

Global Diplomacy Lab

First Global Diplomacy Lab Under the patronage of Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier

Berlin, 13 – 16 November 2014

Conference report

Tectonic changes

The work diplomats do is currently undergoing the greatest upheaval of its history. Digitisation and globalisation in particular are radically changing the day-to-day tasks. Diplomacy is also endeavouring to become more inclusive, that is, to include other views, such as those from the field of culture, regional governments and NGOs. How can this be achieved? How will international relations be shaped in the future? And what role will diplomats play in this? The aim of the Global Diplomacy Lab (GDL) is to suggest answers to these questions. Its founding meeting took place in Berlin from 13 to 16 November, and was attended by 32 young diplomats and representatives of foundations, cultural institutions and NGOs.

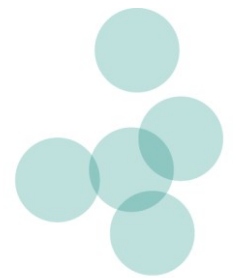
As the aim was to develop genuinely new ideas and to rethink international relations outside the box, the four-day programme was somewhat unusual. For example, the introduction session on the first day took place during a tour of art galleries in Berlin, where the conference participants introduced themselves using a picture of their choice. The following day, they took off their jackets. The idea was to free themselves under the guidance of voice artist Christina Wheeler and to create the right sort of atmosphere for unusual thinking by making unusual sounds as a choir.

The third day of the conference included a visit to the project One Square Kilometre of Education, which is based close to Rütli-Schule, a school that has received extensive media coverage in Germany. This project uses unusual methods aimed at restoring trust between the mainly socially disadvantaged families in the area and schools. Trust was a recurring topic at the GDL founding meeting. The title of the conference was "Trust in Global Affairs – Just a Dream?", and this question resonated through-

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out the event as the main topic. Trust was also the focus of the workshop “Must we trust in trust? Cooperation under conditions of growing complexity” led by professor Andreas Hasenclever where the notion of trust was discussed in detail, at times on a philosophical level.

However, the idea was that the GDL founding members would first learn to trust each other. They had a chance to get to know each other better at the Museum for Communication, where they were divided into small teams and made short films, leaving the political agenda behind. The participants repeatedly stressed that they were representing themselves, rather than their countries, and could therefore speak openly. The Chatham House Rule applied, that is, participants are free to use the information received, but neither their identity nor their affiliation may be revealed.

This approach, the energy it created, and the lively participation by the group members were also noticeable during the conference panel discussions. The following three highlights of the programme merit a closer look.

1. From United Nations to United Actors?

Fishbowl discussion: Diplomacy in the 21st century: learning from stories of ‘new’ political change makers and trust builders

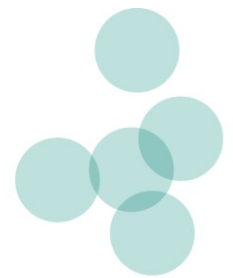
“We lost our exclusivity a long time ago,” said one diplomat. “We’re no longer the only people who define international relations. And diplomacy no longer means relations between governments, but rather cultural diplomacy, civil diplomacy and state branding, that is, a type of PR.” And thus she opened the debate with a series of clear statements. “Some people may not want to hear this, but traditional diplomacy is on the wane. We do more for our country when we are active on Facebook, for example. We need to take part in public debates.”

The session was organised as a fishbowl discussion. This meant that the participants, who were seated in a large circle around the speakers, were welcome to take one of the three free chairs in the middle of the room at

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any time and to join the discussion along with John Ashton, a former diplomat who now works as an independent climate policy consultant, and Tobias Leipprand, who moderated the debate, and who were seated in the middle of the room.

Ashton expressed his views in similarly strong terms. “There has never been a more exciting and a more difficult time to be a diplomat. We are not dealing with normal political forces, but rather with global forces such as climate change. We should talk less among ourselves. Instead, we should reach out to people from the field of culture and the civilian population. In other words, we really need to ask ourselves anew what we actually are. We constantly need to pass our own test: can I explain what I do, and why taxpayers’ money should be spent on it, to someone who has nothing to do with foreign policy?”

Another participant expressed this view in even stronger terms: “We’re moving away from United Nations to United Actors, such as local governments, civil society and NGOs.” Her discussion partner described diplomats as moderators who have to coordinate these actors, while John Ashton summed up the situation by saying that “the demarcation between society and officials no longer exists”.

The chairs in the middle of the room were constantly occupied by different speakers – practically everyone wanted to make a point.

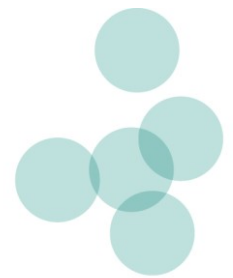
A former diplomat who now works in the private sector, pointed out that non-diplomats from other sectors should also be able to join the Federal Foreign Office. He believes that the ministry should proactively look for talented people, for example from the business sector. He was sceptical about whether diplomats will have enough business skills to make them interesting interlocutors for companies if they continue to pursue the usual career path. “If I go abroad, I don’t look to an embassy for business advice – the staff aren’t specialists.”

Another diplomat raised the next urgent question: Young diplomats from his region are primarily faced with the question of “what to do when the government no longer has the support of the people. To whom do we owe our loyalty at such times?” Ruprecht Polenz, who serves as Dean of

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the GDL, returned to this point at a later stage. In his opinion, the old question of legitimacy has resurfaced as a result of such situations and the shift from “United Nations to United Actors”. “Where does diplomacy actually receive its mandate? And who makes the rules these days?”

The term “inclusive diplomacy” was a leitmotif of the discussion. Another participant said she would welcome the creation of structures that would allow other actors to play a role in international relations. “Foreign Minister Steinmeier said that diplomats fix things and that they need a toolbox. That’s how I see it, too. We need this infrastructure so we can provide diplomats with tools, for example from the field of culture.”

In conclusion, it was pointed out that digitisation gives rise to another new task. “Far more information is available. We are being inundated with information. Increasingly, our task is to weigh up and select this information.” Ashton shared this view. He said we would soon be drowning in a sea of information if we are not highly selective. On the topic of culture, he added that a democratic culture was the most important thing. “At times you may have democratic structures and an institutional framework, but they’re useless if you don’t have a deeply rooted democratic culture.”

2. *“Bring me the people who dare to contradict their minister”*

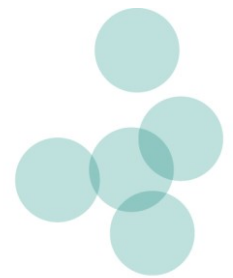
Open Situation Room on the Ebola Crisis

Ambassador Walter Lindner did not shake hands with anyone. Instead he suggested bumping elbows as a form of greeting. Lindner is the Special Representative of the Federal Government for the Fight against the Ebola Crisis and had just returned from the worst-hit countries: Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea. Back in Berlin, he was keen to tell the GDL members about his experiences. After his presentation, the group simulated a situation room, that is, a “political workshop” where governments and experts work together to decide at short notice how to respond to particular crises. This is an ideal laboratory for inclusive, cross-sectoral approaches to problems.

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Ambassador Lindner wears his long hair tied back in a ponytail. He began his talk by describing his unusual career path. Formerly a hippie, taxi driver and globetrotter, he went on to join the foreign service. "Back then, in 1988," Lindner said, "the hierarchy in the foreign service was even more rigid than it is today. Diplomats now have a bit more scope, and I strongly advise them to make use of it! I know you tend to adapt as regards clothing and language. After all, your own career is involved. But I advise you all to be authentic over the entire course of your career!" When Lindner set up a task force to combat Ebola, he primarily wanted to have people with the courage to contradict their minister on his team. "Times have changed. You personally can genuinely change things today."

He then went on to talk about Ebola. His main aim was to share three observations with the conference participants:

1. "Picture the suffering," he said. "What happens when people no longer touch each other, when they don't shake hands or kiss or hug each other? The virus is so diabolical because it goes to the heart of the noblest feelings: care, love, etc. I met many mothers who would rather die than refuse to hug their sick child and then spend the rest of their lives reliving how their daughter desperately reached out her arms for them."

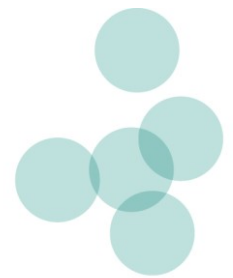
2. Lindner described the helpers on the ground as the true heroes of today. "It's 49°Celsius in those suits and you can only breathe for a limited amount of time. This means you can only work for an hour, and when you're on the point of collapse, it takes another 45 minutes to peel yourself out of the suit with help from other people. They pour three to four litres of sweat out of their boots afterwards. That's how people do their eight-hour shifts: they put on the suit three times for an hour each time."

3. "Help is on the way. We're late, but now the money from the German Government has arrived. However, the aid is not very visible because you don't see flags flying everywhere. This means it definitely has to be explained to the media."

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The conference participants were visibly moved by Lindner's talk and gave him a long round of applause.

Afterwards, two further experts joined the discussion via Skype: virus researcher Dr Lily Horng of the Stanford School of Medicine and German physician Dr Martin Herrmann, who is currently working for the German Red Cross in Monrovia. They answered questions from the conference participants who wanted to know, among other things, if the virus can be detected before symptoms occur, how much progress has been made on developing a vaccine, and if it would make sense to place the entire region under quarantine.

Working in groups of six to eight people, the participants then developed creative potential solutions. Some of the groups had an unlimited budget at their disposal, while others were tasked with finding low-cost solutions and at the same time identifying ways to attract support for their ideas via marketing.

Each group presented three ideas, only one of which had to be explicitly "realistic", while the other two ideas were expressly supposed to be creative and free.

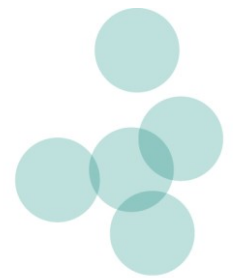
The ideas presented included:

- Involving the aerospace and defence industries in research on better, lighter, cheaper etc. suits for medical workers. This would make the workers' jobs easier, but would also allow the families to bury their relatives because they could wear these suits.
- The Muslim authorities should publicly inform their communities that the deceased do not have to be buried in accordance with religious rituals in emergencies like this.
- Supporting sensible investments in the region, such as those that create better health infrastructure or help the region to get back on its feet.
- Publicity campaigns, radio programmes, cartoons and plays could teach people about Ebola; the social media could use the hashtag #Ebolaction to call for donations; crowd-funding activities etc.; well-known people such as German football stars or Angelina Jolie could help to mobilise support.

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3. "What's the gossip in Manila?"

*Workshop: Is digital just a new medium, or does it change the message?
And if so, what should that message be?*

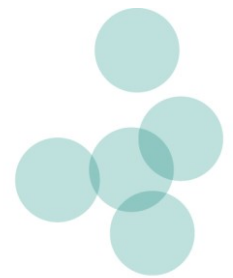
One of the recurring topics of discussion at the GDL was how digitisation is radically changing diplomacy. During the opening session, State Secretary Stephan Steinlein welcomed the participants as the generation of digital natives who are developing new forms of collaboration. This topic came up repeatedly during the fishbowl discussion. Ambassador Lindner also advised the young diplomats to keep in constant contact with the public via the media. "The days when diplomats only met behind closed doors are over."

On the third day of the conference, a special workshop focused on the topic of digitisation and the question "Is digital just a new medium, or does it change the message? And if so, what should that message be?" Ruth Ur, Director Partnerships Europe at the British Council, opened the session at Stiftung Mercator in Hackescher Markt in central Berlin with some information on how the British Council uses digitisation. "It allows us to work in countries where it would otherwise be difficult or impossible to work, such as Syria and Iraq. For example, we can offer English classes via Skype. In general, digitisation allows us to work more efficiently and more closely with people. Over 22 million came into direct contact with us, through exams, teaching, exhibitions and events, including more than 10 million people in face to face activities such as teaching, exams, workshops and meetings. 116 million people used our digital channels (web, social media, apps and online learning), including 16 million people connecting to online learning and social media." One of the diplomats pointed out that it was not only a question of the medium, but also a question of mentality as regards whether one simply used the new options as a further channel for providing information to the public or allowed feedback and sought real dialogue. "We need to ask ourselves if we are taking this seriously. How open are we to input? Openness doesn't come automatically with the medium," he said.

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However, communication certainly seems to be flowing in one direction. Another diplomat said that he and his colleagues have been instructed to tweet at least three times a day. “Sometimes we really need to think hard about what to tweet. We don’t always have that much to say,” he told the group, much to their amusement.

But the question of who is speaking comes up quickly. What gives these people the right to speak and how officially or personally are they speaking? Do only ministers or ambassadors have an account? A diplomat said that in his country only the Foreign Minister tweets. Elsewhere someone states that every member of staff in his ministry has their own account and can tweet and post fairly freely. Another participant said that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in her country does not only have accounts for individuals, but also for the various departments and their target groups, that is, an account for business people, an account for passport issues, and even an account for children.

There is no doubt about the effectiveness of the new media. A diplomat said that when the Prime Minister tweets something, it is immediately published by the media. “This doesn’t happen if we put the same information on our website.” This was backed up with an anecdote from another participant who told the group how his Foreign Minister had tweeted that a FIFA ad showed parts of Ukraine as part of Russia on a world map. Public pressure immediately became so strong that FIFA removed the map from the video straight away.

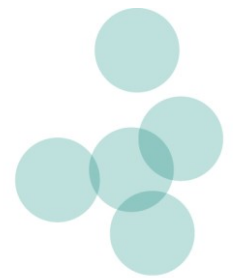
Social media also have a significant impact within the ministries, as they reduce hierarchies. Another diplomat said that colleagues still address each other as “Sir” and “Ma’am” at her ministry. However, this distance fades away when she communicates with her superiors and her own staff on Facebook. “You’re more relaxed there,” she explained. Her ministry is also one of the ministries that uses digital media to engage in dialogue. “This is where I find out what’s on people’s minds – we need to know what the latest gossip is in the capital.”

An employee of an environmental NGO pointed out some of the problems that can arise from this form of interaction. “There is also the danger that people who want to get involved think that they’ve done

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their duty by liking something, and then don't do anything else." Apart from such general problems, digitisation also gives rise to country-specific challenges. Then a diplomat told the conference participants about the difficulties her Ministry of Foreign Affairs faces as regards dealing with hate speech in the internet. Opposing parties use the internet to incite hatred of each other. "We want this situation to calm down, but at the same time we don't want to censor anything. This means we have to react in some way. That is currently the greatest challenge we have in the internet."

What now?

Dean Ruprecht Polenz underlined two things on the first day of the conference. On the one hand, he said, the GDL is primarily a laboratory. "We want to be completely free and open, and we don't know ourselves what the outcome could be." On the other hand, he pointed out that there is a difference between diplomats and philosophers. "We need to find actual answers at some stage." The lab fulfils a sort of balancing act between this idea of an open process and the desire for concrete results, and this was also reflected in the conclusions of the first GDL meeting.

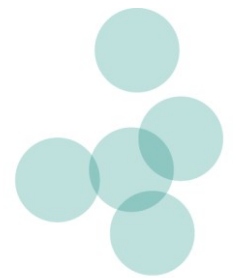
During a pre-scoping meeting in Genshagen, the GDL's mission was defined as follows: It should be a cross-sectoral forum for devising new and inclusive diplomacy. It should be a place for learning and exchange, where the voices of diverse groups of participants can be heard and knowledge can be shared openly.

Although a desire for concrete output was expressed during the last day of the conference in Berlin, it was decided not to define the mission more precisely in order to ensure that the process remains as open as possible. The statement "Sometimes the process is the goal" thus found favour among many of the participants. Markus Hipp of BMW Foundation Herbert Quandt suggested a greenhouse as a metaphor: "If you want to end up with three tall trees, you first need to plant ten saplings." He pointed out that results were not the only important thing – methodology also mattered. "The conference methods and the tools, such as interactive

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panels, which you have learned about here, are something you will also take with you and use in political discourse in the outside world.”

Dean Polenz was so taken with the image of a greenhouse that he mentioned it in his concluding statement: “We now need to invest extensively in the process so that some of the ideas can flourish in the future.” He ended his words of thanks in the spirit of the conference by saying “Add me on Facebook!”

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