



**Peace Corps Symposium in Honor of International Volunteer Day:  
“Volunteering for Development: Supporting Service as a Common Experience Globally”**

**Remarks by Peace Corps Director Aaron S. Williams  
Shriver Auditorium, Washington, DC**

*December 4, 2009*

Rosie, thank you for that warm introduction. I am honored and pleased to have so many visionaries as well as practitioners who together build the bridge between the powerful ideas and the implementation of strong programs. In particular, I welcome our panelists:

First of all, Senator Harris Wofford, one of the founding architects of the Peace Corps and a great friend of the Peace Corps for almost fifty years. He’s a leader and advocate of national service and volunteering as so many of you know. It’s always a pleasure to welcome Senator Wofford back to his home here at the Peace Corps.

Also I have to mention that – and maybe some of you don’t know this – that Senator Wofford is a former country director of Ethiopia. So not only does he know the headquarters here at the Peace Corps he’s also been out in the field.

We’re also delighted to welcome the Director of the Office of Social Innovation and Civic Engagement at the White House. She is also a partner of the Peace Corps, welcome Sonal Shah.

We have with us today and it’s a pleasure to welcome Steven Rosenthal, head of the Building Bridges Coalition and Director of Cross-Cultural Solutions, welcome.

And it’s good to see my old friend from the Inter-American Development Bank, Elena Suarez, welcome to the Peace Corps.

All four are visionaries and practitioners who we have invited to share their thoughts and examples about how they imagine a world in which every young person has the opportunity, capacity and motivation to serve. I also welcome many esteemed colleagues from a wide range of domestic and international organizations. We value this opportunity to continue the dialogue, to learn from you, and to identify some concrete steps to help us work together.

Peace Corps is convening this symposium in honor of the UN’s International Volunteer Day. Our goal is to further the ongoing effort to create a common vision and develop the necessary strategies to make service the common experience of all young people. We will focus today on how to expand collaboration with government, NGO and international agency partners all aimed at increasing volunteer opportunities for youth around the world. We hope to do this by pursuing innovation, sharing our thoughts and resources and identifying some of the promising practices among our agencies.

For nearly 50 years, the vision that President Kennedy and Sergeant Shriver assisted by Sen. Wofford laid out to establish the Peace Corps has compelled many, many generations of volunteers in the United States. Nearly 200,000 Americans have served in the Peace Corps. Our volunteers' desire to make a difference has improved the lives of millions of people around the world and their local communities when they return back home to America, our famous third goal.

Peace Corps Volunteers represent a legacy of public service that has become a significant part of America's history and positive image abroad. Today, we have over 7,600 Peace Corps Volunteers serve in 75 countries – in fact we just recently added our 75<sup>th</sup> country, Sierra Leone, and as many of you know the President recently announced the fact that we're going to Indonesia. Volunteers serve in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, Central and South America, Europe and the Middle East. Peace Corps Volunteers provide technical assistance to countries that request it; we share America's most precious resource – our people.

We are also seeing the call to service growing exponentially around the world. In Ghana earlier this year, President Obama challenged all young people when he said: *"You can serve in your communities and harness your energy and education to create new wealth and build new connections to the world. You can conquer disease, and end conflicts, and make change from the bottom up. You can do that."* The President also said, "Yes you can." Because in this moment, history is on the move.

History is indeed on the move and the future is now. This challenge is met by the over one million young people that participate in Global Youth Service Day every year, supported by our friends here at Youth Service America and the enormous global network they have worked to build. Not to mention, Earth Day, World AIDS Day, and countless other days of service and action. This year the theme we celebrated for World AIDS Day was *"Learn, Respect, Serve."* We honor our host country partners who contribute so much in the fight against HIV/AIDS and indeed, give us purpose and direction for the work we do.

While Peace Corps Volunteers, their partners, and our host countries have always relied heavily on the strength and courage of community volunteers, over the past year we here at Peace Corps have worked to provide a more strategic approach to help them do this. The V2 Volunteerism Action Guide: *Multiplying the Power of Service* is a how-to manual for Volunteers and their local partners to engage young people in bringing about community change. We sent out this Guide to every Volunteer in the field.

As many people in this room well know, there are over 1.5 billion young people between the ages of 12 to 24 worldwide, with 1.3 billion of them living in developing countries. I spent 4 wonderful years working in the field of youth development with the International Youth Foundation, that coupled with my career in international development have given me a comprehensive understanding of the magnitude of both the challenge and opportunity.

It remains to be seen whether this cohort will be perceived as the greatest resource the world has ever known, bringing about unimaginable innovations, tackling poverty, disease, and building peace. Or, alternatively, they are just as likely to be perceived as a threat or a source of

instability, contributing to the potential fragility of governments when they are marginalized and left without hope for the future.

Which view ultimately prevails is, at least in small part, up to many of us in this room.

We know that many of our host country partners, especially some of those here today are working tirelessly to make sure that this latter vision does not become a reality.

And as I stand here, in front of you, we know there is a flourishing and growing network of international agencies and groups working to expand opportunities and capacity for service among a global citizenry. Peace Corps aims to be a partner of choice in this movement, bringing to the table our nearly 50 years of experience in designing, managing, and delivering a corps of volunteers which has, in effect, been successful because of its partnership with and engagement of host community members in their own development.

At the same time, we know the domestic service movement in the United States, which at this moment is on the cusp of unprecedented growth and innovation, brings a wealth of knowledge, resources, and lessons that can help springboard countries that want to prioritize this type of development. Peace Corps can serve as one nexus between the domestic service community and international efforts to expand and enhance volunteering.

That is one reason we are honored to have so many of our friends here today from the Corporation for National and Community Service, City Year, the National Youth Leadership Council and many others that we have much to learn from.

While the call to service has seen a remarkable resurgence in the United States, and of course, has always been the heart and soul of the Peace Corps, many people often forget that supporting our host country partners to develop their own service programs is actually part of Peace Corps' founding legislation. Part of the Peace Corps Act states that it is the role of our agency to help support countries as they establish programs and engage their own citizens to volunteer in order to meet their own development needs.

Despite all of the potential, there are a number of barriers and challenges that we need to address to further this vision. To address these constraints, we believe that there are four pillars for growing the service movement, including: the opportunities to serve, the capacity to manage volunteer programs, the motivation to serve in significant ways, and a policy/infrastructure that allows for the growth of these networks.

**Opportunities:** With regard to creating opportunities, research has found that one of the main barriers to people serving, especially in many developing countries, is the lack of structured volunteer opportunities. Peace Corps is helping meet part of that challenge by engaging youth in projects in both schools and community groups. But much more needs to be done to both expand the number of opportunities that organizations provide locally as well as to build the capacity of youth to generate their own projects addressing issues that are important to their communities. This might be reading to younger children in their school, educating other youth on HIV/AIDS, or promoting malaria nets. The possibilities are endless.

Second, there is a continuing need for capacity-building of volunteer leaders and organizations that use volunteers. Many organizations and schools still lack strong volunteer management practices that allow for the service by youth to be transformative in terms of meaningful action and reflection. In many of our host countries, Peace Corps Volunteers are training teachers in how to integrate elements of quality service-learning into their curriculum and after-school activities. But we are just touching the tip of the iceberg. We can work together to create portals of knowledge and training programs that can increase the capacity of people who are managing volunteer programs.

Third, there is tremendous energy among the world's youth, but there are also competing demands on their time and attention. Service has to be appealing, fun and relevant so that youth can see how to advance their personal priorities. We know that once youth have a high quality volunteer experience, they discover its true power and this allows them to embrace the higher goals of service. Whether it is Serve.gov, MTV's Agents of Change, or the new I-Participate national media campaign in the United States, there are a many ways that we can scale up motivation.

Fourth, we need to build the policy and infrastructure networks in each country to truly be sustainable. Part of our challenge is to ensure adequate funding and support. Many donors still consider service and volunteering as a nice approach but they often fail to see how it is integrated into projects on the ground. We must continue to work to show the value proposition of volunteering.

In conclusion, Peace Corps is committed to enabling youth to have more and better opportunities to volunteer. Just as importantly, we are also committed to working to train community groups and teachers in making their service a transformational experience through service-learning methodologies.

I believe we can support our partners in building strong citizens who both address current problems through volunteering and work together to address the underlying policies that will build healthier communities.

Around the world, volunteers connected to your organizations and Peace Corps are addressing urgent global development priorities including poverty reduction, food security, malaria, HIV/AIDS and clean energy. These priorities cannot be exclusively met by paid professionals and development agencies - but rather in part by community members feeling empowered to take action and contribute their time and energies to addressing these issues that affect them locally.

So today I invite you to listen, share your experiences, and identify new organizations with whom you would like to collaborate. I hope that every person who's here today leaves this room with at one new powerful idea or resource you want to bring back to your respective organizations and at least one organization with whom you see value of walking on this journey-walking on this journey that is so important to all of us- of walking on this together.

I want to express my thanks to our panelists, to our working group facilitators, my dedicated staff here at Peace Corps and especially to all of you for taking the time today to initiate this important conversation about service. We hope this is just the beginning of a very productive relationship.

Our panel will be moderated by the distinguished, Senator Harris Wofford. It is a privilege to have his sage advice and counsel he's a great friend of mine and a great friend of the Peace Corps and a great friend of the service movement as all of you know. Please join me in welcoming Senator Wofford.

Please join me in offering a warm and appreciative welcome to our panel as I invite them to take the stage and begin their discussion.

Thank you.

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