

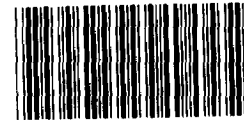
United States General Accounting Office
Washington, D. C. 20548

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FOR RELEASE ON DELIVERY
Expected at 10:30 a.m. EST
Wednesday, March 21, 1979

Statement of
J. Kenneth Fasick
Director, International Division
before the
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

on
[Peace Corps Activities]



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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

We appreciate the opportunity to summarize for the Committee the results of the GAO's recent review of Peace Corps' activities. Our report on the results of this review was issued to the Director of ACTION and selected congressional committees on February 6, 1979. With your permission, we would like to submit for the record that report entitled "Changes Needed for a Better Peace Corps."

Our review was made at ACTION and Peace Corps headquarters in Washington D. C., and five foreign countries: Afghanistan, Colombia, Honduras, Kenya and Malaysia. To complement our own work, we also used 1200 questionnaires to seek volunteer views and experiences in these countries.

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Our review concentrated on the management areas of programming, volunteer support, host-country support and commitment, staff hiring and volunteer recruitment.

On the basis of our review, we concluded that:

--Some programs and projects are of questionable value and lack accord with Peace Corps goals and objectives.

--Host-country commitments to provide supervision and financial and material support to projects should be strengthened and periodically reviewed.

--Volunteer recruitment and placement procedures have shortcomings.

--Many volunteers lack commitment and terminate service before their scheduled completion, often within the first months of service. Peace Corps pays volunteer return transportation costs regardless of the period served.

--Personnel problems include high turnover of employees, and time-consuming employment processes.

ACTION and Peace Corps have taken, or plan to take, actions to correct most of these problems.

Programs of Questionable Value

The programs in two of the five countries we visited raised questions about their appropriateness to Peace Corps goals and objectives. Limited opportunity for projects that directly benefit the needy and constraints imposed on volunteers were both hampering the potential usefulness of Peace Corps programs in Afghanistan. Whether to continue to maintain a large Peace Corps presence in Malaysia was a critical question of Peace Corps programming in view of continuing economic growth and Peace Corps difficulties in placing volunteers in projects which directly benefit Malaysia's poorer population. Additionally, ACTION's own evaluations of Peace Corps programs identified three other countries-- Gabon, Thailand, and Tunisia--where the continuation and value of the programs were questionable.

Some of the obvious problems involved matters such as (1) host country constraining volunteers to its capital city, (2) programs largely involved teaching English to university students, (3) volunteers were difficult to effectively place due to economic health of the host country, and (4) volunteers frequently did not feel they were needed.

Host-Country Support of Peace Corps

To carry out its programs in countries around the world, Peace Corps depends on the host countries for material support and supervision of assigned volunteers as well as for

cash and contributions in kind to help defray Peace Corps expenses. Peace Corps regards the provision of adequate host-country supervision, support, and contributions as an important indication of host-country interest and commitment.

Although each country was making cash and/or in-kind contributions, we noted reluctance of some country directors to approach host-country officials for increased contributions or fulfillment of existing support agreements. There are no existing criteria which prescribe the level of contribution host countries should provide.

The Peace Corps did not agree with our positions on this matter stating that country directors are capable of dealing with host countries on issues "sensitively and appropriately" and that variations in the degree of host-country support are appropriate due to differing needs in each country. However, the volunteers we contacted and questioned did not support the Corps position. Further volunteer responses to our questionnaire regarding host-country material support and supervision pointed to inadequacies in all countries where the questionnaire was used.

OTHER ASPECTS OF PEACE CORPS
VOLUNTEER SUPPORT

In addition to the support received from host-country agencies and organizations, the volunteers also receive support from Peace Corps in-country staffs. As part of this

review, we obtained volunteer views and comments regarding this support; particularly, the adequacy of volunteer living allowance and health care. Although there were instances of dissatisfaction, on the whole we found volunteers to be satisfied with the support they receive from Peace Corps.

Volunteer Recruitment and Placement

Weaknesses and shortcomings exist in ACTION's recruitment and placement of Peace Corps volunteers. Recruitment and placement processes do not

--insure that applicants are adequately informed of overseas living and working conditions to enable them to decide whether they can commit themselves for 2 years or

--require indepth scrutiny to identify unsuitable applicants and provide guidance for placing volunteers in compatible environments.

In addition, ACTION recruiters and Peace Corps placement officers are not often sufficiently trained nor provided uniform standards and guidance for making informed decisions about Peace Corps applicants.

As a result, a large number of volunteers are entering Peace Corps (1) inadequately screened for suitability and (2) poorly informed of conditions under which they will be expected to serve. As a further and more costly result,

many volunteers are terminating service before scheduled completion--frequently within the first months of service. As an operating policy, Peace Corps pays for volunteer return-transportation costs regardless of the period served.

Agency management has made, or plans to make, substantial improvements to deal with the problems raised. These improvements began during our review.

Mutual Service Obligation

Peace Corps volunteers are not legally obligated to complete specified lengths of service. Although expected to complete a 2-year tour, volunteers can quit at any time for any reason. Of the volunteers who entered Peace Corps in 1975, about 22 percent of those terminated did so within 6 or less months of entering. In these cases, not only did volunteer placement and return prove costly, but Peace Corps derived little benefit from their service.

We believe that a number of terminating volunteers might have remained in service had they been formally obligated to serve a minimum duty period. Such a requirement would cause volunteer applicants to (1) give greater thought to their personal commitments before going overseas and (2) make extra efforts to adjust to their new environments after entering on duty as volunteers in order to serve full tours.

In our questionnaire to volunteers we proposed the following:

"A volunteer is not legally obligated to any specific tour of service. Some believe the volunteer should be obligated to a minimum period, say, one year. If the volunteer terminated early before that minimum length of time, and there were not an extenuating reason; i.e., death in the family, injury to the volunteer, etc., she/he would be required to reimburse Peace Corps for the cost of the transportation to and from the host country."

We then asked, "If you had been required to sign such a statement, would you have still volunteered? Please explain."

About half said "yes," but stressed that Peace Corps, in return, would have to recognize its obligation to insure that volunteers would be properly screened and placed, adequately trained, would have a viable project, and would receive good in-country support. They contended that Peace Corps should do its job properly, and that only then would they become obligated.

During the 1960s Peace Corps did not bear the return costs of early terminating volunteers unless their reasons were considered beyond their control. One Peace Corps official told us that this practice was discontinued because country directors objected to making this determination.

ACTION and Peace Corps agree that the early termination problem is serious and costly, but are not convinced that the proposed mutual service obligation is necessary. Peace Corps believes its new preinvitational screening and orientation will significantly reduce the number of early terminations because it will screen unsuitable candidates before they go overseas. The Agency also said it is directing overseas trainers to more selectively decide which trainees will become volunteers ready to commit themselves to 2 years of service. In addition, efforts are underway to stress to trainees (1) the seriousness of their commitments to serve and (2) the harmful effects to the host countries and to Peace Corps of early terminations.

Personnel Management and Volunteer Support

The Peace Corps has significant problems including (1) a personnel turnover rate that triples rates experienced by other Federal agencies and (2) an inability to fill staff vacancies quickly because of lengthy employment processes. These problems have resulted in inadequate supervisory staff-to-volunteer ratios in almost all countries and have prevented adequate staff support of the volunteers.

The experience in Honduras shows some of the difficulties. The Peace Corps in-country management staff consists of a country director, five associate directors, and a program training officer. Of these positions, the following were vacant for the periods shown:

Country Director

January 9, 1974, to July 20, 1974 6 months

July 8, 1976, to December 18, 1976 5 months

Associate Director (Health)

September 1, 1974, to November 2, 1975 14 months

Program Training Officer

December 19, 1976, to September 1977 9 months

The Country Director told us that the absence of a program training officer had been sorely felt. The incumbent has full-time responsibility for monitoring training and for coordinating the program staff and the training center. When the position was not occupied, the associate directors had to monitor the center in addition to their other duties.

We believe the 5-year rule, whereby Peace Corps staff employment is generally limited to two 2-1/2-year contracts is the cause of much of this personnel turnover. In our sample of terminations of Corps staff, the 5-year rule--which in effect precludes a career program for Corps staff--was responsible for causing about 40 percent of the turnover. Since 1965 when the Congress made it part of the Peace Corps Act, the rule has applied to all Peace Corps employees. Before 1965, the Peace Corps Director applied the rule as administrative policy for overseas personnel, with the intent of making Peace Corps staff service similar to volunteer service--short term.

ACTION officials agreed that there had been insufficient study of the 5-year rule and its impact on Peace Corps operations, and said that such a study would be made.

Improving Coordination of AID and
Peace Corps Programs

We are now completing, Mr. Chairman, a review of U.S. Development Assistance to the Sahel and expect to issue our report shortly. As a part of that review, we examined the relationships of Peace Corps and the Agency for International Development (AID) in that troubled region and their efforts to make their programs more effective and efficient.

Peace Corps and AID agree that increased cooperation is desirable and that it could improve the effectiveness of both agencies. GAO concurs and suggests that the cooperation could be improved. We believe that:

- changes in management and programing procedures, such as better communication of project planning and programing data,
- clearer identification of the types of development efforts which are conducive to joint effort, and
- improved motivation of field people to work together more closely, could result in higher levels of program collaboration.

In general, Peace Corps and AID recognize the problems and the opportunities identified by us, and GAO has recommended increased management attention to these problems and certain shifts in program emphasis in order to overcome them.

International Volunteerism--An
Alternative to the Peace Corps
Bilateral Program?

The Peace Corps Act authorizes the Corps to provide volunteers and money to support international volunteerism.

The United Nations Volunteer (UNV) program, a part of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), is currently the only international volunteer organization receiving Peace Corps support. To qualify for the UNV program, a U.S. citizen must apply to and be accepted by both Peace Corps and UNV. Peace Corps pays volunteer costs incurred outside the host country including recruitment, travel to and from the country, and readjustment allowance. The United Nations pays in-country costs.

UNVs work only on UN-funded projects which may be sponsored by UN agencies, such as Food and Agriculture Organization, United Nations Children's Fund, and UNDP. In-country there is no UNV staff. On-the-project supervision is provided by UN project personnel, usually UNDP.

Peace Corps participation in international voluntary agencies was quite limited until recently. Section 10(a)(2) of the Peace Corps Act limited the number of U.S. volunteers to 125. In addition, UNV had an unwritten rule restricting the number of U.S. volunteers to 20 percent of total volunteers provided by all industrial (developed) countries.

Since industrial countries were limited to 50 percent of total UNV, the U.S. share could be restated as 10 percent of the total. As of September 1978 Peace Corps had 19 volunteers in the UNV program out of a 330 total.

We believe the lack of interest in Peace Corps programs shown by some countries, notably Afghanistan and perhaps others, could be partially offset by placing more volunteers in multilateral organizations whose programs, because of host-country nationalism, may be more acceptable to less-developed countries than are bilateral programs. For example, the travel constraints imposed on Peace Corps volunteers did not apply to UNVs in Afghanistan. We believe efforts should be continued to expand U.S. participation in multilateral volunteerism. If the UNV program proves unacceptable to ACTION, we believe possibilities should be explored for participation in other international volunteer organizations.

We have discussed the results of our reviews with ACTION and Peace Corps officials. We believe there is substantial agreement with the findings in our reports, and we are pleased with the corrective actions which have been taken or are planned with respect to them. We believe these actions should strengthen and improve the Peace Corps.

Mr. Chairman, this completes our statement. We will be pleased to answer any questions.