

IVCO 2022 Think Piece

THE KEY INGREDIENTS IN THE PEACE CORPS RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

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Seismic events are fueling monumental shifts in societal norms: COVID-19 has turned the world upside down, climate change has impacted our lives in unprecedented ways, poverty and economic inequality are on the rise, international conflicts have increased, and global outcries against power inequities have resulted in new ways of thinking about relationships. We long for a return to normal but realise that the new normal may bear little resemblance to the past.

Against this backdrop, there is a palpable sense of urgency to chart a new course. Before embracing this new future, many international volunteer sector organisations, including the Peace Corps, have used the pandemic pause as a time for introspection, taking stock of who we are, both as individual organisations and as a wider field. The first step in effectively planning for the future is an honest evaluation of what we have to offer and how we can address our shortcomings.

The Peace Corps developed a Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 to 2026 Strategic Plan to provide a foundation for addressing this shifting context while also looking at new service models using a 20-year time horizon. A team was tasked to determine the attributes that make up the essence of Peace Corps service and are core to our Agency's identity, brand, and success—the secret recipe that leads to transformative and impactful experiences for Volunteers and the communities they serve. A literature review, interviews with Agency stakeholders, and 20 focus groups, with roughly equal numbers of American and host country staff and partners, were conducted. The team found a strong consensus amongst all groups and identified six foundational themes that are the hallmarks of Peace Corps service.

Authentic Relationships: The life-long connections developed between Volunteers and local community members are deep bonds among ordinary people, outside the realm of international business, development, and politics. These relationships build solidarity and empathy among diverse peoples, fueling a shared desire to make a positive difference in the world.

Grassroots Development: Peace Corps programming reflects an approach grounded in a deep understanding of the local context and community-driven priorities. Volunteers are not external 'experts' with all the answers; they are listeners, facilitators, and connectors. They work hand-in-hand with partners to best support communities.

Social Capital: This refers to the Peace Corps' indirect role in developing a strong community of American and host country citizens who can more sensitively and collaboratively address challenges in their communities and countries as well as internationally.

Broadened Worldview: The Peace Corps provides both Volunteers and host country communities the opportunity to get out of their comfort zones, challenging and then transcending assumptions about other places and people.

Language and Culture: The Peace Corps' strong emphasis on language and intercultural learning enables Volunteers to meaningfully bridge cultural differences and integrate into host communities. Both Volunteers and local community members benefit from an improved ability to understand differing viewpoints while respecting diversity.

Commitment to Service: The Peace Corps emphasises Volunteer service to, and partnership with, communities where they are invited and where there is a need. It is about people giving back, caring about one another, and working for the public good within and across borders.

As the Peace Corps considers new volunteer service models, these key ingredients will need to be intentionally incorporated into their design to ensure that the Peace Corps' recipe for success remains intact. At the same time, the Agency must enhance its operations to address issues most mentioned during the Agency's research: 1) power inequities inherent in a service model sending American Volunteers overseas; 2) improved sustainability through increased empowerment of host country partners; and 3) the need to better define, measure and tell the story of Peace Corps' impact.

Though we are still moving through this process at the Peace Corps, we have found that there is a lot to learn, much to preserve, and exciting opportunities to embrace in the future. Only by better understanding ourselves and asking difficult questions can we move forward, confident in who we are and what we will contribute to this changing world.