Connecting to African Communities: A Peace Corps Model

OSD/AFRICOM Roundtable

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(based on Peace Corps research)
Voice of Victor Britcov, Peace Corps Medical Officer, former USSR military officer and M.D.

- I considered myself a citizen of the Soviet Union, a country that would never collapse, my motherland. Suddenly it was gone. I woke up one morning without having something big behind myself, something I had worked and served for all those years.

- I witnessed every morning US soldiers raising the US flag at the Lackland Air Force base.... There was something in my mind at that time telling me: "These people must be proud of their country and must be proud that they have this country”.

- I now tell Peace Corps trainees that I hope they will always remember they have a motherland which must be respected and cared about. “Do not let this country down.”
Why Do Peace Corps Volunteers Integrate Into Communities?

The Three Goals (since 1961)

1. Help the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women. *(offer skill)*
2. Help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served. *(share selves as Americans)*
3. Help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans. *(share others to Americans)*
Achieving Three Goals

• **Before service, clarify expectations as applicant begins process.**

  For example, applicant affirms:
  – Give 27 months of service
  – Be responsible 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for personal and professional conduct
  – Engage with HCNs with cooperation, mutual learning, respect
  – Establish sustainable projects based on local trust, confidence built by living in, integrating into host community and culture
  – Know that Volunteer is perceived as representative of people, cultures, values, traditions of USA
Achieving Three Goals ....

• 3 months In-country Pre-service Training
  – 60% local language learning (top priority); HCN language instructors; must achieve FSI 2.
  – Live with local host families throughout training
  – 30% technical, cultural, daily living including training in community mapping, integration strategies
  – 10% staying safe, secure, healthy within proper cultural environment
Achieving Three Goals...

• Two years community based living and working
  – Live with host family first several months
  – Live, socialize, work in local language throughout two years
  – Use first few months for understanding, building trust in and being accepted by community
  – Use first few months to encourage community to help define specific tasks and projects within broad assigned sector (health; agriculture; education; IT; etc.)
  – Share individual stories, experiences with friends, families on blogs, e-mails, websites
Achieving Three Goals...

• Completing service and returning home
  – Good-byes to community in culturally traditional and respectful ways
  – Continue communications after leaving
  – Share experiences in the US
What Peace Corps has learned

• Language, culture, country specific learning is best done in-country and specific to Volunteer’s in-country region; taught by HCNs from local regions, closest to where it will be used by Volunteers.

• Technical, language, culture are intertwined; technical is not achieved without other two; yet technical (relevant to community needs) is perceived purpose for being in country and community.
What Peace Corps has learned...

- No two Volunteers have the same experience; Peace Corps tries to communicate culture, language, country information through these individual experiences. Currently serving Volunteers in specific countries are the best information source (e-mails, blogs, etc.) for those preparing to go to that country.

- Volunteers most often describe knowing they “belong” after about a year into their service. Trust takes a long time, even when living in community.
What Peace Corps has learned...

• Volunteer’s social and family time in community is as important as professional time, if not more so, particularly for achieving second and third goals. Social time also enhances first goal.
Does Model Work?
Peace Corps Measurements

• Annual Volunteer Survey of Volunteer perceptions of success in meeting three goals.
Annual Volunteer Survey

PCVs at post 9 months+ months: Rate how well you think you achieved Goal 2.

Peace Corps - Office of Strategic Information, Research, and Planning
Measurements ...

• HCN perceptions of Volunteer impact
  – Guided questions method
  – Use trained host country interviewers
  – Interviews completed in local languages
  – Research begun three years ago and adds countries each year
Research Questions

• How does frequent, long term interaction with Peace Corps Volunteers affect host country nationals’:

  – Level of understanding about people from the United States?
  – Opinions of people from the United States?

• What lessons can we draw to improve the interaction?
Goal 2: Research Model

Prior understanding of Americans

- Prior to interacting with Volunteers, what was respondents' understanding of Americans and on what was it based?

Level of interaction with Volunteers

- What was the level and type of respondents' interaction with the Volunteer/the Peace Corps?

Understanding of Americans after interaction

- Was respondents' understanding of Americans different after interaction?
- What characteristics did respondents associate with Americans after working/living with the Volunteer?
- What impact does this understanding have on respondents' outlook or behaviors?

What caused change in understanding?

- To what degree did the Volunteer cause a change in understanding?
- What Volunteer actions had the most impact on respondents' understanding?
## Respondent Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Host Country Individual</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project stakeholders</td>
<td>People who have a major stake in the design, implementation or outcomes of the project.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Project partners/counterparts</td>
<td>Individuals who have worked most closely or are assigned to partner with Peace Corps Volunteers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Project beneficiaries</td>
<td>The people that the project is primarily designed to advantage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Host family members</td>
<td>Families with whom Volunteers lived during all or part of their service</td>
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</table>
Respondents

- 880 individuals
- 8 countries
Source of Information

- Television shows or movies: 84%
- Newspapers or magazines: 66%
- Conversations with friends or relatives: 61%
- School, classes or textbooks: 40%
- The Internet: 36%
- Personal interaction with people from the United States in HC: 29%
- Personal interaction with people from the United States in the U.S.: 14%
- Other: 3%
Opinions Before: What People Said

Uneven work-life balance

- I thought they were workaholics, they don't pay attention to other people, don't know how to have fun and entertain themselves, they are cold people.

Arrogant/Ethnocentric

- I thought that Americans tended to be rude, arrogant and thought that they 'knew it all'.
- I thought the majority of Americans were prejudiced and did not engage in anything unless it was for their own benefit. I thought that they had a limited knowledge of the rest of the world, tended to be self-absorbed and stuck together.

Friendly and Helpful

- I thought Americans were friendly and helpful.
Level of Contact at Work

- 43% Daily
- 30% Several times a week (2-5)
- 15% Approximately once a week
- 8% Approximately 1 to 2 times a month
- 2% Less than monthly
- 0% Not at all
Level of Social Contact

- Daily: 24%
- Several times a week (2-5): 26%
- Approximately once a week: 18%
- Approximately 1 to 2 times a month: 13%
- Less than monthly: 9%
- Not at all: 10%
What HCNs Remember

Intense and prolonged interaction with PCVs leads to lasting impressions:

• *One day she visited the home of a person with HIV and the house was dirty and pitiful, but the PCV respected the sick person and sat with her.*

• *The day she cooked for the teacher’s association.*

• *Most memorable was the demeanor of the Volunteer. She was not fussy and did not complain. She was 'down to earth' and easy to get along with.*

• *I remember when they were trying to communicate with people using their simple and moderate language, but at least they tried to communicate.*
Opinions After Peace Corps - Office of Strategic Information, Research, and Planning
Pathway to Positive Opinions

• Opinion after interaction is:
  – positively correlated with level of understanding
  – negatively correlated with prior opinion

• More contact directly correlates with greater understanding, which in turn correlates with changes in opinions
Opinions After: What People Said

Some negative opinions were discarded
- They are different than I thought, more like us, with their individuality.
- They are not focused only on financial stuff.
- They are more genuine people, than I thought before.

Other opinions were softened and seen with new eyes
- [The experience] made me know them better and my opinion of Americans is better.
- People like us, but they are more driven and have the desire to do things.
- Same perceptions, but with more precision.
• Divergence in opinions that Cameroonians had about Americans prior to working or interacting with PCVs
  – There were almost as many different opinions, attitudes, perceptions, levels of knowledge of Americans as there were respondents. For example, whereas some thought that Americans were very social and humanitarian others thought of them as being racist and spies.
• Uniformity in opinions that Cameroonians have about Americans after working or interacting with PCVs

– opinions are more or less the same and positive. For example, almost all the respondents including beneficiaries and host family respondents unanimously say Americans are hardworking, punctual and open minded people. There are of course a few people who continue to think that there is a hidden agenda behind PCV activities without being able to say what that agenda is.
Mali

- **Fast Facts**
  - Project Sector: Small Enterprise Development (SED)
  - Data Source: 106 interviews across 16 sites
    - 43 counterparts
    - 41 beneficiaries
    - 22 host family members

- **Goal 1 Findings**
  - Transfer of organizational, technical and business management skills occurred
    - The most frequently mentioned organizational change was improvements in specific business skills
    - The most frequently mentioned individual level change was increased understanding of business norms
  - Small business opportunity expansion occurred
    - Better business relations and the development of new contacts
  - Business owners improved their access to micro finance institutions/services
    - Respondents mentioned both increased confidence regarding and use of mobile banks
  - Capacity building sustained
    - 83% of counterparts said that organizational changes were maintained
    - 82% of counterparts said that community changes were maintained
    - 56% of beneficiaries said the project was maintained to a large extent
  - Satisfaction with Peace Corps work
    - >95 % of counterparts and beneficiaries were satisfied with the work of the Peace Corps
    - 88% of respondents said that the Peace Corps project met the needs of their organization

- **Goal 2 Findings**
  - More positive opinions of Americans
    - 74% of respondents had a more positive view of Americans after interacting with Volunteers
Counterpart comments about the benefits of Peace Corps projects:
Artisans have woven sustainable and strong commercial relationships with external partners. Our members each have an e-mail address now, which was not the case before. Due to the nature of our demands, the quality of our products has improved. Creation of jobs, sensitivity on collection techniques, that helped us transport milk from the point of production to the dairy facilities.

Beneficiary comments about the lasting effect of the Peace Corps Volunteer
Reduction of poverty; Autonomy of artisans for years to come.

We will be well established in development framework and well structured (with indicated resource persons). We will be autonomous and will continue the volunteer's work with the counterparts, if they are well trained.
Counterpart comments about whether they would want another Volunteer: 
Maliens always welcome [them] and volunteers bring innovations. 
That will fill-up the gap --- in terms of human resources, as we move toward rural areas. 
They are sincere and ready to help us. They guide us in the right direction.

Counterpart advice regarding how sites should prepare for a SED project
Peace Corps staff should organize groups and/or organizations who will work with the volunteer.
All the stakeholders must be involved in the trainings.
The community should welcome volunteers, bring them to fields to see and identify real needs, and propose the work to be performed during their stay.
Volunteers should understand the local language (dialect), involve all the community in decision-making, and “own” the projects. Partner organizations should:
o Have initiatives before having a volunteer.
o Have transparent people involved in the management.
HCN reported opinions of Americans prior to interacting with a Volunteer:

For me, they were like rebels, bloody killers (exactly as the Tuareg Rebels we have here in Mali).

Wicked, because they don't have the same religion and same judgment as we do.

People ready to help us (Africans). So when someone helps you, you should also help that person (to encourage him).

Spies coming to exploit us in a different way.
• **HCN Comments about how their opinion of Americans Changed After Interacting with Volunteers**
• **Counterpart comment**
  - *We thought they were very difficult to understand with. But they are sociable and have respect for people. They are not shy when doing something. They persevere until they get what they want.*
• **Beneficiary comment**
  - *My perception has changed positively.*
  - *I thought they were very racists, it was the opposite. They integrate easily.*
• **Host family comments**
  - *This has totally change. I saw in them hard workers, people who really want others to get developed.*
HCN opinions of Americans after interacting with Volunteers:

Before, we thought they were just tourists who come to find information; we did not know they could work with us. Now we know they come for our happiness. We are no longer scared to challenge them.

My perception has greatly changed. They are simple and ready to collaborate.
• HCN comments about what they remembered most about interacting with someone from another country:

• Their work experience; she knew a bit of everything and got interested in everything (she always asks questions to understand things).

• They live our realities and they thought we were living on the bad side when they arrived in our country. They realized now that we also live well. But they always had the bad side in their minds.

• People of principle, very regular. To change together, eating together from the same plate with our hands.
HCN comments about ways that Volunteers helped promote positive relationships across cultures:

Their availability at all times. They like to tell truth. They are very serious at work.

The intervention in all areas (advice in all areas) without regard to gender.
• What kinds of terms did respondents use to describe Americans?
• After each interview ended, interviewers completed a check list of personality descriptors to indicate whether respondents spontaneously used any of those terms during the interview. The most frequently used positive terms were:
  • o Hardworking (100%),
  • o Willing to work together (99%),
  • o Motivated to do the work (97%), and
  • o Possessing strong technical skills (83%).

• The most frequently mentioned negative terms were:
  • o Individually oriented (97%),
  • o Lacking in common sense (64%), and
  • Unreliable (62%).
• Each night I sit with these four old men and learn their language. We go over simple phrases like, ‘How is the body?’ ‘the body is well,’ ‘I tell God thank you.’ But it is this small effort that brings us together. (RPCV, Sierra Leone)