

Framing EU Health Diplomacy with a Global and Systemic Worldview

An InsSciDE issue paper

Diseases are able to cross geographic and biological barriers with greater ease and speed than ever before. An intricate web of factors, from globalization to widespread environmental degradation, are changing the risk landscape of public health, with possible impacts extending far beyond human health. Economic, social and political implications are at stake on every scale, from local to global.

Addressing present and future health challenges with recognition for their boundary spanning nature requires connecting health sciences with international politics. Between these fields, there is a need to build up trust and communication channels, to foster understanding of the others' practices and priorities and to establish mechanisms that enable inclusive knowledge exchange and more efficient coordination in emergencies.

The European Union (EU) is bolstering its role in public health in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Further enhancing cooperation on health challenges among EU member states and between the EU and the rest of the world will be key to being prepared for future health challenges.

Health diplomacy, the practice of converging public health fields and diplomacy, may provide a strategic starting point.

What is health diplomacy?

Health diplomacy can be considered a subset of science diplomacy, by which health sciences intersect on an international level with governmental or non-state actors on questions of health policy or global health governance. The practice entails consideration for a multiplicity of social, security, economic, or political interests and public health knowledge, while remaining in line with political agendas.

Already a component of various levels of health- or foreign policy around the world, health diplomacy is used to convene joint humanitarian action in crisis, establish commitment to common challenges like infectious diseases or bolster soft power among regional neighbors.^{1 2}

Health diplomacy elevates health issues to an international level of policy and diplomacy, offering means to disperse the burden of challenges posed by communicable or non-communicable diseases among countries or communities. At the same time, the label may also apply when health issues or related technology is instrumentalized for foreign policy goals.

Traditional actors of health diplomacy include officials in national health ministries, delegates of the WHO or public health professionals posted abroad in official capacities. But the ecosystem of health diplomacy is enlarging and now regularly includes private sector actors, non-profit organizations (NGOs) and even cities, which may engage in health diplomacy through international city-to-city

¹ Lee, K; Gomez, E; (2011) Brazil's ascendance: The soft power role of global health diplomacy. European Business Review (January). 61-64. <https://www.aber.ac.uk/en/media/departmental/interpol/chair/KL---Brazil's-ascendance-article.pdf>

² HD Euro perspectives
https://www.euro.who.int/data/assets/pdf_file/0009/347688/Health_Diplomacy_European_Perspectives.pdf



relationships. Convening stakeholders through health diplomacy has been shown to yield more long-term results in health campaigns.

In the context of an ambitious agenda to reform health policy in the EU in response to the pandemic, the practice of health diplomacy could be key to convening the interests of the EU's member states and international partners.

Health diplomacy in the EU and beyond

The EU and its member states recognize that health interventions abroad can simultaneously entail a moral obligation and a necessary means to protecting European populations and interests.³

Interest in health questions has been on a steady rise among European foreign affairs ministries for several decades and the topic features regularly on the agendas of the G7, G20 and BRICS, although with varying depths in commitment.^{4,5}

Health diplomacy has furthermore been a natural byproduct of the EU's growing role in global affairs and sustainable development. In Central Asia for instance, EU efforts to support democracy and political stability have broadened to include partnerships and programmes that fight communicable diseases, improve maternal and child health systems, and build health information management

Health Diplomacy in Global Vaccination Governance: From an InsSciDE Case Study by Anna Pichelstorfer and Katharina T. Paul

Recent efforts by intergovernmental actors, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), to foster collaboration on vaccine-preventable diseases stand in stark contrast to the contextually contingent nature of national immunization programs: vaccination schedules and delivery differ greatly, and so do the ways in which these programs are assessed by means of coverage rates—a key metric in global health governance. These divergences, we show, are side-lined and resolved diplomatically in WHO assessment practices: here, seemingly standardized metrics and practices of datafication function to translate political differences into technical discussions about “data quality.” Using a practice-based approach, we conceptualize data practices as a form of health diplomacy and their infrastructures as constitutive of global health governance. Drawing on document analysis and interviews, we examine the WHO's practices of producing coverage rates provided by member states. We argue that these metrics are performative inasmuch as they help frame vaccination as a global concern and mediate between global norms and local practices. We show how datafication is both an effect of, and a means for, health diplomacy and helps sustain the authority of the WHO. Our research further demonstrates the need to attend to practices of datafication and their political implications.

³ Collins, N., Bekenova, K. and Kagarmanova, A. (2018). Negotiated Health Diplomacy: A Case Study of the EU and Central Asia. *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 13(4), pp.432–456.

⁴ Soft power and global health: the sustainable development goals (SDGs) era health agendas of the G7, G20 and BRICS <https://bmcpublihealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-019-7114-5>

⁵ Framing health and foreign policy: Lessons for global health diplomacy <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/45797685> Framing health and foreign policy Lessons for global health diplomacy



systems. The health initiatives have allowed the EU 'to gain more influence in the region and enhance its positive image', in contrast to projects on democratization which are often ineffective.⁶

In response to Covid-19, the EU has outlined plans for a European Health Union and Health Emergency Response Authority (HERA) and strengthened the mandates of the European Centre for Disease Control (ECDC) and Prevention and the European Medicines Agency (EMA). Health diplomacy is a foundation to the cross-member state negotiations and processes that form these initiatives and their implementation. However, up to date there is no EU-wide health diplomacy strategy or other health policy connected to today's globalized and interconnected world outside of the EU.

As the EU pursues a greater role in European wellbeing and health security, health diplomacy is implied in its operations at the interface of national and EU policies on health, security and external action. By formalizing an EU-level strategy and designating specific resources to enhance the EU's capacity for health diplomacy, health challenges can be tackled with greater cogency between (health) sciences across the world and political and foreign policy agendas.

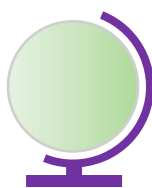
Towards a common EU Health Diplomacy Strategy

At EU institutional level, health diplomacy could build on established common ground and interest of member states to encourage shared responsibility for health security and promote international sharing of critical resources and knowledge. Consolidating member states' voices into one EU position on the global stage could in turn improve coordination on health data, priorities and research with other regions and on a global scale.

It is worth noting a growing movement to 'decolonize global health' calling for a more inclusive and transparent engagement with third countries, in particular with the global south and promoting two-way knowledge exchange. Indeed, underrepresentation of developing countries' perspectives in the public and scientific discourse creates imbalance in any collective efforts to combat health challenges, and bypasses valuable insight that exists beyond the developed countries.

To shape EU health diplomacy in view of supporting the world's ability to address global health challenges, these traits could be considered at the core: global and holistic, shared and responsive.

Global and Holistic



In today's landscape of vast global trade, travel and migration, no country exists in a vacuum, and each is affected by the other's economy, security and public health. Attentiveness to these global and sectoral interlinkages is central to anticipating, preventing and responding to health challenges, and needs to form the basis of health diplomacy processes and initiatives.

⁶ Collins, Bekenova and Kagarmanova, 2018



Shared



Fostering international cooperation on border-spanning health challenges requires convergence of expertise, resources and interests. Acting on behalf of member states, EU health diplomacy must be grounded in the Union's shared values of respect for human dignity and human rights, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law, and further propped up by the discussed declaration on common values and principles of 2006. By advocating for shared responsibility for health challenges and leading by example, the EU can support the cultivation of broader cooperative spirits on the global scale.

Responsive



Responsive health diplomacy refers to EU capacity to respond quickly and adapt creatively to both chronic and acute health challenges, in and beyond Europe. It implies a keen sensitivity to geopolitical contexts, colonialist histories and socioeconomic inequalities among the actors and stakeholders in health diplomacy processes. With shifting geopolitical conditions and rapid evolutions in science and technology, policies must be broad and flexible to be responsive to health threats, yet precise enough to ensure EU values are never forgone.

Recommendations for the Way Forward

Health diplomacy is necessary to face the increasing severity and scale of present and future health challenges. Success of many initiatives, from improving centralized health data collection among member states to fostering research partnerships, will be contingent on policies and actors that function effectively in a range of scenarios and can adapt to rapidly evolving situations. Building the EU's capacity to address health challenges could entail establishing a formal health diplomacy strategy with a framework and having 'in-house' professionals that can understand and navigate the complex ecosystem traversing public health and foreign policy.

Grounded in the notion of a *global and holistic, shared, and responsive* approach, a health diplomacy strategy could gather the health actions of the EU under a more coherent framework. The strategy could be implemented along two vectors. Internally, health diplomacy facilitates a common public and global health agenda among member states based on shared values and interests. Externally, HD bolsters the EU as a global actor, helps monitor and respond to health threats and consolidates progress towards health-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Several actions could advance health diplomacy in view of addressing the current and future health challenges in the EU and beyond. An EU health diplomacy strategy might prioritize elements such as:

- **Multistakeholder involvement**

Involve representatives of diverse communities in the design, implementation and evaluation of EU health diplomacy strategy or initiatives. Leverage the strengths and recognize the interests of stakeholders from each region concerned, including epistemic communities, diplomats, private enterprises, NGOs and civic society. Convening capacities can help synchronize resources, data and expertise to generate the most effective and innovative policy solutions.



- **Training in health diplomacy**
Navigating the complex ecosystem traversing public health and foreign policy requires interdisciplinary expertise and a unique combination of skills. Health diplomacy training can ensure actors are well equipped to contemplate the multiplicity of scientific, sociocultural, economic and political factors specific to this interface.
- **Health diplomats**
EU health diplomats may constitute a task force for an EU health diplomacy strategy and provide frontline expertise in evolving health crises. Deploying combined expertise of public/global health and diplomacy could facilitate cooperation and coordination between EU institutions and the governmental agencies, epistemic communities or international industries in third countries. Furthermore, EU health diplomats may direct efforts 'inwards' to strengthen synergies among member states.
- **Support for global south countries**
Engage in dialogue and co-construction with countries struggling with public health to determine the best means of support for their needs. Supporting prevention measures and ensuring access to basic medical resources is essential to diminishing the world's severe health inequality problem and to protecting public health everywhere. Due to the long history of oppression and injustices by European powers towards many global south countries, building trust and effective cooperation requires an exceptionally long-term view and acute historical awareness.
- **Health across sectors and policies**
The development of the European Health Union, including strengthening the ECDC and EMA, is an opportunity to foster convergence among member states in health data monitoring and national policies. It is also a chance to emphasize the interlinkage between human health, animal welfare and a healthy natural environment.

As the field of health diplomacy expands, the EU is positioned to become a more effective actor of the practice. Structuring and formalizing existing activities in health diplomacy, by the EU and on member states level, can improve coordination and achieve more effective results. A collaborative approach, driven by inclusive dialogue and knowledge-to-policy infrastructures, is fundamental for combatting urgent health threats as well as for proactive disease prevention and achievement of long-term development priorities.

