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**INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEER SERVICE:  
A SMART WAY TO BUILD BRIDGES**  
RECOMMENDATIONS ON HOW TO ENHANCE U.S. VOLUNTEER EFFORTS

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## Introduction

*President Obama has proposed expanding the Peace Corps and building a global network of volunteers, “so that Americans work side-by-side with volunteers from other countries.” Achieving this goal will require building on the success of the Peace Corps with a new combination of public and private initiatives designed to expand opportunities for volunteers to address critical global problems such as poverty, contagious diseases, climate change, and conflict.*

*We examine alternative service models, both domestic and foreign, and offer recommendations to the Obama Administration for harnessing the energy and skills of Americans eager to engage in volunteer work in foreign countries as part of a multilateral mobilization effort and smart power diplomacy.*

## Peace Corps and AmeriCorps

When President Kennedy established the Peace Corps in 1961, he captured brilliantly the American spirit of volunteer service and produced a program that quickly became the gold standard at home and abroad. President Clinton built on this foundation when he established AmeriCorps and created the Corporation for National and Community Service in 1993. Both Bush presidencies provided innovative service leadership including an unprecedented mobilization of support to address HIV/AIDS and malaria in Sub-Saharan Africa. By signing into law the “Edward Kennedy Serve America Act” on April 21, President Obama took a “quantum leap” toward the goal of expanding service opportunities for Americans.

The Peace Corps did not arrive “out of the blue.” Alexis de Tocqueville noted the service ethic inside the United States as early as 1835. International service by Americans has roots in the work of medical missionaries and student exchange programs in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Under the leadership of Sargent Shriver, the Peace Corps had 15,000 volunteers working abroad when it was barely five years old. Regrettably, it then went through a period of decline and almost disappeared. The Peace Corps slowly rebuilt to a level of around 8,000 volunteers working in more than 70 countries at the end of 2008.

Although the Peace Corps has become almost invisible in American communities, it has retained its position as the leading model for international volunteer service. It has been able to select highly qualified men and women from a large pool of applicants, it provides exceptional pre-service training, and its two-year service commitment has ensured a high degree of effectiveness. Nevertheless, despite an effort by President George W. Bush to double the Peace Corps after 9/11, scaling up has been hampered by the program’s lack of clear alignment with major U.S. national interests (thus the difficulty of securing significant congressional support), its relatively high costs and long terms of service, and its image in much of the world of being a Cold War instrument.

The only other international volunteer program funded by the federal government is Volunteers for Prosperity (VfP), a USAID-managed program that seeks to connect Americans who wish to serve abroad with private sector programs. VfP was recently authorized in the Edward Kennedy Serve America Act with bipartisan support from Senators Kennedy and Hatch. Global Service Fellowship legislation (Feingold-Voinovich) being considered by Congress would further expand support for non-governmental organization (NGO) service opportunities abroad with funding for 10,000 fellows every year with a budget cost of \$50 million.

Inspired by the Peace Corps, the VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) program was created in 1965 to direct volunteer energy to disadvantaged communities within the United States. Several other domestic volunteer programs were subsequently initiated, but the major breakthrough in this direction came in 1993 when President Clinton established AmeriCorps. AmeriCorps now has more than 70,000 members at work. One critical difference from the Peace Corps model is leveraging federal budget dollars through partnerships with NGOs and state/local government agencies. Another difference is a service commitment of one year.

President Clinton also established the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) to administer not only AmeriCorps but a “family” of volunteer programs appealing to different demographic pools of volunteers and focusing on different community needs. A steady parade of visitors from other countries has arrived at CNCS in recent years seeking advice on how to mobilize volunteer energy domestically.

## Multilateral Variants

The idea of transforming the Peace Corps from a bilateral to a multilateral program is not new, but it has several variants. One is offering Americans service opportunities in multilateral volunteer programs. A second is to integrate the work of Peace Corps volunteers in host countries with the work being done by their own volunteers and by volunteers from other sending countries. A third is to bring volunteers from other countries to the United States, either as part of a two-way Peace Corps, as a program managed by the CNCS, or as a stand-alone program working in conjunction with NGOs such as Atlas Corps.

Today the leading multilateral volunteer program in the public sector is the U.N. Volunteers program (see below). In 2007, 106 Americans served as U.N. Volunteers, many of whom had completed service in the Peace Corps. The low number is largely a reflection of the minimal funding for the program contributed by the United States. The Peace Corps recruits and screens American applicants and generally treats it as a low priority activity.

A plethora of humanitarian relief, disaster relief, and post-conflict peace-building work cries out for attention in countries where the Peace Corps is not operating. The Peace Corps could dramatically expand America’s contribution to these efforts by scaling up its collaboration with U.N. Volunteers and a growing array of NGO, faith-based, and corporate volunteering initiatives.

Integrating the work of Peace Corps volunteers with the work of other volunteers in individual host countries seems to be happening to an increasing extent. One example is in the area of HIV/AIDS, a priority area of work for many international volunteer programs and an area where pressure to cooperate is intensified by the urgency of the problem.

Much evidence exists that scaling up the Peace Corps depends critically on overcoming the image of the Peace Corps as a one-way street. Moreover, the United States has much to gain from hosting volunteers from other countries, not simply in terms of gaining friends but also in terms of benefiting from their skills and experience.

As early as 1966, when he was the Associate Director of the Peace Corps, Harris Wofford noted that the original idea of the Peace Corps included “reverse volunteering” through which men and women from developing nations would perform volunteer work in communities throughout the United States. Resistance from the State Department and the U.S. Congress snuffed a couple of attempts by the Peace Corps to start a reverse volunteering component, but two recent private sector models exist that demonstrate the inherent feasibility of the concept. Almost 2,000 certified teachers from overseas are currently work-

ing in U.S. high schools in seven states under the Visiting International Faculty program. Atlas Corps is arranging for professional-level volunteers from India, Colombia and other developing nations to work in US-based non-profit organizations.

## Bilateral Programs of Other Countries

Most advanced democracies have established international volunteer programs, quite a few inspired by the Peace Corps. In the 1990s, the Peace Corps organized a pair of conferences that brought together representatives from these programs to exchange views on major challenges and common problems. The International FORUM on Development Service was born out of these conferences to continue this collaborative effort and now has 21 member organizations. In March 2005, the Brookings Institution brought the heads of eight of these programs together with the heads of UN Volunteers and the Peace Corps for a two-day conference focusing on work in the area of HIV/AIDS, research to measure results, and contributing to post-conflict reconstruction. The five programs briefly described below represent the range of models available in this group.

The leading volunteer-sending organization in the United Kingdom is *Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO)*, a charity funded in large part by the U.K. Government. Established 50 years ago, VSO supports more than 1,500 volunteers abroad. VSO has recently multilateralized its program to include volunteers from Canada, other Commonwealth countries, Ireland, the Netherlands, India and Kenya, and the Philippines.

Canada's *Uniterra*, focusing on reducing poverty, supports 1,000 volunteers from Canada and 13 other countries. Uniterra was formed as collaboration between World University Service Canada and the Center for International Studies and Cooperation. The Canadian International Development Agency is an important source of funding. Volunteer commitments range from two weeks to two years.

The German Development Service, *Deutscher Entwicklungsdienst* or *DED*, supports more than 1,000 "development workers" in 45 countries. Volunteers must be under age 28 and serve for one year. DED emphasizes professional skills and has been a leader in mobilizing volunteer expertise for post-conflict reconstruction.

The *Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteer (JOCV)* program was established in 1965 and modeled on the Peace Corps. Japan has played a leading role in international volunteering through its sponsorship of the U.N.'s International Year of Volunteers in 2001 and other U.N.-based efforts to promote volunteering.

Nigeria's *National Youth Service Corps (NYSC)* was established 35 years ago as a program of the federal government. One year of domestic service under NYSC is mandatory for all university and polytechnic graduates under age 30 who have not served in the military or police or a few additional exempted activities. Currently, around 300,000 Nigerian graduates join NYSC each year.

## Multilateral Programs

The leading model among a handful of multilateral programs is U.N. Volunteers. The next largest is the European Voluntary Service, and the third model is a program established by the Inter-American Development Bank.

*U.N. Volunteers* is managed by the U.N. Development Program (UNDP) and headquartered in Bonn, Germany. U.N. Volunteers was established in 1970 and currently deploys more than 7,500 volunteers in 140 countries, which makes it comparable in size to the Peace Corps with much greater geographic distribution. Drawn from 162 countries, more than 77 percent of these volunteers are from developing countries, and many are working in their own country. Most U.N. volunteers are assigned to projects being carried out by U.N. agencies.

The *European Voluntary Service* (EVS) deploys European volunteers, ages 18 to 30, to work on projects in the European Union, in the neighboring countries of Southeastern Europe, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and the Mediterranean. Some EVS volunteers also serve in North Africa and the Middle East. Volunteers spend between two and 12 months outside their home country. Each EU member state has a designated national agency responsible for implementing the EVS program in its own country.

The Inter-American Development Bank's *Youth Development and Outreach Program* addresses several areas of youth development including engagement in volunteer service and a regional Youth Network for Latin America. The Youth Network includes several thousand individual members as well as government agencies, NGOs, private sector entities, and religious groups. The network also has members from Europe, Asia and Africa.

## Corporate Programs

Corporate volunteering was almost invisible as a concept 10 years ago, despite the fact that General Electric created a substantial volunteer program for its employees in the 1920s. A benchmark study by the Brookings Institution in 2005 focused attention on an array of new international initiatives in this area being launched in the context of corporate social responsibility programs.

An expanded study conducted by FSG Social Impact Advisors on "Volunteering for Impact," sponsored by Brookings and Pfizer Inc, and Pfizer Global Health Fellows program, spotlighted leading programs in the corporate sector including IBM's Service Corps, Pfizer's Global Health Corps, and General Electric Company's employee volunteering councils.

The Prince of Wales International Business Leadership Forum (IBLF) in the United Kingdom helps businesses contribute to sustainable development and achievement of the U.N.'s Millennium Development Goals. Its ENGAGE campaign encourages business to expand and improve service programs for employees worldwide.

## University-based Programs

Service learning has become an increasingly popular component of college and university education in the United States. The early focus was on domestic volunteer opportunities, but the number of service opportunities abroad for American students is growing rapidly. Moreover, universities are beginning to offer “gap year” or “bridge year” programs for incoming students. One example is Princeton University’s Bridge Year Program that will place all of its participants in foreign countries. The first group of 20 students will be assigned to partner organizations in Ghana, India, Peru, and Serbia, and the program will quickly expand to 100 students each year out of an incoming class of about 1,300.

American University is leading a national consortium of colleges and universities committed to scaling up volunteer service abroad. Duke University’s “Engage” program is an example of the many programs that provide stipends for undergraduates pursuing service opportunities abroad for a semester or more.

Universities in the United States are also making an important contribution to international volunteering through a variety of research activities. The Center for Social Development at Washington University in St. Louis has established a Global Service Institute that is carrying out research projects on several aspects of volunteering. The Institute also coordinates an information-sharing network of 898 organizations around the globe that manage local and national service programs. The Center for Civil Society Studies at Johns Hopkins University carries out research, training and information sharing both in the United States and globally. For example, the Center has partnered with the International Labor Organization to develop a manual on how to count and value volunteer work, revealing that volunteering is much more extensive and valued than commonly assumed.

## NGO Programs

The Brookings study in 2005 identified more than 100 for-profit and non-profit programs in the United States, which together were sending more than 40,000 volunteers every year to work in foreign countries. Many of these programs required the participants to bear a substantial share of the costs. The largest program is operated by Cross Cultural Solutions, which matches roughly 4,000 volunteers per year with service opportunities in 12 countries. Some are faith-based programs, like Habitat for Humanity. The demand for teachers of English under programs such as World Teach is especially high.

The Building Bridges Coalition—which grew out of Brookings’s Initiative on International Volunteering and Service and now includes 210 NGO, corporate, university and faith-based leaders—has committed to double by 2010 the number of volunteers sent abroad every year under their programs (including the Peace Corps). According to its 2008 survey, the coalition achieved a 23 percent increase in 2007 and projected a 92 percent increase by 2010, to a level close to 100,000 volunteers.

## Design Elements and Best Practices

A close examination of this wide universe of international volunteer programs points to several design elements and best practices that could help to make a new initiative by the Obama Administration successful.

***Offer Multiple Service Options.*** The success of programs as different as Atlas Corps, Cross Cultural Solutions, Earthwatch and Partners of the Americas suggests that scaling up successfully will depend on offering a range of service options instead of trying to design a single program that appeals to all potential volunteers and to all host countries.

***Tackle Concrete Issues.*** Focused programs can be especially attractive and effective. Examples are Malaria No More, Rick Warren's P.E.A.C.E. initiative in Rwanda, the Nairobi River cleanup initiated by the Global Peace Festival with Kenyan Prime Minister Raila Odinga, and Grameen Foundation's asset-based development work and empowerment of youth in Middle Eastern nations.

***Focus on Measurable Outcomes.*** In the context of the effort to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki Moon has said "volunteerism represents a vast and largely untapped resource that developing country governments are only beginning to recognize as a tremendous asset." Indeed, it may not be possible to achieve these goals without effectively mobilizing volunteer workers.

***Build In-Country Capacity.*** Accumulated experience suggests that a high priority be given to building up the institutional capacity in every country to manage the inflow and outflow of international volunteers. A premium should be placed on the role global volunteers play in catalyzing and supporting local in-country volunteer sector initiatives and local volunteer recruitment. Efforts in this direction include policy development, technical support, mentoring, reducing costs, and ensuring sustainability.

***Support the Private Sector.*** The private sector is engaged in international volunteering, but corporations, for-profit, non-profit, and faith-based organizations could do much more with catalytic financing from the public sector and other policy-oriented support.

***Focus on Youth and Retirees.*** Multiple studies have shown that early experience with volunteer service is strongly correlated with a life-long commitment to volunteering. Engaging young people in volunteer service can also play a critical role in peace building in conflict-ridden countries. Today, retirees probably represent the largest untapped pool of high-quality volunteers.

***Assess Impacts.*** A near-universal constraint on public funding for international volunteering is the largely anecdotal evidence of the benefits. More rigorous studies could show that the benefits are substantial compared to other programs designed to promote mutual understanding and reduce the potential for conflict.

## Policy Recommendations

Based on this survey of volunteer efforts worldwide and the assessment of best practices, we propose the following recommendations for consideration by the Obama administration to further enhance U.S. volunteer opportunities with the goal of strengthening America's multilateral development engagements and impacts.

1. Mindful of the 50th anniversary of the Peace Corps in 2011, appoint an innovative leader as its next Director along with a mandate to develop a new mission appropriate to the global challenges that will confront the United States over the next 50 years. Include the critical features of empowering multilateral service and the expanded array of NGO, faith-based and corporate partners in the mandate.
2. Ensure that international volunteering has a meaningful place in U.S. development assistance/foreign assistance strategy and citizen diplomacy.
3. Initiate a policy review to examine options for creating a "family" of international volunteer programs alongside the Peace Corps, possibly combined in a Corporation for International Study and Service.
4. Double the Peace Corps to 15,000 volunteers and assign 2,000 of them to work in cooperative arrangements with volunteers from other countries.
5. Enact and fund the Global Service Fellowship program to send 10,000 fellows abroad each year to work in NGO and faith-based programs.
6. By 2012, provide federal support for 100,000 volunteers abroad through the Peace Corps, the Global Service Fellowship program, Volunteers for Prosperity and high-quality private sector programs.
7. Provide incentives to expand the international component of corporate volunteer programs through the new Social Innovation Fund and other initiatives that leverage private sector funding.
8. Expand research on international service data by the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Corporation for National and Community Service. Provide funding for empirical research on international volunteer programs with an emphasis on measuring outcomes in target areas such as malaria, education, and asset-based development.
9. Increase U.S. funding for multilateral service, through entities such as U.N. Volunteers or NGOs, to support countries and the volunteer sector in achieving institutional capacity required to participate in and manage a two-way exchange of volunteers.
10. Explore the possibility of negotiating an international treaty on cross-border volunteer service, a key feature of which would be a fast-track procedure for issuing visas to volunteers sponsored by organizations meeting rigorous standards of effectiveness and accountability.

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