

## **Cultural Diplomacy in the Times of COVID-19**

COVID-19 has brought uncertainties and challenges, regardless of where people live, level of their wealth, education and job. Still much remains unknown about this virus. Social media users have been posting stories on how various aspects of life are being shaped by the virus - whether it is an inaccurate result of a COVID-19 test kit in Karachi, or closed door of a pharmacy in New York during working hours. The reliability of such posts is questionable, but they still contribute significantly towards building information, disinformation and conspiracy theories regarding the virus. In the times of COVID-19, it is not only important how governments control the virus at home, but how their efforts are seen and perceived by the public of other countries.

Diplomacy and foreign cultural policy are currently not a priority for governments. However, policymakers will be judged for their pandemic-related policies and transparency in the future since these have impacted the cultural image of their country. Pandemic control and security policies, digitalisation, cooperation with non-governmental actors, as well as counter-policies towards conspiracy theories have shaped cultural diplomacy.

Cultural diplomacy is a skill to construct cultural ties between countries and foreign publics, over the long term. Exchange of ideas, information, art, language and other aspects of culture is among the examples of cultural diplomacy efforts. Instruments, perspectives, challenges, opportunities of cultural diplomacy in the time of COVID-19 have been changed in different ways.

**First**, the ability of governance systems to control the virus has created not only legitimacy at home but also generates acceptability, internationally. Some countries are facing a leadership crisis to control the pandemic, and yet, are not ready to accept failure. Some countries are using the situation to present themselves as a worldwide saviour through health diplomacy by sending aid abroad. The good governance system coping the pandemic shapes the soft power more than ever.

**Second**, use of digital instruments and partnerships of non-governmental actors have been key for filling communication gaps and limitations for cultural diplomacies. COVID-19 had a huge impact on (those based on face-to-face interaction) projects that countries pursue abroad. The visa section of some embassies have been temporarily closed, ceremonies of national days or opening events of cultural festivals have been suspended. Moreover, communication between international diplomats, due to limitations of social distancing, have been reduced. However, there have been embassies that took advantage of digitalisation to continue their communication with the foreign public and worked with a variety of nongovernmental communities (academics, artists, journalists, activists and governors) to adopt new ways of co-working, collaborating, negotiating and exchanging ideas on the E-platforms. The use of digitalisation indirectly emphasises how modern, smart and efficient cultural diplomacy actors are. It also illustrates the level of integration of civil society partnership into the foreign cultural policy. Meanwhile, those who extensively use classic activities (like face-to-face projects) were hit more than others during the pandemic.

**Third**, the pandemic illustrated worldwide that when it comes to being vulnerable to natural diseases, all are equal. This realisation can be used to generate an intercultural global understanding, regarding good governance, health and climate change policies. This

intercultural understanding should help us understand that national security is now world security and people of the world either all win or all lose. Generating intercultural dialogue over the issue of global cooperation to guarantee security and happiness for the world, can be among the future cultural diplomacy activities.

**Fourth**, developing labs to test and create medication against COVID-19 currently are not enough for the states to manage the situation. Disinformation, half-truths and conspiracy theories that spread virally through social media and misguide the public are the new challenges of the states. States suffer or benefit from conspiracy theories in different ways. The idea that the virus is less dangerous than scientists claim would justify the delay on health policies in some countries. On the other hand, conspiracy theories making specific countries (like China) responsible for generating COVID-19 have shaped their international image. As a result counter policies towards conspiracy theories are more important for cultural policies, than ever before.

The public and cultural diplomacy during and after the pandemic can achieve its aims by applying ways which guarantee development for the world in a sustainable way, or as SDG 16 approach peace, justice and strong institutions. This will also encourage the notion that peace, human rights and goodwill of a nation is just as important as the world's.

The panel will concentrate on the following issues:

- Good governance system (e.g. health and education policies) as a generator of a strong diplomacy and soft power
- Digitalisation: (the only) chance for diplomacies to launch culture, art, education and other projects abroad during COVID-19
- Cooperation between civil society and state to generate cultural and international image for countries - challenges and benefits
- Soft power, cultural diplomacy or propaganda - main or new factors of global power relations during this time of the pandemic
- How conspiracy theories regarding COVID-19 shape (cultural) diplomacies and soft power - which policies or counter-policies are taken?
- Science is still not enough - how do diplomacies take the common understanding of the public for mobilising global cooperation for peace and security?
- Medical diplomacy - will cultural activities be replaced by medical aid as an instrument of diplomacy and foreign cultural policy in the future?

The panel aims to bring together these three groups:

- **Experts:** academia who have expertise in fields of public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, cultural power, soft power and international relations
- **Experienced actors:** diplomats and high officials who have worked in fields of culture, art, music and tourism
- **Scholars:** academics, students and journalists who have interest in the issue of diplomacy.

**Panel Organisers**

Dr Fatemeh Kamali-Chirani, Visiting Research Fellow, Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Islamabad, Pakistan

Email: [fatemehkamali@sdpi.org](mailto:fatemehkamali@sdpi.org)

Ms Rabia Tabassum, Research Associate, Sustainable Development Policy Institute Islamabad, Pakistan

Email: [rabia\\_tabassum@sdpi.org](mailto:rabia_tabassum@sdpi.org)