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Reimagining Exchange: The Local Impact of Cultural Exchanges [1]

From the earliest days of statecraft, cultural exchanges informed foreign publics of the world beyond their borders. To this day, they remain of enduring importance as a means of promoting peace and mutual understanding while supporting foreign policy objectives. Most major nations have devoted substantial resources and dedicated considerable effort to developing state-sponsored cultural exchange programs coupled with programs created by non-governmental organizations and interest.

Typically, these programs select and sponsor international visitors for short-term stays in the host country, providing opportunities for them to interact with individuals and organizations in the host community. Even though “mutual understanding” is often stated as a program goal, the overwhelming emphasis is on shaping international participants’ perception and attitude toward the host nation. In turn, program impact, and its conception, reflects this orientation. Program impact is generally defined and measured primarily in terms of visitor experience,

program satisfaction and a “multiplier effect” on their family members, friends, colleagues and others after their return to their home countries.

Unfortunately, what has been conspicuously missing from traditional evaluations of cultural exchange programs is a deeper conceptualization of “exchange.” In other words, fully understanding the two-way flow of information and experience, not to program participants, but also in turn to local communities and organizations that host them. This local impact of hosting international visitors is an indispensable aspect of the larger goal of creating mutual understanding through cultural diplomacy.

Improving and innovating cultural exchanges requires understanding the experiences and impact for international visitors as well as host communities.

Delivering a distinctive experience to international visitors is essential to program success. Contemporary exchanges are experience-based rather than information-driven. As we live in an age of information abundance and accelerating flow of ideas and people, information about other countries is now a commodity and easily accessible, while experience—the time spent with people and organizations—becomes more valued. In-person interactions represent a more fundamental form of human experience based on authenticity and mutuality, especially in an increasingly hyper-techno world. As the American playwright David Henry Hwang has noted, cultural exchanges are critical to “forging human connections and exchanging ‘soft power’.”

Moreover, we argue that the consequences of hosting international exchanges are desirable for local communities as they seek to thrive in a global economy and society. As an example, the most export-dependent places in the United States are small rural or suburban counties—according to a Pew Research Center study from 2017. At the same time, the opportunities and resources for organizations, companies and professionals to have global connections or to enjoy foreign travel are limited. Thus, sustaining and growing local economies requires that we provide local communities the resources and opportunities they need to first understand, and then to compete, in a global marketplace.

There is overwhelming evidence of the value of exchange programs to exchange participants. But do local communities also benefit from cultural exchanges?

This in fact is an empirical question. To answer it, we created a conceptual framework for capturing and estimating how exchange programs impact local communities. In this case, we define “local community” as composed of all the various groups, organizations and individuals that interact with international exchange participants. This definition is wide-ranging and includes volunteers, youth (K-12 and higher education students), community leaders, businesses and companies, professional and labor associations, diaspora and immigrant communities, advocacy organizations, arts and cultural centers, economic development and trade bodies, local government agencies, media and journalists, etc.

“Impact” on local communities is defined as creating capital or resources that enable the community to do something better and/or achieve organizational or community goals. Based

on our review of the extant literature on community capital and cultural exchange, we identified five categories of “capital” that cultural exchange programs may impact:

Knowledge Capital — Resources that enable one to be better informed about other countries and international affairs. This knowledge impact is manifested in the local community’s learning more about the country and culture of the international visitors as well as gaining a deeper understanding of the country’s own foreign policy.

Cultural Capital — Resources that enable one to develop cultural literacy, empathy, effective cross-cultural communication skills, appreciation of diversity and global-mindedness. The sort of impact effectuated on the local community could include an expanded global outlook and enhanced cultural competencies through interactions with international visitors.

Social Capital — Resources that enable one to connect to larger social networks, international as well as local connectivity. Through hosting and participation, individuals and organizations form social connections—not only with international visitors—that provide opportunities for travel and business collaboration, but also form tighter bonds with other individuals and organizations within the local community that may be leveraged for local needs.

Civic Capital — Resources that enable one to develop civic spirit: Volunteering, contribution to community and community belonging. That is community-building by virtue of fostering civic engagement and volunteerism in supporting these exchange programs.

Economic Capital — Resources that enable one to develop business connections and opportunities and to improve local workforce through professional capability-building. Through exposure to different cultures, local professionals gain experience and insights that either amplify, or substitute for, formal training in cross-cultural business activities. They have the needed capital to not only pursue international opportunities and interact with foreign clientele, they also are better equipped to function locally in a multicultural environment.

We tested the local impact framework in a pilot study of a major U.S. cultural exchange program through a survey of individuals and organizations involved in hosting international exchange participants. Our study shows that the framework and the employed measures are generally reliable and consistent with qualitative findings.

In short, improving and innovating cultural exchanges requires understanding the experiences and impact for international visitors as well as host communities. Ultimately, if we are to maximize the benefits of both sides of the *exchange* equation and to capitalize on mutuality inherent in dual impacts, we must first fully conceptualize and measure the extent that cultural exchanges improve and enhance the quality of life in their host communities.