

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

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, public diplomacy has become central to foreign relations, emphasizing trust, mutual understanding, and cooperation at the community level. Effective public diplomacy requires initiatives that resonate with local populations, promote intercultural engagement, and foster sustained relationships (Fitzpatrick, 2023). Community perceptions of programs in culture, education, and development significantly influence their effectiveness, as they foster positive relations and sustainable outcomes. For instance, Rural Community-Based Tourism (RCBT) initiatives empower communities to preserve cultural identity while supporting economic growth (Isaza & Salas, 2023). Similarly, mobile phone surveys and volunteer tourism programs highlight the importance of tailoring engagement strategies to local demographics, accessibility, and socio-cultural contexts (Khan et al., 2023; Anuar et al., 2022).

Community participation is a cornerstone of effective local governance and public diplomacy. Studies show that factors such as age, gender, education, socioeconomic status, and local governance structures influence engagement levels (Nurbaiti & Bambang, 2018; Abukari & Mwalyosi, 2020; Brotusilo et al., 2020). Effective facilitation by community officers and trust-building are crucial for active involvement in health, agricultural, and development programs (Guiron et al., 2019; Gholipour et al., 2023; Obot et al., 2022). Similarly, international educational programs and people-to-people diplomacy have been shown to enhance perceptions of host countries and strengthen long-term relationships (Hajdari et al., 2024; Tran & Bui, 2021).

Legal frameworks supporting these efforts include the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961), which provides the basis for diplomatic initiatives; the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goals 4, 11, and 17; and Laos's National Policy on Cultural Heritage Protection and Promotion, which encourages cross-cultural collaboration (Slaughter, 2022; Simon & Alston, 2023; Xayasith & Keomany, 2023). While high-level diplomacy is well-studied, locally-driven initiatives by foreign service officers remain underexplored. This study examines the impact of FSO-initiated local engagement programs in Vientiane, Laos, on public diplomacy, aiming to assess how they foster international understanding, strengthen diplomatic ties, and inform best practices for grassroots diplomacy in culturally sensitive contexts (Al-Kassimi, 2022; Snow, 2022).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community Perceptions of FSO-Initiated Local Engagement Programs

Cultural exchange programs play a crucial role in shaping community perceptions and intercultural interactions. Kwenani and Yu (2018) surveyed 42 community partner organizations, finding high satisfaction with international student involvement, though 20% reported no engagement due to language barriers. Onosu (2021) emphasized that cultural immersion transforms self-identity, suggesting broader psychological impacts on host communities. El-Asri and Karfa (2024) noted that authentic cultural exchanges enhance intercultural competence and foster positive perceptions of host cultures, supporting cultural diplomacy. Sustarsic (2020) highlighted the mutual benefits recognized by long-term host families and called for longitudinal studies to assess lasting impacts. Ma (2015) contextualized cultural diplomacy as evolving to include non-state actors, with ASEAN exemplifying multi-stakeholder initiatives. Enaifoghe and Makhutla (2020) discussed African

cultural heritage as a driver of tourism, business, and soft power, advocating strategic frameworks for cultural diplomacy. Community development projects rely heavily on local perceptions for success. Stefani (2017) stressed the need for “contextual empathy,” while Chan et al. (2024) demonstrated that river tourism in Petagas-Putatan enhances livelihoods but requires skills training and infrastructure support. Clissold and McNamara (2019) emphasized gender inclusivity and socio-cultural understanding in Vanuatu’s adaptation initiatives. Yttredal and Homlong (2020) argued for contextualizing sustainability to align global and local concerns, reinforcing the need to integrate community insights into development strategies.

Educational initiatives also hinge on community perceptions. Maharaja (2018) highlighted study abroad programs’ role in fostering intercultural competence, while Nordholm et al. (2020) stressed the importance of school leaders in promoting education in rural and urban settings. Mphahlele (2020) advocated inclusive education tailored to local resources and stakeholder engagement. Ardiwinata and Mulyono (2018) emphasized adaptive public education responsive to community needs, and Yemini et al. (2022) examined place-based education, highlighting the influence of local perceptions on implementation and effectiveness. Overall, these studies underscore that cultural exchange, community development, and educational initiatives succeed when local perceptions are recognized, incorporated, and respected, enhancing both program effectiveness and public diplomacy outcomes.

Community Participation in FSO-Initiated Local Engagement Programs

Community involvement is influenced by household characteristics, education, and socio-economic factors. Irene (2015) notes that household size, parental education, and economic stability significantly affect participation in harambee primary schools, with religious organizations often supporting educational initiatives. Parji and Prasetya (2020) highlight that, in Madiun City, community involvement often remains limited to funding or endorsing school plans, rather than deeply engaging with curriculum and character development. Stakeholder engagement improves project outcomes when inclusive. Waudu and Yusuf (2020) emphasize that participation in planning and implementation fosters ownership and reduces conflicts, recommending continuous sensitization and technology integration. Meyer et al. (2019) find that university students engaged in community service develop empathy and trust, though self-selection limits participation diversity, suggesting reflective practices and mandatory components. Karunakaran (2019) critiques top-down approaches, advocating for community empowerment through education and information access.

In health and development contexts, Haldane et al. (2019) link successful health interventions to targeted outreach and trust-building, stressing long-term monitoring. Mengistu and Assefa (2019) identify limited community participation as a barrier to watershed sustainability in Ethiopia, influenced by extension contact and access to credit. Mmeko et al. (2023) report that structural and financial barriers limit local involvement in tourism development in Mmadinare, calling for empowerment through land rights and education. Similarly, Chih Lo and Janta (2020) highlight security, land, and financial challenges in Thailand’s community-based tourism, emphasizing local decision-making opportunities. Derkyi et al. (2021) show that socio-demographic and cultural factors shape participation in Ghana’s FLEGT-VPA, advocating for inclusive conservation and sensitization. Howard-Grabman et al. (2017) stress leadership, management capacity, and trust-building as crucial for community health

programs. Villarojo et al. (2019) identify personal experiences, social networks, and gender dynamics as significant participation determinants. Htet (2022) highlights youth engagement barriers in Myanmar, noting the influence of familial, peer, societal, and policy factors, and calls for inclusive youth-focused strategies.

Overall, meaningful community participation requires understanding socio-cultural contexts, building trust, empowering local stakeholders, and addressing structural and policy barriers to enhance program effectiveness and sustainability.

Perceived Impact of FSO-Initiated Local Engagement Programs on Public Diplomacy

The impact of locally initiated programs on public diplomacy is significant, fostering community engagement and bilateral relationships. Osore et al. (2022) highlighted the Humanitarian Mobilization Program (HMP) in coastal communities, showing that participation offers benefits like financial support and skill development, driven by both community welfare and personal incentives. Tran and Bui (2021) examined the New Colombo Plan (NCP), emphasizing the role of universities in preparing students for cultural immersion and advocating for a collaborative approach to enhance mutual benefits between Australia and Indo-Pacific nations. Fitzpatrick (2017) argued that the future of public diplomacy lies in relational and ethical communication, aiming to build mutual understanding and promote broader societal goals like peace. Goldsmith et al. (2021) found that high-level diplomatic visits, when integrated with public diplomacy efforts, positively influence foreign public opinion, enhancing soft power. Rhee et al. (2023) noted that media framing of public diplomacy activities plays a critical role in shaping public opinion and diplomatic outcomes, highlighting the importance of strategic communication.

Rugh (2017) emphasized the role of government professionals in managing public diplomacy, particularly in addressing negative perceptions abroad, while suggesting that international educational programs could improve America's soft power. Hajdari et al. (2024) demonstrated how non-formal educational programs in Kosovo helped reshape international perceptions through people-to-people diplomacy. Lastly, Ozkan (2015) stressed that nation-branding and ongoing investment in education and cultural exchange are essential for building long-term relationships and enhancing a country's global image.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

His study used a descriptive correlational research design, which examines relationships between variables without manipulation. The goal was to identify patterns and assess the strength and direction of relationships, focusing on how variables are connected (Copeland, 2022). In correlational research, variables such as community perception and participation in FSO-initiated programs are measured to assess their relationship. Unlike experimental studies, this design does not establish cause-and-effect links but explores whether and how variables are correlated—positively, negatively, or neutrally. The study specifically examined how FSO-initiated local engagement programs impacted public diplomacy, focusing on how community perception influenced participation and how participation related to the programs' success in advancing public diplomacy.

Sources of Data

The primary data for this study were gathered from key stakeholders directly involved in or affected by FSO-initiated programs. These included community members, FSO staff and program organizers, as well as local government and community leaders. Their participation was vital, as they possessed firsthand experience and insights into the programs' implementation and influence on public diplomacy. Only the primary data collected from these respondents were subjected to statistical treatment and analysis to determine the relationships and impacts among the study variables.

Population of the Study

The population of this study comprised 38 key stakeholders from targeted communities in Vientiane, Laos. From this population, a sample of 35 respondents was selected using purposive sampling, an approach suited for identifying individuals most relevant to the research objectives. Since the study focused on participants directly involved in or affected by FSO-initiated programs, purposive sampling allowed for the intentional selection of stakeholders with firsthand experience or specialized knowledge in diplomacy, community engagement, and public relations.

Instrumentation and Validation

The researcher developed a researcher-made survey questionnaire, which was divided into three sections: Part 1 focused on community perceptions of Foreign Service Officer-initiated local engagement programs, including Cultural Exchange Programs, Community Development Projects, and Educational Initiatives. Part 2 examined community participation in these programs, and Part 3 evaluated the perceived impact of these programs on public diplomacy efforts. The face validity of the questionnaire was established through a review conducted by a panel of five experts in the fields of public diplomacy, international relations, and community engagement. These experts assessed the clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of the questionnaire items in relation to the study's objectives. They also provided constructive feedback and recommendations to enhance the instrument's overall quality and alignment with the key constructs being measured. To ensure the reliability of the instrument, a pilot test was conducted, and the results were analyzed using Pearson's r to determine the consistency of the responses. A high correlation coefficient of 0.8598 indicated that the questionnaire produced stable and reliable measurements across its items, thereby affirming its internal consistency.

Evaluation and Scoring

To assess community perceptions of Foreign Service Officer-initiated local engagement programs, the following measures were used:

Assigned Points	Numeral range	Verbal Interpretation
4	3.25-4.00	Strongly Agree/Very Positive
3	2.50- 3.24	Agree/Positive
2	1.75- 2.49	Disagree/Less Positive
1	1.00- 1.74	Strongly Disagree/Least Positive

To assess the level of community participation in Foreign Service Officer-initiated local engagement programs, the following measures were used:

Assigned Points	Numeral range	Verbal Interpretation
4	3.25-4.00	Strongly Agree/Very High
3	2.50- 3.24	Agree/High
2	1.75- 2.49	Disagree/Low
1	1.00- 1.74	Strongly Disagree/Very Low

To assess the perceived impact of Foreign Service Officer-initiated local engagement programs on public diplomacy, the following measures were used:

Assigned Points	Numeral range	Verbal Interpretation*
4	3.25-4.00	Strongly Agree/Transformative Impact
3	2.50- 3.24	Agree/Significant Impact
2	1.75- 2.49	Disagree/Moderate Impact
1	1.00- 1.74	Strongly Disagree/Minimal Impact

Data Gathering Procedure

Before data collection, the researcher took steps to inform relevant parties. Formal letters were sent to key officials at the Philippine Embassy in Vientiane, Laos, to ensure compliance with proper protocols and to keep them informed about the study. A separate letter was also addressed to the stakeholder-respondents, outlining the purpose of the study and inviting them to participate voluntarily.

To streamline communication and address any potential concerns, the researcher personally distributed the questionnaires to the stakeholders. After completion, the questionnaires were promptly collected to maximize the response rate. The collected data were then entered into a spreadsheet for subsequent statistical analysis to facilitate the examination of patterns and correlations.

Statistical Treatment Data

Using MegaStat, the following statistical tools were employed for quantitative data analysis:

1. The weighted means was used to determine the **community perceptions** of Foreign Service Officer-initiated local engagement program, the level of **community participation** in the programs, and the **perceived impact** of these programs on public diplomacy efforts.
2. Pearson Product Moment Correlation was utilized to determine how community perception of these programs relates to their level of participation; and how community participation correlates with the perceived success of these programs in advancing public diplomacy.

RESULTS

Community Perceptions of FSO-initiated Local Engagement Programs

Table 1
Composite Table on the Community Perceptions of FSO-Initiated Local Engagement Programs

Variable	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
Community Perceptions of FSO-initiated Local Engagement Programs	3.70	Strongly Agree/Very Positive	2
Community Development Projects	3.66	Strongly Agree/Very Positive	3
Community Development Projects	3.76	Strongly Agree/Very Positive	1
Overall weighted mean	3.71	Strongly Agree/Very Positive	

Legend:

3.25-4.00	-Strongly Agree/Very Positive	1.75-2.49	-Disagree/Less Positive
2.50-3.24	-Agree/Positive	1.00-1.74	- Strongly Disagree/Least Positive

Table 1 presents a composite summary of the community's overall perceptions of Foreign Service Officer (FSO)-initiated local engagement programs, as categorized into three key components: cultural exchange programs, community development projects, and educational initiatives. All variables received a **“Strongly Agree”** or **“Very Positive”** interpretation, reflecting widespread approval and appreciation of these initiatives.

Among the three categories, **educational initiatives** ranked highest with a **weighted mean of 3.76**, indicating that respondents found these programs particularly impactful in providing valuable learning opportunities and supporting the community's educational

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goals. This suggests that educational diplomacy is perceived as a highly effective approach in fostering community development and long-term capacity building.

The **cultural exchange programs** followed closely with a **weighted mean of 3.70**, ranking second. This score reflects the community's strong agreement that such programs promote intercultural understanding, inclusivity, and mutual respect. The positive reception highlights the importance of soft diplomacy in strengthening people-to-people connections and enhancing the image of diplomatic missions at the grassroots level.

Interestingly, **community development projects** received a slightly lower weighted mean of **3.66**, placing third among the three categories. While still viewed very positively, this suggests that some aspects of these projects may benefit from further alignment with the community's evolving needs or increased involvement of local stakeholders during planning and implementation.

The **overall weighted mean of 3.71** confirms that the community holds a **very positive perception** of FSO-initiated engagement programs across all categories. These findings demonstrate the effectiveness of FSOs in delivering initiatives that not only promote foreign relations but also contribute meaningfully to local development, education, and cross-cultural understanding.

Participation in the FSO-initiated Local Engagement Programs

Table 2
Participation in the FSO-initiated Local Engagement Programs

Indicators	Frequency (n=34)				Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
	4	3	2	1			
1. Community members are actively involved in planning the Foreign Service Officer-initiated engagement programs.	19	13	2	0	3.50	Strongly Agree/ Very High	8
2. I feel that our community is given adequate opportunities to participate in FSO-led programs.	11	20	3	0	3.24	Agree/ High	10
3. The community is well-informed about upcoming activities and events organized by the Foreign Service Officers.	15	14	5	0	3.29	Strongly Agree/ Very High	9
4. Community members frequently volunteer to support the activities and projects initiated by Foreign Service Officers.	20	12	2	0	3.53	Strongly Agree/ Very High	7
5. Foreign Service Officers encourage feedback from the community to improve future programs.	23	11	0	0	3.68	Strongly Agree/ Very High	5
6. Community leaders are actively engaged in the FSO-initiated programs.	25	9	0	0	3.74	Strongly Agree/ Very High	3.5
7. There is a strong sense of collaboration between the community and Foreign Service Officers in these programs.	26	8	0	0	3.76	Strongly Agree/ Very High	2
8. I feel that the community's input is valued and considered in the decision-making processes of these programs.	22	11	1	0	3.62	Strongly Agree/ Very High	6
9. Participation in FSO-led programs has strengthened the community's connection and engagement with these initiatives.	28	6	0	0	3.82	Strongly Agree/ Very High	1
10. Community participation in FSO-initiated programs positively contributes to the success of these initiatives.	25	9	0	0	3.74	Strongly Agree/ Very High	3.5
Average weighted mean					3.59	Strongly Agree/ Very High	

Legend:

3.25-4.00	-Strongly Agree/Very High	1.75-2.49	-Disagree/Low
2.50-3.24	-Agree/High	1.00-1.74	-Strongly Disagree/Very Low

Table 2 presents the level of community participation in Foreign Service Officer (FSO)-initiated local engagement programs. The data reveal a consistently high level of involvement and collaboration, with all indicators falling under the “Strongly Agree” or “Very High” interpretation, except for one that still received a favorable rating of “Agree” or “High.” The average weighted mean of 3.59 indicates a very high level of participation among community members in various aspects of these programs.

The highest-rated indicator, “Participation in FSO-led programs has strengthened the community's connection and engagement with these initiatives,” received a weighted mean of 3.82 (Rank 1). This result strongly affirms the community's sense of ownership and growing attachment to the programs, suggesting that meaningful engagement leads to sustained involvement and trust in FSO-led activities. Following closely are two equally ranked items: “There is a strong sense of collaboration between the community and Foreign Service Officers” and “Community participation in FSO-initiated programs positively contributes to the success of these initiatives”—both with weighted means of 3.74 (Rank 2 &

3.5 respectively). These findings highlight that the collaborative nature of the programs is not only acknowledged but also seen as instrumental to their effectiveness.

Equally notable is the high rating given to the statement “Community leaders are actively engaged in the FSO-initiated programs”(WM = 3.74, Rank 3.5), reinforcing the idea that participation is not limited to general members but also includes key stakeholders who can drive wider community involvement.

The indicator “Foreign Service Officers encourage feedback from the community to improve future programs” received a weighted mean of 3.68 (Rank 5), suggesting that the participatory approach of FSOs extends to listening and adjusting based on community input—an essential feature of inclusive and responsive program design.

Meanwhile, “Community members are actively involved in planning the Foreign Service Officer-initiated engagement programs” (WM = 3.50, Rank 8) and “The community is well-informed about upcoming activities and events” (WM = 3.29, Rank 9) received slightly lower, yet still positive, ratings. These results may indicate areas where further improvement can be made, particularly in deepening grassroots involvement during the planning phase and enhancing communication about upcoming initiatives.

The only indicator interpreted as “Agree” or “High” rather than “Strongly Agree” or “Very High” was “I feel that our community is given adequate opportunities to participate in FSO-led programs” (WM = 3.24, Rank 10). Although still positive, this response suggests that some respondents may perceive limitations in the accessibility or inclusivity of participation opportunities.

In summary, the results point to a very high level of community engagement, with respondents recognizing the inclusive, collaborative, and empowering nature of FSO-initiated programs. These findings emphasize that active participation not only enhances program relevance and impact but also fosters stronger ties between the diplomatic mission and the host community.

The findings of this study are strongly supported by the work of Zhang and Swartz (2020), who contend that community participation is a cornerstone of effective public diplomacy. Their research highlights that inclusive engagement—particularly the active involvement of local leaders and volunteers—enhances program outcomes and strengthens diplomatic relations. This aligns closely with the present study’s results, which demonstrate that community involvement significantly contributes to the success and sustainability of FSO-initiated programs.

Similarly, Manor (2019) explored the contemporary shift toward interactive, citizen-centered diplomacy, emphasizing that diplomatic missions increasingly depend on community participation to co-create initiatives that reflect local priorities. Although Manor’s focus is on digital diplomacy, his conclusions reinforce the broader principle that two-way communication and responsiveness to feedback are essential for meaningful engagement—a view echoed by this study’s respondents, who expressed high agreement on the value of collaboration and inclusion in FSO-led programs.

In the same vein, Pamment and Wilkins (2021) argue that engaging communities in planning, decision-making, and implementation fosters trust and legitimacy, thereby enhancing the

perceived value and long-term effectiveness of diplomatic efforts. Their insights closely mirror the current study's findings, particularly in relation to the strong community perception of shared ownership and collaboration in local engagement programs.

Perceived Impact of FSO-initiated Local Engagement Programs on Public Diplomacy Efforts

Table 3
Perceived Impact of FSO-initiated Local Engagement Programs on Public Diplomacy Efforts

Indicators	Frequency (n=34)				Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
	4	3	2	1			
1. The FSO-initiated local engagement programs effectively promote a positive image of the Philippines in Vientiane.	25	9	0	0	3.74	Strongly Agree/ Transformative Impact	5.5
2. These programs have increased the community's awareness of Philippine culture and values.	21	13	0	0	3.62	Strongly Agree/ Transformative Impact	10
3. The Philippine Embassy's local engagement efforts help strengthen diplomatic relations between the Philippines and Laos.	25	9	0	0	3.74	Strongly Agree/ Transformative Impact	5.5
4. FSO-initiated programs contribute to mutual understanding between the Filipino community and the people of Laos.	24	10	0	0	3.71	Strongly Agree/ Transformative Impact	8
5. The local engagement activities led by FSOs foster goodwill and trust between the Philippines and Laos.	26	8	0	0	3.76	Strongly Agree/ Transformative Impact	3
6. I believe that these programs play a valuable role in promoting peace and collaboration between our nations.	28	6	0	0	3.82	Strongly Agree/ Transformative Impact	2
7. The public diplomacy efforts of the Philippine Embassy in Vientiane have a positive impact on the local community's view of the Philippines.	23	11	0	0	3.68	Strongly Agree/ Transformative Impact	9
8. Through these programs, the Embassy effectively communicates the values and priorities of the Philippines.	26	7	1	0	3.74	Strongly Agree/ Transformative Impact	5.5
9. The FSO-led initiatives encourage the people of Laos to engage in more cultural, social, or economic activities with the Philippines.	26	7	1	0	3.74	Strongly Agree/ Transformative Impact	5.5
10. The FSO-initiated local engagement programs contribute meaningfully to the Philippine Embassy's public diplomacy goals in Laos.	32	1	1	0	3.91	Strongly Agree/ Transformative Impact	1
Average weighted mean					3.75	Strongly Agree/ Transformative Impact	

Legend:

3.25-4.00	- Strongly Agree/Transformative Impact	1.75-2.49	-Disagree/Moderate Impacts
2.50-3.24	-Agree/Significant Impact	1.00-1.74	- Strongly Disagree/Minimal Impact

Table 3 illustrates respondents' perceptions of the impact of Foreign Service Officer (FSO)-initiated local engagement programs on public diplomacy efforts in Vientiane, Laos. The data

show a strong consensus among respondents, as all items received a “Strongly Agree” interpretation, corresponding to a “Transformative Impact”. The overall weighted mean of 3.75 confirms that these local engagement programs are perceived as highly effective in advancing the public diplomacy goals of the Philippine Embassy.

The highest-rated item was “The FSO-initiated local engagement programs contribute meaningfully to the Philippine Embassy’s public diplomacy goals in Laos,” which earned a weighted mean of 3.91 (Rank 1). This indicates a strong perception among respondents that these programs are not only visible and well-executed, but also closely aligned with the strategic objectives of Philippine diplomacy in the host country.

Ranking second is the statement “I believe that these programs play a valuable role in promoting peace and collaboration between our nations” (WM = 3.82). This result reflects how community members perceive these initiatives as more than cultural or development efforts—they are viewed as platforms for strengthening bilateral relations, building goodwill, and fostering peaceful cooperation.

The indicator “The local engagement activities led by FSOs foster goodwill and trust between the Philippines and Laos” (WM = 3.76, Rank 3) also received a very high rating. This further underscores the programs’ role in building soft power and strengthening interpersonal and intergovernmental ties.

Several items were rated equally at 3.74 and ranked jointly at Rank 5.5. These include statements on promoting a positive image of the Philippines, strengthening diplomatic relations, communicating Philippine values and priorities, and encouraging further cultural, social, or economic exchanges. The convergence of scores across these indicators suggests that the programs are viewed as comprehensive in scope and consistent in reinforcing Philippine interests through people-centered diplomacy.

Notably, the statement “These programs have increased the community's awareness of Philippine culture and values” received the lowest weighted mean of 3.62 (Rank 10), though still within the “Strongly Agree” and “Transformative Impact” range. This suggests that while awareness-building is recognized, there may be opportunities to further deepen cultural communication or visibility in certain segments of the community.

Overall, the findings point to a strong and transformative impact of FSO-led programs on public diplomacy. These initiatives are seen not only as instruments of foreign policy but as trusted and valued engagements that foster mutual respect, promote peace, and enhance the image of the Philippines within the host community. The consistency of high ratings across all indicators affirms the strategic value of these local engagement efforts in advancing diplomacy at the grassroots level.

The findings of Table 3 are well-supported by recent literature on contemporary public diplomacy practices. Cull (2019) emphasized that effective public diplomacy increasingly depends on engagement-driven strategies, such as cultural exchanges, educational initiatives, and grassroots outreach. These people-centered approaches are instrumental in fostering mutual understanding and international goodwill, ultimately contributing to a positive national image **and** stronger bilateral ties. This aligns directly with the present study’s findings, which highlight the effectiveness of FSO-led programs in promoting peace, collaboration, and the diplomatic objectives of the Philippine Embassy in Laos.

Similarly, Zaharna (2020) underscored the role of shared values, consistent messaging, and relational communication in achieving transformative public diplomacy outcomes. She argues that initiatives grounded in mutual respect and narrative engagement, such as those implemented by FSOs, tend to generate long-lasting impact beyond short-term informational goals. This perspective affirms the study's results showing that FSO-led activities are perceived to foster goodwill, trust, and enduring cultural connections between the Philippines and Laos.

Moreover, Sevin (2021) highlighted the importance of dialogue, active listening, and responsive community engagement in building public diplomacy credibility. His research demonstrates that embassies and diplomatic officers who prioritize local participation and cultural sensitivity are more likely to gain legitimacy and public trust. This reinforces the present study's finding that community members view the FSO-initiated programs as inclusive, strategically aligned, and instrumental in enhancing the public image and diplomatic presence of the Philippines in Vientiane.

Relationship between Community Perceptions of Foreign Service Officer-Initiated Local Engagement Programs and the Level of Community Participation

Table 4
Significant Relationship between Community Perceptions of Foreign Service Officer-Initiated Local Engagement Programs and the Level of Community Participation

Variables	Statistical Test	Computed Value	Critical Value @ .05	Decision	Interpretation
Community Perceptions of Foreign Service Officer-Initiated Local Engagement Programs vs. Level of Community Participation	Pearson r	0.461	0.632	Accept Ho	No Significant Relationship

Ho: There is no significant relationship between community perceptions of Foreign Service officer-initiated local engagement programs and the level of community participation $\alpha = 0.05$ level of significance

Table 4 presents the results of the statistical test conducted to determine whether a significant relationship exists between community perceptions of Foreign Service Officer (FSO)-initiated local engagement programs and the level of community participation in these initiatives. Using Pearson's r, the computed value was 0.461, which is lower than the critical value of 0.632 at the 0.05 level of significance. As a result, the null hypothesis is accepted, indicating that there is no statistically significant relationship between the two variables.

This outcome suggests that although community members strongly agree that FSO-initiated programs are effective and beneficial—as reflected in earlier findings—their level of participation in these programs does not appear to be directly influenced by these positive perceptions. In other words, even when people view the programs favorably, it does not necessarily translate into higher or more active engagement.

Several factors could account for this finding. For instance, logistical barriers, time constraints, or limited access to participation opportunities may inhibit community involvement despite favorable views of the programs. It is also possible that participation is influenced more by personal motivation, invitation, or availability rather than perception alone.

While the result indicates no significant linear relationship, this does not diminish the value of either variable. The data from previous tables still affirm that the community regards the programs as highly impactful and well-executed, and participation remains very high overall. However, this statistical result emphasizes the need to further explore what motivates community members to participate and how participation can be enhanced independently of perception.

Bettencourt and Gulisova (2020) argued that even when communities hold positive perceptions of diplomatic initiatives, actual participation may remain limited due to logistical barriers, lack of time, or insufficient information. Their findings support the idea that perception is not a guaranteed predictor of engagement—reinforcing the present study’s finding of no significant relationship. Kim and Ball-Rokeach (2019) emphasized that while attitudes and perceptions matter, structural and contextual factors—such as access, social capital, and community infrastructure—are stronger predictors of actual civic participation. This too aligns with the study finding that favorable views of FSO-led programs do not automatically result in active involvement.

The study of Nisbet and Stoycheff (2021) identifies a persistent “approval-action gap” in international and diplomatic outreach programs. They found that although many respondents express strong support or approval, few actually participate, due to limited agency, competing priorities, or passive forms of engagement. This theoretical concept directly supports the lack of significant correlation in the current study.

Relationship between Level of Community Participation In Foreign Service Officer-Initiated Local Engagement Programs and the Perceived Impact of these Programs on Public Diplomacy

Table 5

Significant Relationship between the Level of Community Participation in Foreign Service Officer-Initiated Local Engagement Programs and the Perceived Impact of these Programs on Public Diplomacy

Variables	Statistical Test	Computed Value	Critical Value @ .05	Decision	Interpretation
Level of community participation in Foreign Service Officer-initiated local engagement programs vs. perceived impact of these programs on public diplomacy	Pearson r	0.256	0.632	Accept Ho	No Significant Relationship

Ho: There is no significant relationship between level of community participation in foreign service officer-initiated local engagement programs the perceived impact of these programs on public diplomacy $\alpha = 0.05$ level of significance

Table 5 presents the statistical results analyzing the relationship between the level of community participation in Foreign Service Officer (FSO)-initiated local engagement programs and the perceived impact of these programs on public diplomacy. Utilizing Pearson's r , the computed value was 0.256, which falls below the critical value of 0.632 at the 0.05 level of significance. Based on this result, the null hypothesis is accepted, indicating that there is no statistically significant relationship between the two variables.

This finding suggests that although community members generally participate actively in the FSO-led initiatives and perceive them as highly impactful—as shown in the previous tables—these two factors do not significantly correlate. In other words, a higher level of participation does not necessarily equate to a stronger perceived impact on public diplomacy, and vice versa.

Several factors may account for this disconnect. Some community members who participate in the programs may not fully grasp their diplomatic intent or broader foreign policy goals, viewing them primarily as local service or cultural initiatives. Conversely, others who do not actively participate may still recognize their diplomatic significance and appreciate their contributions to bilateral relations through indirect exposure (e.g., media, social discourse, or second hand accounts).

This result emphasizes that perception of diplomatic value and participation behavior operate somewhat independently, possibly influenced by differing motivations, levels of awareness, or personal interests. It also points to the importance of strategic communication and outreach, ensuring that the diplomatic aims of such programs are clearly conveyed to participants and non-participants alike.

While the statistical test shows no significant relationship, the high ratings in both variables individually reflect that FSOs are succeeding in earning public trust, delivering meaningful programs, and maintaining active community involvement—all of which are important indicators of successful diplomacy at the grassroots level.

Castells (2021) emphasized that public perception of diplomacy is more closely tied to symbolic communication and narrative framing than to actual participation levels. He argues that individuals can perceive diplomatic programs as impactful even without direct engagement, due to media coverage, institutional credibility, or national sentiment. This supports the present study finding that high perceived impact can exist independently of the degree of community participation.

The study of Teti and Gervasio (2020) demonstrated that participation in diplomatic outreach programs often reflects local socio-economic conditions, access, and community dynamics, whereas perceived diplomatic impact is shaped by broader narratives, cultural affinity, or national pride. They concluded that the two variables—participation and perceived impact—can exist independently, with little to no significant statistical correlation.

Further, the findings of this study are supported by Melissen and Lee (2021), who emphasize that public diplomacy outcomes are often evaluated based on visibility, symbolic resonance, and cultural alignment, rather than on the extent of community participation. Their edited

volume presents the view that even individuals who do not directly engage with diplomatic programs can still form strong positive perceptions of their impact when the messaging reflects shared values or cultural relevance. This perspective is consistent with the present study's result indicating that community members may perceive FSO-initiated programs as diplomatically impactful even in the absence of active participation.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

1. Community Perceptions of FSO-initiated Local Engagement Programs

Respondents expressed a very positive perception of FSO-initiated local engagement programs, with all components—educational initiatives, cultural exchange programs, and community development projects—receiving a “Strongly Agree” rating. Among these, educational initiatives received the highest weighted mean (3.76), followed by cultural exchange programs (3.70), and community development projects (3.66). The overall weighted mean was 3.71, indicating a consistently favorable view across all categories.

2. Participation in the FSO-initiated Local Engagement Programs

Community participation in FSO-led programs was rated as very high, with an overall weighted mean of 3.59. All but one indicator received a “Strongly Agree” or “Very High” rating. The highest-rated item was the strengthened connection between the community and the programs (WM = 3.82). Lower-rated items, though still positive, pertained to opportunities for participation and awareness of upcoming activities.

3. Perceived Impact of FSO-initiated Local Engagement Programs on Public Diplomacy Efforts

Respondents rated the impact of FSO-initiated programs on public diplomacy as strongly positive and transformative, with an overall weighted mean of 3.75. The highest-rated indicator (WM = 3.91) reflected the programs' contribution to the Embassy's diplomatic goals in Laos. All other items were similarly rated as “Strongly Agree,” confirming widespread agreement on the programs' positive impact.

4. Relationship between Community Perceptions of Foreign Service Officer-Initiated Local Engagement Programs and the Level of Community Participation

The Pearson r value of 0.461 did not exceed the critical value of 0.632 at the 0.05 level of significance, indicating no statistically significant relationship between community perceptions of FSO-initiated programs and their level of participation.

5. Relationship between Level of Community Participation In Foreign Service Officer-Initiated Local Engagement Programs and the Perceived Impact of these Programs on Public Diplomacy

The Pearson r value of 0.256 was also below the critical value of 0.632 at the 0.05 level of significance. This result indicates no statistically significant relationship between the level of community participation and the perceived impact of FSO-led programs on public diplomacy.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. FSO-initiated programs successfully foster strong public perception and are widely recognized as meaningful efforts in both community-building and diplomacy.

2. The active engagement of community members reflects a well-established sense of collaboration and shared purpose, indicating that these programs are inclusive and responsive to local needs.
3. Local engagement efforts by FSOs are viewed not only as service-oriented initiatives but also as vital instruments for promoting peace, cooperation, and the international image of the Philippines.
4. While the community holds favorable views of FSO programs, these perceptions do not necessarily translate into increased participation, suggesting that involvement may depend on other factors such as accessibility or structural design.
5. Community engagement and perceived diplomatic impact function independently, highlighting the need for both effective program implementation and intentional communication to sustain trust and visibility.

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