



Martti Ahtisaari, stepped down as President of Finland thirteen years ago, but at 76 he has seldom been as active and busy and is travelling the globe fulfilling his commitment to create and uphold peace and security.

After retiring from day to day politics in 2000, Ahtisaari has devoted himself to the [Crisis Management Initiative](#), which he founded and [The Elders](#), the exclusive club of former world leaders.

Ahtisaari who won the [Nobel Peace prize](#) in 2008, after he had formally joined the rank of retirees, is an excellent role model on the International day of older persons, which is celebrated worldwide today.

Mr. Ahtisaari, graciously accepted to discuss his life work and current projects with Johanna Lillqvist and Lassi Härmälä for the UNRIC website.

President Ahtisaari was born in 1937 and started his diplomatic career at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in Finland. He then moved on to international diplomacy and served as the UN commissioner for Namibia. In year 1994, he was elected President of Finland and served until the year 2000. After his term as President, he moved back to peace mediation and established the independent Crisis Management Initiative (CMI), an independent non-profit organization that works to prevent and resolve violent conflict in the world by involving all actors relevant to achieving sustainable peace.

The CMI's expertise lies in mediation, dialogue and capacity building efforts. President Ahtisaari's post-presidential activities have included serving in various high profile UN positions, including in Indonesia and Aceh, Iraq, the Horn of Africa and Kosovo. In year 2008 the former Finnish President was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize "[for his important efforts, on several continents and over more than three decades, to resolve international conflicts](#)". In year 2009, President Ahtisaari received the honor of joining the distinguished group, The Elders. The request was made by Nelson Mandela, a man President Ahtisaari "admires without reservation", and Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu. Today he continues his peace building efforts through many different engagements globally.

After your presidency you decided to return to peace mediation and the Crisis Management Initiative was established. Why did you feel it was important to establish a new organization?

After the Presidency, I decided that I wanted to stay in Finland and work with peace mediation; therefore, I had to establish a new office where I could attain the needed support.

This is not a one-person job, you need help. At the moment I am the chair of the board of the CMI and we have almost 80 competent staff members from many different nationalities. In addition, I have a small office of three staff members.

The CMI is highly valued, well known and appreciated in the world. What makes CMI such a well functioning organization?

The only way to achieve appreciation is through good quality work. CMI is just like any other workplace, when the quality of work is high, people will come to you for help.

Tuija Talvitie is the executive director of the CMI, and I give her full recognition, it is a pleasure to watch the activities from the board position.

The reason I have my own small office, is because I have many other engagements as well, that are not part of the CMI. Having said that, many of the engagements intertwine; sometimes The Elders will call on the CMI for its expertise in certain issues. It is a very flexible arrangement.

What are important aspects for the CMI and for peace mediation in general to consider?

The CMI must openly and honestly evaluate a conflict, whether we can be of any assistance and whether there is an added value in our involvement. Many countries turn to non-governmental organizations for mediation if they do not want to make the conflict international by including the UN. But I have noticed that, even though we might not officially involve the UN, we can quietly turn to them and ask for guidance.

One thing I noticed early on in my mediation career is that, no matter how good you are at mediating, there will be no results unless the main players are supportive. Crucial countries, such as members of the UN Security Council, and especially the USA, have to support the process to reach a successful outcome.

Have you ever in your career felt that a challenge is insurmountable?

I have never felt like we aren't able to achieve anything. But, there have been frustrating times. For example, my first UN experience in mediating in Africa in Namibia. I was chosen as the commissioner in 1976 and we only got access to the country in 1989 to monitor the elections that led to Namibia's independence. The experience taught me patience and the importance of cooperation.

It is a good example on what international cooperation at its best can achieve. In the mid 80's, I started to feel that it was time to return to Finland and start working for the government instead, but my African friends said “you are not going anywhere, we are seeing this through together.” And we did.

Has your Nordic background been helpful in your work and what kind of added value can the Nordics bring to mediation?

My whole career is based on Nordic cooperation. During my time in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs the Nordic cooperation was crucial, I learnt more about the cooperation than of anything else during that time.

Nordics know a lot and share information; it is hard for me to imagine my work without the other Nordics. We have the same values. Our development model is a fair one and can be demonstrated proudly to the world. Being Nordic has been a huge asset for me in international cooperation.

You have worked at the UN, CMI and in The Elders; do these intuitions have anything in common?

One often hears that you have to be neutral as a mediator, but I have always tried to say that it isn't true. In a neutral role, one cannot influence. I have always stressed, that a mediator should first and foremost be honest. There are situations where both parties have certain important issues that need to be solved, by addressing these issues honestly negotiations can move along. Being neutral would not help the process, but both parties need to feel that they are getting honest treatment.

The other common denominator is my pickiness with hiring my colleagues. I try to find the best co-workers and turn to them time and time again. One has to realize that being generally good at something is not enough; there is always someone who has better detailed know-how of the issue.

What kind of issues are on The Elders’ agenda?

During our last meeting in May, we decided to hold a meeting in each capital of the permanent member states of the Security Council. These are important meetings for us, especially considering that the negotiations between Israel and Palestine are gaining momentum. I feel the efforts made are the most serious ones in solving the conflict in the recent decades. We are also discussing about other visits to North Korea and to Myanmar and we support numerous other activities, such as the “ [Girls, not Brides](#) ” campaign for girls’ education.

What do your future plans look like?

After receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 2008, my calendar has been full. I do not envy those in charge of it! All recent laureates have been high-level people with little extra time to share. I should almost ask the Nobel committee to make sure that the next laureate is someone who has time to take on all these requests and engagements! I travel a lot and my fall is extremely busy. This is what it is like, the life of a “retired” 76-year-old.