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DeKalb county, Illinois

Peace Corps and people-centered development

BY WILLIAM G. MOSELEY

Guest columnist

The root causes of terrorism (poverty, inequality, isolation, misinformation and hatred) are best addressed by a program of bottom-up, people-centered development and international exchange.

Among U.S. foreign assistance programs, the Peace Corps is ideally suited to facilitate development and understanding abroad and at home.

In contrast to aid delivered by the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Peace Corps tends to focus on small-scale projects using locally appropriate technologies and limited external financing. The Peace Corps is also an important exchange program in that volunteers share their culture with host country nationals during their tenure abroad, and then return to this country to share their experiences and insights with their home communities. The real beauty of the Peace Corps is that volunteers (working in such sectors as education, environment, health, business and agriculture) are

encouraged to work with local people on their own terms.

Volunteers learn the local language, and often eat, dress, and use accommodations that are typical for the communities within which they are working. This priority on integration at the local level often means that volunteers do not accomplish much in the way of tangible work during the first six to 12 months of a two-year term of service. This approach is also looked down upon by some in the foreign assistance community as "going native." The benefit, however, is that volunteers really get to know the local people, ecology and culture. While locals may initially laugh at the awkward American wearing traditional clothing and stumbling through a new language, they almost always end up appreciating the effort. In this context, Americans come to be known as fellow human

beings, and the TV image of the ugly American begins to fade away. Knowledge of the area and close relationships with local people also lead to better development work, work that is based on local priorities and sensitive to prevailing environmental and social conditions.

I served as an agricultural volunteer in the West African nation of Mali from 1987 to 1989. Mali is a predominantly Muslim country (over 90 percent), and some recent reports suggest that fundamentalism is on the rise. While nearly all of my friends in the village where I lived were Muslim, my own religious persuasion was rarely an issue. Given that I lived in a small, remote community, there was little to do for entertainment in the evening other than watch the stars and talk with my neighbors and friends. We would talk and debate about everything, from politics, to sex, to mysticism. The beauty of these discussions was that we developed a deep respect for one another, and a sense that it was acceptable to disagree.

Since the end of my Peace Corps contract in 1989, I have returned to this area about every two to three years because of research related to my academic career. This periodic contact has allowed me to keep up with friends and discuss the current issues of the day. While the religious leanings of some friends have grown more fundamentalist over the years, there is still a basic level of tolerance for other perspectives. In a small way, I believe the Peace Corps has contributed to this tolerance.

I admittedly have presented a very positive image of the Peace Corps. Volunteers may not integrate into a local community as suggested above, or may even act in a way that develops a bad name for Americans. In my experience, however, the number of good cases far outweighs the number of bad ones. Unlike much larger, capital-intensive development schemes, the potential negative repercussions of a failed volunteer initiative are fairly limited.

Many, of course, are critical of the Peace Corps and U.S. foreign assistance in general. If asked why we should be helping out foreign countries when innumerable social problems exist here at home, I simply would point to the tragic events of Sept. 11. By failing to address poverty and inequality abroad, we contribute to a climate of desperation that is fertile ground for religious fanaticism. What makes Peace Corps a doubly wise investment is that it develops a valuable reserve of human capital in this country with experience and understanding of other cultures. Since its inception in 1961, the Peace Corps has produced over 160,000 volunteers and trainees. The vast majority of these individuals have shared the knowledge they acquired abroad with their home communities in the United States. A citizenry that has a basic understanding of the globe's major cultures, religions and environments is better placed to interact with the rest of the

world and demand an enlightened foreign policy from its government.

There has been an enormous outpouring of support for the victims of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and a desire among many to volunteer for constructive action. To this end, I can think of no better volunteer opportunity than the Peace Corps. Congress must also do its job and carefully consider the Bush administration's nominee for Peace Corps director, Gaddi H. Vasquez.

Vasquez's lack of foreign policy expertise and dubious record as Orange County, Calif., supervisor cast doubt on his qualifications for the job.

Now, more than ever, what the Peace Corps needs is a visionary leader with ample overseas and grass-roots development experience. Better yet, this individual should be a former volunteer.

William G. Moseley is an assistant professor of geography at Northern Illinois University and a returned Peace Corps volunteer (Mali, 1987-89).