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, the first 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, which we are faced with today. Not only are they pressing, they are transboundary and global. 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 is one of the questions that was raised during the seminar on “A Science Diplomacy Approach for Belgium?!”, 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 Brussels (IES-VUB). The discussion addressed the three dimensions of “Science for Diplomacy”[[1]](#footnote-1), “Diplomacy for Science”[[2]](#footnote-2) and “Science in Diplomacy”[[3]](#footnote-3). The event linked up to 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 by making a clear distinction between Science Diplomacy and International Scientific Cooperation. His views on whether there exists a European Science Diplomacy strategy 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*](http://www.ewi-vlaanderen.be/sites/default/files/2.pb_ruffini_0.pdf)

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

* + Moedas: [a Science & Innovation policy 'open to the world’](http://bookshop.europa.eu/en/open-innovation-open-science-open-to-the-world-pbKI0416263/)
	+ Mogherini: [a Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy](https://www.google.be/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwi55Y2u3s3QAhXHiywKHXbiDg0QFggoMAE&url=https://eeas.europa.eu/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf&usg=AFQjCNFeTV9puPU7yJpJubnmwzOjekG3Cw)

Scientific initiatives enable to build bridges and to develop or improve 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 build for further cooperation.

Science diplomacy has to be looked at from different levels, as well on (diplomatic) state level, as among individual scientific or institutional actors (reminding that for the nuclear deal with Iran the interlocutors were scientists).

With the EU investing 20% of the global research while producing 32% of the knowledge, still 2/3 of the knowledge development is done outside of the EU. Hence it is emphasized 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 prepares also for improved quality of lives in the region. “It [SESAME] is a light that we need for the future”  [3.z\_sayers\_sesame.pdf](http://www.ewi-vlaanderen.be/sites/default/files/3.z_sayers_sesame_0.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 in the world. He emphasised the need to support the scientists, whose role in science diplomacy is considered as key given their scientific expertise, but also to build trust and promote collaboration among scientists, diplomats and policy-makers. 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](http://www.idi.mineco.gob.es/stfls/MICINN/Investigacion/FICHEROS/Informe_diplomacia_cientifica_Version-ingles.pdf)).  [4.g\_ortsgil\_fecyt.pdf](http://www.ewi-vlaanderen.be/sites/default/files/4.g_ortsgil_fecyt_0.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 for the use of science diplomacy beyond national interests and geared towards mobilising science and technology in support of the Sustainable Development Goals.

**Panel Discussion**

The panel debate brought together representatives of different Belgian and governmental 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 in view of the limited resources?

Different approaches in the international cooperation (bottom-up or mixed bottom-up and top-down) where presented by regional representatives.

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

The need to devote more attention to interdisciplinary research and to suited evaluation mechanisms was pointed to. Also acknowledged was the growing practice of policy-makers seeking scientific advice to formulate evidence-based policies. Conversely, there is a necessity 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's shared the experience of its Swissnex network for internationalisation of education, research and innovation. Sharing of 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 act as an important leverage in building new alliances where collaborations seemed impossible at first.

Attention was also given to empowerment of developing countries by strengthening our cooperation with regard to the enhancement of research and innovation capacities and science/evidence-based policy-making.

**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 need a concerted action of all the key players at the different levels of governance. While developping convergent policiies that serve simultanuously different objectives, we may contribute to a more prosper future in an inclusive and resilient society on a sustainable earth.

1. Science for Diplomacy (S4D): Scientific cooperation can improve international relations. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Diplomacy for Science (D4S): Diplomacy can facilitate international scientific cooperation. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Science in Diplomacy (SiD): Science can provide advice to inform and support foreign policy objectives. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)