

## Resilience: Solutions for a more peaceful world with Scott Weber, President of Interpeace

### Episode 2: A conversation with Amb. Fred Ngoga-Gateretse

**Scott:** When COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the WHO African leaders took decisive actions. As the epicenter shifted from Asia, Europe, and North America, infection rates across Africa remained mercifully low but for how long. This crisis has revealed, in fact, exasperated structural inequalities in our societies that are at the origin of most conflicts and violence. Is this more than just a health crisis? Is this a crisis of the social contract? Do we need a new social contract? And how will any of this affect the African continent? There is no one better to answer these questions than our guest today Amb. Fred Ngoga Gateretse, the Head of the Conflict Prevention and Early Warning division of the African Union. Welcome, Amb. Fred and Thanks for joining us.

**Amb Fred:** Thank you so much. Indeed these are incredible times that we live in but in the African continent, we had a 3 pillar approach. First, we addressed this from a health perspective. We took measures early on, as you've seen in many African countries, there have been lockdowns trying to contain the spread of the virus. And compared to other countries, the numbers remain relatively low in the African continent. So we took an aggressive approach visa vice health because we don't have the same health infrastructure. But we also took an economic approach to this where we appointed 5 envoys to go around the world and focus on mobilizing resources to deal with the economic impact of the crisis. We need between 100 - 150 Billion Dollars to actually deal with the pandemic on the African continent and so these envoys have been working around the clock to try to mobilize the resources.

There have also been very significant security implications, and that's what we've been working on particularly. One of the things we have seen is that because of the lockdown, there has been an increase in crime in the continent, we have seen gender-based violence on the rise, the truth of the matter is that this has also affected our efforts to carry out mediation efforts or implement peace agreements that were already in the works it has taken a backseat. It has affected us in Libya, CAR, South Sudan, and elsewhere as everyone has shifted their focus on dealing with COVID. Unfortunately for us, the terrorists have not given us a break because they have stepped up their attack as you've seen in terms of the attack that was carried out by Boko Haram, Al Shabaab, and other groups. So we've had to also continue to respond to the terrorist threats that we're faced with. For example, we carried out military operations in Somali, we are in the preparation of deploying 3000 forces in the Sahel. So we have not lowered our guard and we remain heavily engaged. We have also seen, because of this new working methods, cybersecurity has become an important aspect we have been paying attention to. Hackers have been very smart in terms of taking people's data and using it for different crimes so we've been working on that. I would also like to highlight something you said which is extremely important it's about this new social contract.

I think that after COVID, we will have to rethink the state in Africa in the sense that we can no longer just be talking about growth for the sake of growth, we can no longer have a focus on infrastructure without putting the wellbeing of the human being at the center of what we're doing. People no longer want to serve those who govern, they want those who govern to serve them. People will want their leaders to listen to them, we will need a new social contract in terms of what is important to us, our security, health, education... the roads and everything else is important but they can come later on but we are going to

have to catch up with decades of neglect of our social fabric and our health infrastructure in a matter of months so yes we are going to need a new social contract.

**Scott:** The food and agricultural organization and Oxfam have both issued reports in the last couple of days predicting tens of millions of more Africans may become food insecure as a result of the COVID pandemic and we've both seen that food distribution efforts in Kenya and Nigeria have turned violent already and that is already bad enough. What other forms of conflict might be sparked by this crisis and how do we prevent them?

**Amb. Fred:** Yes, and now we have floods and the second wave of locusts which is coming our way, we have COVID, yellow fever and we even have Ebola coming back again in eastern DRC. So all this is going to create some sort of uncertainty but what we are trying to do now is to try to address this from a local perspective, right now because of the limitations in terms of what we can do, we can only work with the locals to try to see how they can best respond. So have been focusing on providing training to the locals, we have been seeing stigmatization, in some countries, people have also died because they were accused of bringing COVID into villages and neighborhoods so sensitization using women, youth so the people can understand what this virus is all about. And quite frankly, we're also telling people that the issue that they had before dwarfs compared to the threat this pandemic poses to our common humanity and that everything should be set aside.

We have been working to secure a cease-fire, working with different organizations such as the center for humanitarian dialogue, CMI, and others and this was possible. The armed groups who had been causing problems in CAR have announced succession facilities we have secured through CHD succession of facilities in ... Cameroon. We are working on telling people that "we have our common humanity here that is at threat these are unusual times, we can no longer afford conflicts, we all need to focus our attention on survival. " Now, because we have all these threats that are coming at the same time, it will require extraordinary measures, it's not going to be business as usual and we are all going to have to act in unison.

**Scott:** One of the biggest problems we're also seeing is what the WHO calls the 'infodemic', the viral misinformation that is accompanying this pandemic and the rumors that are circulating are far more difficult to get rid of than we thought. How do we combat this viral misinformation? How do we get ahead of this, especially at the local level?

**Amb. Fred:** It is a major problem. For example, yesterday we received reports that Al Shabaab is saying that AMISOM forces in Somalia are the once bring the coronavirus in Somalia. Like I said earlier, we can, of course, fight misinformation online but also community sensitization is important. But then again we are also faced with the issues of social distancing which is difficult on the African continent. In some contexts where we have IDPs and refugees, we have about 30 million of them spread across the African continent so you can imagine that it is very difficult but we have to do it. Misinformation/ fake news that is circulating about this virus, is not only affecting the people in the rural areas, it is also affecting the middle class and intellectuals. Just think about the amount of information you've received on your phone about what coronavirus is all about, all these conspiracy theories, or the vaccines that people are proposing. So it is there and that we have to fight it hard but the best way to do that is to get the public officials to be candid and transparent in terms of the information that they provide.

One other aspect of this is the fact that people are not asking about is that people don't have faith in the health officials to provide them with the real numbers of what is exactly happening and how much it has spread. When you have countries that are telling you they have only 4 cases it's quite suspicious and their neighbors have 200 or so. Last but not least we have a problem with religious leaders, we have to mobilize them so they can work with us. We saw in Tanzania, churches were packed and then the numbers spiked to the point where they had to impose some severe lockdowns. Imams in mosques who are fighting against lockdowns and people wanting to go to pray. We need all segments of society to work with us to contain the misinformation.

**Scott:** One of the things we realize is that people don't necessarily trust the information they trust the sources of information. It is important to build relationships with those most trusted in society including at the local level, in order for them to relay the science to their own communities because they are the ones who are most listened to. The latest data from the afro barometer about trust in governments, trust in local leaders, and trust in religious leaders and it is relatively low on the continent so indeed greater transparency but also building on those people can trust will be a critical part of the strategy. We worked on the Ebola response in eastern DRC and the biggest obstacle to that response process was actually mistrust that the communities had in their government and in the international community and that was exasperated by the way that the humanitarian response, the health response was designed in the earlier months before it turned around.

How can we prevent a similar type of reaction and rejection of a vaccine when it does become available? When it comes to distribution? There are a lot of rumors about a vaccine about how it is dangerous and will kill people, there is a lot of resistance already and it doesn't even exist. How can we build enough trust so we can be able to get that to not be a source of tension?

**Amb. Fred:** Our governments are going to have to work hard and we have the African CDC now for the continent and most people have trusted that information which has been quite reliable. I think that if we have the African CDC saying that this is the vaccine that should work, people would have a little bit more faith in the event they don't trust their own government. But we have also another challenge and it is peculiar to the African continent, people are getting sick and they are not going to the doctor because when you look at the interventions when a case is declared somewhere the people get scared when they see people coming covered with masks. In western culture, people will find that to be ok but not in our case. People are afraid of even saying they're sick so now we are having cases of people staying at home and not reporting to the doctors.

The other thing is about testing, you can only flatten the curve if you have a health care system. Our health care systems are still weak so when it comes to testing, they are only testing those who have shown symptoms and that is the same thing in the UK. It is still a challenge in terms of knowing how many people have been infected. I also want to talk about African resilience, about a few months ago we were dealing with the malaria pandemic, in Burundi, almost a 100,000 people were affected by malaria, we have also been dealing with cholera and yellow fever and others and yet life went on. So I think that this pandemic is unique because of the way it spreads and how it affects us but I have no doubt that we will be able to also weather this storm and live with it for the foreseeable future taking all the necessary precautionary measures.

**Scott:** You were mentioning ceasefires, we've just helped President Tshisekedi to manage a cease-fire in eastern DRC in South Kivu, which is still holding and there is a cease-fire monitoring committee which is going out to all the different armed groups to make sure they continue to adhere to this despite the COVID crisis because they believe so strongly not only is that ceasefire important but if there is greater conflict managing the health intervention and the health crisis will become impossible and that's why the work that you and other peacemakers are doing is so critical because it's about preventing a vicious circle. Trying to manage this health crisis in the midst of chaos. We've also seeing election being postponed, the executive director of the human rights watch Kenneth Roth recently warned that in many countries governments might seek to instrumentalize the state of emergencies to further erode the path towards democracy. Are you worried about that in Africa?

**Amb. Fred:** We have about 15 elections which are about to happen in the African continent and we've had some elections or referendum that have happened amidst the crisis. The reality is that you have 2 tails of this, one is those who say let's postponed the election seek an extension until we weather this storm, that is causing problems. As we speak, in CAR there is a huge debate that is ongoing but it is not a problem that is unique to CAR, we have Cote D'Ivoire, Burkina Faso. And others are saying we should go ahead with the elections otherwise, some regimes may entrench themselves. But what is at the heart of all of this is we are saying, this is unique times if you have an extension, seek consensus with the different stakeholders, and on the way forward people are not unreasonable. And if you are going to have elections then you need to take the necessary measures because we saw the head of the electoral commission in Guinea who passed away from the coronavirus. We have an upcoming election that is happening in Burundi, they have lower levels of infection but there are ways in which you can take measures. So yes it is an issue but we are advocating is that there is no one size fits all solution but consensus must be the norm in terms of how to proceed.

**Scott:** A divided community can't handle anything a united community can. Coming to a divided community at the international level and the crisis of multilateralism which is only going to make this more complicated we have an America first policy, we have a China first policy, a Russia first policy it's almost like we have a pandemic of a 'me first'. With the closure of borders in Africa and some heightened nationalism are you worried about a Nigeria first, Kenya first, Egypt first, South Africa first policy setting in or on the contrary are you seeing the African Union's dynamics keeping the countries working together and multilateralism being strong?

**Amb. Fred:** Some may say that countries will start looking more inwards and even avoid paying their dues to multilateral organizations but I say no we should look at it the other way around, actually now more than ever they're going to need the support of multilateral organizations because not a single country can address these problems alone. So as they pivot and shift their budget towards health care they will still need to run a country, they will still need resources, they still need to train, build their capacity and this is where I think multilateral organizations if they play it well, they have a unique opportunity to become relevant again to their member states. For me, in the case of the African continent, we might see this. For example, we have South Africa which is creating ventilators, and these ventilators we may need them in Malawi and elsewhere so it is only through cooperation that we will be able to get that. We have Rwanda which is producing its own ventilators as well. So the Coronavirus might help us to breathe a new lease of life into pan Africanism rather than contrary because we will need to work together. Yesterday there was a meeting of the ECOWAS heads of states virtually and they agreed on a

certain set of measures for the ECOWAS region. Recently there was an IGAD extraordinary summit and they've also agreed on a set of measures for the IGAD region and EAC is about to do the same. So we are seeing more solidarity on the African continent than we are seeing elsewhere. Look at Ethiopian Airlines, they have distributed the kits and all the equipment from the Jack Ma foundation across the 55 African countries that we have. I'm more optimistic about what this will do to the African continent in terms of solidarity, we might see a bigger role for multilateral organizations.

**Scott:** I think that Africa can probably lead the way on a new commitment to multilateralism globally by demonstrating its positive effects for its citizens. How is this affecting you as an individual, as a peacemaker, as a father, as a husband, and as a citizen?

**Amb. Fred:** A few weeks ago we went to have a meeting in Congo, Brazzaville on Libya and when we came back there was someone in our delegation who tested positive so I quarantined myself for 2 weeks. By the time that ended, I could not join my family my wife and daughter who are in Nairobi so I've been stuck at home in Addis Ababa but it's ok, we are adjusting to this new life and I've never worked this much as worked when I went to the office. It's also provided us with time for some rest because the traveling can take its toll but I'm quite happy with the way our African union has been responding. We've had 2 communique now on COVID. Yesterday we had a meeting on the Sahel with the Peace and Security Council. Our Commissioner for Peace and Security is constantly in meetings with different leaders. So we have continued to work just working from home and we've kept business going.

**Scott:** Your work has never been more important than it is now and you can count on the support of the full interpeace team in helping you achieve those objectives. Thanks for taking the time today and good luck.

**Amb. Fred:** Thank you so much and we hope we got our message across.