



PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS: PERSONAL STORY OF IN-SERVICE TRAINING LINKED WITH COMMUNITY CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT IN MALI

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Introduction

This case study examines my work as a U.S. Peace Corps volunteer in the Mopti region of Mali, West Africa, from 2010 to 2012 and provides a perspective of the Peace Corps approach to community development.

The Peace Corps is an independent agency of the U.S. government that engages American citizens who volunteer to assist with grass-roots development efforts in developing countries around the world. Volunteers aim to fulfill three goals that are core to the Peace Corps program: to help people of host countries meet their need for trained men and women; to promote a better understanding of Americans by the peoples being served, and to promote a better understanding of others by the Americans.

Volunteers are assigned to host countries, where they initially receive three months of training and then serve for two years. Volunteers typically have college degrees and are placed in technical sectors that best correspond to their skill sets. During training, volunteers learn about their specific sector (agriculture, health, community economic development, etc.), study the local languages and learn about the host country's history and culture. Volunteers then work within communities, providing support and building the capacity of community members and counterparts to implement small-scale development activities. Volunteers work with local community organizations, host government agencies, and individuals demonstrating better practices and facilitating cooperation among various stakeholder groups as well as with other aid organizations (Peace Corps, 2012).

History and Context

The Peace Corps was founded in 1960 when then Sen. John F. Kennedy asked a group of college students whether they would be willing to work in the name of peace in a country of need. In 1961, the first volunteers were posted to Ghana. The Peace Corps program in Mali began in 1971 after a formal request by the Malian government.

The volunteers worked primarily in agricultural development to reduce the burden associated with severe drought. Nearly 3,000 volunteers have served in Mali in more than 1,000 communities since 1971. Currently, about 140 Peace Corps volunteers are working in five of the eight regions and the district of Bamako in Mali. Volunteers work in five technical sectors: education, environment, health, small enterprise development, and water and sanitation management (Peace Corps, 2011). They are assigned to work with local governments and communities, schools, cooperatives and small businesses. Volunteers are placed in a variety of settings. Some may be placed in large cities to work with local associations or help other development organizations. Others may be placed in small villages, where they work with the community and community organizations.

Training begins immediately upon arrival in the host country. Peace Corps volunteers are generalists with a wide range of backgrounds, so the three-month initial training period is crucial to prepare them for their work. The majority of the training period is devoted to language acquisition but is supplemented with technical and cultural training. Knowledge of the local language is crucial to the successful integration of volunteers into the community. Community-based training (CBT) takes place in communities around Bamako, where the headquarters of Peace Corps Mali is located. Volunteers stay with host families and take language classes from Peace Corps language instructors during the day. The supplementary technical and cultural training is often integrated into the language training. Emphasis is placed on hands-on experiences. During the training period, program directors analyze and evaluate volunteer trainees for site placement so that volunteers are accurately placed at sites according to capabilities and ambitions. For example, when I completed my training program, I was initially assigned to work as a water and sanitation volunteer in Fombori, a small village just outside of Douentza in the Northern Mopti region. After eight months, I was moved to Kouyentombo, a small village outside of Bankass. The primary assignment for both

locations was to increase or improve the access to potable water because of my capabilities in water and sanitation.

Challenges Faced by Peace Corps Volunteers and How They May be Solved

It is standard Peace Corps procedure to place each volunteer with a counterpart from the local community. The local counterpart is chosen by the requesting community and is supposed to collaborate with the volunteer on work to be carried out within the village. Ideally, a counterpart should be a motivated individual with the available time and the desire to work with the volunteer to improve the community. The counterpart has much to gain by working with the volunteer and is usually the person most closely involved with the volunteer and his or her work. The selection of counterparts, however, is often politicized and abused because of the benefits associated with the role. The best candidate for a counterpart might not always be the one chosen. To alleviate the pressure from the lack of a good counterpart in Fombori, I created a committee of interested community members who also helped to plan, organize and complete development projects. The committee proved to be very successful. It was much easier to find motivated individuals when there was a pool of them to choose from.

The ability of the volunteer to accurately assess the needs of an assignment is paramount to the volunteer's success. The Peace Corps trains volunteers in methods that help them understand and determine the needs of a community and, more importantly, to help the community understand its own needs. The Participatory Analysis for Community Action (PACA) approach is commonly used within Peace Corps (Peace Corps, 2007).

In a village of 2,000 inhabitants, however, it can be quite a challenge to get everyone to agree on what is needed most. While in Fombori, I was under constant pressure to build a bridge and pave a road to the nearby market in Douentza. Despite being very interesting and most likely very beneficial, this project was not feasible and in the end distracted us from the feasible projects at hand. By starting with smaller projects, I was able to gain the trust and respect of the community so that they would understand and accept my assessment of the community's actual needs.

Successes

In Fombori, working with the committee of 10 women and 10 men, we decided to start a small income-generating project that could potentially create revenue for the committee as well as for the women who were interested in participating in its formation. The committee was founded as the entity responsible for the water and sanitation of the community, designed to help organize and implement improvements in access to water and sanitation systems throughout the

village. We chose to make soap to promote hand washing. We held several meetings to decide how we would proceed. Because of a very modest budget, we started with a very small initial batch and hired a local woman from Douentza to demonstrate the soap-making process. The women committee members already had a grasp of soap making, having made traditional soaps on their own. The purpose of the demonstration was to help build confidence and improve techniques. We developed a budget that showed how much money had been spent on the supplies and how much we hoped to make. We kept records of the recipe and everything that was added to the soap. The initial small batch was by most standards a failure because the soap became too dry and crumbled easily. To make the soap useable, we had to pound the whole batch into a powder and then mix it with water to form it into balls. I was anxious that the women would be discouraged, but they were not. Because of the small batch and relatively low investment, and because we kept good records of the soap recipe, the women felt that they could make a new batch and resolve the problems of the old batch. The future batches that we made together were much smaller even than the first and more experimental. We had spoken extensively about how we would make our product better than what was already on the market. So although making the soap itself was a failure, the lessons learned were valuable. Communication, cooperation and planning were important to the success of the project and to how the women felt about their work. They learned the value of analyzing the market and creating a product that stood out.

In Kouyentombo, the need for improved access to water was great. In a village of about 1,000 inhabitants there were only two wells and a broken pump. We held several village meetings to discuss the improvements that we intended to make throughout the village and in several other nearby villages. Having learned from the prior experience Fombori, I worked to keep the goals realistic. After establishing priorities, we decided that we would try to repair the broken pump before the dry season. We discussed in detail what had failed with the last pump and why it had not been repaired. We did not want to repeat the same mistakes. The original pump was a relatively expensive model, and although it was supposed to break less often than cheaper models, it was costly to repair when it did break. After a few repairs, the community decided that it was no longer in its best interest to pay for repairs, and the pump remained broken.

On the basis of this information, we decided to replace the existing pump with a pump that would be less expensive to repair. We also initiated a small fee for using the pump to build a fund for future repairs. The main goal of the project was to improve access to potable water in the village. The village, however, has also formed a sustainable system that ensures the pump is maintained long after I was gone.

Lessons Learned

The Peace Corps gets its strength from its volunteers living on site and having a strong understanding of the community and its needs. Each community is different, and although many of them have the same needs, those needs cannot always be met in the same way. The Peace Corps volunteers must be flexible so they can tailor projects to fit individual communities and thereby make their efforts more effective.

Volunteers also provide an example to their counterparts, demonstrating the initial phases of project planning and the work required to then see a project to completion. Having lived in areas where Peace Corps volunteers have worked in the past, I have seen the results. They may not have been as dramatic as a guinea worm eradication campaign, but they were just as powerful. The legacy of the volunteer can have a lasting effect on a community. Seeing the local counterparts of former Peace Corps volunteers five years after working with a volunteer using the skills attained through trainings and observation to improve their community is a proof. The success of a volunteer is also due in large part to the quality of their counterparts.

The collective sharing of knowledge, skills and traditions in the community are all too often overlooked in implementing development projects. Ignoring them is often the cause of failure for many projects. Volunteers are able to evaluate the knowledge and skills of the community members and to work more effectively within the traditions to ensure the success of their development efforts because of their integration into the community.

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