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AND THE EVOLUTION OF OVERSEAS VOLUNTEERING

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50 YEARS OF CHANGING THE WORLD

HALF A CENTURY AFTER THE LAUNCH OF CUSO AND THE PEACE CORPS, GLOBAL VOLUNTEERING HAS EVOLVED INTO A WORLDWIDE MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE TRAVELLING TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE. BY ZALINA ALVI

A Peace Corps volunteer uses illustrations to teach a class on nutrition to women in her community in Sierra Leone. 1968. PHOTO: PEACE CORPS

At the end of the 1950s, the idea of volunteering overseas was about as common as a tie-dyed T-shirt. The options for a young Canadian or American who wanted to make a difference rarely extended beyond their own backyard: helping out at their church, a local school or an animal shelter in their neighbourhood, perhaps.

Then, in the early sixties, an overseas volunteering movement exploded at universities across Canada and the United States. It was fuelled, in part, by idealism of students who wanted to make a difference in developing countries just emerging from the shadow of colonialism.

In 1960, Senator John F. Kennedy delivered an impromptu two-in-the-morning campaign speech to a group of students at the University of Michigan. He shared a vision of Americans serving their country by living and working in the developing world. Soon after his inauguration, plans to create the Peace Corps were set in motion and, just ten months after his Michigan speech, Kennedy gave a personal send-off to the first group of Peace Corps volunteers headed for Ghana.

Across the border, a similar movement was afoot at Canadian universities. At the University of British Columbia, undergrads Brian Marson and Michael Clague delivered a letter to the university president proposing a student overseas service. At the same time in Toronto, Lewis Perinbam, Guy Arnold and Keith Spicer were all working independently on their own proposals for a Canadian voluntary service. In 1960, a first group of volunteers left for India with Spicer's fledgling organization, Canadian Overseas Volunteers (COV). A year later, COV and a number of

similar initiatives across Canada were merged under a new national organization, Canadian University Services Overseas (CUSO).

Since then, myriad organizations—governmental or independent, small and large, with long-term placements or short-term—have emerged. And lots has changed in the half-century since those first intrepid volunteers set off to places many of them could barely point to on a map.

"Fifty years ago you might have gotten on a boat and had no contact with home and gone to a place you had very little imagery of," says Steve Rosenthal, founder and executive director of Cross-Cultural Solutions, a New York-based volunteer sending organization. "Today, you're tweeting home to your family and you're going to a place you might have seen a virtual tour of before you got there."

Technology has, without question, altered—some might even say, blunted—the experience of travelling and volunteering overseas. But if access to instant communication has dulled that exhilarating sense of being cut off from the familiar, it has also sharpened criticism directed toward those who dare to arrive in a country ill-informed.

John Wilcox, one of CUSO's first volunteers in India, recalls proposing that residents of a small village raise chickens as a way of boosting the local economy. In an interview in the Salt Spring News, 40 years later, Wilcox said, "I had no idea of the cultural dimensions of doing that; many of them are vegetarians and they will not even eat a fertilized egg." Fifty years ago, it may have been an excusable oversight for a 19-year-old farm-boy from southwestern Ontario. But not today.

There have been other changes in the landscape and Ian Smillie has witnessed many of them first-hand. A long-time foreign aid watcher and critic, past executive director of CUSO and a member of the Order of Canada, Smillie first volunteered in Sierra Leone with CUSO in 1967. He identifies a shift toward a demand for volunteers with highly specialized skills and knowledge.

"They need people who know something about agriculture, food technologies and food preservation. And they need health professionals," says Smillie. "The big numbers in CUSO, in the early years, were BA generalists who went to teach in secondary schools and there's almost no demand for that anymore."

PHOTO: PEACE CORPS

"FIFTY YEARS AGO YOU MIGHT HAVE GOTTEN ON A BOAT AND HAD NO CONTACT WITH HOME AND GONE TO A PLACE YOU HAD VERY LITTLE IMAGERY OF. TODAY, YOU'RE TWEETING HOME TO YOUR FAMILY AND YOU'RE GOING TO A PLACE YOU MIGHT HAVE SEEN A VIRTUAL TOUR OF BEFORE YOU GOT THERE."

A CUSO or Peace Corps volunteer placement is a long-term commitment—a year for CUSO and two for the Peace Corps. Few of us are in a position to spend that amount of time away. But in spite of that, interest in international volunteering and a desire to lend a hand has grown dramatically in recent years. As a result, an entire volunteer industry of sorts has emerged, enabling people to participate on projects for very short periods of time—two weeks or less in many cases.

"We have a more engaged general public and a more aware constituency that really wants to effect positive change," observes Rosenthal. "International volunteering is the way to turn those ideals into action."

The idea of short-term volunteering is not without its detractors. They argue that a volunteer can't possibly begin to make a meaningful contribution in a country they know little about over the course of a couple of weeks, or even a couple of months.

Supporters, on the other hand, point out that the real value is the capacity for these types of volunteer experiences to contribute to an acutely tangible understanding of other cultures and how we affect each other. A volunteer who brings that understanding home with them can become a catalyst for change.

Indeed, it's hard to deny the positive impact on life back home from sending thousands of citizens around the world to live and work.

"It's about the kind of experience, knowledge and understanding that Canadians would bring back to Canada after their experience," Smillie says. "That we would become a more international kind of country, broader in outlook and wider in experience than we had been."

As the field matures and grows in popularity, it's being scrutinized with an increasingly critical eye. Sending organizations, prospective volunteers and, recently, the media are paying attention to the relationship between the volunteer organization and the community. How are overseas communities being involved in projects? Are the goals sustainable? What impacts are volunteers having on the community—good and bad? If volunteers are paying fees, how is the money spent? And who, really, are the experts on a project—the volunteers, or the locals?

As the field continues to evolve, the two organizations that ignited the spark 50 years ago will undoubtedly continue to be at the forefront of international volunteering.

"CUSO gave an opportunity for not hundreds but thousands of young people to go overseas and have a first-hand experience of development," says Smillie.

For Rosenthal, a past Peace Corps volunteer in Kenya, the impact has been more direct, inspiring him to start his own organization.

"I can never put into words the impact of Peace Corps on Cross-Cultural Solutions because it's so enormous," says Rosenthal. "The Peace Corps and CUSO really brought in a new era of service."

TOOLS FOR CHANGE

IN POOR DISTRICTS OF LIMA, PERU, YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT IS HIGH AND JOB-HUNTING SKILLS ARE FEW. CUSO-VSO VOLUNTEERS AND A PERUVIAN NGO GIVE THEM A LEG UP.

BY ANDREA GOURGY
PHOTOS: MATHIEU GAGNON

Before 19-year-old Jackelinne Quispe-Brito first stepped into the youth employment centre in her hometown of San Juan de Miraflores—one of the poorest districts in the Peruvian capital of Lima—she had never held a formal job. Quispe-Brito had applied for work at numerous local businesses including supermarkets and fast food chains, but like many young people in the area, she never got a call back.

Finding a job in a slow economy can be tough anywhere, but in the district of San Juan de Miraflores, high unemployment rates are exacerbated by crime, violence and

poverty. It is estimated that in this district of about 300,000 people, there are as many as 46,000 youth who are unemployed or underemployed. Competition is stiff for a young person trying to enter the workforce.

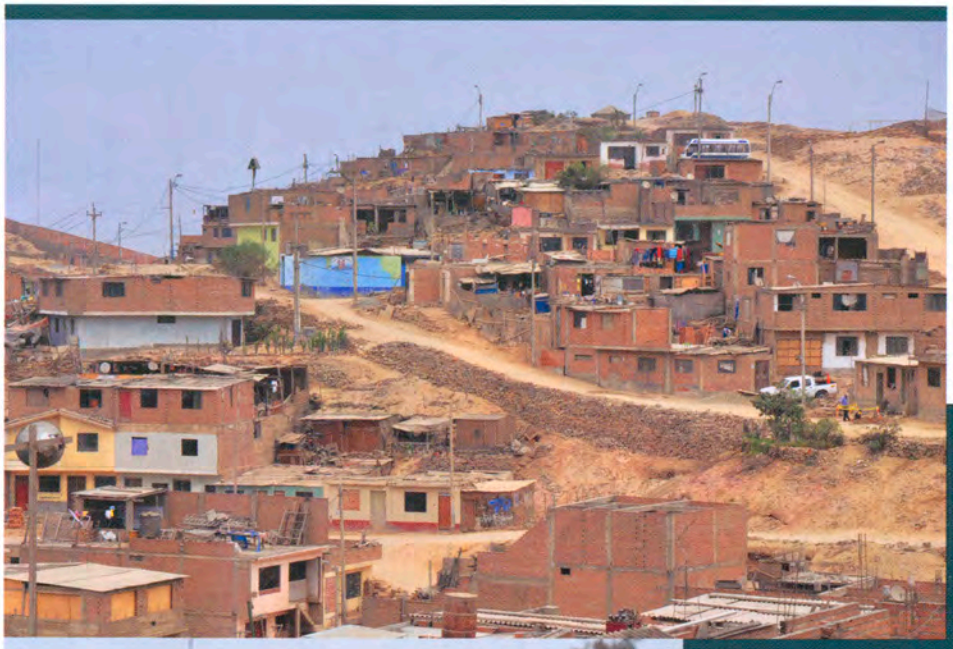
Despite the difficult circumstances here, some youth are getting help—in part, due to the dedicated work of international volunteers like 27-year-old New Brunswick native Mike Cameron. Cameron is in Peru on a two-year placement working with CUSO-VSO, a non-profit development agency that sends volunteers to more than 40 countries. Together with a Peruvian community-development organization and NGO, Asociación Kallpa, they've launched a youth employment centre that offers assistance in finding work, resume writing and even basic entrepreneurship.

The idea for the project actually started in Quebec. In Gatineau and the Outaouais region of that province, the non-profit organization Carrefour jeunesse emploi de l'Outaouais (CJEO) provides career counselling and helps youth with job searches and business development. CUSO-VSO recognized that CJEO's method was highly successful and decided to take similar services on the road. Cameron and other volunteers trained at CJEO for five weeks before heading to Peru to start up a sister organization there.

"What stayed with me from the philosophy of the CJEO," Cameron says, "is that youth are often forgotten in the community. So the first thing that youth need to feel when they come to the centre is a feeling of belonging, that they matter, that the people at the centre are there to help..."

Arriving in San Juan de Miraflores in June 2009, Cameron was met with dusty, unpaved roads and families living together in very tight quarters.

"My first impression was just a sense of chaos," Cameron recalls. "You can see that people here are closer to the level of survival than in other places. They don't have very good systems for waste collection so there is a lot of garbage in major streets and residential areas. You don't feel very safe because it's one the districts with the highest numbers of gangs."



"YOUTH ARE OFTEN FORGOTTEN IN THE COMMUNITY. SO THE FIRST THING THAT YOUTH NEED TO FEEL WHEN THEY COME TO THE CENTRE IS A **FEELING OF BELONGING,** THAT THEY MATTER."

Cameron says that the district's young people are particularly affected by the situation. With many parents out all day trying to carve out a living, most youth don't have a stable parental presence. Domestic abuse, he says, is also a common issue plaguing many youth in the area.

The Centro de Jóvenes y Empleo, or the Centre for Youth and Employment, opened in October 2009 with funding from Cordaid, a Dutch-based development organization, and Spain's Liga Española de la Educación y la Cultura Popular.

From the start, the municipality of San Juan de Miraflores supported the project, even offering to house the centre in their main building. There was already a small employment centre there although the ser-

CUSO TIMELINE

1960: University-based initiatives including Canadian Overseas Volunteers (COV) are created across the country.

Summer, 1961: COV sends its first group of 15 volunteers to India, Sri Lanka and Malaysia.

June 6, 1961: To unite the growing volunteer movement among Canadian universities, a national body called Canadian University Service Overseas (CUSO) is founded at McGill University in Montreal.

1963: CUSO absorbs COV and almost 100 volunteers leave for placements in 15 countries with CUSO.

50 YEARS: CUSO-VSO

vices were extremely limited. When CUSO-VSO in conjunction with Kallpa became involved, they brought in new services and equipment such as computers, a photocopier and a printer—technology that is key to searching for work.

When someone comes into the centre, he or she is welcomed, given a short introduction to the services available and then directed to the ones that are most appropriate to his or her needs. For example, if that person is looking for work specifically, he or she would likely be directed to the municipality's job bank or encouraged to participate in the centre's two-day job search workshop.

The job search workshops have become key in helping youth look for work; they cover job searching skills such as resume writing, communication and presentation skills. "It gives them a moment to reflect on what strengths they have, a little bit of confidence before going to the interview, and ultimately gives them a bit of an edge," explains Cameron.

They also strive to give participants the confidence to demand fair and dignified working conditions—like having a contract, benefits and social security, earning at least minimum wage and having their physical and mental integrity respected. It's an issue that many locals have difficulty with. Cameron gives an example of a local employer who docks $1 of pay for every minute an employee arrives late to work. This, Cameron says, is a difficult situation considering that employees can be earning as little as $1.50 per hour.

Quispe-Brito was in one of the first workshops that Cameron led in San Juan de Miraflores. "The best sessions were the workshops where they taught you which words to use in an interview and how you should present yourself," recalls Quispe-Brito.

Ultimately Quispe-Brito found work in a call centre for Bembos, a Peruvian fast food chain. After only two months, they moved her to work at one of their restaurants and a month after that she was in a supervisory position. She says that the centre empowered her to find her job and communicate effectively. "I don't feel that it helped me find work, it helped me look for work," she says. "I learned how to present myself at job interviews and that helped me a lot to find the job where I'm currently working."

The centre also runs a six-week-long small business start-up course. Participants

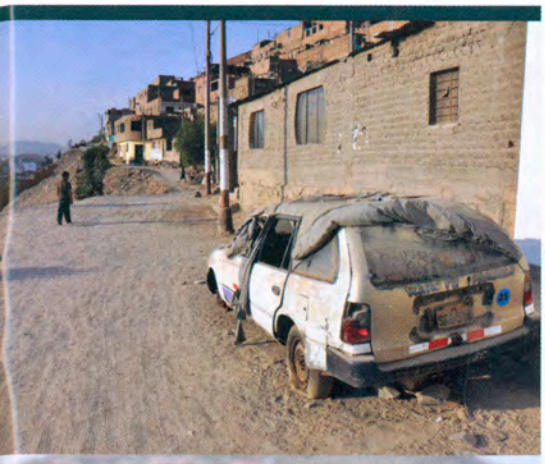
CUSO TIMELINE

1965: CUSO begins to receive government funding, which continues today through the Canadian International Development Agency.

1981: The Quebec branch of CUSO, Service universitaire canadien outre-mer (SUCO), separates and continues to exist today as a separate NGO.

1981: CUSO stops using its full name to acknowledge that many volunteers are not just university students, but working professionals from many disciplines.

1984: Formal partnerships are made between CUSO and groups with similar interests in Canada and the developing world.



decide on a type of business, conduct a market study on its viability, develop a marketing strategy and project the costs needed to get it started. The centre even holds a contest whereby the five best ideas are given $300 each as seed money. This year's first place winner was a 20-year-old woman who launched a business selling traditional Peruvian desserts. The start-up money was instrumental to getting her new business up and running, allowing her to purchase a worktable, a scale, an apron and boxes for her desserts printed with her new company logo.

The centre has about 15 youth coming in daily and Cameron notes that about 25 to 30 per cent of them find work and stick with it—a reasonably good number in a town where jobs are hard to come by. In the centre's first year, they had 3,000 youth come in and about 1,800 of those went through the workshop programme.

But most important are the long-term results. Right now, the centre is doing an in-depth analysis of 14 cases, 7 males and 7 females who went through the programme's entire process and found work. Now, they are examining these cases and their current employment situation. The key is to figure out if the centre helped them not only get a job, but keep a job. They are also examining employment conditions that were stressed in the workshops such as work safety and social security—issues that are just as important as the job itself.

And the programme is expanding, both within Peru and abroad. A second centre opened in Cusco, Peru the same month that the first centre opened in San Juan de Miraflores. In Bolivia, they have opened two centres and are working on a third, and there are plans for a centre in Jamaica. All of these centres use, or will use, the same philosophy as in San Juan de Miraflores.

With almost two years under his belt at the centre in San Juan de Miraflores, Cameron is planning to return to Canada in May, and another volunteer is currently being hired to replace him. Although Cameron was instrumental in getting the project off the ground, he is humble about his role. Ultimately, he says, a two-day workshop isn't long, but it is enough to give young people a sense of confidence and community with other job seekers. In fact, he says that often they will form relationships with each other, which gives them a support network as they go through the job-hunting process.

"It's really about greeting the person when they come in, making them feel at home and giving them a glimpse of hope," Cameron says. "It makes them feel like they have the support of other people. That's where the real impact lies."

Canada *Produced with the financial support of the Government of Canada provided through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).*

CUSO-VSO **STATS**

BY THE NUMBERS:

Total number of volunteers and trainees to date: 15,000+

Current number of volunteers and trainees (2009–10): 225

Total number of countries served: 40+

Current number of countries served: 34

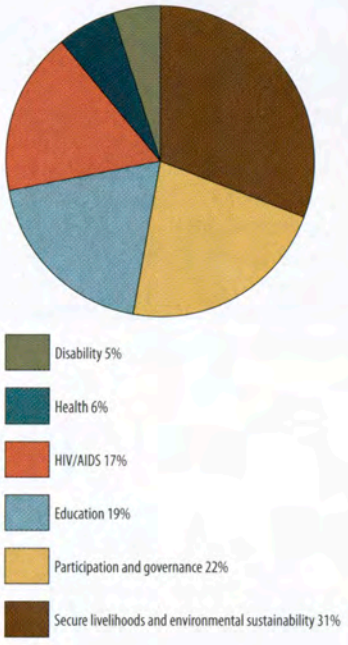
BREAKDOWN OF CURRENT VOLUNTEERS:

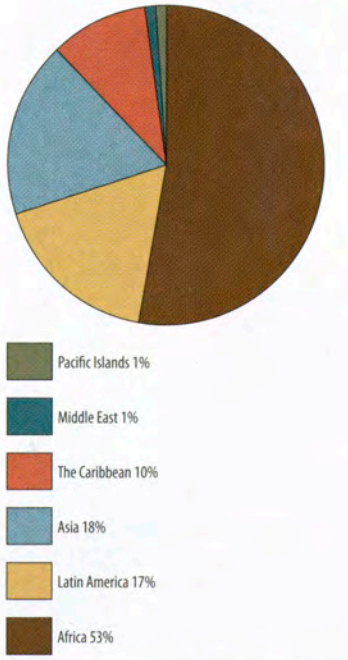
Gender: 59% female, 41% male

Average age: 41

Volunteers over the age of 50: 28%

Annual budget: $18,000,000





1985: CUSO expands its volunteer recruitment to include people from the United States and countries from the developing world.

1990: For the first time, volunteers from developing countries are recruited, trained and placed in other developing countries.

Judy and Stephen with the mayor and council members of Widikum, a small town in northwest Cameroon. Widikum was one of 13 municipalities participating in their project to encourage more women and young men to become involved in the local political system.

A SERIES OF FORTUNATE EVENTS

A CHANCE MEETING ON A PROJECT IN INDIA. NEARLY 40 YEARS LATER, TWO OF CUSO'S FIRST VOLUNTEERS MEET AGAIN—THIS TIME, FOR GOOD.

BY ZALINA ALVI

No one could have predicted that a chance meeting of two volunteers in India half a century ago would lead to this.

It was 1961 and Canadian Overseas Volunteers (COV) had just been founded. Stephen Woollcombe, a 22-year-old political science and economics student at the University of Toronto, was invited by a PhD student named Keith Spicer—one of the pioneering minds behind the creation of COV—to join the organization's first group of volunteers heading for India. Woollcombe recalls how excited he and his peers were about the opportunity to work in the developing world and to learn how to contribute more effectively.

"It was very heady times for young Canadians and idealists. The sky was the limit," he says. "We were motivated by both our desire to do good things and to serve, as well as by a certain opportunity for challenge and excitement."

One year later, Woollcombe was teaching English and geography on the outskirts of Ahmedabad, the largest city in Gujarat, India. COV had just been merged into the newly formed Canadian University Services Overseas (CUSO) and 22-year-old Judy Barber was sent to India by the fledgling organization. When she arrived, a fellow volunteer named Stephen helped introduce her to the project before returning home.

Barber was studying physio and occupational therapy at the University of Toronto. Drawn to CUSO by her sense of adventure, an interest in the developing world and a desire to help, she was placed as a volunteer in a general hospital in Ghataprabha, a small village in the southern state of Karnataka, India.

CUSO TIMELINE

1995: A branch of the UK-based Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) is launched in Canada.

2001: VSO Canada begins recruiting and posting volunteers within Canada.

2008: CUSO and VSO Canada merge to become CUSO-VSO, now representing North America in the VSO International Federation.

June 6, 2011: CUSO-VSO celebrates its 50th anniversary.

"It just was so gratifying and really changed my outlook on the world. I've never felt the same since, coming back home and seeing how much we have," she says. "I would have loved to have gone back overseas but I was married by then. I married a doctor and I thought 'Oh, good, we'll go and save the world,' but unfortunately he didn't have the same ideas that I did."

Barber would not venture overseas again as a volunteer for more than 30 years but the passion for development work remained. At home, she continued to direct that energy by working with the Hunger Project, a global non-profit that continues to work towards ending world hunger, and later for a development advocacy group called Results Canada.

Meanwhile, Woollcombe went on to earn a Master's degree in international affairs and served with the Canadian Foreign Service, primarily in Cameroon as a diplomat, specializing in economic development. He also served briefly as an executive with the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) during its formative years.

"The India experience shaped the whole direction of my life," he says. "I went there a boy, and I came away a man. It gave me a whole lot of learning experience of life—philosophical, religious and so on."

In 1998, Barber joined a group organizing a reunion trip to India for the people who worked there during those first few years. Coincidentally, Woollcombe also volunteered to help and the two met again. This time, the moment was not so fleeting. The pair stayed together and, in 2007, were married.

Since then, Woollcombe and Barber have continued to volunteer overseas in Cameroon, Panama and other countries with Canadian Executive Service Organization (CESO), which specializes in sending volunteers with experience and expertise on overseas placements.

For Barber in particular, being able to return to overseas volunteering in her seventies has been a gift.

"Here I am at this age, this stage of my life, and having an opportunity to go back overseas and do some work. So it's been very wonderful," she says. "It's like a dream come true. Steve and I are so happy."

PHOTO: CUSO-VSO

A VIEW FROM THE TOP

AN INTERVIEW WITH CUSO-VSO EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR **DEREK EVANS**

Verge: How would you describe the role of overseas volunteering and CUSO in particular in the international development landscape?

Derek Evans: I think overseas volunteering is one of the most innovative forms of international development at this point, in that we are able to respond to the specific development needs identified by our partners in the field. We're able to respond to those by looking throughout the world, practically, to find exactly the right people with the right skills to be able to join those communities in their development exercise.

V: People generally consider CUSO a leader in the field of service learning. Do you agree?

DE: That's what we aspire to be. One of the things that we think puts us in the place of being leaders is that we put a great emphasis on being able to recruit volunteers, certainly from Canada, but also from the United States and about 18 other countries around the world. So it's not only a North-to-South exchange at this point, but it's also increasingly South-to-South. We're also involved in growing what's referred to usually as 'diaspora work', which means building strong relationships with communities in Canada and the United States to mobilize some of their resources to contribute to development in their countries of origin, including volunteering. Another thing that we think is an area of some leadership for us is the way in which we're beginning to increasingly challenge the corporate sector to recognize its role in international development, in cooperating with us.

V: Does CUSO have room to grow? What improvements or changes do you see in its future to stay effective?

DE: Those areas that I've just referred to, those will become major influences in shaping our direction as we go forward. Also, figuring out how we contribute to issues of climate change in vulnerable countries is one of the areas where we're significantly challenged, but that's becoming an increasingly important part of our work and we now have major projects in Nigeria, emerging in Cameroon and certainly in parts of Latin America and Southeast Asia as well.

Another major field of work that we see as a challenge for international development generally is finding ways to more fully support the inclusion of young people in the economy. Also, in all countries the key thing that progress depends upon is the inclusion of women in decision-making from the village level right up to national decision-making around national priorities. So those are important programmatic directions.

Additionally, we're increasingly seeing ourselves not simply as that provider of expertise from the outside into a community, but what we're wanting to do is build up the capacity of about 21 countries around the world to increasingly create national volunteering systems within their country and mobilize forces within their societies for development work. That's quite an exciting thing that might have an exponential impact as we go forward.

V: What do you think might be in store for CUSO's next 50 years? Do you think there will always be a role for overseas volunteers?

DE: Always is a big word. As I say, we are trying not to be a permanent force in any specific situation but to respond to the needs of a relationship with a partner in the field. But if we're in a situation where we're sending volunteers to do relatively similar work in the same area for a long period of time, that's a mark of failure. And so that's an area we would then look at to see what needs to be done and to change the dynamic there, because we're not about building an ongoing dependency in any way.

I think that there will, for the foreseeable future, be an important role for international volunteering, but, as I say, its profile will change. It will involve people from all walks of life; it'll involve not only people going from the North to countries in the South, but exchanges across the globe and including people coming from the South to the North for various engagements and sharing.

What we're talking about is really a new form of building solidarity going forward, and building the network that's really essential to creating the kind of sustainable and viable future that we're going to depend on in the world.

NET GAINS

PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS USING NEW APPROACHES IN SENEGAL ARE PAVING THE WAY FOR ANTI-MALARIA INITIATIVES.

BY ANDREA GOURGY

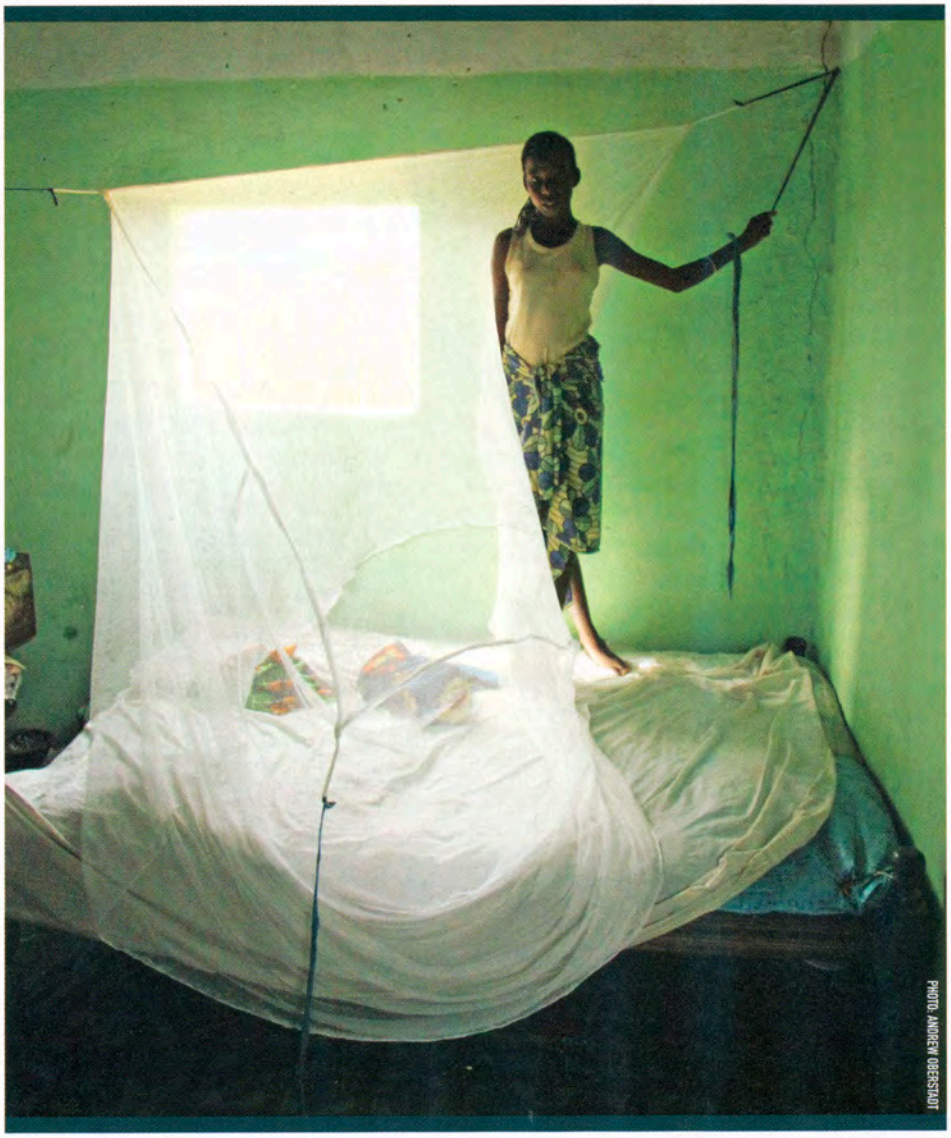


PHOTO: ANDREW OBERSTADT

Whenever Peace Corps volunteer Jessie Seiler, 24, distributes mosquito bed nets in rural regions of Senegal, locals always know exactly what they are.

After all, these insecticide-treated mosquito bed nets are key in the fight against malaria—the number one cause of child mortality in Senegal. So according to Seiler, whenever they hand them out within local communities, people are enthusiastic.

"When men receive their nets, they look proud and excited," explains Seiler. "I've seen women pick up their nets and start dancing right there, while others bring out makeshift drums, pots and pans, to provide a bit of music... It's a celebration."

Seiler, a native of Los Angeles, is based in Ndiago, a village of about 300 people in the Kaolack region of this West African country of 12 million people. She is working as a coordinator on the Peace Corps's universal bed net campaign, which, in conjunction with other malaria initiatives, aims to reduce the rates of malaria in the region, if not eradicate it entirely.

Malaria is caused by a parasite that is spread to people through Anopheles mosquitoes. These mosquitoes bite mainly during the night, so sleeping under an insecticide-treated bed net reduces the risk of getting bitten, and in turn, reduces the rate of illness. In the past, mosquito bed nets were distributed mainly to groups that are at higher risk for contracting and falling ill with malaria, such as pregnant women and children who are less immune. But for the past five years, the World Health Organization has

PEACE CORPS TIMELINE

Oct. 14, 1960: Senator John F. Kennedy speaks to 10,000 students at the University of Michigan. At 2 a.m., after a day of campaigning for presidency, he issues a challenge to serve their country by living and working in the developing world.

March 1, 1961: President Kennedy signs an executive order to create the Peace Corps.

March 22, 1961: Politician and peace builder R. Sargent Shriver takes up his post as the first director of the Peace Corps. In less than six years, he recruits more than 14,500 volunteers for programmes in 55 countries.

June 1962: Programmes officially begin in 22 countries across Asia, Latin America and Africa with more than 2,800 volunteers in the field.

July 1971: President Richard Nixon brings the Peace Corps under the umbrella of a government agency called ACTION.

PHOTO: KELLY HENKLER

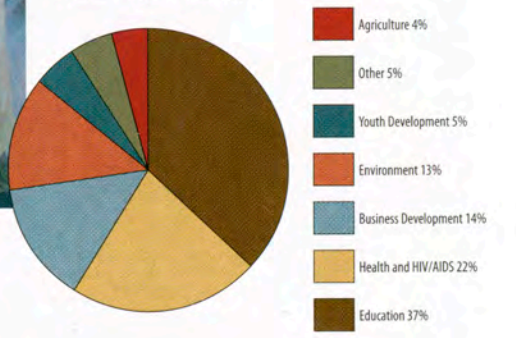
PEACE CORPS **STATS**

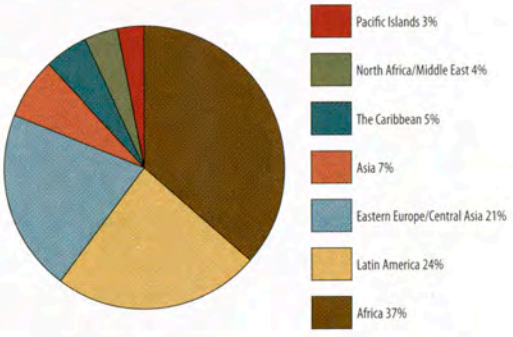
BY THE NUMBERS:

Total number of volunteers and trainees to date: 200,000+
Current number of volunteers and trainees: 8,500+
Total number of countries served: 139
Current number of countries served: 77

BREAKDOWN OF CURRENT VOLUNTEERS:

Gender: 60% female, 40% male
Average age: 28
Volunteers over the age of 50: 7%
Annual budget: $400,000,000





WHEN PEOPLE CAN PROTECT THEMSELVES FROM MALARIA, WHEN THEY FEEL LIKE THEY'RE IN CHARGE OF THEIR OWN FUTURES AND ARE ABLE TO PROTECT THEIR CHILDREN FROM WHAT BEFORE THEY THOUGHT OF AS THIS RANDOM HORRIBLE CURSE FROM OUT OF NOWHERE, THAT FEELS LIKE A TRIUMPH TO ME

recommended universal coverage, meaning everyone—high risk or not—should sleep under the nets. This method cuts off the blood supply to the mosquitoes and forces them to leave the area.

The Peace Corps began net distribution in 2008 in Fongolimbi, part of the southeastern Kédougou region, an area with one of the highest rates of malaria. An organization called NetLife, founded by former Peace Corps volunteer Andrew Sherman, was instrumental in securing financing and coordinating shipping. Malaria No More, AgainstMalaria and even personal donations all contributed to the initial pilot project.

Many other organizations that do net distribution in Africa often make educated predictions as to the number of nets needed in a given area. In contrast, the Peace Corps actually trained locals to count every single bed, mattress or mat in a given village in order to get the exact number of nets needed into every home—not an easy feat considering the pilot project distributed 10,000 nets.

In addition to the idea of universal coverage, they've added another weapon to their arsenal. Instead of relying solely on foreign volunteers, they've taught Senegalese communities how to use the nets so they can help themselves. This means that every five years when the nets need to be changed, locals can take it into their own hands to distribute and ensure proper usage of the nets.

Community members are also in charge of spreading the word about a natural mosquito repellent that is made in Senegal called *neem* (made from soap, oil, water and leaves of the neem tree). Seiler explains that locals educating other locals goes a long way toward empowering the population.

"Doctors and nurses here in Senegal are hearing about it and telling their patients about it," she says. "When people can protect themselves from malaria, when they feel like they're in charge of their own futures and are able to protect their children from what before they thought of as this random horrible curse from out of nowhere, that feels like a triumph to me."

Based on the initial success they had with the project, the Senegalese health care system, in conjunction with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the President's Malaria Initiative (PMI), have taken on the task of net distribution. Thus far, they've distributed

Oct. 11, 1977: President Carter appoints Carolyn R. Payton as Peace Corps director, making her the first woman and the first African-American to hold the position.

1981: Legislation passes to secure the Peace Corps' autonomy as an independent federal agency.

October 1993: Carol Bellamy becomes the first returned Peace Corps volunteer to be appointed as director of the agency.

August 1995: Crisis Corps, a programme to allow returned volunteers to provide short-term assistance during natural disasters and humanitarian crises, is launched.

April 30, 1997: First lady Hillary Rodham Clinton announces the creation of the Loret Miller Ruppe Fund for the Advancement of Women to champion women in development, named in honour of the longest serving Peace Corps director.

ESPRIT DE CORPS

AN INTERVIEW WITH PEACE CORPS DIRECTOR **AARON S. WILLIAMS**

PHOTO: JUAN CARLOS POLANCO

Verge: How would you describe the role of overseas volunteering and the Peace Corps in particular in the international development landscape?

Aaron Williams: In 2011, Peace Corps commemorates 50 years of promoting peace and friendship around the world—a legacy of service that has become a significant part of America's history. Peace Corps is a grassroots, people-to-people form of public service that provides host communities with sustainable solutions. From AIDS education to emerging technologies to environmental preservation to income generating ideas, Peace Corps volunteers are making a difference in communities around the world. Presidents and cabinet ministers in dozens of countries credit their start to Peace Corps volunteers who touched their lives at an early age.

V: People generally consider the Peace Corps a leader in the field of service learning. Do you agree?

AW: As a returned Peace Corps volunteer from the Dominican Republic, I know firsthand that Peace Corps service is a life-defining leadership experience. Peace Corps volunteers are committed and talented individuals who work every day to help people build better lives for themselves and their communities. Volunteers work at the local level in a variety of areas, including education, youth and community development, health and HIV/AIDS, business and information and communication technology, agriculture and environment. Projects can include developing "green" buildings in a town in Guatemala, malaria prevention in Senegal to teaching English in a city in Ukraine. During Peace Corps service, volunteers learn valuable life skills that they will apply throughout their careers, including fluency in a foreign language, cross-cultural understanding, international experience and technical skills.

V: Does the Peace Corps have room to grow? What improvements or changes do you see in its future to stay effective? Are any of these plans currently underway?

AW: Today, there are more Americans serving as Peace Corps volunteers than any other time in the last 40 years. There are more than 8,600 Peace volunteers serving in 77 host countries. This represents a 13 percent increase over 2009. Due to increase in requests from host countries, more than half of our posts increased their size over the last year. In 2010, we re-entered three new host-countries: Sierra Leone, Indonesia and Colombia. One of my top priorities is increasing service opportunities for all Americans.

V: What do you think might be in store for the Peace Corps' next 50 years? Do you think there will always be a role for overseas volunteers?

AW: Although times have changed, the Peace Corps remains true to its mission: Helping the people of interested countries meet their needs for trained men and women; helping promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of people served; and helping promote a better understanding of other people on the part of Americans.

Peace Corps' mission is even more important today as demands for volunteers' talents and services from host countries grows. In an ever-changing world, volunteers meet challenges with innovation, creativity, determination and compassion.

over a million nets throughout the country.

But they are still facing challenges along the way, according to 23-year-old Peace Corps volunteer Kelly Henkler. Based in the south of the country, Henkler, a native of Lansdale, Pennsylvania, works on a number of development projects including the universal bed net campaign. She insists teaching health is about sharing knowledge, but it's also about encouraging people to change their behaviour. Many Senegalese work in the fields all day, eat dinner around 8 p.m. or 9 p.m. and socialize until late, which puts them at risk for getting bitten. Some people will only use the nets during rainy season, which is another source of exposure. The nets need to be used properly and that kind of behaviour change, she says, takes time.

"It is easy to look at these behaviours as an outsider and think that it should be easy to change and that the change would be worth it if it meant fighting malaria," Henkler points out. "But to put things in perspective, it is just as easy as asking Americans to stop sun tanning to prevent cancer or to exercise and eat right to combat heart disease."

When it comes to development work like this, measuring results can be difficult. Former Peace Corps volunteer Matt McLaughlin explains that there are a number of ways that they measure results on this project. A native of Manchester, New Hampshire, McLaughlin spent four years in the Kédougou region working on the universal bed net campaign. He has since been hired on as the program manager for their entire African Malaria Initiative.

McLaughlin explains that they look at a number of criteria in order to gauge success. He points out that not only did they get the nets into everyone's hands in the areas they were working in, but they found that more than 95 percent of the nets were in houses and people were, by and large, using them.

The most important factor, however, is whether or not the project actually affected the number of people in Senegal who get sick or die from malaria. Project Management Institute (PMI) is providing

PEACE CORPS TIMELINE

March 3, 1998: The first annual Peace Corps Day is held to highlight the "domestic dividend" of returned volunteers.

May 29, 1998: Senior Volunteer Appreciation Day is created on what would have been President John F. Kennedy's 81st birthday.

May 24, 1999: President Clinton doubles the Peace Corps budget to $365 million by 2003.

May 2003: 1,000 volunteers and $15 billion over the next five years are directed to fight HIV/AIDS abroad.

Nov. 12, 2003: Gaddi H. Vasquez, the Peace Corps' first Hispanic director, is appointed and signs an agreement to have volunteers sent to Mexico for the first time.

Sept. 13, 2005: Volunteers are deployed domestically for the first time to aid in the Gulf Coast following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

PHOTO: ANDREW OBERSTADT

funding for surveys that will take blood samples from random households and check for the malaria parasite. One survey was performed in November, and everyone is anxiously waiting for the report to come out in April. But, McLaughlin says that they've already accomplished a big feat in getting larger organizations, like PMI, to take notice and adopt their methodology.

"Their [PMI's] budget is in the millions," he explains. "They make Peace Corps' entire operation look insignificant, which is why it's so impressive that a methodology that we piloted changed the way they do malaria prevention."

McLaughlin says he spent the best years of his life in the Kédougou region, two years of that in the city of Kédougou itself. A city of approximately 20,000 people, it's only about 80 kilometres from the border with Mali and 40 kilometres from the border with Guinea. He describes it as dusty in the dry season, and a maze of puddles in the rainy season. After so much time on the ground in Senegal, McLaughlin is realistic about how the locals react to the work they do.

While many locals are appreciative of the campaign, McLaughlin says that there's no universal response to the work they do given that Senegal is such a diverse country.

"I once handed a stack of nets to an old man and had him yell at me for not giving him money because I was American and I should pay him to hang the net," recalls McLaughlin. "I also had a man pull me aside during a distribution, looked me the eyes and in the most sincere tone I've heard told me that 'only God will ever be able to repay you for what you've done.'

"If you demand universal love in exchange for your charity, you're going to be severely disappointed. I take great comfort in the knowledge that even that person who yelled at me will be less likely to get malaria. But sometimes it takes a thick skin."

Feb. 27, 2011: A 50th Anniversary World Expo is held to showcase the work of volunteers around the world in Jacksonville, Florida and in later months at universities across the country.

March 1, 2011: March 2011 is officially recognized as "National Peace Corps Month" and will feature anniversary celebration events across the United States. events.peacecorps50.org

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