



International Volunteering: Smart Power

By Lex Rieffel and Sarah Zalud

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The face of America that has been welcomed most enthusiastically in the rest of the world for decades has been the face of a volunteer: assisting with disaster relief, building houses for poor families, teaching English to university students, and so much more.

International volunteer programs contribute directly and indirectly to our nation's security and well-being. They represent one of the best avenues Americans can pursue to improve relations with the rest of the world. The scale of these programs, however, is far below the levels suggested by their benefits. The federal budget for FY 2006 supports 75,000 AmeriCorps volunteers working domestically but only 7,800 Peace Corps volunteers working in foreign countries.

Reflecting the value that Americans see in volunteering overseas, programs in the private sector have grown rapidly in the past ten years. In 2005, at least 50,000 Americans participated in NGO and corporate programs. The number could be much higher, easily more than 100,000, with a program like AmeriCorps that leverages private funding. The number could be doubled again by offering additional options suitable to large pools of talent, such as retiring baby boomers.

The potential dividends from scaling up international volunteer programs are impressive relative to most other "soft power" programs of the U.S. government. The time is ripe for a breakthrough in this area, with policies aimed at strengthening existing programs such as increased funding for the Peace Corps, raising the public awareness of volunteer programs overseas, linking service and study, and measuring effectiveness. It is a smart way to knit the United States more effectively into the fabric of this rapidly changing world.

The United States is seeking a leadership role that protects its vital national interests while effectively engaging other nations as willing partners. Global challenges such as terrorism, poverty, and HIV/AIDS call for new policies to promote mutual understanding and cooperation with the citizens of other countries.

The disadvantages of acting alone or in small coalitions have become clearer in recent years. Furthermore, the experience in Iraq has made the American public more aware of the limitations of "hard power." Hard power can topple unfriendly regimes, but it cannot build stable and prosperous nations.

The appointment of Karen Hughes as under secretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs in March 2005 showed that the Bush Administration is committed to relying more on the kind of "soft power" that Harvard professor Joseph Nye has been advocating for more than a decade. Soft power is exercised through a vast array of public sector activities, from the Fulbright program of academic exchanges to the new Millennium Challenge Corporation. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice underscored the move toward soft power in a speech on January 18, 2006, that highlighted the State Department's plan for a new "transformational diplomacy."

Overseas volunteer work is a form of soft power that contributes measurably to the security and well-being of Americans. Volunteers working in other countries develop life-long relationships and promote cross-cultural understanding in ways that few other federally funded programs can do. They bring home to the U.S. an understanding of foreign cultures that enriches our country and informs our policy choices. Volunteers also contribute to institutional capacity building, social capital, democratic governance, and a respect for human rights, all of which help to make the world a safer place for Americans both at home and abroad.

International volunteer programs represent one of the best avenues Americans can pursue to improve relations with the rest of the world. Despite the obvious benefits, however, the scale and effectiveness of these programs remain far below their potential.

NGOs and corporations can take steps by themselves to scale up their international volunteer programs and make them more effective. These programs could grow faster, however, with the help of a campaign to raise public awareness of the benefits of international volunteering, and more of the kind of catalytic support the federal government provides for AmeriCorps and other domestic volunteer programs.

U.S. Government Support for International Volunteer Programs

The Bush Administration gave a big boost to volunteer programs generally when it created USA Freedom Corps in 2002 and Volunteers for Prosperity in 2003. The

support has been primarily rhetorical, however. Budget funding for these two programs has been very limited. The vision is there but not the muscle.

- **USA Freedom Corps** was created by President Bush as a coordinating entity in the White House charged with “promoting a culture of service, citizenship, and responsibility in America.” With an emphasis on domestic volunteering, USA Freedom Corps has created a database of volunteer opportunities (Volunteer Network), it administers the President’s Volunteer Service Award program and the Presidential Greeter program, and it supports the President’s Council on Service and Civic Participation. It is a focal point for five national service programs (AmeriCorps, Citizens Corps, Learn and Serve America, Senior Corps, and Peace Corps), and for government-sponsored volunteer service initiatives such as Volunteers for Prosperity.

- **Volunteers for Prosperity (VfP)** was created by Executive Order in September 2003 as a web-based program to promote the use of volunteers in six presidential initiatives, and to assist highly skilled Americans in finding suitable volunteer assignments overseas. Prospective volunteers can find links on the VfP website to 220 partner organizations. In 2005 a total of 12,000 volunteers were placed overseas by these partner organizations. VfP’s office is located in the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

- **The Peace Corps** was created in 1961. It had 7,810 volunteers serving in 72 countries at the end of FY 2005. This was the highest level in 30 years, but well below its peak in 1966, when the Peace Corps had more than 15,000 volunteers in the field. It is a shadow of the 100,000-strong Peace Corps that President Kennedy believed would be desirable. In his 2002 State of the Union address, President Bush proposed doubling the number of volunteers to 14,000 within five years. His budgets for FY 2003 and 2004 were consistent with that target, but Congress only appropriated enough funding to sustain an 18 percent increase. Peace Corps volunteers commit to 27 months of service, and receive a \$6,075 relocation allowance upon return. One hundred percent of Peace Corps funding comes from the federal budget.

- **Other federally funded international volunteer programs.** Several private sector programs are heavily dependent on federal funding, primarily from USAID, and several others use federal funding to supplement funding they receive from individual and corporate donors. Examples of these programs are ACDI/VOCA (in agriculture), the Citizens’ Development Corps, and the Financial Services Volunteer Corps. The number of volunteer assignments they support each year appears to be fewer than 1,000.

International Volunteer Programs without U.S. Government Support

A surprising number of programs beyond the Peace Corps provide opportunities to engage in volunteer work in foreign countries. They cover a wide range of thematic

areas including basic health and sanitation, education, housing, and agriculture. For the purposes of this study we have divided them into four categories: generalist, professional, corporate, and faith-based. In round numbers, the annual participation in 52 programs surveyed in 2005 was 38,500 volunteers.

- **Generalist Programs** select volunteers primarily on the basis of their commitment to overseas service and provide varying degrees of training. One of the largest programs in this category is EarthWatch Institute, which assigns volunteers to work with scientists engaged in research projects in foreign countries.
- **Professional Programs** attract skilled volunteers with substantial work experience. One of the best-known programs in this category is Doctors without Borders. The American Bar Association has a growing program drawing on the large pool of lawyers in the U.S.

**Table 1: Estimated Number of Programs and Volunteers in 2005
A Conservative Estimate**

Organization	# of Organizations	# of Volunteers
Peace Corps	1	7,800
Generalist Programs	21	18,700
Professional Programs	14	9,600
Corporate Programs	8	2,200
Faith-Based Programs	9	8,000
Sub-totals	52	38,500
Grand Total	53	46,300

- **Corporate Programs** may be the fastest growing category. A large number of multinational corporations now encourage their employees to engage in volunteer work in their local communities or in places where there is a high demand for their skills, including foreign countries. The General Electric Company's "Elfun" program began in 1928. Pfizer's Global Health Fellows program supports employees in six-month assignments working with leading NGOs overseas.
- **Faith-based Programs** are linked to a specific religious faith, but programs that send volunteers abroad primarily to proselytize are excluded from this study. All of the programs included accept volunteers from any faiths. The largest single program without government support, Habitat for Humanity International, belongs in this category. Other examples are Catholic Relief Services, and the Presbyterian Hunger Program.

The Budget Context

In the federal budget context, funding for international volunteer programs is almost invisible: around \$350 million. This is less than two one-hundredths of one percent of the \$2.5 trillion of federal spending for FY 2005 and less than one percent of the international affairs budget. In contrast, federal spending on national defense amounted to \$456 billion, or 18.4 percent of total federal spending and 47 percent of discretionary spending.

How do the benefits of spending for international volunteering compare with the benefits of spending for other soft power programs? Unfortunately no broadly acceptable methods exist for comparing programs that compete for budget dollars because they are so fundamentally different in their approaches and because their impacts are so difficult to measure rigorously. The only practical methods of comparison are highly judgmental in character.

To simplify the task of comparing more than a hundred distinct programs within the international affairs budget category (budget function 150), we have grouped the programs into seven categories (see Table 2). For each category we have made a judgment about its associated benefits.

- *“Strategic” Programs* (\$10.018 billion). Fifty-one percent of the total budget for “strategic programs” in FY 2005 represented the sale of military equipment and the cost of military training. The remainder represented money given to foreign governments to advance a broad range of economic and foreign policy objectives. The results achieved by this category of programs over the past 30-40 years are the least tangible even though it is the biggest category.
- *“Bilateral Aid” Programs* (\$9.336 billion). Within this category are child survival and health programs and disaster/famine assistance programs, which stand out as high-value activities. Other programs in this category, such as agriculture programs and the Millennium Challenge Corporation, have yielded mixed results.
- *“Political” Programs* (\$2.155 billion). These included the dues paid to the United Nations and other international organizations, the assessed share for the U.S. of UN peacekeeping missions, migration and refugee assistance, and several other small UN programs. The benefits of programs in this category have been high because of their multilateral character. They finance global goods.

**Table 2: Budget Function 150 – International Affairs, FY 200
(Actual Outlays, \$ billions)**

	\$ billions	percent
Budget Function 150 Total	35.6	100.0
Foreign Operations	24.4	68.5
<i>“Strategic” Programs</i>	<i>(10.018)</i>	<i>(28.1)</i>
<i>“Bilateral Aid” Programs</i>	<i>(9.336)</i>	<i>(26.2)</i>
<i>“Political” Programs</i>	<i>(2.155)</i>	<i>(6.0)</i>
<i>“Drug” Programs</i>	<i>(1.672)</i>	<i>(4.7)</i>
<i>“Multilateral Aid” Programs</i>	<i>(1.219)</i>	<i>(3.4)</i>
State Department Administration	7.0	19.7
State Department Programs	3.9	11.0
<i>Contributions to Int’l Organizations</i>	<i>(1.166)</i>	<i>(3.3)</i>
<i>Contributions to Int’l Peacekeeping</i>	<i>(1.113)</i>	<i>(3.1)</i>
<i>Other (incl. Eximbank OPIC, TDA, etc.)</i>	<i>(0.595)</i>	<i>(1.7)</i>
<i>Broadcasting programs</i>	<i>(0.592)</i>	<i>(1.7)</i>
<i>Educational, exchange, and cultural programs</i>	<i>(0.395)</i>	<i>(1.1)</i>
Peace Corps and other vol. programs	0.3	0.9

- *“Drug” Programs* (\$1.672 billion). Assessing the relative benefits of anti-narcotic programs is too difficult to attempt in this context.
- *“Multilateral Aid” Programs* (\$1.219 billion). Most of the multilateral aid category represented the U.S. contribution to the World Bank’s soft loan window. U.S. contributions to multilateral aid agencies are highly catalytic because they are matched several times over by contributions from other donors.
- *State Department Administration* (\$7.0 billion). This category included the cost of maintaining a corps of foreign service officers willing to serve overseas and use their diplomatic skills to advance the foreign policy objectives of the United States. Nearly one third of this category was for spending on physical security enhancements primarily at embassies overseas.
- *State Department Programs* (\$3.9 billion). This category includes a set of educational, exchange, and cultural programs that have consistently provided exceptional benefits over many years, exemplified by the Fulbright Scholars program. Contributions to international organizations and contributions to international peacekeeping, included in this category, are also high-value activities. The benefits of other programs such as the Export-Import Bank and certain broadcasting programs have been distinctly less impressive.

- *Peace Corps and other volunteer programs* (\$350 million). The Peace Corps at \$317 million in FY 2005 was dwarfed by most other programs and yet its track record over the past 45 years may be unmatched by any other international program. Its value is reflected in President Bush's proposal to double the size of the Peace Corps. The estimate of \$33 million for other volunteer programs is rough because they are not broken out in most budget presentations.

Key Issues

How far can the supply of volunteers be increased?

Budget constraints have put out of reach President Bush's goal of doubling the Peace Corps to 14,000 volunteers. The size of most NGO programs is similarly limited by funding both for the sponsoring organizations and the volunteers themselves. Many programs require volunteers to pay their own travel costs and medical insurance. Some also charge an administrative fee of as much as \$2,500 for a two-week program. The few programs that do cover all out-of-pocket costs are primarily geared to professionals who are not being compensated for their skills and experience. A relatively small increase in federal funding could substantially increase the number of Americans able to volunteer abroad by decreasing the financial constraints on NGO programs. The supply constraints on corporate volunteer programs are not financial per se. They relate more to corporate social responsibility policies. A public sector-private sector campaign to call attention to the benefits of international volunteering could multiply the number of high-quality applicants.

How far can the demand for volunteers be increased?

The level of demand depends critically on how the role of the volunteer is portrayed: to teach or to learn. Another critical aspect is distinguishing between legitimate requests for volunteers from those with little merit. Making the United States more open to foreign volunteers could have a major impact on demand by underscoring the value of personal networking (social capital), and by making volunteering more of a two-way street.

How can volunteer effectiveness be improved?

Volunteer effectiveness is extremely difficult to measure apart from opinion surveys. Two distinct impacts are associated with volunteer work: the impact in the country where the work is done, and the impact in the U.S. after the volunteer returns home. A large fraction of returned Peace Corps volunteers have described their experience as "transformative" in the sense of leading to a life-long commitment to service, a critical career choice, or some other change in direction or outlook. All reputable international volunteer programs have documented similar experience.

More generally, effectiveness is widely considered to be related to selection, training, and support. The most successful volunteer programs are careful in matching applicants with specific assignments, offer language training, and have field staff to

help volunteers deal with problems that arise. In addition, volunteer effectiveness tends to increase with the length of assignment.

Policy Options

- **Raise public awareness.** Too few Americans are aware of the opportunities for volunteer work overseas that exist beyond the Peace Corps. As the Baby Boom generation approaches retirement age, messages targeting this large pool of high quality applicants could be particularly effective.
- **Strengthen existing programs.** Increased federal funding for the Peace Corps would help to ensure the support of returned volunteers, who now number more than 182,000. Increased funding for Volunteers for Prosperity could be used to test alternative forms of support for NGO and corporate sector programs.
- **Tackle specific obstacles.** The cost of field offices is relatively high, but they play a critical role in volunteer effectiveness. NGOs could reduce their overhead costs by co-locating in international volunteer centers in each country. The biggest obstacle for Americans interested in volunteer work overseas appears to be the cost of travel and medical insurance. The pool of applicants from low- and moderate-income families would grow substantially if the federal government partially covered these or other costs. A service stipend, similar to that of the Peace Corps and AmeriCorps, could be used to encourage longer assignments.
- **Measure effectiveness.** All programs are seeking better ways to measure the effectiveness of their volunteers. Greater collaboration among programs in this area could lead to breakthroughs that would strengthen the case for increased public sector and private sector funding.
- **Promote what works.** Dialogue and collaboration among overseas volunteer service programs is weak. The Corporation for National and Community Service, the Points of Light Foundation, and Volunteers for Prosperity have recently begun to convene an international roundtable each year to share information about best practices. The International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE) meets every two years, but U.S. participation has been surprisingly subdued. The United States is a global leader in volunteering, but legislative constraints inhibit generous responses to inquiries from other countries about our experience.
- **Link service and study.** More than 190,000 college-age Americans are going overseas to study each year. Developing stronger links between overseas service and overseas study can enhance the study abroad experience.

- **Help to build capacity in the volunteer programs of other countries.** Many countries have begun their own indigenous volunteer programs. A concerted effort to strengthen volunteer programs in other countries would foster a global culture of volunteerism and create social capital.

Conclusions

Americans engaging in volunteer work in other countries encourage more favorable attitudes among foreigners toward America and generate greater understanding among Americans of foreign perspectives. A more robust cross-cultural dialogue could make the United States less dependent on hard power, which has high budget costs.

An effort to scale up international volunteer programs in the NGO and corporate sectors will begin to rectify more than three decades of relative neglect by the federal government. The benefits in terms of national security and economic well-being provide a compelling rationale for investing more of the federal budget to support these programs across the board.

Lex Rieffel is a visiting fellow in the Global Economy and Development Center at the Brookings Institution.

Sarah Zalud was an independent consultant for the Global Economy and Development Center at the Brookings Institution.