

SCIENCE OFFERS A HOPEFUL NEW DIPLOMACY

When you bring together committed scientists who work in a region of conflict, borders dissolve and human issues come into focus.

by Zafra Margolin Lerman



Photo: Labeeba Hammed

Zafra Lerman is president of the Malta Conferences Foundation, which uses science for diplomacy and peace in the Middle East. She has received over 40 international awards, including the 2016 Andrei Sakharov Prize from the American Physical Society and the 2014 Science Diplomacy Prize from the American Association for the Advancement of Science. For 25 years she chaired the Committee on Scientific Freedom and Human Rights for the American Chemical Society.

► Delegates at a Malta Conference [Photo: Morton Hoffman]

The Malta Conferences Foundation brings together scientists from 16 countries in the Middle East and North Africa to collaborate on scientific issues of importance to the region and to the world. The biggest challenge for these scientists is the lack of a diplomatic relationship between their governments. Solving regional issues must be done through collaborations between nations.

Borders are only lines on a map. Nature and the environment don't recognize these borders, and therefore, issues of climate change, air pollution, water quality and diseases require collaborations among nations for their solutions – only science diplomacy will succeed in solving such issues.

A new way of thinking, teaching and learning science is also required. Science will play a major role in solving the challenges that face our planet and especially the developing world. We must have scientists who will be able to solve these problems. In order to have these types of scientists, we must have, in the pipeline, students who will become the scientists able to offer solutions to existing and new problems. This means developing a new curriculum and new methods of teaching science so that it can be accessible to all students in the developing world. The Malta Conferences are an example of a collaborative effort to establish an advanced science curriculum, which integrates ethics, new pedagogies and new technologies into the curriculum.

In addition to having a strong science curriculum, it is essential to incorporate



a component on science diplomacy in the education of scientists. Science diplomacy can succeed in solving many of the problems in the developing world, but only when many scientists participate in the process.

The Malta Conferences are successful in working on regional problems like water because the scientists who participate set aside the traditional ideas of regional borders and eagerly work on the issues at hand. This is science diplomacy in action.

This model for collaborations and cooperation between scientists can be duplicated in many parts of the developing world to solve a wide range of issues. The Malta Conferences are a clear example that if scientists whose countries are at war can collaborate and build understanding, then science diplomacy truly prevails. ■