


Seminar on “A Science Diplomacy Approach for Belgium?!”

With the organisation of the seminar on “A Science Diplomacy Approach for Belgium?!” on 1 December 2016, initial steps were taken towards better linking research and innovation to diplomatic and political cooperation and influence to address today’s major societal challenges, to promote our knowledge and strengths and to increase international cooperation and visibility.

Climate change, migration and pandemics are just some of the numerous grand societal challenges we are faced with today. These challenges are not just pressing, but transboundary and global as well. To address such challenges, there is a need for international cooperation, in which scientific research plays an important role. How can science and diplomacy reinforce each other to strengthen international cooperation? This was one of the questions raised during the seminar on “A Science Diplomacy Approach for Belgium?!”, which was co-organised by the Belgian Federal Science Policy Office (BELSPO), the Flemish Department of Economy, Science and Innovation (EWI), Wallonia-Brussels International (WBI) and the Institute for European Studies at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (IES-VUB). The discussion addressed the three dimensions of “Science for Diplomacy”¹, “Diplomacy for Science”² and “Science in Diplomacy”³. The event was organised in line with the European political agenda in which Science Diplomacy (SD) is becoming a priority of the European External Action Policy and a key element of the Science and Innovation Policy.

Concept and best practices

Professor Pierre-Bruno Ruffini (Université du Havre, FR) started by introducing the basic concepts and making a clear distinction between Science Diplomacy and International Scientific Cooperation. His views on whether or not a European Science Diplomacy strategy exists are clear: “The EU’s political diplomacy is weak, but its research policy is effective and influential. Attraction, cooperation and influence are the drivers of any Science Diplomacy approach.”  [2.pb_ruffini.pdf](#)

Dr Kostas Glinos (DG Research & Innovation, European Commission) highlighted that SD is becoming a priority topic at EU level, both at the External Action Service and at the Directorate-General for Research & Innovation. He mentioned the common approach which is being developed by Commissioner Moedas and HR/VP Mogherini, while referring to their recent policy notes:

→ Moedas: [Science & Innovation policy 'Open to the World'](#)

→ Mogherini: [Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy](#)

¹ Science for Diplomacy (S4D): Scientific cooperation can improve international relations.

² Diplomacy for Science (D4S): Diplomacy can facilitate international scientific cooperation.

³ Science in Diplomacy (SiD): Science can provide advice to inform and support foreign policy objectives.

Scientific initiatives enable the building of bridges and the development or improvement of international relations (referring to 'science for diplomacy'), in particular in situations where traditional diplomacy fails. By facilitating the sharing of knowledge and data, trust can be built for further cooperation.

Science diplomacy has to be considered from various levels, i.e. from the (diplomatic) state level and from individual scientific or institutional actors (keeping in mind that the interlocutors for the nuclear deal with Iran were scientists).

The EU invests 20% of the global research and produces 32% of the knowledge, which means that two-thirds of the knowledge is still developed outside of the EU. Hence it is emphasised how crucial the international science cooperation dialogues are along with the engagement in an open data policy, at international level.

Professor Zehra Sayers (Sabanci University, TR) presented the SESAME project, the international centre for Synchrotron-light for Experimental Science and Applications in the Middle East. It is a remarkable example of Science for Diplomacy, framed in Europe's neighbourhood policy. On top of being the first synchrotron centre vested in the Middle East and the Mediterranean region, this project is using the language of science to bring together people from different backgrounds. SESAME (re)builds trust and promotes understanding between countries that have tense relations. The project offers research cooperation opportunities in many different fields from physics and material sciences up to health and archaeology. The enhancement of the research and innovation capacity also prepares for improved quality of lives in the region. "It [SESAME] is a light that we need for the future"

 [3.z_sayers_sesame.pdf](#)

'Science Diplomat' Guillermo Orts-Gil (Spanish Foundation for Science and Technology-FECYT, ES) opened his address by claiming that "anyone who believes in science is potentially an ambassador for science". He shared the experience and importance of science coordinators becoming science diplomats in different capitals around the world. He emphasised the need to support scientists whose role in science diplomacy is considered to be key given their scientific expertise, but also to build trust and promote collaboration among scientists, diplomats and policymakers. For that purpose, FECYT recommends to invest in the set-up of a worldwide network. Its bottom-up strategy for science diplomacy is outlined in the "Report on Science, Technology and Innovation Diplomacy" (available [here](#)).

 [4.g_ortsgil_fecyt.pdf](#)

Luk Van Langenhove (Institute for European Studies, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, BE) presented the H2020 project "European Leadership in Cultural, Science and Innovation Diplomacy" (EL-CSID), which analyses the relevance of cultural, science and innovation diplomacy for EU external relations in the evolving global context. He indicated that national science diplomacy efforts need the elaboration of a strategy, next to the deployment of specific tools and the set-up of support structures. He also advocated the use of science diplomacy which transcends national interests and is oriented towards mobilising science and technology in support of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Panel Discussion

The panel debate brought together representatives from various Belgian and government entities and funding agencies and international organisations to gain insights into the following issues:

- In which domains can scientific advice best contribute to decision-making on international issues?
- How can scientists take up a diplomatic role?
- How to determine which topics are the most relevant to address given the limited resources?

Different approaches to international cooperation (bottom-up or mixed bottom-up and top-down) were presented by regional representatives.

Some argued for the necessity to move from isolated initiatives to improved cooperation in a more structurally organised system.

The need was pointed out to devote more attention to interdisciplinary research and to appropriate evaluation mechanisms. Also acknowledged was the growing practice of policymakers seeking scientific advice to formulate evidence-based policies. Conversely, there is a need to reflect on the extent to which researchers should be trained to provide scientific advice.

UNESCO's experience in science advice networks and in 'science for peace' initiatives was highlighted.

SwissCore shared the experience of its Swissnex network for internationalisation of education, research and innovation. Sharing their learning with regard to the assessment of the added value of the network might be useful.

The panellists came to the conclusion that science diplomacy can serve as an important lever in building new alliances where collaboration seemed impossible at first.

Attention was also devoted to the empowerment of developing countries by strengthening our cooperation for the enhancement of research and innovation capacities and science/evidence-based policymaking.

Conclusion

The first steps were taken towards better linking research and innovation to diplomatic and political cooperation to address today's major societal challenges. This lays the foundations for the development of a Science Diplomacy strategy for Belgium that will require concerted action from all the key players at the different levels of government. While developing convergent policies that serve different objectives at the same time, we may contribute to a more prosperous future in an inclusive and resilient society on a sustainable Earth.