

Ten years of The Elders: Achievements and Impact

July 2017

Following the high-profile launch of The Elders by Nelson Mandela in South Africa in July 2007, specific country visits were arranged both to secure international publicity for the issue at stake, and to establish The Elders' name as an organisation.

Critical factors behind the success of the most valuable initiatives have included good timing, solid advance preparations, a comparative advantage for The Elders, persistence and follow-up, building trust with allies, and the active involvement of two or more Elders.

The Darfur (2007) and Zimbabwe (2008) initiatives achieved this, with a press conference in South Africa, a meeting with President Zuma receiving considerable media attention, and private meetings with Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir in Khartoum. Whilst the Government of Zimbabwe's refusal to allow the Elders delegation into the country curtailed the initiative, the press conference held in Johannesburg attracted considerable media attention.

The Côte d'Ivoire visit (2011) enabled The Elders to calm tensions directly by visiting and confirming the safety of former president Laurent Gbagbo, who had not been seen publicly since his arrest three weeks earlier.

Country visits became part of The Elders' identity, as well as offering opportunities for influence or civil society support.

On a thematic level, The Elders had considerable impact through their initiative on child marriage, which started in 2010 and was born out of their founding commitment to work on women's equality. Child marriage was a neglected and, in some places, a taboo human rights issue causing widespread social and economic harm. The Elders' niche was well-defined, putting the issue on the global agenda through meetings, speeches and articles, reaching audiences who would not necessarily have otherwise focused on the issue – for example Archbishop Tutu's speech on the topic to the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2012. At the same time, The Elders brought together the disparate activities of mainly grassroots organisations that had been working on the issue around the world in an uncoordinated way. The initiative became a fully-fledged campaign, Girls Not Brides, with its own brand and identity. Girls Not Brides has thrived since becoming a legally separate organisation in 2013, and the Elders remain keen supporters of its work.

In 2015-16, The Elders made a well-regarded contribution to the reform of the system for selecting the UN Secretary-General, calling for greater accountability and transparency in what

had historically been a highly opaque process. The appointment of António Guterres in October 2016 was seen in part as a result of his strong performance in the public hearings, which were introduced by the UN for the first time in response to calls from across civil society – including The Elders – for a more open contest.

The Elders have also played an important role in the international fight against climate change, especially by providing a clear moral voice in the run-up to the Paris Climate Agreement in December 2015, including briefings and high-level engagement such as a speech at the closing session of the UN Secretary General’s Climate Summit in New York (2014), and close cooperation and consultation with the then-Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC, Christiana Figueres.

The impact of private diplomacy is inevitably difficult to measure. The lengthy meeting in Moscow with President Putin in April 2015 was a sign of respect for The Elders, although subsequent Russian foreign policy interventions from Ukraine to Syria cannot be said to have developed along lines The Elders would advocate. In other P5 countries, access to the highest political and diplomatic levels has remained a challenge, with Elders tending to meet Foreign Ministers rather than Heads of Government. In other instances though, The Elders have made other kinds of diplomatic contributions e.g. in 2013-15 in Myanmar through the establishment of regular channels of access to senior military commanders on both sides of the ethnic conflicts..

Evolution of the organisation

The Elders’ London office was established in July 2008. In the beginning, considerable organisational support also came from time donated by financial supporters and their companies or foundations. External paid consultants played and continue to play a significant role in delivering policy expertise.

The Elders reached their current degree of coherence as a group several years after the launch, during which time the Secretariat evolved from a small, low-key office to a team of policy, communications and operations specialists.

From the outset, The Elders has been supported by substantial unrestricted funds committed by a small number of dedicated donors and their philanthropic organisations. These supporters were brought together in the form of an Advisory Council (AC; formerly the Advisory Board). Over the years, the AC evolved into a sounding board and source of advice at The Elders’ board meetings and support in between them, and brought access to other influential groups, in particular to business people.

The Elders’ range of approaches to their work has included:

- International travel (country visits, speaking at international conferences, holding high-level and grassroots meetings)
- Letters sent privately, sometimes with a public statement issued in parallel; letters received back from governments are not usually published
- Private phone calls to government and other leaders

- Convening or co-hosting private meetings and events with select public audiences
- Public statements, often with follow-up media work, opinion pieces, blogs or interviews adverts

The Elders has always sought to maintain a balance between public advocacy and private diplomacy; and between geo-political engagement and thematic initiatives such as child marriage and Universal Health Coverage. Statements issued by The Elders may be effective in two major ways: either by reassuring and giving cover to those who already agree with The Elders on an issue, or through changing the minds of those in power who do not agree.

Recent years have seen a shift from intensive country visits towards more frequent issuing of statements. As the capacity and experience of the Secretariat has developed, some tasks that were previously done solely by the Elders themselves have been delegated to staff. These have included field missions, speaking at conferences, and convening meetings with protagonists in conflicts. In 2014 and 2015, for instance, staff convened meetings in Chiang Mai, Thailand, of the United Federal Nationalities Council – an often divided coalition of anti-government ethnic parties in exile from Myanmar – to persuade them to maintain a common front and enter into constructive peace negotiations with the government and army.

Collaboration with other organisations and wider external engagement

All of The Elders' geopolitical initiatives have relied heavily on the help of local partners, for background briefing and during implementation. Full partnership initiatives have been rarer, with the organisation preferring to maintain its distinct identity and independence.

The “Every Human has Rights” campaign, driven especially by Mary Robinson and Advisory Council members, ran for a year from December 2007. It marked the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and involved a coalition of civil society organisations, notably CIVICUS, ActionAid and Amnesty International, as well as grassroots NGOs, media and education partners. The Elders also participated in the launch of Global Zero, the international movement for the elimination of nuclear weapons, in Paris in December 2008, with ten Elders becoming signatories to the Global Zero compact.

Approaches to collaboration since 2011 have involved the Secretariat organising private meetings for The Elders to host with partner organisations. For example, from August 2011 to April 2014, The Elders and The Carter Center held seven workshops to help the Palestinian leadership develop and implement strategies to preserve the two-state solution. A prominent aspect of the Stronger UN initiative was a series of public and private meetings – in Munich, Liechtenstein, London and New York – in 2015 and 2016. Informal cooperation has flourished especially where it has been with organisations that have strong connections with individual Elders or Advisory Council members, such as Humanity United, The Carter Center, Crisis Management Initiative and other Elders' foundations.

Learning from young people, and inspiring them to become change-makers, has often been accomplished in collaboration with others. For example, the “Elders & Youngers” initiative

included a successful live-broadcast event with young Egyptians in Cairo in October 2012, organised jointly with the Anna Lindh Foundation and the British Council.

Conclusion

The Elders' influence has been deployed in a broad range of contexts on many different issues. There are clear examples of impact, such as on child marriage and UN reform. Achieving strong coherence within the Elders as a group, and clear and distinctive roles for each part of the organisation, has been important.

Other factors contributing to success have included good timing, advance preparations, a comparative advantage, persistence and follow-up, building trust with allies, and two or more Elders committing significant time to an initiative. The Elders have been particularly effective where they have identified a niche and applied moral authority to build support for action on a forgotten or sensitive issue.

All these factors and reflections will inform The Elders' approach to their collective work and mission in the future, as they work for peace, justice and human rights.