Published on *USC Center on Public Diplomacy* (https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org)

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Jun 12, 2020 by Madison Jones McAleese

Nonprofit Diplomacy is Needed Now More than Ever [1]

The state of the U.S. economy is dire. COVID-19 has obliterated small businesses, forced layoffs and furloughs, and shuttered doors for good. But private business is not the only industry suffering. The economic crisis created by COVID-19 has resulted in unprecedented challenges for nonprofit organizations. Yet, it is now, more than ever, when nonprofits are needed to engage in a unique form of nonprofit diplomacy at home and abroad.

According to a recent survey by La Piana Consulting of more than 750 nonprofit participants, 91 percent of respondents have had to curtail their services or adapt how services are provided, while 90 percent of organizations experienced a loss of revenue. Further, nearly half of respondents have had to make further reductions in staff, and nearly a quarter expect to make further reductions in services. These numbers are startling for organizations that do such important work.

These data are bleak—but while nonprofits are suffering in the midst of COVID-19, we must be reminded that they are also the key to important cultural and public diplomacy efforts and should continue to receive funding throughout this crisis.

So many of our cross-cultural ties are connected to arts and cultural diplomacy efforts. For example, the Arts Council for Monterey County reaches an underserved and immigrant population through its arts education and exhibitions, while also using arts in healing programs for senior citizens and veterans. During the current pandemic, the Council has had to shut its doors and offer resources and activities online.

Additionally, important museums like the Japanese American National Museum and the National WWII Museum have temporarily closed. These cultural institutions play an integral role in educating the public about our collective historical past while highlighting the important ties we share with other cultures.

We also know from Joseph Nye's work how important these types of cultural organizations are for American soft power. We saw the significance of these institutions during the Cold War, when museums, theaters and opera companies traveled to the Soviet Union to perform and spread American values, challenging some Soviet citizens' perception of American society.

Additionally, "some NGOs enjoy more trust than governments do," Joseph Nye writes in his book, *Soft Power.* This is a trend we are currently seeing as countries around the world work to prevent the spread of COVID-19. While governments scramble to address the crisis, many vulnerable populations are left behind.

Nonprofit organizations, on the other hand, are the players on-the-ground, working directly with communities, promoting exchanges and facilitating cultural dialogue in a time when citizens around the world live in fear. Groups like the NAACP and ACLU have spoken out in regard to Asian American discrimination as a result of COVID-19, fighting xenophobia and promoting unity, while Amnesty International is working to protect human rights as governments respond to the pandemic.

Nonprofit diplomacy, especially now, should not be understated. It is imperative that nonprofit organizations continue to be funded through this crisis so they can continue to provide services once stay-at-home orders are lifted. When the rest of the world is facing fear, discrimination, isolation and worry, nonprofit organizations are working on the front lines, addressing critical issues facing our communities and providing a voice of reason and trust in a time of mass uncertainty.