

FOSTERING FOREIGN RELATIONS AT THE GRASSROOTS: THE IMPACT OF FOREIGN SERVICE OFFICER-INITIATED LOCAL ENGAGEMENT PROGRAMS ON PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN VIENTIANE, LAOS

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ABSTRACT

This study assessed the impact of Foreign Service Officer (FSO)-initiated local engagement programs on public diplomacy in Vientiane, Laos, focusing on community perceptions, participation, and perceived diplomatic outcomes in cultural exchange, community development, and education. It also examined relationships among these variables to understand effective public diplomacy at the community level.

Using a descriptive-correlational design, 38 key community stakeholders were engaged, with 35 purposively selected based on their direct involvement with FSO programs. This approach ensured reliable insights from knowledgeable participants.

Findings revealed highly favorable community perceptions of FSO initiatives. Educational programs received the highest appreciation (Weighted Mean = 3.76), followed by cultural exchanges (3.70) and community development projects (3.66), resulting in an overall perception rating of 3.71. Community participation was similarly strong, with a weighted mean of 3.59, highlighting active engagement and a strengthened connection to the programs (Weighted Mean = 3.82).

Perceived diplomatic impact was affirmed as positive, with an overall weighted mean of 3.75. The highest-rated indicator (Weighted Mean = 3.91) highlighted alignment with the Philippine Embassy's strategic goals, demonstrating the programs' role in fostering international cooperation and goodwill.

However, correlational analyses revealed no significant relationships. The Pearson r between community perception and participation was 0.461, below the critical value of 0.632, and the correlation between participation and perceived diplomatic impact was 0.256. This indicates that positive perceptions do not necessarily translate into higher participation, and participation does not predict perceived diplomatic influence.

In conclusion, FSO-led initiatives are broadly perceived as relevant and effective, reflecting inclusivity and alignment with local and diplomatic priorities. While perceptions and participation are strong, program accessibility, scheduling, and communication strategies may be key to enhancing engagement and ensuring that perceived impacts align with actual diplomatic influence.

Keywords: Descriptive Correlational Study, Foreign Relations, Grassroots Engagement, Foreign Service Officer, Local Engagement Programs, Public Diplomacy, Vientiane, Laos