second, how did we get here?!" And that's truly incredible to think about. That is. So thank you for sharing that. We have just one minute or two minutes more before we wrap up. You're free to stay, if you can, but we understand you are busy and have other meetings as well. We just wanted to thank you. Just, thank you for being here.

Aya Chebbi [00:33:15] Thank you, thank you so much. Thank you to both of you, and all of the best.

Cairo Eubanks [00:33:19] Thank you. We wish to keep you posted on our success when it [launches], obviously.

Announcements and Youth Resources

Co-host Cairo Eubanks makes announcements and invites young leaders to submit content.

Cairo Eubanks: [00:33:27] Now for the next segment of our interview series: Here are upcoming events at the United Nations that you can register to attend/participate in!

The following items are highlighted. We have the ACTNow Campaign. To learn about individual actions that you can make to promote a healthier planet you can visit www.un.org/actnow. That's www.un.org/actnow. And you can actually log those actions and have them counted.

Now for our audio submissions. Young leaders, we invite you to submit your stories on how you are inspiring change within your local, national, and global communities. This could be anything from supporting a community organization to spearheading initiatives that you're passionate about that align with the Sustainable Development Goals. You can visit SDGs.UN.org to learn more about the Sustainable Development Goals. That is SDGs.UN.org. You can also click on the submission form shared in the description box and submit a 3–5-minute recording that answers the questions on the form. I promise that it's a very easy to fill out. These submissions will help us better understand the work you're doing to impact change and some recordings may appear on future episodes and potentially even on our digital sites.

Before closing, I have to thank the amazing Youth Steering Committee for believing in this youth voices series and for including it as part of our initiatives and programming. Specifically, I need to thank our incredible Storytelling with a Purpose Sub-Committee for bringing this program to reality, contributing to the marketing, promotion, and editing of the content to launch this program with success. Storytelling with a Purpose wouldn't be where it is today if it were not for this Sub-Committee.

Alright well thank you for listening to Storytelling with a Purpose! This has been Cairo Eubanks, have an action-filled and inspiring rest of your day and week.

Concluding remarks by Co-host Rinor Jani [00:35:43]

Rinor Jani, PTP Representative to the UN, Pathways To Peace, Committee Member, Civil Society Youth Representatives Steering Committee, DGC, Co-Host of Storytelling with a Purpose gives final remarks.

“Thank you Aya for joining us for our first episode and for sharing your truthful wisdom and insight on how we can make an impact throughout the world. Thank you everyone for tuning in to the Storytelling With A Purpose Youth Interview Series!

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