EUROPEAN CAPITALS OF CULTURE LONG-TERM EFFECTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document was requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education.

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This study is a response to the European Parliament's call for a comprehensive assessment of the long-term effects of hosting the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) Programme. Its main aim is to examine the wealth of published material on ECoC hosts, in order to: identify the most common strategies for success; review evidence of impacts and long-term effects from a cultural, economic, social and policy point of view; and understand the main recurrent challenges.

Key findings

History and development

The expansion of the operational and legislative framework for the ECoC Programme at EU level can be split into three Phases.

- Phase 1 (1985-1996) designations were considered intergovernmental activity and lacked a legislative framework. Cities were typically nominated by their member state, with most lacking time to fund or develop ECoC-specific initiatives.

- Phase 2 (1997-2004) introduced selection criteria and bidding deadlines from 1998 that considerably enhanced cities' ambition and their capacity for ECoC-specific programming. The Programme also secured greater prominence through inclusion in the main EU culture programme(s).

- Phase 3 (2005-2019) brought with it the first legislative framework for the Programme, which became a Community Action with formal European Dimension criteria. During this period, selection, monitoring and evaluation processes have been clarified and strengthened.

In 2013, the European Parliament, Council of Ministers and European Commission have updated the legislative framework for the next ECoC Phase, covering 2020 to 2033.

Bidding approaches

With the increasing prominence of the Programme across Europe, the bid process has itself become a high profile ECoC stage, with many cities now competing fiercely for their national designation.

In terms of overall vision, the most common objectives expressed by successful candidates are raising the capacity/ambition of the cultural sector in the host city and raising the profile of the city and its cultural appeal. Other objectives emphasised by winning bids include the use of the ECoC as a 'catalyst' for economic and social development goals.

The most widely recognised strengths of successful bids are broad stakeholder consultation and support for the bid proposal; the proposed level of investment; and a high quality artistic programme. However, the absence of a strong European Dimension is a widespread weakness of bids.

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Delivery approaches and success strategies

The professionalisation of the hosting process over time has led to the emergence of common strategies for success that are now discernible in most cities. Some of the most noticeable approaches include:

- Developing an aspirational vision to transform the city by using the ECoC as a catalyst for cultural, social and image change.

- Using the ECoC to facilitate cross-sector agendas targeted at positioning or repositioning a city and, occasionally, its surrounding region.

- Creating a balanced range of themed activity for the year, often in the form of distinct seasons, to assist in the distribution of resources and the coordination of marketing priorities.

- A rapid first growth in grassroots activities and then a sustained effort to engage with as diverse an audience as possible, supported by strategic and substantially funded social programmes.

These commonalities suggest an 'ECoC style' of operations that would benefit from formal translation into a common 'ECoC know-how' for more effective knowledge transfer.

Effects and impacts

Although the broadening of host objectives has led to an increase in the volume and magnitude of reported impacts, these claims are not always supported by evidence. The areas of positive impact for which evidence is stronger include:

Cultural and image impacts

- The Programme can have a significant effect in strengthening networks, opening up new collaborations, encouraging new work to continue, and raising the capacity and ambition of the cultural sector.

- Many host cities with a low (or even negative) profile have experienced an image renaissance and have successfully repositioned themselves as cultural hubs.

Social impacts

- The most positive social impact of the Programme is its effect on local citizens' perceptions of their city and sense of pride.

- Others include the diversification or growth of cultural audiences during the ECoC year.

Economic impacts

- The Programme has had a considerable effect on immediate to medium-term tourism trends in a large proportion of cities. This, in turn, can have a significant impact on the city's economy.

Impacts in other areas are harder to prove, but this is partly due to the fact that appropriate methodologies for capture are more complex. The development of new techniques to engage communities (e.g. volunteering and training opportunities) makes this one area of ECoC impact that is likely to develop in the future. The European Dimension is another area with greater impact potential, particularly since the implementation of refined criteria and greater monitoring support.

Challenges and obstacles

Early challenges that have been largely overcome, due to regulation, professionalisation and experience gained, include:

- A lack of planning or poor sustainability approaches.

- Inconsistent communications and poor marketing and branding strategies.

Other challenges, however, have evolved over time or continue to exist, such as:

- The capacity of ECoCs to propose a clear vision that can secure local ownership.

- Adequate balancing of cultural, social and economic agendas.

The European Dimension requirement is a particularly prominent challenge (despite the expansion of EU-funded monitoring and evaluation), with hosts rarely meeting original bid promises, or struggling to evidence success due to the historic inadequacy of data capture mechanisms in this area, and local agendas dominating over international aspirations.

The lack of formal knowledge transfer between ECoC hosts is another major obstacle. Informal networks of ECoC organisers are highly valued as a source of first-hand experience, and there has been a growth in published research since 2005, with comparative studies used extensively. However, most evaluations lack continuity and, in general, the quality and comparability of available evidence is poor.

Conclusions and recommendations

The ECoC Programme is a mature international event capable of shaping trends in major cultural event hosting, but calculating its real worth requires better-coordinated assessment. Some of the key recommendations of the study include:

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For ECoC organisers:
- Place a cultural ambition, agreed on by key stakeholders, at the heart of a distinct ECoC vision, either linking this with existing cultural strategies or using the ECoC as a platform for a new culture-driven strategy.

- Ensure that this vision is understood by the core team before attempting broader communication, which should avoid raising unrealistic public expectations.

- Make local politicians central to ECoC championing rather than operations; ensure public transparency; and balance artistic independence with the need to be inclusive and representative of diverse constituencies.

- Accept that the different stages of the event may require different skills, and plan ahead for the potential loss of staff.

- Support post-ECoC legacy-building by appointing a transition task force to manage the handover back to city stakeholders.

- Open up local debate around the value of a European Dimension and explore the relationships *between* local and European cultures, rather than programming for them separately.

For ECoC organisers and researchers:
- Support knowledge-transfer by providing high-quality data against a common set of indicators defined by the Commission.

For the European Commission:
- Encourage the continuity of ECoC staff and advise that core staff remain in place six to twelve months post-event; but be open to changes that ensure appropriate skills at each stage of the hosting process.

- Create a common set of indicators and a common data collection framework.

- Consider allocating part of the EU grant funding to ECoC research, so that all host data includes aspects relevant to broader Programme impacts and legacies, beyond the local environment.

- Work towards a centralised ECoC documentation centre for reliable data archiving.

For the European Commission, Parliament and Council:
- Reframe official advice so that the aspiration to independence from politics does not risk political disengagement.

- Supplement current European Dimension criteria with an encouragement to opening local debate.

- Recommend a wider set of indicators pertaining to the European Dimension and request quantitative as well as qualitative accounts of relevant outcomes.