




SCIENCE DIPLOMACY: A DELICATE DRAMA

The third AAAS-TWAS Summer Course in Science Diplomacy placed future science diplomats into a complex, high-stakes simulated negotiation.

 by Sean Treacy

The story went like this: Two neighboring developing countries, both rich with a diversity of species, were divided by a deep difference in cultural values. One country, Industria, favored taking advantage of their species for rapid economic growth; the other, Pacifica, prioritized cautious environmental conservation.

Over the decades, the squabbling over their chaotic border grew so intense that the World Bank decided to intervene. It brought both countries to the negotiating table and offered them an opportunity to apply for a USD2 billion grant, if they could come to agreement on how to manage their biodiversity.

But part-way through the process, a surprising rumour about a secret meeting put the entire effort in jeopardy.

This was just one turning point in a high-stakes role-playing exercise that was central to the annual science diplomacy course organized by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) and TWAS in Trieste, Italy. The course, held from 11-15 July, brought together about 30 participants from 22 nations and used the simulation, along with presentations and discussions, to explore the complex workings and potential value of science diplomacy.

In addition to the simulation, participants in the summer course heard from scientists and others directly engaged in real-life science diplomacy, who explained how it can build stronger science and better relationships between nations. Among the science leaders at

the course were Princess Sumaya bint El Hassan, the president of the Royal Scientific Society of Jordan, and Vaughan Turekian, science and technology adviser to U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry.

In the simulation, participants were given roles such as high-level ministers, national parks directors and indigenous community representatives working together to solidify the deal. They played out private caucuses, negotiating strategies and responses to unforeseen disruptions. Each disruption was designed to teach important skills through hands-on experience in science diplomacy.

The rumour was one of the most dramatic disruptions – one that almost completely derailed the negotiations. Word spread that a World Bank delegation member with the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) met privately with two Industria representatives, presenting an offer from pharmaceutical companies to use a plant grown in Pacifica to develop a skin cream. The news rattled the delicate trust between everyone involved.

At one point, Pacifica all but accused the World Bank delegation of collusion. Then the ICC representative, played by Ana Elorza Morena of the Spanish Embassy in Washington D.C., became incensed, denying the accusations and pointedly reminding the national delegations that they had come to them for funding.

“Excuse me,” interrupted Pacifica’s increasingly irritated Foreign Affairs Minister, played by Mounir Ghribi, who is actually from the National Institute



▲ Mounir Ghribi, playing the foreign minister for a country that favors environmental conservation over economic development, speaks at the negotiating table during a science diplomacy simulation game at this year's AAAS-TWAS Science Diplomacy Summer Course.



of Oceanography and Applied Geophysics in Italy. “I understand that money is important, but we are not here begging. We are from the developing world, but we still have dignity.”

A SAFE PLACE FOR DIFFICULT LESSONS

The simulation gave students the difficult challenge of reconciling environmental concerns, indigenous rights and commercial development interests all at once – both within their individual nations, and between nations. The simulation’s organizers planned several disruptions to the process, such as breaking news of a massive poaching crime near the border of Industria and Pacifica. One disruption took a humorous turn, after it was revealed that an outside foundation offering alternative funding was run by a politically embarrassing cult that believes humanity descended from aliens.

But surprise is part of diplomacy in real life, too, and the occasional humour of the simulation helped the group to bond.

“Simulations enable experiential learning in a fun and safe-to-fail environment – without the burden of decision,” said Marga Gual Soler, the project director at the AAAS Center for Science

Diplomacy, who organized the course. “That empowers scientists and diplomats to jointly explore their creative side and flexibly adapt to unpredictable negotiation situations.”

The goal of the exercise was to allow students to learn from their own and each other’s mistakes, said David Schindel of the Smithsonian Institution’s U.S. National Museum of Natural History, who ran the simulation. “It’s all about acquiring skills of negotiation and diplomacy through some funny and sometimes painful lessons.”

When the participants failed to react diplomatically to news of the secret-meeting rumour during act two, it was a valuable teaching moment. “What’s wrong with this?” Schindel asked the participants. “It’s unsubstantiated. It’s anonymous. It may not be accurate.”

He explained that in such situations, diplomats may prepare for the worst but should assume the best about their negotiating partners, at least in public. “Even if you don’t trust the other side, you’re here to explore a trusting relationship.”

Students in the summer course said that the simulation helped them better understand the perspective of diplomats and appreciate the different skills necessary to make diplomatic progress.

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David Schindel

Each participant was given a role somewhat different from their normal occupation, forcing them to assume a view of international politics from an unfamiliar perspective. For example, Leandra Gonçalves, a marine biologist studying international relations of Universidade do Estado de São Paulo in Brazil, was placed in the role of a ritual healer advising the Pacifica delegation.

“It was very interesting to see how, in real life, traditional communities need to make a huge effort to be heard in these kinds of negotiations,” Gonçalves said. ■

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