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HALTING THE CHILDHOOD OBESITY EPIDEMIC: IDENTIFYING DECISIVE INTERVENTIONS IN COMPLEX SYSTEMS

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If you're interested in writing either an op-ed style article for our website or the program report, or a personal reflection blog post, please let Salzburg Global Communications Associate Oscar Tollast know or email your submission directly to otollast@salzburgglobal.org.

If you do intend to write for your organization after the program, please make sure to observe the **Chatham House Rule** (information on which is in your Welcome Pack). If you're in any doubt, do not hesitate to contact Oscar. We'll be updating our website with summaries from the panels and interviews with our Fellows, all of which you can find on www.SalzburgGlobal.org/go/642.

You can also join in the conversation on Twitter with the hashtag [#SGSHealth](https://twitter.com/SGSHealth) and see all your fellow Fellows and their organizations on Twitter via the list www.twitter.com/salzburgglobal/lists/SGS-642. We're updating both our Facebook page www.facebook.com/SalzburgGlobal and our Flickr stream www.flickr.com/SalzburgGlobal with photos from the program during this week and also after the program. If you require non-watermarked images for your publication, please let Oscar know.

We will also be posting photos to Instagram www.instagram.com/SalzburgGlobal. Use the hashtag [#SGSHealth](https://twitter.com/SGSHealth), and we might re-share your posts on Instagram and Twitter.



@RichardTaunt Fascinating day at @SalzburgGlobal talking childhood obesity. Yet what tensions bubble under the surface of our happy chatter? My blog on how we talk, what we talk about, and the breadth of the approach:
link.medium.com/Wcx4Wlror2



Participants pose for a group photo outside Schloss Leopoldskron

Recommendations to be Presented

As the Salzburg Global Seminar and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation program, *Halting the Childhood Obesity Epidemic: Identifying Decisive Interventions in Complex Systems*, comes to a close, participants are preparing to present recommendations this morning on how to take the work forward.

Following three days of discussion and presentations, participants were asked to suggest focus areas which could form the basis of small working groups. Yesterday morning, participants signed up for one of six working groups, all of which carried a different theme.

Participants were then sent to different rooms in Schloss Leopoldskron to refine their ideas and work on a prototype to share with the rest of the group.

At the time of writing, one group set out to work on the proposition that ancestral/Indigenous knowledge adds value to the prevention pathway with the intent to acknowledge historical trauma to enable communities to address chronic illnesses such as childhood obesity.

Other themes that were identified included considering the dietary change to address climate change as a stealth intervention for obesity. Meanwhile, some participants wanted to look at generating a list of effective policies and programs that can be replicated and scaled that reduce levels of obesity and

improve health equity.

New themes that emerged on Tuesday morning included the idea of working on a Global Cities Learning Network. Some participants also wanted to develop a framework that offers recommendations on how to easily execute cross-sectoral communication by key influencers, providers, and other audiences about childhood obesity and traumatic experiences to co-design strategies for communities. Another group set out to look at regulating transnational food companies, defending the public interest and food cultures.

One participant stressed the importance of creating synergy and merging the ideas shared during the program. They said this could be the best way to have a collective impact, and participants should avoid working in silos.

The group as a whole was reminded of Salzburg Global's previous use of Salzburg Statements and how they had been used as tools for advocacy.

Participants were tasked to establish goals in their working groups, identify an audience, and develop a communications strategy for getting their ideas across. Some funding is available to help support participants if they want to incubate a project after leaving Salzburg. There is a desire to make the support stretch as far as possible to support everyone's goals.



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“Gangsta” Gardening and Changing People’s Lives

Ron Finley on the fight against complex systems, growing together, and actionable outcomes

Claire Kidwell

“We’re in a war where we’re fighting for souls. We’re fighting for life,” says Ron Finley, otherwise known as the “gangsta gardener.”

Finley is speaking to me while attending the Salzburg Global Seminar and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation program, *Halting the Childhood Obesity Epidemic: Identifying Decisive Interventions in Complex Systems*.

With the Ron Finley Project, he’s hoping to bring culture and community together. He envisions a world where children know their nutrition and communities embrace growing and sharing fresh-grown food.

Finley says people should expect an uphill battle and recognize the problems they’re all trying to tackle didn’t start overnight. These problems won’t be fixed overnight either.

“Sometimes, you’re going to get extremely frustrated and think that nothing’s happening,” says Finley. “But if your message is getting out, know that you’re affecting somebody. Know that somebody is hearing you, and you’re changing somebody’s life.”

Finley wants to show children gardening is an art form, which also allows them to provide for themselves. These skills are tools children can utilize for the rest of their lives.

His work also includes showing people how to be humane. He wants to teach people “how to take their neighborhoods back, how to take their lives back, and design them the way they want to live.” He adds, “Not the way that some clown has designed it for them.”

However, Finley recognizes it’s not just enough to give kids tools. It involves gardening and life skills. “It needs to be a full circle,” he says, and many children don’t get this full lesson.

As for the “gangsta” aspect, Finley wanted to change the vernacular of that word, of what people consider to be “gangsta.” If you have knowledge, that’s gangsta, according to Finley. “If you’re a gardener, that’s gangsta because you’re providing not only for yourself, you’re providing for your community and the people around you,” he adds.



Ron Finley (pictured) in Parker Hall

It’s not just about nutrition and gardening, though. Finley says there are “many lessons in that garden that are metaphors and truths for life.” For him, it’s about showing children their worth.

“We as a race need to embrace our kids and tell them just how special, just how unique, just how brilliant they are.”

Finley says it’s the adults who inadvertently show children they have little worth. “How do we show kids that they have no value? Easy,” he says. “We put stuff in front of them that they cannot obtain, and we don’t give them the tools to get these things. So, therefore, they think things are worth more than the things they have, and things have more value than they do.”

As for what comes after this program, Finley says there’s more to get out of Salzburg Global than hope. He says, “I don’t really deal in hope. I don’t. I don’t even like the word hope. I like the word opportunity.”

Finley wants to see action come from these discussions – measures which put an end to issues like childhood obesity, so hope is no longer required. He says, “I want to see something that we go out and

affect people... I want to see us build and move mountains with this with. That’s what I’m here for. To hell with all this conversation - we know the problem.”

Finley says research can take too long, and communities lose lives in the interim. He says he got his reputation through doing something about the issues he saw around him, not sitting and waiting for something to happen.

“It’s like I said, good in, good out. If you put good in, that’s what you’re going to get out. And if we grow together, we grow together. This is about community, period. And this is our community, not just the community you live in. I mean, we’re all on the same planet. We’re all breathing the same air. Let’s bring it down to that.”

Did you know?

- Ron Finley’s TED Talk, “A guerrilla gardener in South Central LA,” has - at the time of writing - received 3,489,528 views. The video was published in February 2013. Watch the video at this link: <http://bit.ly/2qZtvcM>

Bringing All Stakeholders Together

On Monday morning, participants had the chance to listen to two powerful presentations on the effects of colonization on Indigenous peoples in Australia and New Zealand. Afterward was a panel discussion on topics surrounding the impact of health care, public health, and social services to change the support that children and families at risk receive. Unfortunately, children sometimes “fall through the net” with regards to lack of services and limited funding.

One participant weighed the pros and cons of specializing in research, stating that it often tended to encourage people to stay in their silos. However, specializing in research is how strides are usually made. Rural communities often face disproportionate challenges because that is where there’s the least investment, according to one participant, who also stated, “The extension of health services in rural settings varies based on location, [and] some places are

more difficult than others. These strategies need to be developed, and it needs more of an outreach support.”

Governments can also be a part of the problem, as noted by one participant who described how water is privatized in Chile, “so people in the [Global] North can have avocados.” However, we should not give up on our governments and democracy, because it is “the best we have,” despite narratives sometimes making it seem like we no longer need them.

One participant mentioned the importance of the psychology of food. Some children who have previously faced food insecurity might display behavior such as hoarding food when given a proper meal since they are accustomed to food not being consistently available. All of these issues tie into the broader topic of child health.

It is increasingly evident that to tackle this issue, an interdisciplinary approach must be adopted.

The Key Drivers for Systems Change

On Tuesday morning, participants listened to a panel discussing two questions: What might be the key drivers in prioritizing the most transformative, evidence-based approach to childhood obesity prevention with a measurable impact on disparities in prevalence rates in three to five years? What thought leadership in health-care, human/social service organizations, philanthropy, and political life is necessary to change the culture and achieve this?

Participants discussed the importance of keeping children and families at the center of all solutions, as well as marginalized, vulnerable Indigenous communities. One participant discussed the food industry in the United States, saying, “The marketing industry spends millions of dollars a year targeting Hispanic, African-American, and other low-income families with ultra-processed food.”

However, change won’t happen unless society agrees this needs to be a priority. Historic discrimination has led to inequity in different communities - “not two hundred years ago, but every year for the past two hundred years.”

Using a trauma-informed approach

to public policy will allow for the consideration of safety, trustworthiness, and empowerment to address population-level trauma. If we don’t understand the inequities that have led us to this point, it will be hard to implement the appropriate solutions. One participant commented, “Inequity is about taking advantage of the disadvantage.” However, out of inequity, a holistic approach can be developed.

Pivoting to early childhood education, one participant discussed the importance of school readiness, including language skills, social skills, and motor skills.

These skills are often correlated with health and social services. However, though these services may be universal, not everyone accesses them. For example, they might be distrustful of the system, they might be mobile, or there might be a domestic violence situation.

An idea that ran through the panel discussion is that childhood obesity is a systems issue. It is impossible to think of it from a unilateral perspective; rather, it should be considered and tackled from an interdisciplinary viewpoint. As one participant succinctly stated, “Think systems, act locally.”

Salzburg Snapshots

Photos from *Halting the Childhood Obesity Epidemic: Identifying Decisive Interventions in Complex Systems*



Hot Topic: “If You Were to Advocate One Recommendation Which You Think Could Halt the Child Obesity Epidemic, Who Would You Aim It At, and What Would the Recommendation Be?”

Mira Merchant

“My top recommendation is for us as a group to think more about food security instead of simply nutrition, because nutrition security and food security are connected, but they are not the same. What I think we need to address as part of that food systems discussion, that is so important for addressing [the] childhood obesity epidemic, is a need for families to have consistent access to enough amount of food that is healthy, nutritious, safe, that respect[s] their cultural and social preferences and that... leads to an active, healthy life...”

Rafael Perez-Escamilla,

Professor of public health and director, Global Health Concentration and Office of Public Health Practice, Yale School of Public Health

“I would go with a very broad suggestion or wish. I’d say that what I...want to see [are] long term strategies and long-term funding. And I’d address all the sectors of government.”

Michaela Adamowitsch,

Scientific expert in nutrition and health promotion, Austrian Agency for Health and Food Safety (AGES)

“The most important stakeholder for halting childhood obesity in Asia, especially South Asia and East Asia, which is going to be the most vulnerable region in terms of childhood obesity, I think it’s going to be the policymakers in the health sector... The most important thing which is not being realized in Asia is that it’s not the priority right now. ... We have to convince the policymakers that we have to take care of our children because, in Asia, the population growth is also very high. And if [there are children with obesity], it’s going to have huge health costs, [it] is going to have huge physical, psychological and

emotional costs for the population... we need to tackle this menace as early as possible.”

Athar Mansoor,

Civil servant and Ph.D. candidate in public policy at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

“I would aim [my recommendation] at the minister of health in South Africa because that’s my experience. I always feel like they always recommend food for the children... like feeding schemes and all that stuff. But my thing is when you’re doing the feeding schemes, do you actually maybe consider the health value of the food that you’re feeding the kids?”

Sandiso Mchiza,

Digital graphic designer, CILT Department, University of Cape Town

“I would aim at researchers and people who fund the researchers. And the recommendation would be to create or support a framework of equity and inclusion that allows them to have an equity lens when they do their research, and that the funders then find that equity lens useful in selecting research projects to support.”

LaDonna Sanders Redmond,

Intercultural development consultant, Columinate

“Child sleep is at least as important as physical activity or nutrition. And as one-third of the problem, I’m thinking that it should gain the attention it deserves... Sleep should be one of the three pillars to tackle obesity. You should have nutrition, physical activity, and the third one should always be sleep. And I think we should really go for that. It’s the missing piece of the puzzle.”

Vincent Busch,

Senior researcher, Sarphati Amsterdam



#FacesOfLeadership

“It was great to listen to diverse opinions that weren’t necessarily the same as my own. It was challenging for me, but I think... the only way that we are going to be able to solve things is being able [to] sit at the table with people with whom we don’t necessarily agree and try to come with an open mind in terms of life, in terms of what we’re going to listen to, and also come into sort of a generous approach in terms of sharing your own perspective... We had a working group based on social participation. For me, that was an amazing experience to learn about the vision of the people that were there that were from Maori tribes in New Zealand, from Australia, from the United States also. And our working group actually has stuck together this whole year because we’ve worked on an article [and] despite our very different time zones, we managed to meet and talk a number of times during the year... Our focus was on Indigenous voices and the process of colonization and how it continues on until today. So that’s informed my work... I’m studying [for] my Ph.D. in public health. And for sure, my focus is going to be, I hope, industry interference in public policy design and social participation with this focus, this critical view of how colonization continues to this day.”

Carina Vance,

Former minister of public health in Ecuador reflects on the Salzburg Global program, Healthy Children, Healthy Weight, and what’s happened since