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THE PEACE CORPS: Agent of Change

Edward Seaga

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PEACE



COORPS

By Edward Seaga

In this world of ordinary problems and ordinary folk, helping to build a water tank, teaching farmers in the field and bringing literacy to the unschooled, are mightier messages of international friendship than the treaties and concords which resolve conflicts and hostilities between states.

Eighty thousand Peace Corps volunteers have, in 20 years, become missionaries to a common cause; helping people to help themselves. In any single month, the Peace Corps affects the lives of more than one million people in 60 different countries.

In a sense the greatest tribute that can be paid to achievements of the past 20 years is that the work of the Peace Corps has been a cumulative aggregation of international goodwill.

This success can only mean that in the design of the Peace Corps a unique formula emerged, defying social law, equivalent to an international-friendship perpetual-motion-machine.

The Peace Corps took the non-traditional route: It is an investment of people in people.

When this concept was formalized and initiated with the birth of the Peace Corps, it gave rise to the first international middle level manpower conference. The conference was held in Puerto Rico in 1963, presided over by Vice President Lyndon Johnson.

That conference spawned many more international volunteer movements, which in turn increased the flow of volunteers across the world.

The impact of this on the development process soon became evident.

In most developing countries, rural areas lag substantially behind urban areas in the level and rate of development. The rural sector, already lacking in the capital and technology concentrated in the urban sector, faces a continuous stream of rural skills migrating to towns and cities.

Without skills, neither capital nor technology can be productively used. The result is further retrogression in the low growth sector, spurring more skills to migrate. Unless this cycle is broken, national development strategy becomes in the main, an urban development process. Yet few developing countries have been able



Where is peace in this world today? Well, I know and this Administration knows one place where peace truly is and that is in the person-to-person approach of the Peace Corps. WE STILL GIVE PEACE A CHANCE....

Loret Miller Ruppe
Peace Corps director

22 to create a dynamic development thrust in their rural sectors, and the reason in good part has been lack of skills.

The Peace Corps, it may be said, was the first international movement to penetrate this barrier. The volunteers reversed the flow of migrating skills, adding a dynamic dimension of human resource to the impoverished rural sectors of many countries.

More than that was accomplished. The investment of people in people, in the case of the Peace Corps, broke through the tough social and psychological barriers of race, color, class and creed.

The significance of this was not merely a symbolic breakthrough of social barriers; it gave reinforcement to the neglected development strategy of building from the bottom up, rather than from the top down.

Yet this is easier said than done. Consider the prototype industrial development—high capital cost, reliance on technology, available skills—a relatively easy marriage of resources.

As development comes from the top level mix, it involves at the bottom the skilled worker who is trained to watch a machine and pull a lever when a piece of metal is in place, or to sew two sections of cloth together and pass them on in a process which will eventually become a shirt, or to assemble components fabricated elsewhere to produce a radio.

Consider now the reverse process, the agricultural prototype development of small land units which is the occupation of 40 to 80 percent of the population in the developing world.

Here the task begins, not ends, with the worker—the farmer—in the building process that moves from bottom to top.

Generally he is, on the average, middle or past middle age. He left school more than three decades ago with low level skills. His existence depends on a relatively low yield production scratched out with hand labor and primitive tools [as he finds himself] exposed to the blazing sun and driving rain.

Primitive as this may be, he is expected to master a wide range of skilled knowl-



edge. He must be able to identify soil types, apply techniques of planting or husbandry, protect what he grows or rears from insects, pests and fungus, conserve and protect his land, and reap at the right time with the right skills — less whatever perishes from drought, disease and rain. Hopefully at the end, he will find a marketplace able to offer him a cash return, subject to market gluts which he cannot forecast.

This development process requires far greater skills than the matching of sections of clothing for a straight stitch operation, or the fabrication of wooden or metal components, or the filling of cans or bottles on the assembly line.

Yet the skilled have migrated to unskilled jobs, leaving the unskilled to master the skilled jobs.

Any development strategy building from the top down is the easier option, but in the terms of population reach it has direct impact on the lesser, not the greater part of the country.

This is relevant to the Peace Corps in the sense that it shows a practical scheme for its involvement, which could occur in many countries and which serves to illustrate the levels at which volunteers can serve.

If I may trespass into the realm of policy, the question may be asked: Does the volunteer serve as:

- 1) A front-line worker who buds, sprays, detects disease, practices carpentry or ceramics, etc.?
- 2) As a trainer of 50 trainees in any of these skills?
- 3) As an instructor of 20 trainees who each teach 50 trainees in these skills?

The front-line worker is essential in the entire scheme as a demonstration that people of different backgrounds can have a common cause, an invaluable asset in countries where social problems are as great as economic obstacles.

But in cost-benefit terms, the volunteer trainer who trains trainees and instructors who train trainers, can multiply their effectiveness by 50 to 1,000-fold, increasing factorally the effect of the 5,400 Peace

Corps volunteers now in the field in 61 countries by dramatic multiples.

The Peace Corps pioneered the field program of people-investing-in-people as a prime mechanism in the development strategy of building from the bottom up.

At the beginning of the third decade of the operation of the Peace Corps, I trust that consideration will be given to an expansion of its search—in part by increased numbers and in other part by a new direction — with a new thrust to multiply its impact by training from the top of the stream.

I trust, too, that the Peace Corps will extend its process of recruitment not only to the young and idealistic bounding with energy and ideas, but equally so to the retired pensioners with decades of experience which no school can impart, who long to continue a useful life, and whose acquired skills on the job rank them as invaluable experts.

The 80,000 Americans who volunteered for service with the Peace Corps can be proud of their record of achievement over the last two decades; the foundation they have created of respect and integrity on which the next decade can build, and the penetrating assault they have made on social barriers and skill shortages across the world. □

Edward Seaga is the Prime Minister of Jamaica. The above was excerpted from his presentation at the Second National Conference of Former Peace Corps Volunteers and Staff which was held on the campus of Howard University, June 19 and 20.