

Creating an interaction space for science diplomacy: meta-governance principles in action

Ewert Aukes, Gonzalo Ordóñez-Matamoros, Stefan Kuhlmann (all University of Twente, the Netherlands)

Science Diplomacy has emerged as a popular theme in foreign policy and science policy discourses. With its roots as a soft power mechanism, an arguable second wave of science diplomacy coincides with the observation that grand societal challenges have become increasingly complex, requiring specialised knowledge and technologies, and that these challenges are less and less likely to be tackled by traditional policies or tools. So, it makes sense to consider whether and how science diplomacy, a boundary concept describing the interconnection between the world of science and the world of diplomacy, can be positioned, both conceptually and operationally, to improve the collaboration between international actors to address the challenges they face.

In this paper, we will posit that addressing global challenges requires systemic changes involving a transformed science-diplomacy interface, resulting in new policies informed by science, new modes of science informed by diplomacy, and new modes of diplomacy informed by science. We ask: How can interactions at the science-diplomacy interface intended to address societal challenges be organised for them to be constructive and productive? With this research question in mind, we present a meta-governance framework developed specifically to guide stakeholders in the organization of productive and constructive “science diplomacy interaction spaces” (see below).

We approach this question from the perspective of meta-governance as introduced by Jessop c.s. Meta-governance is a notion from policy studies describing the observation that traditional governance modes – e.g. hierarchy, network, market – are incapable of solving societal challenges, if they are not mixed and continuously re-balanced and evaluated. As a result, governance frameworks constructed with meta-governance in mind cannot prescribe specific actors or mechanisms that constitute the ‘perfect’ science diplomacy. Rather, a meta-governance framework presents the enabling conditions that need to be met for stakeholders to be able to work substantively on developing science diplomacy activities.

This does not preclude the meta-governance framework to be ‘prescriptive’, however. It is a normative framework developed with the political goal of addressing transboundary societal challenges in mind. Hence, this meta-governance framework presents science diplomacy as a governance mode in itself that will enable stakeholders to continuously recalibrate the governance of specific policy issues and tensions occurring at the intersection of foreign policy and science. The governance framework will also not be able to bridge all tensions conceivable between actors in the international context. Value systems, interests, and worldviews may simply be too divergent to come together and commit to common interests. Thus, the governance framework presupposes the transcendence of national interest towards what has been called a cosmopolitan worldview (Ulrich Beck). Our Protocol is only usable in situations that are potentially collaborative and not competitive.

The meta-governance framework – “A new Science Diplomacy Protocol” – consists of nine procedural and three infrastructural principles meant to guide smooth transboundary knowledge flow by means of illustrating ways to cope with potential tensions occurring at different stages, levels of decision making and arenas of practice in the science diplomacy enterprise evolving in the international politico-scientific context. The nine procedural principles are: sensitivity, inclusiveness, transparency, deliberation, reciprocity, complementarity & manoeuvrability, legitimacy, alignment and evaluation. The three infrastructural principles are: capacities, capabilities and trust. All principles were derived from lessons learned from the empirical programme of the S4D4C project¹, and from the authors’ knowledge and expertise on science policy and governance studies. The empirical basis includes 9 case studies and a transversal case analysis. The principles are defined and described in greater detail including examples from the other products of S4D4C, notably the empirical case studies and the transversal case analysis.

As such, the new Science Diplomacy Protocol is geared towards creating what we term the Science Diplomacy Interaction Space at the intersection of the scientific knowledge production arena, the problem deliberation & reflection arena, and the politics & powering arena. These arenas represent specific practices that altogether shape those activities that can be labelled as science diplomacy. We deliberately refrain from a specific actor perspective, as the notion of social practices allows for a more nuanced picture. To mention just one example, universities, of course known primarily to figure in the scientific knowledge production arena, also engage in agenda-setting, which would also fit the problem deliberation & reflection arena.

We conclude that meta-governance thinking is particularly fit to interact with the substantive elusiveness of science diplomacy as a concept. The procedural and infrastructural principles are shaped so that science diplomacy activities do not only figure traditional diplomatic stakeholders and mechanisms. Rather, they represent the move towards international governance beyond national governments and including lower policy levels, NGOs, business and other civil society organizations. These actors are invited to put the framework to the test when organizing science diplomacy activities geared towards addressing and ultimately tackling societal challenges.

¹ “Using science for/in diplomacy for addressing global challenges (S4D4C)” was a three-year H2020 project dealing with the phenomenon of science diplomacy. Among others, it brought together scholars from higher education studies, science studies, policy studies and foreign policy. It was a profoundly transdisciplinary project with national science and technology foundations from Spain, Germany and Austria involved.