When People Push Boundaries Together: New Ideas for Tackling the Refugee Question

Open Situation Room
November, 6th, 2015
The idea
The nature of diplomacy is evolving. It is no longer the strict purview of national governments and international organisations. The Global Diplomacy Lab is a platform for exploring a new and more inclusive diplomacy that goes beyond traditional politics. Creative professionals from various fields are thus needed to explore new tools of communication on the basis of mutual trust and to re-formulate an agenda for collective action.

What should diplomacy look like in the future?
Which competences do we need in order to define our scope of action more precisely?

These are questions that the Federal Foreign Office, under the patronage of Federal Foreign Minister Dr Frank-Walter Steinmeier and in partnership with the BMW Stiftung Herbert Quandt, the Robert Bosch Stiftung and the Stiftung Mercator, are eager to investigate with outstanding members of their networks from all continents.

The Global Diplomacy Lab is managed by a Secretariat based in the Federal Foreign Office and is responsible for organising regular meetings worldwide and fostering a permanent dialogue between partners, alumni and external stakeholders.

The bi-annual Labs
Around forty alumni of programmes run by the Federal Foreign Office, the BMW Stiftung Herbert Quandt, the Robert Bosch Stiftung and the Stiftung Mercator are invited to participate in the bi-annual meetings (also known as Labs) of the Global Diplomacy Lab.

Together with the Global Diplomacy Lab’s Dean, Ruprecht Polenz, Chairman of the German Bundestag’s Committee on Foreign Affairs from 2005 to 2013, the alumni first gathered in Berlin from 13 to 16 November 2014 to sketch multiple facades of trust portrayed in global affairs. The second edition of the Global Diplomacy Lab took place in Istanbul from 4 to 7 June 2015 and dealt with the issues of fragmentation versus integration, while the broad and complex issue of migration will be the topic of the third Lab, which will be held in Berlin from 5 to 8 November 2015.

As the form, measures and instruments of international cooperation are changing, new tools of communication based on mutual trust need to be designed. In order to open up original pathways for a more inclusive diplomacy, the Global Diplomacy Lab seeks to identify experimental approaches focusing on cross-sectoral knowledge exchange and on the drawing of a common language.

One of the main ideas of the Global Diplomacy Lab is that the network shall be borne by dedicated professionals. Together, they want to create a long-lasting welcoming platform for joint learning and production of ideas to inspire positive transformations in the diplomacy practised around the globe and to formulate an agenda for collective action in the 21st century.
New Approaches to Urgent Problems: The Open Situation Room

The idea of the Open Situation Room builds on the political “Situation Room” where crisis management teams of one government convene to give advice for urgent foreign policy issues. The Open Situation Room expands this idea by adding a more diverse selection of participants and a creative problem-solving approach to arrive at new perspectives and new possible solutions. The original Open Situation Room was developed by the crstl gmbh under Nicola Forster as part of the “Project Review 2014—A Fresh Look at German Foreign Policy”. One of the aims of the Open Situation Room is to support efforts by various ministries to increase civil society participation in EU-foreign policy and to expand on the methods available to policy-makers today. Several ministries and international organizations are now experimenting with this workshop format to achieve this goal.

The present version of the Open Situation Room is structured around a three-hour working session, a workshop rather than a conference. During this time, top-level decision makers and experts engage and explore a topic with participants selected from distinct disciplinary backgrounds. Architects, social entrepreneurs, medical doctors, designers, NGO representatives and others work together with policy experts and diplomats under time pressure to generate new possible approaches to address complex foreign-policy challenges. Previous OSRs have dealt with containing and fighting Ebola; coping with arms supply to Kurdish Peshmerga; or ways to react to the annexation of Crimea.

Typically, a high ranking decision-maker and topic expert provide a short introduction and important background information that leads to a specific question. The multi-disciplinary participants assume the role of advisors who bring their experience and backgrounds to the fore to produce new actionable ideas for the decision maker. They do so while working under realistic policy conditions, by generating stakeholder maps and identifying interests under great time pressure. These ideas are then sorted, filtered and bundled before they are presented to the decision maker.

In addition, the Open Situation Room familiarizes participants with concepts and methods of design thinking as they apply to complex matters of policy-making and policy implementation. Design thinking suggests that human experiences and human interactions provide valuable insights into a given situation and trigger new thinking about a problem that can lead to new action. In the context of addressing complex and sometimes wicked problems, design thinking has emerged as a powerful approach to overcome current entrapment and to develop “what if” scenarios and alternative futures.

The interdisciplinary make-up of the group and the stimulating work environment of the OSR encourage the development of new ideas and perspectives, producing valuable impulses for the decision maker that can lead to a significant reframing of the actual question. The synergies in the room can at times even reshape the relationships among participants and lead to new future collaborations around the topic.

About the Topic “People Pushing Boundaries Together”

Why did we choose the topic of „People pushing boundaries together“? In each challenge Germany is facing in the current refugee situation, we can trace some kind of boundary. Some of these boundaries are intangible, for example, when they have their roots in different cultural norms, social values or political beliefs. At other times boundaries exist in physical form. That is the case when they are of geographic nature or constitute national borders. People’s willingness and ability for financial support, provision of logistics, running of operations and administrations, too, are dominated by concerns for finite resources, yet another kind of boundary. And then we can think of boundaries created by bureaucratic red tape, prejudice and fear. What joins these different forms of boundaries is that they tend to prevent people from working together, from agreeing on a common solution. But while these boundaries are currently in flux, as people push and pull on every one of these from all sides, there is an opportunity to reconsider the challenges. With the GDL Open Situation Room, our aim is to generate innovative thinking and actionable ideas for how to work with these boundaries and for how to overcome them. We have no illusion that we can resolve the refugee crisis in a three-hours design thinking session. But we strongly believe that we can instill some new thinking and open new paths for collaborations that contribute to improving the current situation. People are already pushing boundaries together. What if we took this opportunity to reflect on these boundaries and to move some of them ourselves?

The Workshop Hosts
Nicola Forster & Sabine Junginger, PhD
Contributors: Members of the 3rd Global Diplomacy Lab

Abdul Rahman, Eirliani - Singapore/India
Al-Arqaq, Dima - Palestine
Ammash, Mohammed - Iraq
Atasayi, Sibel - Turkey/Germany
Azzam, Tamer - Egypt/Germany
Bernarding, Nina - Germany
Braun, Johannes - Germany/China
Anne-Lorraine Calderon, Brisa - Brazil/Mexico
Davydova, Angelina - Russia
Eryuce, Onur - Turkey/Belgium
Farjon Israel, Adi - Israel/Germany
Forster, Nicola - Switzerland
Haug, Sebastian - Germany/United Kingdom
Igboegwu, Amarachi Chidiebere - Nigeria
Jasch, Hans-Christian - Germany
Junginger, Sabine - Germany
Kalmár, Szilvia - Hungary/Germany
Karoubi, Amel - Tunisia/Germany/UK
Kaufmann, Matthias Christian - Germany
Khouri, Josiane - Lebanon/France
Küppers, Almut - Germany/Turkey
Li, Lina - China/Germany
Maslilji, Ahmad Seyer - Afghanistan/Belgium
Mahlbo, Mbali - South Africa
Nguyen, Chi T D - Vietnam/Canada
Oppenheim, Seth - USA
Osoia, Diego - Canada
Ponjavic, Ivana - Serbia
Preks, Anna-Maria - Estonia/Germany
Preuss, Jakob - Tunisia/Germany
Randhawa, Jasdeep - India/Kenya
Saleem, Mome - Pakistan
Salz, Susanne - Germany
Saller, Lukas - Germany
Shen, Qilan - China
Simmins, Imran - South Africa/Germany
Tuncalp, Emre - Turkey/USA
Turhan, Ebru - Turkey
Valencia, Vivian - Mexico/USA
Varju, Kristzina Dóra - Hungary
A Turkish German Migration Center

The purpose of this center is to allow for a more in-depth exchange of experiences and approaches to refugee and migration related questions between Turkey and Germany. It would build on the existing histories of both countries where Germany has developed approaches to integrate large Turkish communities whereas Turkey has become a key actor in the current accommodation of Syrian refugees. The center would foster Turkish German Cultural Exchanges around practical issues of Migration and Refugees and include refugees in its work. Within the GDL community, foundations and the foreign office could work together to establish connections with stakeholders on both sides.
Policy Makers Living in Refugee Camps Programme

Too few policy-makers get a chance to experience the situation on the ground. This program aims to provide policy makers with opportunities to work directly in and with refugee camps. Refugees would get to know some policy-makers and policy-makers could spend time in places where their skills could contribute to make the lives of refugees easier and put them at ease. Next steps are to identify three Members of Parliament willing to engage in this programme. GDL Dean Ruprecht Polenz has been identified as a facilitator for these contacts.
Develop a Website for Culturally Sensitive Teaching in Host Countries

The idea is to provide support for teachers but also hospitals and other public institutions that engage with more and more cultural diversity as a result of the current migration. Many teachers, for example, face new dynamics in their classrooms and new student populations they are often not familiar with. The aim of the website/initiative is to establish a cross-cultural teaching methodology that is available online. Next steps are to finance the idea through crowdfunding and to specify the expertise needed to move forward. Possible outlets are also a special Youtube channel to provide support and materials for how to deal with conflicts.
Mapping Data on Costs and Benefits of Migration

Visual images very often show the negative impacts of migration and do not focus on the positive contributions of migrants to host societies. This team proposes to visualize the benefits to local communities and national economies by migrants in a visual map of costs and benefits, which will support the communication about refugee contributions. This map would connect demographic data with data of migration and put it in the context of labor market demands and skills needed.
Portable Media Center for Refugees

Help refugees stay informed by establishing a portable media center that they can trust. The portable media center would connect refugees to global news and social media and inform them about latest developments and their options for participating in their host country’s society. The media center would integrate different platforms like Facebook and other social media but also link to the MigrAPP developed by the team “Think & Do”. Next steps will be to benchmark with other projects and see what is already available.
"It Works" – a New Narrative for Inclusion

This idea promotes the benefits of welcoming refugees into their host countries through story telling. One of the aims of these “micro stories” is to change the narrative about integration in close collaboration with Mayors of Municipalities. “It works” offers support for the local community and generates new opportunities for locals and newly arriving migrants to learn about each other. This could be done by sharing success stories from different regions around the world. Next steps include a review of similar initiatives, for example that of the Alpbach Forum in Austria.
Create an App “MigrAPP” for Refugees

Create a mobile App for and by migrants. The idea is to develop a software through a hackathon where refugees, migrants, and technically skilled work together to identify what such an App might look like. The purpose of the App is to inform migrants about services, policies, programs, etc. and to keep them up to date in this fast changing environment. The intention is to scale the project to a global level where governments can also learn from migrants and their needs by engaging with them directly. The next steps are to participate in or organize a hackathon to get started.
Match Capacities!

This team proposes the creation of a resettlement program on a global scale that makes use of big data. Its aim is to identify capacities and willingness to distribute refugees among countries by showing their potential gains in relation to their own demographic and economic developments. Next steps would be to get policymakers interested and engaged.
Be Legal!

This team wants to strengthen and emphasize legal immigration. It suggests a legal reform to achieve this and to allow for greater numbers of legal migrants. This could also be supported by pro bono legal advice to migrants. Rather than pointing to people as “illegals” the idea of “be legal” is to build safe legal channels for people who must migrate.