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Domestic Public Diplomacy for Small Island States ^[1]

For Pacific island states, engaging the public in foreign affairs can complement critical public diplomacy campaigns focused on climate change and strengthen youth skill development. Domestic public diplomacy is a way to hone public relations that influences a state's image overseas. The study and practice of public diplomacy focuses on state communications with foreign publics to promote its national interests, while the domestic dimension is less examined.

This article develops five ways states can strengthen public engagement based on the work of the [U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy](#), [Australian Institute of International Affairs](#)  and [Netherlands Institute of International Relations](#) . Examples from Samoa demonstrate how strategies have been, and can be, adapted by Pacific island states through partnerships. The government uses traditional and new media to promote its messaging and activities, notably through Savali (which launched the online version in 2011), [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) pages and [Official Web Portal](#). It is one of the few national governments with a website and official releases in multiple languages (Samoan and English).

1. Use the unique power and influence of government to bring together stakeholders and create a feedback loop. Governments wield significant convening power for legitimacy and resources. Many countries' domestic outreach programs include conferences and working groups, or bring student groups into a ministry of foreign affairs. Consistent public dialogue should improve public awareness and understanding of foreign policy, government priorities and international issues.

Samoa: Youth Engagement

In the context of Sustainable Development Goals, youth engagement is critical for small island states. The [Samoa National Youth Council](#) is an active group that uses its [Facebook](#) and links to other organizations to promote programs and youth participation. It is supported by the government's [initiative](#) to tackle youth unemployment and received a [public diplomacy grant](#) from the U.S.

2. Create "Citizen Diplomacy" opportunities for self-sustaining networking. States should bring foreign and domestic communities together and let connections blossom. Public diplomacy programs help states identify and sustain local leaders. With online tools, groups can collaborate even after exchanges finish, creating a forum for new ideas. Alumni of programs such as Sister Cities International can play a role in future outreach, strengthening democratic involvement in foreign policymaking.

Samoa: External Partnerships

Relying on international partnerships due to its small economy, Samoa has been a haven for international and community engagement. For example, in March 2016, the Internews Earth Journalist Network trained Samoa's journalist community on Samoa's policy on climate change and their place in the UNFCCC process and best practices for approaching different angles on climate stories.


3. Widen your reach with new media. Digital diplomacy provides multiple avenues for engagement. But, states must know the audience and capacity. Followers are not necessarily receptive to messaging, and media can be used to have conversations instead of talking at people. Additionally, domestic and international audiences can access the same information about policy. Yet, while the use of technology can create more opportunities for democracy and e-government, it can also reinforce existing power structures; there must be political will and understanding of gaps in the digital divide.

Samoa: Digital Diplomacy

Digital diplomacy is an area where Samoa can improve. In Samoa, Internet access is reported to be less than 30%. Digital diplomacy may be more effective for driving international attention as opposed to reaching local communities. Yet the government seeks to improve access. A project led by High Tech Youth Network was launched in March 2016 to address Samoa's school leavers and unemployment. The program intends to be "culturally authentic," transform village life and create a "Silicon Island."


4. Think creatively. Small budgets do not have to cramp engagement. Consider collaborative diplomacy, which includes local or international nonprofits or non-government organizations alongside local residents. Supporting opportunities for diaspora communities to connect back with their homeland can help stimulate ideas, new partnerships and international business opportunities. Nonetheless, sports diplomacy and traditional cultural exchanges can still be effective with the right partners.

Samoa: Sports Diplomacy

Sports diplomacy has been an underutilized but successful tool in the Pacific thanks to expatriate communities in Australia and New Zealand. In July 2015 for the first time, the rugby team Manu Samoa played the New Zealand All Blacks in Apia. The match was heralded  as having an unprecedented impact. And, after battles over resources and performance that included international campaigns (including from All Blacks players) the government recognized the importance of a strong Manu Samoa brand.

5. Mindfully use data-driven diplomacy. Small island states face challenges in data collection due to their meager National Statistical Offices and remote populations; particular approaches can create a distorted image. Governments should think beyond public opinion polling, and examine social and economic behaviors for different segments of the population. Also considering which platforms (workshops, online networks, cultural programs, etc.) make sense to engage with target communities can lead to a more appropriate domestic public diplomacy strategy.

Samoa: Research and Evaluation

Samoa has institutions for promoting good governance and community engagement that help the government understand the needs and capabilities of its citizens. In 2015, the Office of Ombudsman National Human Rights Institution released its first State of Human Rights Report  after community consultations, and the Prime Minister delivered a speech to media and government officials. The report discusses how Fa'asamoa principles relate to themes such as equality and respect and protection of vulnerable populations. The Human Rights Commission maintains a public outreach role to inform and monitor Samoa.


Engaging the public in foreign affairs through domestic public diplomacy brings positive returns. Community engagement will help build a base from which to pool the next generation of leaders and innovators (necessary where the youth population is double the global average) to continue international advocacy and action for the region. Furthermore, the Pacific is upgrading ICT infrastructure alongside growing regionalism. Thus as foreign affairs departments are becoming more transparent, non-state actors are engaging in foreign policymaking. States cannot contain their use of public diplomacy, but must conceive of domestic public diplomacy as a tool  of foreign policy and democratic decision-making.

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