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Opportunities for Southern California Public Diplomacy in Southeast Asia ^[1]

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It's easy for an American urbanite to feel at home on arrival in Ho Chi Minh City. The ride from the airport is punctuated by beeping horns, near-collisions and chaos. And that's just on the straightaways. The city's traffic circles require even more courage. On approach they resemble carousels of motorcycles, circling frantically, but steadily. Traffic in Ho Chi Minh City is a ballet of close calls; yet somehow, amid the honking, the bustle and the sight of entire families on two wheels, the system works. And everywhere there is thunder, the rolling thunder of motorcycle engines that take Vietnam's people from place to place on their breakneck rise in the global economy. Just ask the USC Master of Public Diplomacy students who experienced the city's traffic over spring break. Ho Chi Minh City is brimming with growth; and amid the blue exhaust smoke, the sticky rice and the noise of Vietnam's robust form of Marxist capitalism are plenty of opportunities for regional and diaspora public diplomacy, California-style.

Southern California has the largest Vietnamese population outside of Vietnam, concentrated primarily in Orange, Riverside and Los Angeles Counties; so it's a natural partner with this burgeoning Southeast Asian country in a number of areas. Why not start with traffic? Ho Chi Minh City, with an estimated population of 5,976,000, is actually larger than the City of Los Angeles, though smaller than L.A. County. Vietnam's largest metropolitan area could certainly benefit from some of the high tech innovations being developed to smooth the flow of freeway traffic in Southern California. A web-based traffic site such as www.sigalert.com, which keeps track of freeway slowdowns and tie-ups, would be a perfect fit for Vietnam, which has the 17th highest number of Internet users in the world. Traffic apps would also be appropriate in a country that has the tenth highest number of cell phones of any nation on the planet and in which smart phones comprise 13.4% of the market.

Education is another area in which Californians can reach out to Vietnam. According to the Oakland-based NGO East Meets West, "upper secondary education enrollment rates [in Vietnam] hover stubbornly at about 50% and graduation rates are lower still." East Meets West has launched an initiative called SPELL (Scholarship Program to Enhance Literacy and Learning), which targets the poorest 10% of Vietnam's families, paying school fees and covering the costs of books, uniforms and other expenses while mandating tutoring, family visits and progress reports. There's no reason why Vietnamese educators couldn't trade notes and visits with their counterparts in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), which wrestles with a four-year dropout rate of 29.6%. In Vietnam, EMW's School Construction Program has built or renovated more than 300 schools, with local governments contributing part of the cost. Lessons learned in developing Vietnam's educational infrastructure could certainly be applied to the LAUSD, which is so cash-strapped that the school board has agreed to sell the naming rights to its buildings. Los Angeles and Vietnamese school systems

could also cooperate in developing efficient and cost-effective English as a Second Language programs, which are badly needed in both cities.

The Siem Reap region of Cambodia, where the Temples at Angkor Wat are located and a number of the MPD students visited, is also a logical public diplomacy partner for the Los Angeles area. Both cities are magnets for tourists, and both have pronounced wet and dry seasons, making them vulnerable to forest fires. Joint programs in fire suppression technologies and fire prevention techniques would be valuable to both regions and would be comparatively easy to implement, since the high fire seasons for the two areas do not coincide. According to Nin Chan Samean, Director of the Department of Forestry Management, Cultural Landscape and Environment for the Apsara Authority, deforestation is a major problem in Cambodia. Joint programs involving forestry officials and students from California and Cambodia would certainly be effective.

Washington may be the nerve center of U.S. public diplomacy, but it does not always need to take the lead. States, counties, cities and even school districts can find common ground with their counterparts around the world.

Sometimes innovation is just a matter of thinking outside the border.

In March 2011, Jerry Edling participated in a research trip to Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam which was partially funded by the USC Master of Public Diplomacy program and the Dean's office of the Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism. He is a Master of Public Diplomacy candidate with a special interest in international broadcasting and the incoming Editor in Chief of "PD" magazine.
