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Child Centred Nations Will Not Happen Without Public Diplomacy ^[1]

If we want to see transformational change for children, by putting children at the center of policy design, budget allocations, and decision making, then public diplomats must step up as "Child Centred Champions."

When I founded this movement, we called for presidents, prime ministers and ambassadors to have the courage to declare that, for too long, children have been ignored, and that they commit to becoming child centred nations. I invited experts from around the world to help shape it with those who were working alongside children. We set a grand vision to see societal change on an international level; published an article as part of the Royal Society of Arts' 270th anniversary, which focused on courage; ran online events; and began engaging with government ministers. Recent efforts in Togo included meetings with two Cabinet Ministers, an event with 750+ people, and a TV show.

What is very clear? For this to gain further momentum and see a group of countries taking a leadership position on the global stage for the betterment of the lives of children, it needs those expressing interest to act. It needs to move from my desk and ripple through communities of social innovators, change makers, and public diplomats.

If we step back to consider the practice of public diplomacy, one distinction we can draw is direct collaboration with the home country, which in some cases receives funding to do so, versus citizen instigated and citizen driven, which is going to push for progress between two or more countries regardless of whether home country backing is provided or not.

To illustrate this, I spoke to Dr Mary Hattori, Director of the Pacific Island Development Program at the East West Center. In considering the position of Indigenous people in diplomacy, she pointed out that "permission is often granted for Indigenous people to perform, to showcase their culture through art and music, yet not be given a seat at the table for discussions and decision making or to even have recognition in the constitution of their own country."

On the flip side, some years back when establishing the Pacific Engagement and Sports Diplomacy Forum from within a professional sports organization in Australia, I was disappointed that Australia's Foreign Minister declined the invitation, the only invitee to do so. Yet, as the dialogue commenced, there was a very special atmosphere and progress was made quickly. It was pointed out to me by an attendee that this was because "the donor is not in the room. This is a meeting of equals, offering a hand of friendship. I have never seen this in my diplomatic career." Citizen-led, aligned to Australia's new (at the time) foreign policy that reaffirmed its focus on the Pacific, but without formal support or funding.

Considering these two types of practice, both are required, but my current view is that the latter needs to make up the majority of the effort to deliver major progress on the Child

Centred Nation movement. There are leading countries in child centred praxis, and some seek to extend this into their foreign policy, such as Norway, as Professor Nicole Hennum has both identified and critiqued. For many other countries, there is much to do at home before they would feel confident to take a leadership position on child centred foreign policy.

Yet a prerequisite for perfection at home can be a barrier to multilateral diplomatic collaboration. We defined ten critical themes for decisionmakers to consider and develop to see their country progress towards becoming a Child Centred Nation. The structure is not a staircase; it does not require completion of themes one after the other. Our stated view is that Child Centred Nations consider children at the crux of their foreign policy to see positive outcomes for the children of other countries. Indeed, Professor Ali Watson OBE of the University of St Andrews provided an example of child centred foreign policy used by one country to do harm in another.

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Consider Togo. Significant work is overseen by the Ministry for Social Affairs to bring progress in the context of significant rates of extreme poverty, with an estimated 34.66% of the population living on under \$3 per day (World Bank data which applies the World Bank's new upper financial limit to extreme poverty, defined in 2025, to 2021 data). Yes, there is much to do at home, but this should not hold back the Minister of Foreign Affairs from tabling Child Centred Nation as a motion at the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), at the African Union, The Commonwealth, and taking a leadership position to see likeminded states come together for collective action.

In positioning this work, it is fully citizen led without alignment or support from any home countries. There may be, for example, Norwegians who read this and see a way to bring further progress through alignment and support from their country, which would be very welcome. Yet now, those who have been involved do so for the cause itself and the need for new methods to seek new levels of positive change for children.

A second angle of theoretical analysis comes from considering public diplomacy together with social innovation.

In a recent meeting someone shared that the challenge for government ministers is that everything is critical, and not everything can be funded. This reaffirmed my view of the need for public policy innovations, which seek to deliver the same level of outsized impact that breakthrough innovations in large corporations are tasked with, akin to the remit of game-changing social innovations for transformational societal impact sought by INGOs, movements and social innovators. A key question is how can we see impact that is decoupled from a linear relationship with income, and what role can public diplomacy play in this?

Let us link two further lines of analysis:

1. As Cynthia Rayner, Sophia Otoo and Francois Bonnici framed in the recent Stanford

Social Innovation Review, titled "The Future of Innovation Is Collective": "Only a collective approach to social innovation can solve for challenges that are too large for individual organizations."

2. Paul Tracey and Neal Stott set out five blockages to progress towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which included the marginalization of the state: "Most social innovation debates in theory and practice focus on the social and/or private sectors, with the state often perceived as part of the problem rather than part of the solution." (Tracey, P & Stott, N., 2024, "Social innovation and the UN Sustainable Development Goals: Five blockages to progress")

So, we need a collective approach; we need high quality engagement of the state; and I would add that we need public diplomacy effort to provide the energy, skills, and voices to focus attention, to position a movement like Child Centred Nations at the forefront of foreign policy development, discussions at supranational institutions, and collaborate action between countries to accelerate outcomes for children.

Child Centred Nation serves as a live case study to analyze, from the perspectives of public diplomacy, social innovation, and development. In terms of practice and outcomes, it remains to be seen which country or countries will take the global leadership position and drive the Child Centred Nation movement alongside other actors, as a collective. It might be Togo; it could be one of the other countries that has invited me to speak with them on this topic, maybe ECOWAS, perhaps the Pacific Island Forum or ASEAN. What we do know is that public diplomacy has a major and continued role to play if we are to see countries making measurable progress to become Child Centred Nations.
