



A Discussion Brief – Creating Positive Futures for Children through Diversity and Inclusion

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The content and key findings of this discussion brief derive from the materials and dialogue from a Nordic Business Roundtable on Creating Positive Futures for Children through Diversity and Inclusion held in November 2022. Fourteen participants from leading Nordic businesses from various industries participated in the Roundtable, which was organized by UNICEF Finland and Nokia. This was one session in a series of four Nordic Business Roundtables co-created by Nordic UNICEF offices (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden) to mark the 10th Anniversary of the [Children’s Rights and Business Principles](#).

The objective of the Roundtable was **to explore and identify key business diversity and inclusion actions needed to ensure positive impacts for children**. More specifically, the aims included raising awareness of the impact of diversity and inclusion actions and journeys on children, their lives and future potential. Finally, we wanted to identify significant actions that businesses can take in their own activities as well as in supply chains and beyond. This discussion brief summarizes the key themes and findings that emerged during the dialogue held under the Chatham House Rule.

Disclaimer: The key themes and findings highlighted in this discussion brief are recollections and reflections from the roundtable dialogues. They do not necessarily represent the view or position of UNICEF or of the participating businesses.

DIVERSITY

The wide variety of shared and different personal and group characteristics among human beings. Diversity includes many characteristics that may be visible. It also includes less obvious characteristics like personality style, ethnicity, disability, education, religion, job function, life experience, lifestyle, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC), migration status, geography, regional differences, work experience and family situations that make us similar to and different from one another. ¹

INCLUSION

Inclusive societies recognize and build development policies around the diversity of their members and enable everyone's full inclusion and participation, regardless of their status. Inclusive, people-centred development means addressing the structural or legal barriers that discriminate against particular peoples and groups. In other words, inclusion is not only about including those who are traditionally excluded but must also be about dismantling the many forms of discrimination that contribute to the persistent marginalization of groups on the basis of arbitrary distinctions, such as their age, their gender or the colour of their skin. ²

Key Outcomes

- 1. Commitment starts at the top.** To be effective, integrating diversity and inclusion needs to be an executive management level priority. This is a prerequisite for building an organizational culture of diversity and inclusion that can then expand to supply chains, business partners and the wider community.
- 2. Family-friendly policies are a powerful tool to promote child rights.** Parents' and caregivers' benefits and employment conditions have a direct link to child wellbeing and the parents' ability and resources to care for their families.
- 3. Gender balance has many societal and business benefits, yet it is a challenge in many industries.** Companies carry a responsibility for next generations and should take meaningful action to nurture diverse future talent.
- 4. Marketing, advertising and product development should be free of harmful stereotypes.** Marketing and advertising should be a force for good, ensuring positive representation. Diverse products and services can only be developed by diverse teams.
- 5. Understand and promote children and their rights and needs as they link to diversity and inclusion.** Businesses can engage children directly or consult and learn from experts, such as child rights organizations, to better identify and hold themselves responsible for how their decisions influence the future generations' wellbeing and opportunities.

Background and Context

The 2,4 billion children on Earth today represent a world of diversity with differences in culture, ethnicity, nationality, religion, dis/ability, sex and so on. These differences can lead to stereotyping, discrimination, and exclusion from opportunity and can limit children from reaching their full potential.

Similarly, discrimination is an unfortunate reality for many parents and caregivers. It can have a significant

indirect impact on children's lives as the wellbeing, development and professional opportunities for parents are directly linked to time and resources they have to provide for their families.

Thus, we need to ensure fair access to opportunity, strive to level the playing field for disadvantaged persons and to identify and address both behavioural and structural barriers to diversity and inclusion.

¹ UNICEF Glossary of Terms Related to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion', United Nations Children's Fund, New York, 2022.

² Ibid.

The Role of Business in Promoting Diversity and Inclusion for Child Rights

Businesses can have a significant impact on children's rights by fostering a culture of diversity and inclusion through their whole business structure, from recruitment policies to marketing and advertising strategies. Businesses need to provide employment opportunities for persons from diverse identities, backgrounds and characteristics and ensure that employees feel valued and included at work. Caretaking-employees should feel encouraged and empowered to have a work-life accommodating the time and efforts required for parenting children – particularly in the face of unforeseen crises like the covid-19 pandemic. Requirements for companies' diversity and inclusion actions should also have an extended reach, where they demand continuously improving social responsibility from their supply chain, business partners and wider community through target and KPI setting.

Children prosper when they see people like themselves represented in an equal manner throughout society and are able to look up to them as role models. From that perspective, it is imperative that businesses provide opportunities for a diverse group of people and help inspire the employees of the future.

From client-facing situations to product and service development and external and internal communications, businesses should provide opportunities for all kinds of children as future employees.

Finally, products and the related marketing and advertising targeted towards children are often stereotyped, role-shaping expected behaviors early in children's lives. In fact, diversity and inclusion in marketing messages can have a significant positive impact on children and youth. Products need to be designed in a way that serves all potential child users. How can companies ensure that diversity and inclusion is included from the start of the product design and development process?

Businesses are increasingly cultivating diversity and inclusion journeys as, in addition to social justice, there is also a clear business benefit. A [2018 McKinsey Report](#) reinforces the link between diversity and company financial performance. Diversity and inclusion can also help to attract a motivated workforce and ease retention.



Children listening to a radio education program, in the community of Idinau, in the south west of Cameroon. Miracle is 10 years old and wants to become a teacher. Her 13 years old friend Thierry wants to become a pilot.

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Roundtable Discussion

FAMILY-FRIENDLY POLICIES

Many businesses have not previously linked the role of diversity and inclusion to child rights impacts. However, Roundtable participants did recognize that focusing on parents and caregivers has a significant impact on children's wellbeing. Thus, businesses intentionally focus on parents and caregivers, for instance, by ensuring equitable parental leave policies, paying a living wage, and setting up an equal pay framework. They also provide separate changing facilities for persons who identify as females and males and set up multipurpose rooms that can be used for breastfeeding or lactation.

In addition, many businesses deliberately cultivate an organizational culture that encourages the father or the secondary caregiver to take parental leave. Babies and small children obviously benefit from forming close bonds to both parents, with the first 1,000 days of their life being instrumental for balanced development and achievement later on.

An overall focus on wellbeing of employees, and caretakers specifically, has a direct impact on the families. After the Covid-19 crisis, the society and companies have seen an increase in people not being able to switch off after work resulting in burn-out. Companies can make sure that managers, leaders, and health programs are equipped to notice deteriorating mental health problems early and make needed interventions swiftly without stigmatizing employees and their families.

Some international businesses strive to expand family-friendly policies outside the Nordics, however, making global policies can be challenging because of the different cultural norms in different countries. For example, legislation around parental leave in the Nordics gives much more comprehensive benefits to parents than is the case in some other countries. Thus, at times it is also necessary to ask the question, how can we localize the approach?

GENDER BALANCE AND NURTURING TALENT

Working towards gender balance is a challenge for many Nordic businesses. Tech companies struggle to attract enough female talent, while other industries may be challenged to attract male talent. The fluidity of the concept of gender as well as intersectional diversity warrant special attention. It will not be enough to set only gender-related targets in the future, but attention must be paid to the inclusion of minorities at the intersections of diversity, such as immigrant women, single LGBTQ+ parents or ethnically diverse caretakers. Frequently, data deep-dives miss understanding their specific hardships and, thus, miss providing solutions. Companies can influence their culture through educating their employees to become better allies for their diverse groups of employees. An ally is able to stand up and open doors for people who represent minorities or unique ways of thinking. Employees who devote themselves to allyship act as role models to their families and friends.

However, today the discussion is still focused very much on gender diversity. The tech company participants at the Roundtable identified the acute need for more female talent. Understandably, recruiting is about hardwiring fair practices (such as inclusive, unbiased hiring, and creating an inclusive culture), but the businesses recognized the need to impact much earlier. How do we encourage diverse young people into STEM? How do we reach different contexts and parts of society? In addition to meeting their own needs for talent, businesses feel responsibility for the next generations – what are the improved ways to provide children globally the kind of childhood environment to be able to join any workforce they want without the burden of gender stereotypes and have better opportunities growing up?

To build this kind of long-term pipeline reaching underrepresented persons some businesses engage the employees working in STEM to mentor and coach children, make school visits, sponsor scholarships and work with child rights organizations.



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Mother and child at the
Bvumbe Health Centre,
Thyolo Blantyre Malawi
21 April 2017.

COMPANY CULTURE AND SUPPLY CHAIN

As with all topics that need to be integrated into corporate action, diversity and inclusion also require top-level commitment. Being intentional is the key, and businesses are increasingly moving away from single actions to diversity and inclusion impact. This translates to setting targets and KPIs and ensuring resources to drive progress. Several businesses attending the Roundtable had done internal surveys to understand their current state-of-play.

Making employees feel valued and included requires an organizational culture of inclusion. In addition to company executives, managers also play a key role as they can enact inclusive recruitment practices and verify equal pay at yearly reviews. Unconscious bias training is important for inclusive practices to succeed. A diverse workforce can be a source of financial benefit for a business, but for children it can define futures. Children need to see people like themselves in various roles throughout society in order to imagine those futures for themselves.

In the ideal situation, a company's internal intent to promote diversity and inclusion spreads much wider – to the supply chain, business partners and the wider community. For instance, a company can include the topic of diversity and inclusion in its supplier trainings and demand diversity plans from business partners. It is also worthwhile to examine how inclusive a company's own sourcing practices are. Could sourcing processes be made less administrative to allow smaller providers to participate? Digitization and data are essential to allow for transparency in the supply chain, at the same time, the participating companies identify challenges such as the quality of data and the multitude of potential tools – it is difficult to gather comparable data.

PRODUCT AND SERVICE DEVELOPMENT AND MARKETING

Advertising and marketing have the potential to strengthen harmful stereotypes for girls and boys. Roundtable participants recognize this phenomenon and actively work for the positive. Some businesses screen or carry out due diligence on the platforms that they want to work with and advertise on to make sure that they are in compliance with, for instance, child safety.

Diversity is also a necessity because a diverse workforce is needed to develop diverse products and services. For this to happen, it is not enough to have a 50/50 gender balance at the company level, because diversity needs to be present in the designing team. Thus, it is important to consider gender and other diversity breakdowns in different parts of business operations. Roundtable participants also recognize that companies could do an analysis of children as end-users of their products even if adults are the technical "customers". Some companies use the Universal Design Framework to ensure diversity in design and development.



Children of the indigenous community of Chicoy of Todos Santos Cuchumatán in the province of Huehuetenango, Guatemala on October 16, 2019 enjoy their last day of school.

Best practices:

- Review family-friendly policies: does your company ensure sufficient parental leave and pay a living wage?
- Increase focus on wellbeing of caretakers through focusing on mental health without stigmatizing employees.
- Implement programs 1) to bring back employees who are on extended leaves to ensure that they have the skills and the confidence to re-enter the workforce, and/or 2) to attract and provide needed training for immigrant employees.
- Inclusive recruitment: ask consultancies to provide diverse candidate slates with at least 2-3 different minority dimensions represented. Slates with only one leads to tokenism.
- Empower supply chains to drive diversity and inclusion through supplier trainings, diversity surveys, requiring diversity and inclusion plans and setting diversity and inclusion targets and KPIs.
- Nurture future talent through sponsorship schemes, school visits or cooperation with child rights organizations and inspire children to pick up STEM roles which will help them to have an impact on their future society, the climate and environment and aspects of social justice.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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