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# EDUCATION AND TRAINING

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## The Peace Corps Model of Building Partner Capacity

By

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Life in the Peace Corps will not be easy. There will be no salary, and allowances will be at a level sufficient only to maintain health and meet basic needs. Men and women will be expected to work and live alongside the nationals of the country in which they are stationed—doing the same work, eating the same food, talking the same language. But, if the life will not be easy, it will be rich and satisfying. For every young American who participates in the Peace Corps— who works in a foreign land—will know that he or she is sharing in the great common task of bringing to man that decent way of life which is the foundation of freedom and a condition of peace.

President John F. Kennedy

Previous article in *The DISAM Journal* [Volume 31-2] detailed the potential benefits of programs to build partner capacity and have compared the potential to the reality of such programs. This article examines the first of three analogous organizations using a comparative case study approach. This first case study explores the Peace Corps, a program designed to assist developing nations in creating sustainable development. As a U.S. Government (USG) agency, it demonstrates that strong relationships are possible even when acting as an agent of the USG. The second organization, Baptist International Missions, Incorporated (BIMI), is a large independent missionary organization. It provides the perspective of a religious non-governmental organization (NGO) that builds relationships with people who often demonstrate hostility toward the organization's objectives and message. The last organization, Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), is an international NGO that supplies medical assistance to populations whose local health structures are insufficient due to conflict or turmoil.<sup>1</sup> This large foreign organization funnels resources to meet pressing international medical needs and strives to create a lasting impact through temporary measures.

All three organizations have successfully built relationships, strengthened host nation capabilities, and met their objectives in resource-constrained environments. Despite their differences, the primary purpose of each organization is to create lasting self-sufficiency within host nations. The Peace Corps calls their version of building partnership capacity "sustained development," whereas BIMI labels their activities as 'building indigenous churches.' MSF, in turn, labels their version of building partner capacity as 'building health care structures.' While these organizations use different terms, their fundamental aims are the same and are analogous to those of U.S. military programs—to build partner capacity. Clearly the case study organizations operate through different structures, environments, and conditions than military organizations. Yet, their programs can illuminate important functional similarities that can improve military programs with the same ultimate aim.

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1. MSF is also known as Doctors without Borders.

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These organizations were chosen based on their similar objectives to military programs to build partnership capacity and their ability to illuminate characteristics of both security cooperation and foreign internal defense (FID). All are large organizations that strive to achieve objectives in challenging international environments. Each organization faces significant obstacles and integrates with others when appropriate. All are concerned about the safety and security of their personnel.<sup>2</sup> MSF is slightly different from the other organizations in that it emphasizes short-term responsiveness instead of long-term engagement, making its activities more analogous to FID, while the programs of BIMJ and the Peace Corps are more analogous to security cooperation. Organizational documents, manuals, directives, training plans, and personnel of each organization reveal interesting parallels to American military attempts to develop relationships and build partner capacity.

With these case study characteristics in mind, this avenue of inquiry compares current programs to build military partnership capacity to the successful programs of the case study organizations. Assessment through the lenses of these outside agencies is used to illuminate functional similarities that can reveal needed changes in military programs with international engagement aims. The final article in this series will explicitly explore the direct applicability of these case study lessons to military building partner capacity efforts.

This series of articles does not presume to contain all of the solutions necessary to form successful programs to build partner capacity by analyzing a few case studies with missions far different than the U.S. military. With a complex international environment comes challenging interconnections between actors and conditions, and such complexity should never be ignored. However, analogous lessons must not be completely dismissed just because case study organizations are different at first glance from the U.S. military. This is especially true if these organizations have demonstrated success and potentially hold explanatory power that can generate important insight.

The Peace Corps is the first example of an organization designed for international engagement and is the object of this article. Even though it is part of a large, USG bureaucracy, the Peace Corps strives to meet President Kennedy's vision by empowering and equipping individual volunteers to make local impacts. Focusing on sustainable development, the Peace Corps' long-term presence is analogous to security cooperation activities. The comparative analysis that follows reveals organizational characteristics that may be applied to military programs with the same ultimate aim.

## **Background**

The Peace Corps was founded by President John F. Kennedy on March 1, 1961 through Executive Order 10924 to have an international impact. In its first year, the organization commissioned 3,699 Peace Corps volunteers (PCVs) and operated on a budget of \$30 million.<sup>3</sup> In the nearly five decades since its inception, the Peace Corps has sent over 190,000 PCVs to 139 nations around the world.<sup>4</sup> These volunteers have interacted with countless people and have performed international projects to improve education, health, productivity, environmental conditions, economic development, and agriculture. Currently, the Peace Corps boasts over 8,000 of its American volunteers stationed

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2. None of the organizations would fully share statistics about violence. The hesitancy about sharing violence statistics is presumably because of fears that such revelations would hinder recruiting.

3. "Peace Corps Congressional Budget Justification" (Peace Corps, 2008), 21.

4. "Peace Corps Fact Sheet 2008" (Peace Corps, 2008).

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abroad and incorporated into the fabric of 74 foreign nations.<sup>5</sup> It currently operates on a budget of \$330 million.<sup>6</sup> Volunteers continue to build relationships, strengthen communities, and encourage self-sufficiency.

The Peace Corps mission and objectives have remained unchanged since its inception. Its mission is “to promote world peace and friendship;”<sup>7</sup> and objectives corresponding to this mission are to:

- Help the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women
- Help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served
- Help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans<sup>8</sup>

The Peace Corps believes that it is achieving these objectives and that the organization remains ‘relevant, vital, and strong.’<sup>9</sup> Peace Corps Director Ronald Tschetter claims that “volunteers earn respect and admiration for the [United States] among people who may never have met an American;” he contends that the Peace Corps “is admired and recognized around the globe.”<sup>10</sup> In 2007, the Peace Corps assisted nearly 2.5 million people and trained over 150,000 host nation service providers;<sup>11</sup> 95 percent of Peace Corps volunteers believe that they “helped host country nationals gain a better understanding of the United States and its people.”<sup>12</sup> These statistics suggest that the Peace Corps may indeed be having the impact for which it was created.

### **Command and Control**

The Peace Corps is a large, independent agency within the U.S. Executive Branch. As an organization, it manages thousands of volunteers by selecting them, training them, placing them within a community in the host nation, and partially funding their projects. In addition, “the Peace Corps staff regularly interacts with [volunteers] to provide project guidance, medical care, safety updates, and general oversight.”<sup>13</sup> In addition to its substantial network of volunteers, the Peace Corps employs a full-time staff of approximately 1,000 and a contractor force of about 2,000.<sup>14</sup> Yet, Peace Corps leaders believe that their volunteers are the heart of the organization.

The Peace Corps operates in a highly decentralized fashion, structured largely to empower its volunteers and allow them to thrive in their local communities. Thus, PCVs are only loosely guided by the Peace Corps organization because individual volunteers are considered the most capable vehicle to build relationships and make appropriate decisions based on their understanding of local situations. As an organization, the Peace Corps is composed of domestic and foreign structures to ultimately provide the best resources and capabilities to its volunteers.

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5. “The Peace Corps Performance and Accountability Report” (Peace Corps, 2007), 10.

6. “The Peace Corps Performance and Accountability Report,” 10, Introduction.

7. “Peace Corps Congressional Budget Justification,” 2.

8. “Peace Corps Congressional Budget Justification,” 3.

9. “Peace Corps Congressional Budget Justification,” Introduction.

10. “Peace Corps Congressional Budget Justification,” Introduction.

11. “The Peace Corps Performance and Accountability Report,” 27.

12. “The Peace Corps Performance and Accountability Report,” 27.

13. “Peace Corps Report to the U.S. Senate: Peace Corps Volunteer Safety and Security (Part 1)” (Peace Corps, 2004), 19.

14. “The Peace Corps Performance and Accountability Report,” 15.

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The domestic Peace Corps structure is primarily responsible for the macroscopic operation of the organization. The role of the domestic organization is to secure funding, manage resources, initiate recruiting, handle legal concerns, distribute manpower to the international community, direct domestic programs, and facilitate the volunteer selection process.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, domestic leaders create strategic objectives and assess them based on a close-of-service survey at the end of each volunteer's tour. The Peace Corps Director is appointed by the President of the United States and manages the staff to guide the organization in the proper strategic direction. The domestic structure includes three Regional Directors (Europe, Mediterranean, and Asia region; Inter-America and the Pacific region; and the Africa region) with country desks assigned to each Regional Director to provide direction and liaison from the Peace Corps' domestic organizational structure to the Country Director's staff.<sup>16</sup>

The Country Director leads the foreign Peace Corps contingent for each nation and manages a permanent medical, programming, training, and administration staff.<sup>17</sup> Much of the staff is composed of host country nationals.<sup>18</sup> Of those on staff who are U.S. citizens, a large portion is made up of former volunteers.<sup>19</sup> The Country Director's staff sets its own strategy, defines the general roles of volunteers, and establishes broad objectives. However, the Peace Corps does not give specific objectives to their volunteers, instead allowing them to shape their own programs.<sup>20</sup> Program Managers work directly for the Country Director and are the supervisors of each volunteer, orchestrating volunteer training, placing volunteers in communities within the host nation, and receiving volunteer quarterly reports. Program Managers also run in-service training programs for their assigned volunteers every six months.<sup>21</sup> These programs educate volunteers through recurrent training and provide a unity of effort for the Peace Corps programs through shared direction and strategy. These programs also allow volunteers opportunities to network with each other and share successful practices. Such periodic interaction among the volunteers also enables the Country Director's staff to better understand the prevailing national situation in order to shape overall strategy, training programs, and placement initiatives.

Peace Corps volunteers are typically dispersed throughout a nation; so adequate communication networks are critical for safety, security, and accountability. Volunteers are free to contact their supervisors as often as needed but are only required to submit quarterly reports to provide updates on their progress. Radios, cellular phones, and satellite phones are distributed among the volunteers as avenues of communication. Tests are occasionally conducted to account for every volunteer, and 100 percent accountability is the standard.<sup>22</sup> Volunteers are expected to keep the Program Managers updated when they are away from their community post for business or leave. Within a host nation, there is also an effective informal communication network among volunteers and the country staff that helps them all remain connected and updated on progress.<sup>23</sup>

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15. "Peace Corps Congressional Budget Justification," 20. The Peace Corps domestic staff determines the allocation of volunteers based on many factors including safety, security, developmental needs, historical presence, and via input by other U.S. agencies including U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the State Department

16. Debbie Curley (Regional Recruiter, Peace Corps), interview by the author, 29 January 2008. Debbie Curley served as a PCV in Cameroon from 1994-96.

17. "Peace Corps Manual" (Peace Corps, 2007). From the Peace Corps Act paragraph 2.2.

18. Chuck Needlman (Overseas Staff Development Specialist, Peace Corps), interview by author, 2 April 2008. Chuck Needlman was a PCV in Liberia from 1975-77.

19. Curley, interview.

20. Curley, interview.

21. Curley, interview.

22. "Peace Corps Report to the U.S. Senate: Peace Corps Volunteer Safety and Security (Part 1)," 17.

23. Curley, interview.

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Volunteer leaders are also an important part of this communication network. These leaders are typically experienced PCVs who have volunteered to stay in-country for an extended period of time. Volunteer leaders are “first and foremost volunteers,” but they take upon themselves additional responsibilities within the Peace Corps’ foreign organization based on their high level of experience.<sup>24</sup> They do not have supervisory authority over other volunteers; but instead volunteer leaders provide guidance, direction, and advice and help with administrative duties, logistical tasks, and counseling. Volunteer leaders also keep the Country Director’s staff updated on conditions within the host nation.<sup>25</sup>

Host nations request Peace Corps assistance, and this is the basis for Peace Corps presence in a particular nation.<sup>26</sup> The host nation also provides staff members, funded by the Peace Corps, who work with the Country Director to provide greater local knowledge and to properly integrate with host nation programs. The Peace Corps also believes that the training and experience of these personnel can further self-sufficiency and sustainable development.<sup>27</sup> This host nation staff receives in-country training and also participates in a month of training in the United States to enhance their capabilities for service in the Peace Corps and beyond.<sup>28</sup> Each volunteer also works closely with a host nation counterpart in their community. This individual is considered the volunteer’s on-site supervisor even though most host nation counterparts consider themselves partners with the volunteers.<sup>29</sup> The host nation liaison helps introduce the volunteers to the community, assists volunteers with language skills, and gives volunteers local credibility. The cultural knowledge of host nation counterparts and their understanding of the governmental system make them an important aspect of the Peace Corps program. Volunteers frequently cite their relationships with their host nation counterparts as a critical component of their ability to successfully contribute during their tenure in a host nation.<sup>30</sup>

Peace Corps programs also integrate closely with other programs when necessary. As part of the ambassador’s country team, the Country Director strives to be a unified component of the country team efforts.<sup>31</sup> Some NGOs develop formal relationships with the Peace Corps to integrate their efforts as well.<sup>32</sup> In addition, the Peace Corps does not discourage volunteers from developing their own relationships with NGOs and inter-governmental organizations (IGOs) as long as these relationships are relevant to volunteer projects.<sup>33</sup> As a result, Peace Corps volunteers see their community work as “very collaborative.”<sup>34</sup>

A reactive part of the Peace Corps structure is Peace Corps Response.<sup>35</sup> This program sends volunteers who have completed their service back to countries to provide humanitarian assistance, HIV/AIDS healthcare, disaster preparedness and mitigation, and natural disaster and post-conflict

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24. “Peace Corps Manual,” From the *Peace Corps Act* paragraph 3.1.

25. “Peace Corps Manual,” From the *Peace Corps Act* paragraph 3.2.

26. “Peace Corps Report to the U.S. Senate: Peace Corps Volunteer Safety and Security (Part 1),” 19.

27. Cathy Rulon (Chief of Operations for the Inter-America and Pacific Region, Peace Corps), telephone interview by the author, 1 April 2008.

28. Rulon, interview.

29. “Peace Corps Report to the U.S. Senate: Peace Corps Volunteer Safety and Security (Part 1),” 19. Curley, interview.

30. Curley, interview.

31. “Peace Corps Congressional Budget Justification,” 24. The Peace Corps headquarters is often separate from the embassy to maintain a sense of independence in the eyes of the host nation population. Andrew L. Steigman, *The Foreign Service of the United States: First Line of Defense* (Boulder, CO: West View Press, 1985), 168.

32. Curley, interview.

33. Dillon Banerjee, *So, You Want to Join the Peace Corps: What to Know before You Go* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2000), 100. Dillon Banerjee was a PCV in Cameroon from 1994 to 1996.

34. Curley, interview.

35. Peace Corps Response was formerly known as the Crisis Corps.

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relief and reconstruction. Peace Corps Response is centrally run by the Peace Corps Director and throughout its history has sent over 1,000 volunteers to over 40 nations. Peace Corps Response uses returned PCVs who have indicated a willingness to return for short trips of up to six months and who already have relevant language, technical, and cross-cultural skills. Peace Corps Response teams strive to make an immediate impact as they arrive in the host nation because team members are already trained and experienced.<sup>36</sup>

The Peace Corps places volunteer safety and security as the agency's highest priority and has developed its structures to protect volunteers.<sup>37</sup> Peace Corps policy states that "safety and security is the personal and collective responsibility of all Peace Corps" members.<sup>38</sup> As a result, safety preparation and training are integrated throughout the organization; it is a substantial part of the Peace Corps training, placement, and integration efforts.<sup>39</sup> Volunteer placement is done in conjunction with the embassy's diplomatic security and regional security offices. The Peace Corps also works closely with the DOS Department, USAID, IGOs, and NGOs to gather the best information about specific threats and security issues.<sup>40</sup> Peace Corps leaders believe that volunteers are best provided safety by integrating them into their community where they are protected by multiple layers of support. In fact, volunteers are often placed alone in a community without the presence of another volunteer to avoid clustering, which Peace Corps leaders believe would actually put them at greater risk.<sup>41</sup>

Peace Corps statements contend that the organization is adequately structured to balance safety and security concerns with Peace Corps objectives, and statistics indicate that volunteers agree.<sup>42</sup> In fact, 96 percent of volunteers have reported that the safety and security portion of their training was adequate.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, 90 percent reported that they were satisfied with the safety and security support from the Peace Corps staff;<sup>44</sup> and over 97 percent felt safe where they lived and worked during their time in the host nation.<sup>45</sup> Actual assaults against PCVs are fairly low. Statistics indicate that around 5.3 percent of PCVs experience some form of assault while in the host nation, compared with 3.5 percent of Americans within the same age group in the United States.<sup>46</sup> So while safety is a concern for Peace Corps leadership, they feel that the actual risk is minimal.

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36. "Peace Corps Congressional Budget Justification," 31.

37. "The Peace Corps Performance and Accountability Report," 11.

38. "Peace Corps Report to the U.S. Senate: Peace Corps Volunteer Safety and Security (Part 1)," 4.

39. "Peace Corps Report to the U.S. Senate: Peace Corps Volunteer Safety and Security (Part 1)," 9.

40. "Peace Corps Report to the U.S. Senate: Peace Corps Volunteer Safety and Security (Part 1)," 25.

41. "Peace Corps Report to the U.S. Senate: Peace Corps Volunteer Safety and Security (Part 1)," 18.

42. "Peace Corps Report to the U.S. Senate: Peace Corps Volunteer Safety and Security (Part 1)," 24.

43. "The Peace Corps Performance and Accountability Report," 31. Rated as adequate, effective, or very effective.

44. "The Peace Corps Performance and Accountability Report," 31. Rated as somewhat, considerably, or completely.

45. "Peace Corps Report to the U.S. Senate: Peace Corps Volunteer Safety and Security (Part 1)," 23.

46. "Peace Corps Report to the U.S. Senate: Peace Corps Volunteer Safety and Security (Part 1)," 20. Between 1997 and 2002, there were 223 reported major sexual assaults and 286 reported minor sexual assaults on volunteers. Additionally, there were 662 reported major physical assaults and 514 reported minor physical assaults. Violent crimes are added together and divided by five to give an annual crime total. This value is then compared with 6,298 volunteers on average during that period at any given time ("Peace Corps Congressional Budget Justification," 21), and the result is a violent crime rate of 5.3 percent. The median Peace Corps volunteer age is 25. Comparing U.S. crimes of violence from the U.S. Department of Justice for 20-35 year olds gives a value of 3.5 percent. Department of Justice, "Criminal Victimization in the United States, 2005 Statistical Tables," <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/cvus05.pdf> (accessed 1 May 2008), Table 3.

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## Selection and Training

Peace Corps leaders use the application and selection process to maintain the organizational character. Over 100,000 people a year contact the Peace Corps to inquire about volunteer opportunities, and the organization selects around 4,000 to be PCVs.<sup>47</sup> The Peace Corps has only two basic criteria for its volunteers:

- They must be U.S. citizens
- They must be at least 18 years of age<sup>48</sup>

A college degree is highly desired, with 95 percent of PCVs having at least this level of education, but is not required.<sup>49</sup> The most important characteristics Peace Corps recruiters look for are:

- Motivation and commitment
- Productive competence
- Emotional maturity
- Cultural sensitivity<sup>50</sup>

The application process helps the Peace Corps select appropriate volunteers, and the training process refines these characteristics to create productive Peace Corps representatives.

The Peace Corps application process takes about nine months on average, from the submission of the application until selected volunteers arrive in their designated country.<sup>51</sup> There is no application timeline, and volunteers are selected on a rolling basis to maintain a constant flow of incoming volunteers. Peace Corps employees screen applications, select potential volunteers for interviews, and perform interviews. Applicants who are selected after the interviews then undergo a medical screening to make sure they are healthy enough to serve their 27-month term in the host nation. Selected volunteers are chosen to serve in a particular country and in one of the Peace Corps general areas:

- Education
- Youth outreach, and community development
- Business development
- Environment
- Agriculture
- Health
- Human immunodeficiency Virus (HIV/AIDS)
- Information technology<sup>52</sup>

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47. "Peace Corps Congressional Budget Justification," viii, 21.

48. Peace Corps, "About the Peace Corps: How Do I Become a Volunteer? Am I Qualified?" <http://www.peacecorps.gov/index.cfm?shell=learn.howvol.qualify> (accessed 29 January 2008).

49. "Peace Corps Fact Sheet 2008."

50. Curley, interview.

51. Peace Corps, "About the Peace Corps: How Do I Become a Volunteer? Top Questions," <http://www.peacecorps.gov/index.cfm?shell=learn.howvol.topques> (accessed 29 January 2008).

52. Peace Corps, "About the Peace Corps: What Do Volunteers Do?" <http://www.peacecorps.gov/index.cfm?shell=learn.whatvol> (accessed 29 January 2008). Applicants can request assignment to a particular nation, but the needs of the Peace Corps trump these requests.

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These volunteers are then ready to begin their Peace Corps training.

Volunteer training occurs in two major phases. In the first phase, PCVs undergo a two-day orientation training called staging prior to leaving for their host nation. This short training period focuses almost solely on safety, security, and personal responsibility and gives volunteers a glimpse of what to expect in the host nation.<sup>53</sup> Following this brief orientation, volunteers travel to their designated host nation to undergo the second phase of training, two-to-three months of intensive onsite pre-service training.<sup>54</sup> This training allows volunteers to immediately begin their cultural understanding and language preparation and is credited by many volunteers with the success of the Peace Corps programs as a whole.<sup>55</sup> In fact, 92 percent of PCVs have stated that this training program properly prepared them to meet the challenges of Peace Corps service.<sup>56</sup>

Pre-service training occupies six-days-a-week and is considered “interactive, participatory, and hands-on.”<sup>57</sup> This program consists of technical training; health, hygiene, and safety preparation; language training; and cultural appreciation.<sup>58</sup> Language training is based on immersion from the outset, with volunteers learning in small groups at a similar pace. During the training period, volunteers live with a host family to further language and cultural lessons.<sup>59</sup> PCVs believe that this aspect of the preparation is an “integral part of training.”<sup>60</sup> At the end of training, PCVs are able to volunteer for a particular location to serve within the host nation, once they have a better appreciation for the needs of a nation and the various projects they can expect. The Peace Corps takes these requests into consideration, as they do with the initial country choice to begin with, but ultimately places volunteers where their skills are most needed. Overall, 86 percent of surveyed volunteers stated that their assignment matched their indicated skills and interests.<sup>61</sup> Married volunteers, who comprise seven percent of the volunteer population, are placed together; but the Peace Corps does not do so for other volunteers.<sup>62</sup> Following the training period, volunteers are sworn in as official Peace Corps representatives and are then transferred to their community to begin their two-year tour.

### **Progression of Service**

Volunteers arrive in their designated community after training with a charter to design, create, and execute a developmental project. PCVs spend their first several months focused on acclimatization and assessing the needs of the community to determine an appropriate project. Projects are discerned based on volunteer experience, assessment, community consultation, and host nation counterpart guidance. Volunteers are responsible for selecting, planning, and executing their projects; they also secure project funding, labor, and supplies. These resources come through a variety of methods

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53. Curley, interview. Elizabeth Erickson (Training Specialist, Peace Corps), interview by the author, 2 April 2008. Elizabeth Erickson served as a PCV in Morocco from 1998-2000.

54. Banerjee, *So, You Want to Join the Peace Corps*, 28.

55. Curley, interview.

56. “The Peace Corps Performance and Accountability Report,” 30.

57. Banerjee, *So, You Want to Join the Peace Corps*, 30.

58. Banerjee, *So, You Want to Join the Peace Corps*, 30.

59. Curley, interview.

60. Banerjee, *So, You Want to Join the Peace Corps*, 30.

61. “Peace Corps Report to the U.S. Senate: Peace Corps Volunteer Safety and Security (Part 1),” 16.

62. “Peace Corps Fact Sheet 2008.” “About the Peace Corps: How Do I Become a Volunteer? Top Questions.” PCVs are distributed within a nation to meet the host country’s needs, with 81 percent of volunteers within two hours of the nearest volunteer. “Peace Corps Report to the U.S. Senate: Peace Corps Volunteer Safety and Security (Part 1),” 20. The Peace Corps secures housing in the communities designated for volunteers to eliminate that as a cause for concern.

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including: Peace Corps grants, Private Sector Initiatives, host nation government allocations, NGO support, IGO involvement, and community funding.<sup>63</sup> Volunteers also create web sites to gather monetary support and are encouraged to be creative in order to complete their projects by the time their tour is finished.<sup>64</sup>

The Peace Corps uses established programs to assist their volunteers upon their return to America and to assess the organizational programs to determine effectiveness. Career centers are located in the Peace Corps regional offices to provide volunteers “relevant educational and job-search materials and services.”<sup>65</sup> These career centers also offer hotlines, newsletters, and educational opportunities to integrate volunteers back into the United States. Each volunteer also participates in a close-of-service conference to elicit feedback to improve Peace Corps service in pursuit of its objectives and to benefit future volunteers.<sup>66</sup>

### **Emphasis on Volunteer Independence**

The Peace Corps gives its volunteers an unusual amount of autonomy in their communities. Once volunteers complete their training, the Peace Corps sees its organizational role as providing advice and guidance if solicited by the volunteer but for the most part allows the volunteers to manage their own projects independently and does not provide active supervision.<sup>67</sup> The Peace Corps remains available for technical and logistical assistance, and volunteers consider their parent organization a good resource. Volunteers are not given specific objectives or job descriptions, are placed alone in a community apart from other volunteers, and are free to assess and respond to the situations they face on their own.<sup>68</sup> Peace Corps supervisors rarely go out to check on the volunteers in the field.<sup>69</sup> Dillon Banerjee, a former PCV, has stated that “once you get to your village, you have a degree of independence that few other jobs offer. You can be as proactive or inactive as you want. You have the opportunity and authority to design, implement, manage, and monitor entire programs with little, if any, intervention from the Peace Corps office.”<sup>70</sup> Peace Corps leaders are comfortable providing such independence because they believe they have selected and trained volunteers who are motivated and capable of living up to the trust given to them and that this independence best achieves organizational objectives.<sup>71</sup>

Peace Corps leaders firmly believe in the benefits of volunteer independence, stating that to closely link volunteers with the organization or each other would be “at cross-purposes with the mission of the Peace Corps”<sup>72</sup> because PCVs have superior local knowledge that allows them the best perspective to develop their own projects.<sup>73</sup> There are several distinct advantages to volunteer

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63. Curley, interview. “Peace Corps Congressional Budget Justification,” 19, 39.

64. Curley, interview. If needed and approved, volunteers can opt to stay a few extra months in the host nation to complete their projects.

65. “Peace Corps Congressional Budget Justification,” 44. There are 11 such regional offices.

66. The Peace Corps recently established the Office of Strategic Information, Research, and Planning to further assess effectiveness, establish strategy, and improve effectiveness. “The Peace Corps Performance and Accountability Report,” 11.

67. Curley, interview.

68. Curley, interview.

69. Curley, interview.

70. Banerjee, *So, You Want to Join the Peace Corps*, 99.

71. Erickson, interview.

72. “Peace Corps Report to the U.S. Senate: Peace Corps Volunteer Safety and Security (Part 1),” 18.

73. Erickson, interview.

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independence according to Peace Corps leaders. Independence allows volunteers an enriching and meaningful experience of personal growth in which they were able to make a difference in their communities largely based on their own efforts.<sup>74</sup> Volunteer ownership of local projects gives them demonstrative proof of the impact they had in their community at the end of their two-year stay. This same independence allows volunteers to better build relationships and integrate more fully in the culture because volunteers cannot seclude themselves from locals by relying on fellowship with other Americans who could draw them away from a community focus. Finally, because each project is independently run by a volunteer, the community has no expectation that there will be follow on assistance at the end of the volunteer's two-year term. Peace Corps leaders believe that this community mindset enhances community involvement in the project and improves their self-sufficiency.<sup>75</sup>

### **Emphasis on Cultural Integration**

Peace Corps leaders consider integration into the local culture and community core value, and the organization has shaped programs with an eye toward successful integration in order to achieve its second and third strategic objectives.<sup>76</sup> Statistics indicate that volunteers feel they are able to achieve such integration. For example, 91 percent of surveyed volunteers believed they were able to embrace the local culture and integrate into the community.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, 93 percent of volunteers believe that their preparation allowed them to understand and integrate into their local culture; and 95 percent of volunteers have reported "that they have helped host country nationals gain a better understanding of the United States and its people."<sup>78</sup>

Several aspects of the Peace Corps programs allow its volunteers to understand, appreciate, and assimilate into the local culture. First, the Peace Corps has been invited into the nations and communities in which volunteers serve. This gives their organization a level of credibility and acceptance with the local population. In addition, the selection process seeks volunteers who are culturally sensitive; and its training program further emphasizes cultural and language lessons.<sup>79</sup> In fact, the majority of training is focused on these aspects of the Peace Corps mission. The Peace Corps credits the program to house its volunteer trainees with host-nation families as a major reason why it is able to produce culturally aware volunteers. Furthermore, two of the three general training graduation requirements mandate that volunteers must be knowledgeable about the language, local culture, and history.<sup>80</sup> Once volunteers leave for their communities, host nation counterparts give them further credibility in the eyes of the local population and help volunteers develop a support network within which to develop relationships and manage projects. Furthermore, "a volunteer integrates into the community by living every day at the level of the locals, establishing friendships, patronizing merchants, and through other social interaction."<sup>81</sup> Peace Corps leadership believes that these integration efforts are greatly respected by the host nation population.<sup>82</sup>

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74. Erickson, interview.

75. Curley, interview.

76. "Peace Corps Report to the U.S. Senate: Peace Corps Volunteer Safety and Security (Part 1)," 20. "Peace Corps Congressional Budget Justification," 3.

77. "Peace Corps Report to the U.S. Senate: Peace Corps Volunteer Safety and Security (Part 1)," 23. Rated as adequate, well, or very well.

78. "The Peace Corps Performance and Accountability Report," 36, 27.

79. Erickson, interview.

80. "Peace Corps Manual." From the Peace Corps Act paragraph 305.4. *Peace Corps Volunteer Handbook* (Washington, DC: Peace Corps, 2006), 37.

81. "Peace Corps Report to the U.S. Senate: Peace Corps Volunteer Safety and Security (Part 1)," 19. The Peace Corps pays its volunteers a wage that allows them to live comfortably "at the level of [their] neighbors in the village." Banerjee, *So, You Want to Join the Peace Corps*, 42.

82. Curley, interview.

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Integration and community acceptance are considered necessary program elements to achieve Peace Corps goals because without cultural understanding and integration, volunteers would be unable to develop meaningful relationships.<sup>83</sup> Volunteers are considered the “face of America;” and these personal relationships “serve as a crucial foundation for world peace, cross-cultural exchange, and understanding.”<sup>84</sup> Most importantly, volunteers “foster positive relationships with host country nationals [and] dispel myths about Americans,”<sup>85</sup> building “bridges of understanding.”<sup>86</sup>

Peace Corps leaders believe that relationships have many additional advantages, contending that the safety and security of volunteers are best safeguarded through strong community relationships and volunteer integration.<sup>87</sup> With close community ties, volunteers are protected by their communities.<sup>88</sup> Integration and relationships also enable volunteers to leverage community and national resources to complete their projects. Community integration also provides volunteers a rich experience that helps them appreciate different cultures and return to the U.S. with a broader international perspective.<sup>89</sup> In addition, cultural and language skills allow volunteers to remain largely independent from the Peace Corps organization. Finally, integration allows volunteers to better communicate skills to the host nation population, which gives the community a better ability to sustain projects once the volunteer leaves.

### **Emphasis on Sustainable Development**

One of the Peace Corps’ fundamental principles is creating sustainable development—a level of long-term self-sufficiency for the communities and the nations within which volunteers are involved.<sup>90</sup> It is a constant organizational focus to shift reliance away from the Peace Corps and onto the host nation; “it is about making something theirs”<sup>91</sup> and “building local capacity with a focus on developing people, not things.”<sup>92</sup> One of the Peace Corps’ strategic goals is to broaden “the impact on the lives of the men and women in their host communities by transferring tangible skills,”<sup>93</sup> with 86 percent of volunteers believing that they have successfully transferred such skills to others.<sup>94</sup> As an example, Peace Corps volunteers trained 155,565 service providers in 2007—helping develop teachers, clinic workers, agricultural agents, and others.<sup>95</sup>

Peace Corps projects are set up to develop self-reliance on the part of the host communities. Each volunteer’s term in a community is isolated—there is typically no one that replaces volunteers once they leave a community.<sup>96</sup> If a project is not complete at the end of two years, then the community is expected to finish it. If the project requires permanent manpower—like nurses in a clinic or teachers

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83. “Peace Corps Report to the U.S. Senate: Peace Corps Volunteer Safety and Security (Part 1),” 24. Erickson, interview. “Peace Corps Congressional Budget Justification,” 5.

84. “Peace Corps Congressional Budget Justification,” Introduction, viii.

85. “The Peace Corps Performance and Accountability Report,” 2.

86. “The Peace Corps Performance and Accountability Report,” 21.

87. “Peace Corps Report to the U.S. Senate: Peace Corps Volunteer Safety and Security (Part 1),” 2.

88. Erickson, interview.

89. Erickson, interview.

90. Curley, interview.

91. Curley, interview.

92. *Peace Corps Volunteer Handbook*, 45.

93. “The Peace Corps Performance and Accountability Report,” 25.

94. “The Peace Corps Performance and Accountability Report,” 26.

95. “The Peace Corps Performance and Accountability Report,” 27.

96. Curley, interview.

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in a school—then the community is expected to furnish it. This gives the community a sense of urgency about developing their ability to sustain projects well into the future. Therefore, volunteers mandate heavy community participation in their projects from the outset.<sup>97</sup>

Volunteers are trained to focus on developing the ability of communities to help themselves. PCVs are encouraged to “build the capacity of the host country nationals with whom they work and to help teach solutions that will be sustainable within the community.”<sup>98</sup> It is for this reason that the largest single project category within the Peace Corps is education, with 35 percent of volunteers performing education projects where they can pass on knowledge and skills to host nation populations.<sup>99</sup> Capacity-building efforts “are targeted toward individuals, service providers, and organizations, who can, in turn, teach fellow community members;” and volunteers are to work themselves out of a job in their communities.<sup>100</sup> PCVs, through their own volunteer actions, also promote volunteerism in others.<sup>101</sup> Similarly, host nation staff members are equipped to develop leadership, administration, and logistical skills to strengthen their host nation’s developmental capabilities.<sup>102</sup> In the view of Peace Corps leaders, this entire approach is the best way for the organization to efficiently and effectively utilize its resources. Instead of maintaining a constant presence in communities around the world, they use their resources to empower and equip others to help themselves. Once volunteers leave a nation, Peace Corps leaders hope that sustainable development and self-sufficiency are left behind in their place.

### **Assessment of the Peace Corps**

From the preceding description, it appears that the Peace Corps has a positive international impact because of its sustainable development activities. There is plenty of anecdotal evidence that supports such a claim. Quantification of the Peace Corps’ impact, however, is unspecified. Only in 2007 did the Peace Corps attempt to assess effectiveness, establish strategy, and improve effectiveness by forming the Office of Strategic Information, Research, and Planning. This organization is attempting to better quantify the Peace Corps’ ability to achieve its three strategic objectives. Currently, however, the only data upon which to base assessment is from close-of-service surveys which reveal volunteers’ opinions, but not the opinions of those served by the Peace Corps. It is these later opinions that would define success regarding the first two Peace Corps objectives.

In order to achieve its objectives, the Peace Corps advocates the independence of its volunteers. There certainly appear to be great benefits to allowing PCVs the flexibility and responsiveness to adjust to local conditions. Independence, however, only works when volunteers are properly motivated and skilled. While the selection process helps Peace Corps leaders select volunteers who meet such qualifications, it does not do so perfectly. There is always the potential that independence could allow substandard volunteers to abuse their freedoms and possibly create lasting negative impressions of the U.S. instead of positive ones. Peace Corps leaders rely on informal communication networks to reveal such problems, but these networks are also not as timely or as accurate as sometimes needed.

Independence is also most useful when channeled appropriately. While the Peace Corps leaders give credit to volunteer independence for its organizational success, such independence is supported

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97. Curley, interview.

98. “The Peace Corps Performance and Accountability Report,” 27.

99. “Peace Corps Congressional Budget Justification,” 32.

100. “The Peace Corps Performance and Accountability Report,” 27.

101. “The Peace Corps Performance and Accountability Report,” 11.

102. Erickson, interview. Needlman, interview.

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by a large permanent network of domestic and foreign staff members. This staff provides Peace Corps continuity in terms of its overall objectives, resource allocation, and relationships within host nations. The Peace Corps structure provides the framework within which the independent volunteers are able to thrive and deserves a substantial portion of the credit for its sustainable development successes.

Two important limitations prevent the Peace Corps from achieving the scope of influence that it desires. The first limitation is one of safety and security. While Peace Corps leaders claim to be comfortable with volunteer safety, part of this comfort derives from placement strategies that avoid unstable or dangerous locations. Therefore, the strategy of community integration and volunteer independence is only allowed to work in areas designated safe and suitable, preventing the Peace Corps from providing sustainable development to the areas that need such assistance the most. The second limitation is a natural conflict between the Peace Corps' first and second strategic objectives.<sup>103</sup> The Peace Corps strives to provide sustainable development to host nations as part of its first strategic objective and believes that it can best do so through cultural integration and volunteer independence. It also takes great care to maintain its credibility and even believes it is best to locate apart from the U.S. embassy so that it does not appear to be too closely tied with American interests. Separation, however, precludes close integration between Peace Corps actions and other U.S. activities in the host nation. In addition, the second Peace Corps strategic objective is to promote an understanding of the United States to host nation populations. In order to accomplish this, PCVs need to be identified as Americans and maybe even representatives of the United States. This provides a natural tension that if not properly balanced, could have the potential to elevate one strategic objective to the detriment of the other. A similar tension exists in military programs to build partner capacity, which must carefully balance support to host nation forces and American strategic objectives.

While there are some obstacles that Peace Corps leaders face in sustainable development programs, assessment of the Peace Corps does provide some interesting areas to consider regarding command and control, selection, training, progression of service, and areas of emphasis. These organizational areas are particularly illuminating because of the similarities in the ultimate aims of the Peace Corps and military programs to build partner capacity, especially those of security cooperation. Organizational areas are also revealing because the Peace Corps is a part of the USG and is guided and constrained by bureaucratic considerations similar to those of the American military. Assessment of an organization outside the USG, especially a faith-based one such as Baptist International Missions, Incorporated, may offer different insights about how other organizations prepare to build self-sustaining operations. It is this case study that will be examined in a subsequent article.

### **About the Author**

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103. "Peace Corps Congressional Budget Justification," 3.