



# UNICEF Innovation Team Spotlight: Tanya Accone

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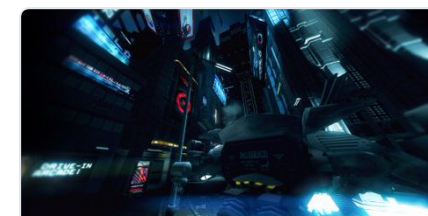
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**Tanya Accone, Senior Adviser on Innovation and Deputy of UNICEF's Global**

## Innovation Centre. Bangkok, Thailand.

### *Tell us a bit about your background.*

I'm fourth-generation Chinese born in South Africa. Most of my ancestors came to South Africa from China to practice traditional medicine and manage trading businesses. Like all non-white South Africans, we gained civil rights and the franchise with the fall of the apartheid government. Three generations of my family voted together for the first time in the 1994 elections. I also have a little German ancestry and am related to the original town planner of Johannesburg, although that family ostracized my great-grandmother upon learning that she had secretly married a Chinese man. It's no surprise that UNICEF's work to realize rights for all children and issues of social inclusion in particular, resonate strongly with me because my childhood was shaped by exclusion.

### *What do you do?*

I help lead UNICEF's work to scale up proven innovations in multiple countries around the world. In the last year alone, our team supported more than 50 countries in applying innovations for real-time information, youth and access to information. In 2015, some 2.2 million people in 22 countries benefitted from real-time information to improve children's health and wellbeing, education, protection and inclusion. U-Report engaged 1.9 million young people, giving them the chance to voice their opinions via their mobile phones, opinions on elections in Nigeria, and going back to school in post-ebola Sierra Leone and Liberia. The Internet of Good Things made life-saving and life-impacting information accessible to 5 million users in 37 countries in 19 languages. We aspire to inspire others to use and support scaling these up by sharing our experiences and making these solutions available to others as open source innovations.

These are incredible.  
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## *What's your working day like?*

There is no such thing as a typical day. It might begin at 5:30am to be a part of an event in New York via a telepresence robot and end at midnight on a conference call between Asia, Europe, Africa and the Americas. On one week I will facilitate a co-creation workshop or travel to meet with partners, and the next I'll be with colleagues in a country office exploring their challenges and opportunities and how some of our networks, skills and existing solutions could address these.

The Global Innovation Centre is modelling another way of working in UNICEF. Our distributed team works from a number of countries with the location chosen with the work results in mind. Managing and being a part of a remote team is a little different; collaborative tools are essential, communication vital and teleworking is not unusual. We “talk” to each other in many ways including calls, various messaging and chat tools, our collaborative spaces and email, but rarely face to face.

## *How would you describe your job to a 5-year-old?*

Do you think grown ups know all the answers? They don't! My job is about finding new answers to problems that children might have, trying them out and letting other people know what works and how to do it.

## *What did you want to be when you were a child?*

I never had a specific profession in mind, but I hoped to do something that would involve the idea of justice and getting to understand different places and cultures.

## *How/when did you join UNICEF?*



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**@unicefinnovate**

An interdisciplinary team tasked with identifying, prototyping, and scaling technologies and practices that strengthen UNICEF's work for children.



It was an old school experience. I saw an advert in a Sunday newspaper seeking someone with experience with the internet in developing countries. At the time, I was working across sub-saharan Africa establishing new companies that brought together internet service, mobile, satellite TV and content. So I mailed in my application in a fat manila envelope. One year and two interviews later I began the work in 2001 to develop, fund and implement UNICEF's first internet strategy.

### *What are the most satisfying parts of your job?*

Ingenuity and creativity thrive everywhere: Innovation is not the preserve of the wealthy or well educated. My role allows me to witness the truth of that saying that 'necessity is the mother of invention.' My work takes me to many places of necessity, and to learn from and share the solutions that young people and communities have designed themselves.

### *What's the most challenging aspect of your job?*

There are many incentives to follow precedent and continue to do things the way they have been done or to adopt a comfortable rate of incremental change. However, the rate of challenge is outpacing what can be achieved with this approach. Persuading some to take a calculated risk on a proven innovation remains a challenge, one that drives us to build better cases, with stronger evidence and clearer communication. Sometimes that is still not enough to move to business unusual.

### *What's your best UNICEF experience/memory?*

I get to repeat my best UNICEF experience frequently whenever I mention the organization I work for. UNICEF engenders such positive regard and respect for the



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results that we all collectively achieve. People almost always respond by saying how lucky I am to contribute to work with meaning and they're right.

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### ***What's one of the biggest risks you've ever taken in your life?***

Not following a linear path is a serial risk that I keep taking. My career has been one of reinventing my professional self every few years. One of the joys of being a part of UNICEF is that there are opportunities to do so without leaving the organization. As a result, I'm one of the few who have worked across external relations and communication, programme and planning, and operations. It's very useful to be able to bring those multiple perspectives based on experience to whatever role you inhabit, and particularly so with innovation which is multi-disciplinary and cross-sectoral.

### ***What are your passions?***

I always have multiple creative projects on the go, from book drafts and business ideas to art projects. I love the natural environment, so am a keen gardener, hiker and enjoy traveling to pristine destinations.

### ***What advice would you give others who are seeking a similar job as yours?***

You're in luck, because this is one area where there is no prescribed background or qualification. Your attitude is as important as your aptitude. Be open, intrigued and curious. Fail fast, reflect and share what you learn. Every functional area has opportunities for you to innovate and try something new or different that adds value.

### ***Who do you look towards for inspiration?***



The optimism, generosity and dignity with which my late father faced the many challenges that life presented him with is one of my inspirations. He was a good man and never let anything keep him or his family down.

***My colleagues don't know that...***

My eight-year-old son and I published a book that we wrote and illustrated together called, Feathers on Fifth. It tells the true story about a family of American Robin birds who chose to nest in an unusual place. We're starting to plan another book about a chipmunk that travels around the 10 countries that make up the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).



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