

We Must Adapt and Adopt
Reforming the Peace Corps Act

By Justin D. Bibee
© 2015

What is the Peace Corps' role in international affairs? What are the Peace Corps' responsibilities – and how do we exercise those responsibilities? These are questions I often found myself asking as I entered my second year of service.

I took an oath, as a volunteer, in early 2014 with a deep personal conviction that I would put the individual at the heart of everything I did for the United States Peace Corps. In my first year of service, I was privileged to work with an extraordinarily committed and talented group of development experts and humanitarians. But none seemed to match my passion for human rights.

As a volunteer I seek to catalyze action across a wide range of issues – from the fight against HIV/AIDS to quality education, to poverty, harassment, and environmental sustainability. But more than anything, I dedicate my efforts to advancing human rights.

I want to bring the Peace Corps closer to the people we serve – to match our unique presence as the preeminent international service organization of the United States with the credibility of seeing that rights are fulfilled, suffering alleviated, and opportunities presented.

Within the Peace Corps community we often talk about the Peace Corps' three goals, which can be paraphrased as; help others help themselves, help others understand Americans and, help Americans understand others. However, there is little talk about Peace Corps' mission, to *promote world peace and friendship*, established in the Peace Corps Act of 1961.

The champion way to promote world peace is to promote the advancement of human rights. Human rights guarantee people the means necessary to satisfy their basic needs, such as food, shelter, and education, so people can take full advantage of all opportunities.

In my first year of service, I saw the sheer appetite for the fulfillment of human rights. The year 2014 could well have been a year of change – for both the Peace Corps and the countries we served. Aspirations for genuine peace and individual rights will be realized through the transitional process of incorporating human rights into the heart of our strategies for development.

I am leading a needful effort to reform the United States Peace Corps Act – to adopt strong human rights provisions – through the incorporation of a Human Rights Committee.

With the establishment of a Human Rights Committee, we will aim to empower people to be aware of human rights issues, concerned by the issues, and capable of standing up for the issues. We will not only teach what rights people have, we will teach what *responsibilities* people have. We are all responsible for advocating human rights to ensure their universal recognition.

A Human Rights Committee aims to address one of the principle objectives of the Peace Corps' mission; namely, to *promote world peace*. Human rights will continue to play a critical role in the development of individuals and communities.

In the field, volunteers witness all too well the urgency of the situation. A more purposeful course of action is clearly necessary. The Peace Corps must play an active role in the advancement of human rights.

Every issue we face on the ground habitually stems from a human rights violation. Without focusing on root causes, we will always play a secondary role in development. We need to break this counterproductive cycle. This is not a way for us to play a constructive role in assisting nations with their development.

I do not imagine that countries everywhere will suddenly respect the rights of their people, or that the United States Peace Corps and/or a Human Rights Committee are the answer. What I have sought – and continue to seek – is a consciousness on the part of all peoples and nations that their integration into the developed world cannot progress without the respect for human rights.

It will be naive to think a Human Rights Committee will provide an easy path to the respect for human rights. Some people do not want to see change. Politics will not stand still.

People in the Peace Corps community – and elsewhere – have a genuine concern that the establishment of a Human Rights Committee will obstruct diplomatic relations. The pursuit to address human right issues does present challenges, but these can – and must – be managed.

My own instinct is to maintain Peace Corps' credibility and bilateral relations with foreign governments. I am acutely aware of the importance of this. But at the same time, we must make clear that our approach to development will be different. Human rights must be at the heart of our strategies.

I am proud, as a Peace Corps volunteer, of our agency's contribution to the development of nations. But a real commitment to development remains elusive. There is a fundamental problem in which we perceive our responsibilities. Human rights matters continue to be treated as distant areas.

By establishing the People's Advocate Council, a volunteer-based organization dedicated to raising awareness about human rights through the implementation of community development projects, I hoped to transition the aspirations of my host-country nationals into a powerful movement of human rights awareness. And in doing so, help set a consensus of what a Human Rights Committee would look like.

The Peace Corps will have to adapt a much broader view of human rights if it is to successfully address the challenges the world faces today. This I know to be true. I have expressed this view in the past. And this leaves me with what will become my greatest challenge as a volunteer: creating an understanding of the necessity to incorporate human rights into the Peace Corps Act.

Many people believe that the absence of violence brings the presence of peace. Oppression and marginalization are not as loud or as visible, but they are just as devastating to the development of an individual. It brings a heavy weight on my mind and tears to my eyes when I think about what some people are going through.

You, I, and others have the responsibility to help those whose rights are being violated. We must do what we can to empower those who are committed to pursuing real change responsibly.

I am pushing the agency hard - challenging it - to realize its full potential. If the Peace Corps Act renews itself for an era of people power, the Peace Corps can aspire to making a far greater impact in the lives of those who need it most. The Peace Corps can truly enter a new period of prosperity.

As I write these thoughts, one year into my service, I remain optimistic about the changes underway. I seek to link my grand aspirations for our agency into something more real, more concrete. The choice between incorporating human rights into the Peace Corps Act or not is no longer an option. We must be ambitious enough to pursue it, and wise enough to adopt it. Without a Human Rights Committee, the United States Peace Corps does not have the necessary means to carry out its mission.

We need to go beyond the traditional concepts of volunteer work. The Peace Corps, I believe, needs to stand strong for the rights of people.

I urge the Peace Corps to take a courageous step. Will the Peace Corps adopt such provisions? Perhaps we should vote – a human right within itself – and something Peace Corps' founder, President John F. Kennedy, lived, fought, and died for.

A Peace Corps that adopts strong human rights provisions – and reemphasizes their mission to world peace – will earn its place in the twenty-first century.