

Establishing bridges through science diplomacy: The experience of a Puerto Rican scientist in Egypt ^[1]

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The 3rd International Conference for Women in Science without Borders (WISWB) [3] was held at The British University in Egypt [4] (Cairo, Egypt) from March 12th-14th, 2019. The conference theme was “Science Diplomacy for Sustainable Development”. WISWB [5] is an initiative to increase cooperation between female and male scientists in terms of excellence in scientific research, where meeting participants are expected to present their cutting edge research. A course on “Science Diplomacy and Advice for Future Perspectives” was held prior to the meeting from March 10-11th, 2019. This pre-conference workshop was the perfect venue to exchange ideas among colleagues in the science policy and science diplomacy areas. This conference allowed the attendees the opportunity to gain more skills and tools to navigate the interplay between science and diplomacy.

During this 2-day workshop, I learned about various initiatives, programs, and resources that contribute and promote science across cultural divides. One of these initiatives was the “L’Oréal-UNESCO for Women in Science Program for Egypt” [6], which aims to honor exceptional researchers from Egypt who help advance scientific knowledge and serve as role models for young Arab women. Another initiative was “Chemists Without Borders” [7], a non-profit organization whose mission is solving humanitarian problems by mobilizing resources and expertise of the global chemistry community. Talk about science policy and diplomacy in action! Their goals are ensuring that every person has access to essential medicines and vaccines, potable water, and sustainable energy supply, among others. Currently, they have very interesting projects to achieve these goals: in Bangladesh, a cost-effective model to fight arsenic poisoning in water; in the University of Massachusetts Amherst, a kit to measure arsenic levels in rice; and in collaboration with “AIDSfreeAfrica” [8], the construction of pharmaceutical manufacturing facilities in Cameroon to be owned and operated locally.

The Global Young Academy Science Advice Working Group [9] panel on “Catalyzing Science Diplomacy for the Global South” was very enlightening for young professionals like me. They discussed how to effectively promote and foster access to academic and professional opportunities for youth in developing countries and, at the same time, lever these opportunities to catalyze new knowledge and technologies for their country’s economic and social growth. Organizations such as “Ekpa’palek” [10] (Latin America) and the “Global Young Academy” [11] (International) provide resources and access to an international network in order to empower young researchers and professionals around the world. I firmly believe that these organizations are essential in our society to highlight the potential that currently exists in developing countries. They aid to counteract the lack of mentorship, academic advising, as well as gender and race disparities, to name a few.

During this workshop attendees received training in how to effectively communicate science to the general public and the current challenges we face to achieve this goal. Antoinique van Staden [12], from the University of Pretoria in South Africa, offered a very interesting workshop on the complexity of communicating science across different fields and to the public. We discussed what to avoid in a scientific abstract (jargon, long sentences, passive sentence structures, cross-references, and vague context) in order to convey an effective message to the general audience. One of my favorite presentations on this topic was from Salma Hassaballa [13], an Egyptian independent filmmaker and a writer. She talked about the “Closer to the Truth” [14] Project, which aims to verify the objectivity of many scientific claims. Despite the “objectivity” of science, there

are disputes among scientists regarding important claims, such as Darwin's Evolution Theory and the "Near-Death Experience (NDE)". For example, when investigating the NDE credibility [15], it was observed that scientific claims in this area are not always objective. The dispute among scientists was not based on scientific evidence, but instead on the scientists' diverse beliefs. Hassaballa wants to raise awareness in the scientific community on the fact that "scientists are humans and their objectivity is questionable, despite their discipline being evidence-based". This project will have 30 episodes, 15 minutes long, and will discuss a scientific claim with scientists who have opposite views about the topic. Stay tuned!

I am extremely grateful with the organizers for allowing me to participate in such a great workshop and for the opportunity of presenting my research at the conference. I will never forget this wonderful experience!

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