Science Diplomacy to Address the COVID-19 Crisis: Perspectives from S4D4C

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We are all affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the effects of the lockdown. In addition, the crisis exposed many weaknesses in the interface between scientific research and international relations[1]. In this article, we would like to review the work done by S4D4C researchers in preparing further ideas on how to address the science diplomacy/science advice interface; drawing lessons from our case studies[2] and in particular, highlight some of the issues that we believe matter in the science diplomacy practice. For details, we refer the reader to our public deliverables and resources available on the S4D4C website.

At S4D4C, our focus lies on existing governance frameworks, tools and instruments, etc. that are available in the European Union. Nevertheless, one of our starting points, the Madrid Declaration on Science Diplomacy[3] (an output of the S4D4C global conference in 2018) is supported by signatories from all over the world. It postulates that "Science diplomacy is often not fully exploited at all levels of governance and especially at supranational levels" and we believe that this particularly holds true for the current crisis.

Europe highlights the global response[4] and launched a series of initiatives based on instruments such as joint programming and EU research programmes (launching calls as early as January 2020) based on an Action Plan[5] coordinating short-term actions. This has inspired a lot of stakeholders and research groups to get involved in international research cooperation for medicine and vaccine development but also in the social sciences and humanities.

The multilateral approach gains more traction in Europe and we have to acknowledge the challenges, but also the opportunities of the situation. As a project, we emphasise the importance of international scientific cooperation, science diplomacy, science advice and multilateralism at both the global and European level, especially to address global challenges. In May 2020, S4D4C provided an extensive policy report[6] that underlined current stoppers, warnings, and drivers for global collaboration and called for a systemic change to implement a strategy of EU science diplomacy for addressing global challenges.

Particularly, in case of COVID-19, we want to highlight how aspects such as (i) narratives, (ii) interests, (iii) values and (iv) interdisciplinarity matter in this crisis and we have narrowed down five specific policy recommendations: "(1) Create interactive spaces, (2) Promote bi-directional science and diplomacy fluency, (3) Engage the full spectrum of science, (4) Ensure open and interpretable science for diplomacy, and (5) Exert bold values-based leadership. In combination, these will create a strong foundation for addressing not only the ongoing issues in this crisis, but also other global challenges, both known and unexpected."[1]

A notable point we make in our policy brief[1] is that while science has played a central role in establishing and shaping the policy narratives around COVID-19, it is not yet well understood and thus, needs further research to investigate among other things: How science advice worked in the crisis, how it formed narratives in non-traditional policy spaces reliant on social media and the internet, how many efforts did not get the time or attention they might have deserved and which kind of dedicated fora should be in place for future crisis. The measures taken now in addressing the COVID-19 crisis will inform not only future answers to infectious diseases, but also to other global societal challenges, e.g. climate change, food security, green energy, etc.

We also highlight the importance for scientists to share, in a well-organised way, accurate and trustworthy data. One of our case studies[7] looked at open science policies as a matter of science diplomacy and the crisis has demonstrated the importance of an open and broad exchange of information efficiently in order to understand the situation, and to develop and test a vaccine or necessary medication as quickly as possible: "Open Science is central to this, and with it the sharing of results, data and methods. We are experiencing a shift towards Open Science at a speed that was previously unthinkable."[8] We believe that Europe played and plays an important role to pave the way for Open Science, including through science diplomacy activities. It is now necessary to build and foster the bridges built by providing robust legal and governance frameworks for sharing and reuse of data and methods and to secure the infrastructures for the exchange. In this context, we also call for more solidarity and leadership at the different interfaces between science, policy/diplomacy and also industry.

These sectors share different values that require resolution in policy-making and "while there is a political and public imperative to provide information quickly, great care must be taken to maintain the critical and deliberate processes of science that serve to ensure quality and accuracy"[1], and this needs to include in particular the social sciences and humanities.

We argue, in another S4D4C Policy Brief[9], that effective science diplomacy practices need literacy in both science and diplomacy. In support of this objective, the S4D4C project has released a free and open science diplomacy online course[10]. Although it focuses on the European perspective, we have already received feedback that it is useful also for trainees from other parts of the world. We would like to invite readers of *Science Diplomacy - India's Global Digest of Multidisciplinary Science* to take the course and to engage with our reports, provide your feedback and stay in touch via our mailing list (subscribe on our website www.s4d4c.eu) and our social media account on twitter @s4d4c.

References:

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5. See "ERAvsCORONA" Action Plan https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/research_and_innovation/research_by_area/documents/ec_rtd_era-vs-corona.pdf

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10. S4D4C European science diplomacy online course, available on: https://www.s4d4c.eu/european-science-diplomacy-online-course/