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# Serving in Africa: US Peace Corps in Cameroon

Julius A. Amin

**Abstract:** Based on a variety of primary sources including recently declassified documents, interviews in Cameroon, letters, and Peace Corps Volunteers' personal correspondence, this study examines the service of the US Peace Corps in "Agroforestry" and "Small Enterprise Development" in Cameroon. The study argues that Volunteers were ill trained, ill prepared, and ill equipped for service in Cameroon, and as a result did not achieve Goal 1 of the Peace Corps Act, which calls on the agency to assist developing nations in gaining "trained manpower". The study has broader implications, as it raises questions about the relevance of Peace Corps-like organizations in Cameroon, and in African nations as a whole. It focuses on Cameroon for a variety of reasons, among which is that Cameroon is one of only three nations in Africa in which Volunteers have served uninterruptedly since 1962.

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**Keywords:** Cameroon, United States, Peace Corps, development projects, agroforestry, small enterprises

**Julius A. Amin** is a professor of history at the University of Dayton, Ohio, USA. His articles have appeared in several journals, including *Africa Today*, the *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, the *Journal of Black Studies*, the *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, and *Africa Insight*; his book, *The Peace Corps in Cameroon*, was published by the Kent State University Press. He is currently working on a book on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Peace Corps in Africa.  
E-mail: <jamin1@udayton.edu>

On 1 March 1961 US President John F. Kennedy established the Peace Corps, and five months later the first contingent of Volunteers arrived in Ghana. The following year, Volunteers arrived in Cameroon. As of 2011, 3,227 Volunteers had served in Cameroon, and of that number over 50 per cent were women (PC Post Demographic Report 2011; Lihosit 2010: 90).

This study argues that Peace Corps achievements in Cameroon were mixed and that, overall, the organization failed to assist Cameroon in gaining “trained man power”, which is a major Peace Corps objective in developing countries. The paper examines Volunteers’ performance in the “Agroforestry” (AG) and “Small Enterprise Development” (SED) projects, both begun in the 1990s. In doing so, it fills an important gap in the literature. While studies exist on the role of the Peace Corps in education and community development, there is a dearth of information on the impact of Volunteers on agroforestry and SED in Africa (Shriver 1964; Ashabranner 1971; Rice 1985; Amin 1992; Fischer 1998; Hoffman 1998; Schwarz 1991; Zimmerman 1995; Thomson 1966; Meisler 2011).

The study focuses on Cameroon for several reasons. Cameroon is one of only three nations in Africa (with Niger and Togo) in which Volunteers have served uninterruptedly since 1962. Referred to as “Africa in miniature”, the problems of Cameroon are symbolic of those of the rest of the continent. Like other African nations, Cameroon had immense political, economic and social problems at the time of its independence (Le Vine 1971).

Established at the height of the Cold War, the Peace Corps’ goal is “to help the peoples of developing areas in meeting their needs for trained manpower, and to help promote a better understanding of the American people on the part of the peoples served and a better understanding of the other peoples on the part of the American people” (US Statutes at Large 1961). Like many other African nations, Cameroon signed an agreement in the spring of 1962 to allow the Peace Corps to enter the country; later that year, the first group of 20 Volunteers arrived to serve as teachers (Office of Strategic Information 2010: 10; Amin 1992: 99-100).

In addition to a variety of published primary and secondary sources, this study is based on archival work; Return Peace Corps Volunteers’ (RPCVs) personal papers, journals and correspondence; extensive interviews conducted in Cameroon; responses to questionnaires; and newly declassified documents by the US government. The author also extensively used Peace Corps post books and quarterly reports written by Volunteers, which are housed in the Peace Corps Office at Essos, Yaoundé. In those documents, Volunteers write about their service, community, challenges, triumphs, failures, residents and activities, and they make recommendations as to whether or not the Peace Corps should continue sending Volunteers to their communities. In addition,

RPCVs supplied the author with their Peace Corps papers, journals, and correspondence. Roughly 300 open-ended questionnaires were sent to RPCVs and approximately 70 responses were received. Responses to questionnaires were received from RPCVs who served in Nigeria, Guinea and Ghana. Four hundred responses to questionnaires were received from Cameroonians. Several acronyms are used in this paper; here are the most important ones, along with their definitions: PC – Peace Corps; PCY – Peace Corps Office, Essos, Yaoundé, Cameroon; PCV – Peace Corps Volunteer; RPCV – Return Peace Corps Volunteer; PSR – Project Status Report.

## Setting the Context

In 1960 Cameroon received independence under its founding president, Ahmadou Ahidjo, and the following year it reunified with Southern Cameroons to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon. Cameroon's 4.5 million people at the time of reunification belonged to over 150 ethnic groups speaking over 200 languages. Its triple colonial heritage of Germany, France and Britain led to further complications, as one of the nation's most difficult challenges has been how to address the Anglophone problem: Though Cameroon is officially a bilingual nation, Anglophone Cameroonians have been marginalized and excluded from major policy decisions (Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003: 51-75, 108-111). Parts of Cameroon, including the North, Far North, and East regions, are quite remote and have limited infrastructure.<sup>1</sup> At the time of independence, over 90 per cent of the population lived in rural areas.

After a referendum in 1972, the Federal Republic of Cameroon became the United Republic of Cameroon. In a peaceful transfer of power in 1982, Paul Biya succeeded Ahidjo as president, a position he still occupies. In 1986 the nation was renamed the Republic of Cameroon. Contemporary Cameroon's population of 20 million people belong to ten administrative areas known as regions: Centre, Littoral, Southwest, East, South, Adamawa, Northwest, West, North and Far North. Dependent on raw materials, Cameroon's economy grew at a steady pace from independence until the mid-1980s, after which it plunged because of a sharp decline in petroleum and agricultural products.

In a visit to America in 1962, Ahidjo asked Kennedy for help, and requested more US intervention in Cameroon, hoping to neutralize the exces-

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1 In 2008 President Paul Biya signed a decree abolishing "provinces", replacing them with "regions". In this paper I use the term "region", even when referring to circumstances previous to 2008.

sive French influence in his country (Memorandum to the President 1962). On the eve of independence from France, former French colonies entered a series of entangling alliances with France, many of which are still in place today (Atangana 1997; Nossiter 2009).

Kennedy honoured Ahidjo's request, and later that year Peace Corps Volunteers were recruited, trained and sent to Cameroon (Fairfield 1962; Amin 1992: 68-98). Based on the terms of the agreement, Cameroon provided adequate housing for Volunteers, and since the programme's inception, the Cameroonian government has spent hundreds of millions of francs (XAF) on their accommodation (Memorandum of Understanding 1998).

During the first two decades the Peace Corps was in Cameroon, its services focused on education and community development; after that period, Volunteers' service was expanded to include community health and sanitation, Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), HIV education, agroforestry, and SED. From the Peace Corps' inception, it was understood that success in Cameroon and developing nations as a whole was based on the quality and training of Volunteers. During the 1960s Volunteers were trained in the US, and from the late 1960s training was shifted to the country of service. Because roughly 80 per cent of the Volunteers were "B.A. generalists",<sup>2</sup> they lacked the technical skills to perform the jobs assigned to them in developing nations. Compounding the problem was the weak training programme Peace Corps Washington created for Volunteers. According to Fritz Fischer, Peace Corps officials did not "know what they were training the Volunteers for" (1998: 34); he adds that "many Volunteers saw little sense in the Peace Corps training programme" (1998: 76). Training was inadequate in the areas of culture, history, languages and technical skills. Because of their ignorance of African culture, Volunteers sometimes referred to Africans as "lazy, seemingly useless people", and categorized them as dependent, different and undeveloped (Grubbs 2009: 172-173). Larry J. Brown, former Peace Corps country director in Uganda, repeatedly referred to "small houses and primitive mud huts", "naked little bodies darting around", "women cooking over outdoor fires", "men trimming branches with much-used machetes", and "children at play amidst the dense greenery and flowering bushes" (2011: 20). Similar descriptions occur frequently in Volunteers' memoirs and post books.

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2 A large percentage of early Volunteers had degrees in liberal arts or other majors that did not provide graduates with specific technical skills. They were referred to as "B.A. generalists".

## Agroforestry

Agriculture is the mainstay of the Cameroonian people. The fact that agriculture has always occupied a prominent position in Cameroon's development plans shows the importance the nation attaches to it. But lack of technology and knowledge of farming techniques to deal with challenges such as soil erosion, the Sahel environment, drought and torrential rainfall threaten the livelihoods of many. On 28 November 1990 Cameroon formalized an agreement with the Peace Corps, asking Volunteers to "provide qualified manpower to contribute in building the capacities of local communities in natural resource management" (Memorandum of Understanding 1990).

In 1991 Cameroon's "Agroforestry and Permanent Farming Systems" project was introduced in the West region, and in 1999 its services were extended to the North region. Volunteers placed within the domain of agroforestry were to assist farmers with knowledge on how to maximize output while at the same time avoiding practices that result in soil erosion and further desertification. The project began with 21 Volunteers in 1999, rose to 26 the following year and declined to 16 in 2001, but has remained at an average of 20 Volunteers annually (PC Cameroon\_PSR\_AG\_2001). Volunteers in the programme organized a series of environmental-education activities, covering topics like the use of trash cans, the recycling of paper, and tree-planting, along with providing information on the importance of biodiversity, bee-farming, live fencing, and nurseries (PC Cameroon\_PSR\_AG\_1999). Volunteers also devised plans to improve techniques in pasture and production, water-shed protection, and windbreak and woodlot establishment (PC Cameroon\_PSR\_Environment\_2004).

Volunteers worked on fisheries and poultry farms. The inland fisheries programme in Cameroon began in 1968. Volunteers were charged with the responsibility of assisting local fish farmers gain self-sufficiency. PCV Erik Schiff worked on fisheries and animal husbandry in Wum, Banzo and other communities in the Northwest region (Schiff 1982). PCV Harlan Gene Peuse worked at a poultry farm in Kumba in the Meme division. Warren Oster served as an agricultural extension officer in Taku village in the Donga-Mantung division in the Northwest region. Volunteers served in different capacities in all ten regions of the nation (responses to questionnaires).

Achievements made by agroforestry Volunteers took different forms. In 1996 in Belo, Dillon Banerjee used a variety of demonstrations to show the techniques of soil preservation and live fencing. In Ukpwa, Charlotte Wolf rallied the community and created a nursery of 10,000 seedlings. In Bambili, PCVs Cheryl and Albert Onega taught farming systems and business classes at the agricultural school. In North Cameroon, Calley Jones helped to transform Alhadji Daou's nursery into a money-making venture. Natalie Parks made

several demonstrations of techniques of field-burning. Richard Waite, assigned to Bangang, successfully encouraged farmers to use medicinal plants to treat common illnesses such as malaria. Lea Loizos, assigned to Bati in the West region, received a grant which was used to purchase a corn mill. The corn mill benefitted an estimated 8,000 people (PC Cameroon\_PSR\_AG\_2001). Alice Kelly in Mozongo worked with her community to develop a forest reserve. In the Far North, Eric Pohlman encouraged women to market their culture: With his organizational help, women's dance groups produced a brochure designed to encourage tourism.

But despite the successes, problems persisted. Volunteers could not accomplish much more because they lacked the language and technical skills to function in the area of agroforestry. Even the Peace Corps' internal assessments confirmed that Volunteers lacked the skills to navigate the social and economic landscape in Cameroon (PC Training Assignment Criteria 1987). Because their training did not prepare them to interact with people in villages, they were unable to teach salable skills to the local farmers. Robert Strauss, former Peace Corps country director in Cameroon, in a blistering editorial in the *New York Times* titled "Too Many Innocents Abroad", agreed that agroforestry Volunteers were too often ill equipped, ill trained and ill prepared for work in Cameroon:

In Cameroon, we had many Volunteers sent to serve in the agriculture programme whose only experience was putting around in their mom and dad's backyard during high school,

he wrote (January 9, 2008).

And the situation was not helped by the training programme. Warren Oster, who served in Ngaoundéré, discovered in the field that much of the technical training at the "centre" was irrelevant. Others complained that the technical training was "too abstract and not always appropriate to conditions in the Sahel". A 2006 Peace Corps "final report" concluded that the "technical competencies they [Volunteers] achieved in pre-service training were insufficient" (PC Final Report 2006).

"Cultural training", PCV Gene Peuse wrote, "was weak", and trainees "spent too much time at the centre as opposed to visiting villages on a regular basis" (response to questionnaire). As with other programmes, lack of motivation was an issue with the agroforestry project. Farmers were neither motivated by nor interested in demonstrations made by Volunteers. And because of inadequate cultural training, Volunteers lacked the ability to either change the mindset of the local people or convince them that those ideas would lead to more productivity. Additionally, Volunteers were impatient with the slow pace of change in agriculture. Even Peace Corps officials

acknowledged that Volunteers felt “frustrated by the absence of immediate results” (PC Training Assignment Criteria 1987). As a result, many turned their attention to secondary projects such as HIV prevention programmes, youth and women group projects, and sporting programmes (Packer, PC Post Book, 2007; PC Cameroon\_PSR\_AG\_1999). Whatever the rights and wrongs of Volunteers’ work, their service reminded the Cameroonian government that agriculture remains the most important – though a very vulnerable – part of the nation’s economy.

## Small Enterprise Development

In 1999 the Peace Corps introduced a new programme in Cameroon, Small Enterprise Development, and tapped Tyrone Gaston to head it. A former PCV in Cameroon, Gaston was optimistic that “SED will make a difference in the lives of the people”. He added, “Given that most Cameroonians do not have access to the formal sector of the economy, SED was a necessity” (Gaston 2011).

The concept of SED originated in the 1980s during the conservative era of President Ronald Reagan, when Loret Miller Ruppe, then Peace Corps director, introduced the programme. Critics of the programme charged that Ruppe was “prostituting the Peace Corps for conservative Republicans” (Hoffman 1998: 239). Conservative Republican ideology taught that SED was the solution to poverty in developing nations. SED Volunteers taught basic skills in bookkeeping, accounting and sales techniques, and assisted locals in starting up and running small businesses. The SED project recruited many young people with business degrees to serve in Africa (Hoffman 1998: 239; Schwarz 1991: 201).

In Cameroon, SED Volunteers’ initial assignments were at microfinance institutions, where they were charged with “improv[ing] the overall efficiency of financial institutions through training and technical assistance in management and business skill transfer” (PC Final Report 2006: 9). Microfinance institutions (MFIs) provided access to loans and savings for the poor.

The beginnings of MFIs in Cameroon date back to the early 1960s, when cooperatives were created in Anglophone Cameroon. The most significant development was the creation of the Cameroon Cooperative Credit Union League (CAMCCUL); today, as the largest microfinance institution in the country, it boasts a membership of over 300,000. As of December 2005, there were 714 approved MFIs in Cameroon with a combined membership of roughly 480,000 members (Charlier and N’Cho-Oguie 2009: 125-128). Because MFIs developed quickly, many were plagued with problems – topping the list were inefficiencies in banking procedures such as loan management, bookkeeping,

income statements and financial projections. Computer knowledge among workers was at a very elementary level, and these institutions were chronically corrupt. In 2000 fourteen SED Volunteers went to work, and over the next ten years the average number of SED Volunteers annually was 23.

Placed under the Ministry of Industry and Commerce, SED Volunteers are assigned to provide credit unions, non-governmental organizations, and small businesses “with technical support and training in management, marketing and other entrepreneurial skills” (PC Cameroon\_PSR\_SED\_2002). At the beginning, SED’s partners included the Ministry of Industry and Commerce; Caisse Populaire Pour L’Agriculture et Commerce (CPAC); Mutuelle Communautaire de Croissance (MC2) – a community-based bank; the CamCCUL, Ltd.; Crédit du Sahel; Micro-Finance for Development (MIFED); Project Crédit Rural Décentralise; Fonds Commun d’Investissement du Sud (FODIS); the Appropriate Development for Africa Foundation (ADAF); and National Investment and Savings Cameroon (NIS-CAM). Over time, additional partners were brought into the programme. SED began slowly and by 2004, its projects had reached all ten regions of Cameroon. At the end of Gaston’s tenure as associate director of SED, he was “proud of SED’s accomplishments” (PC Cameroon\_PSR\_SED\_2004; Gaston 2011). There were 30 Volunteers assigned to SED that year.

SED Volunteers provided technical support and training in computers, financial projections, income statement, cash handling, feasibility studies, budgeting, cash flow, loan management, bookkeeping, and project design. Carolyn Jillson, an SED Volunteer in Akonolinga – a city she described as a “sexually charged, promiscuous town” – collaborated with taxi drivers to create an association designed to improve their business practices (PC Cameroon\_PSR\_SED\_2004). With her help, taxi drivers created the Association de Transporteurs par Moto (ATM). The association empowered drivers to collaborate and create better working conditions for members. Jillson also worked on HIV prevention programmes. In Maroua, Andrea Kersten educated people on the importance of saving money in banks. She encouraged residents to be involved in the operation and management of the village bank (PC Cameroon\_PSR\_SED\_2003). In Tokombéré, Caroline Anderson worked with her counterparts to encourage local people to save money in banks (Anderson, PC Post Book, 2008). In Mamfe, PCV Jeremy Hunley organized the Mamfe Business Summer Program, where residents learned how to undertake their daily business activities. PCV Andrew Richards taught on a variety of topics – for example, developing an effective banking system, grant writing, and conducting feasibility studies (PC Cameroon\_PSR\_SED\_2005).

Frances Provencher-Kambour, assigned to the Appropriate Development for Africa Foundation (ADAF), worked with 28 MC2 community

banks. With her colleagues, she “audited banks, helped determine appropriate collateral for loans, taught filing, Excel, etc., including marketing, feasibility plans, project/plan completion for loans, etc.” (response to questionnaire). Michelle Virgin served in MC2 community banks in Ngaoundéré, where she worked to reverse the distrust local people had for banks. She taught business classes and established ten Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) that served over 200 women.

As in other Peace Corps programmes, Volunteers were encouraged to be creative and to look for work wherever their services were needed. In Ngaoundéré, Kristen Nguyen served in the microfinance institution of MC2. She taught tools such as Participatory Analysis for Community Action (PACA), along with leading cyber café classes for first-time computer users and implementing a global financial and social curriculum in schools and youth centres. Along with other Volunteers, she organized and managed savings-and-loan cooperatives. Cherie Mennel worked at CamCCUL in Kumbo, where she organized and taught a series of business seminars. She did auditing for credit unions, and also taught computer skills. Jeanah Lacey was a pioneer at the Peace Corps’ SED post in Babadjou, where she served two years in an MC2. She taught better accounting practices to recover loans, provided computer training, created tutorials to educate employees on Excel and Word, and collaborated with Peace Corps colleagues to encourage the Bamenda Handicraft Center to acquire an overseas market for its products. To encourage young people to start saving early in life, she started the *Petit a Petit* programme (Lacey, PC Post Book, 2004).

Despite these achievements, Volunteers faced many challenges. With degrees in business and economics from American universities, many SED Volunteers had little or no experience in business practices in Cameroon and as a result faced many frustrations. The three-month training session in Cameroon was insufficient to educate them on business culture and values in Cameroon. Ross Connelly reported having “zero business/microfinance” experience and, not surprisingly, he found that he could not contribute much to the functioning of the bank. A nagging problem has been Volunteers’ lack of knowledge of Cameroonian culture, attitudes and values, and that has often led to feelings of desperation and impatience. Operations at MC2 were fundamentally different from those at a banking institution in the US. In Mokolo in North Cameroon, one of the unit managers at MC2 questioned the relevance and knowledge of Volunteers assigned to the company. They were not “competent”, he wrote in his response to the questionnaire. Often Volunteers became frustrated with their inability to bring rapid change. Unable to get her way at microfinance in Babadjou, PCV Jeanah Lacey hastily placed blame on Cameroonians.

Babadjou doesn't want development [...]. They want charity [...]. They want free labour [...]. They want the appearance of development. We don't even have a decent development committee in this community (Lacey, PC Post Book, 2005).

Those types of reactions were numerous and reveal a subtle arrogance embedded in Volunteers' attitudes.

Adding to the headaches was the poor infrastructure. While SED Volunteers were based in towns, their jobs occasionally required them to travel to rural areas to organize and teach business skills to residents there. Work in villages required knowledge of local languages which many SED Volunteers didn't have. Local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were equally guilty. "The NGO sector is the most corrupt next to the government", wrote PCV Heather Kathrens, who served at a variety of NGOs in Cameroon (response to questionnaire). Volunteers were also shocked by the magnitude of corruption in society. Corruption is a chronic problem in Cameroon, and that part of the country's history is well documented elsewhere (Fombad 2004: 337-354). Volunteers neither understood the magnitude of the nation's corruption nor had any skills with which to address it. Their training on the topic was completely flawed and inadequate (PC Final Report 2006: 9-10).

Following the departure of Gaston, SED was leaderless for almost two years, and that had an impact (PC Final Report 2006). In 2006 the number of SED Volunteers, which had generally lingered at about 20, dropped to 12. But under the direction of James Beighle, the programme found its way again. However, SED is still plagued by an identity crisis. Given its focus on business development, the SED's subsequent assigning of Volunteers to non-profit organizations while mandating them to devote more time to learning the local culture has raised questions about the objectives of the SED programme. Volunteers have argued that SED must decide whether it will continue as a "development organization" or as a "cultural exchange programme". Recently, Gaston argued that SED's leadership must continue to shape the programme's mission and direction. "SED has not outlived its usefulness because Cameroon needs lots of small business entrepreneurs", he said (Gaston 2011).

But now, ten years later, SED cannot point to any specific microfinance companies that were created or have remained in business as a result of the work of its Volunteers. While SED Volunteers boast of assisting street vendors and taxi drivers, the programme's overall impact remains negligible. Hoffman's conclusion that SED's results in Central America were "mixed" is consistent with SED's impact in Cameroon. Perhaps the best that can be said about the programme is the "coming" of Volunteers and their "friendship" with Cameroonians, wrote RPCV Michelle Virgin (response to questionnaire; Hoffman 1998: 239).

## Cultural Immersion and Impact of Service on the Volunteers

A prerequisite for success in development is an understanding of the culture. Prior to service, Volunteers went through a lengthy selection process and a training programme. It was after a successful completion of training that trainees took the oath to become Volunteers. “Life in Cameroon”, Lindsay Miesko wrote,

is not one big thing, it’s a lot of little things, a lot of small habits that you have to make and break. [...] How to get kids to stop calling you *whiteman* [...]. How to [...] go [...] in a pit latrine [...]. How to ride on a motorcycle with three other people [...]. How to eat *fufu* [...]. How to get out of an eight-hour church service [...]. How to take a hot bath [...]. How to handle everything [...]. How to be happy (Miesko, PC Post Book, 2005).

Volunteers adjusted to in-country realities. They ate the food, danced to the music, and became soccer fanatics. They joined traditional meeting groups, participated in *njangis*, established love connections and marriages, and took on separate projects in the community after their service ended. In America, their homes are decorated with African art, and many have continued to organize different forms of *njangi*. Bill Strassberger (PCV 1982–1986) and his colleagues who likewise served in Cameroon established Friends of Cameroon, an organization that educates Americans about Cameroon and provides assistance for development projects there.<sup>3</sup>

In a 2010 survey, Volunteers described their experience as “great”, saying they experienced “lots of personal growth” and “acquired good public skills and confidence”, “gained managerial experience”, “learned a lot about [themselves]”, and “gained independence and confidence” (PC COS 2010). The Peace Corps did a lot for its Volunteers. Living in Cameroon was transformative. Susana Herrera gained self-confidence:

The media [in America] told me what I was lacking and that I had to work hard to attain things I need in order to be fulfilled. They told me that everything about me looks wrong. I should look like Barbie, the plastic mannequin in the store window who wears a size one,

but in Africa

for the first time I hear that it’s OK to look like a woman (Herrera 1999: 62).

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3 See Friends of Cameroon website: <[www.friendsofcameroon.org](http://www.friendsofcameroon.org)>.

Volunteers became leading advocates for racial and economic justice.

For many, Peace Corps service turned out to be a rite of passage to a fruitful and enriching life. Whether they served in Cameroon, Zambia, Malawi, or any other African nation, return Volunteers wrote that their time in the Peace Corps was pivotal in their lives. Nancy Scott, who served in Ghana from 1968 to 1970, said:

Others look back upon college years as the formative years of young adulthood – I look back very fondly on Ghana as the location of my growing and finding myself (response to questionnaire).

RPCV Douglass Prucha, who served in Nigeria, reported:

The greatest gift was the personal growth I felt I made. I initiated projects and got students motivated but they taught me, too, much more – to listen, to relax, to work hard. It was probably the most rewarding experience of my life (response to questionnaire).

Return Volunteers Kris Holloway (Mali) and Michael Buckler (Malawi) shared similar stories of the impact of the Peace Corps on their lives: The Peace Corps changed them (Holloway 2007; Buckler 2011).

RPCV Tony Boatman, who served at Ndu, Cameroon, in the 1960s, wrote that the Peace Corps “shaped the rest of my life so far” (response to questionnaire). Thirty years later, Warren Oster, who received the honorary title of “Mformi” in the village of M’fuh, shared similar feelings, writing: “I am thankful for having served them, and I gained more out of it than they could ever imagine” (response to questionnaire). Ed Kay, who taught mathematics at the University of Buea in the 1990s, saw the Peace Corps experience as pivotal: “I am partly African [...]. The best part of living in Africa is the very genuine friendliness of the people and the complete lack of racism”, he wrote. “It was easily the best two years of my life”, he added (response to questionnaire). The Peace Corps “isn’t for everybody”, wrote James McCormick. It “profoundly changed my life [... and] it isn’t beyond the realm of possibility that I’ll do it again”, he wrote at the end of his Peace Corps memoir (McCormick 1998: 366).

Yet, there were disturbing aspects about Volunteers’ lives in Cameroon and other African nations. Given that adventure and travel were among the reasons given by Volunteers who signed up to serve, some overdid it. There was alcoholism, “binge drinking”, “substance abuse”, and “visibly irresponsible sexual” activities which reinforced perceptions that Americans are reckless and “easy”. Others displayed a “dismissive, condescending and rude” attitude towards Cameroonians. Volunteers could not wait for the weekend, when they could “get together and party” (*PC Staff Newsletter* July-September 2004: 1-2). Strauss lashed out at the “indiscipline” and a feeling of “entitlement” by

certain Volunteers (response to questionnaire), calling on others not to give up on their colleagues.

It is not only around sexual relations that some Volunteers make unhealthy decisions. Drugs and excessive alcohol consumption are significant problems in our community and we are all responsible to one another to make sure that a problem does not evolve into a tragic and avoidable event,

he wrote (*PC Staff Newsletter* May-July 2003: 3). An employee at PCY noted that “some Volunteers drink excessive alcohol”. Another agreed: “Discipline should be reinforced among Volunteers (response to questionnaire; Wollan, *PC Post Book*, 2001). The indiscipline in the Peace Corps is nothing new. Whether in Africa or Asia, Volunteers were involved in a variety of questionable activities (Meisler 2011: 55).

## Conclusion

During the past fifty years, Peace Corps Volunteers have served in Cameroon uninterrupted. In Africa, Volunteers learned that perception was different from reality. Given the negativity about Africa common in America, Volunteers were pleasantly surprised by the positive treatment they received in Africa. They established long-lasting friendships and discovered new career paths. The Peace Corps experience was an awakening.

By serving, Volunteers answered Kennedy’s inaugural challenge: “Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country.” In America, Volunteers reversed the “invisibility” of Africa and its people. Africans are visible, human, and their voices matter. In villages, Volunteers were frequently at neighbours’ homes dining, planning future projects, encouraging children, taking strolls to corner bars, haggling for produce in the local market, and reflecting on their service. Perhaps their most significant achievement has been their ability to make friends for America, even in the most remote corners of Africa, something they have been doing for the past 50 years.

But there were things fundamentally wrong with Volunteers’ service. Many lacked both the skills and the experience to perform their jobs, which did not go unnoticed by Cameroonians. Increasingly, the latter questioned why their government paid thousands of dollars to bring in “unqualified” Americans to serve when thousands of Cameroonian university graduates languished in unemployment. “Volunteers are useless”, wrote a Cameroonian official, also questioning why someone should “leave [...] the US to come to Africa [to] fill vaccination sheets” (responses to questionnaires).

Compounding the problem was the ever-present suspicion of the Peace Corps as an arm of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), even though this author has never found any evidence to support that notion (Hoffman 1998, 160-161; Grubbs 2009: 174).

Volunteers' substantive achievements have been limited. In agroforestry and SED, the Peace Corps did not accomplish Goal 1 of the Peace Corps Act, which calls on Volunteers to provide "trained manpower". There is a culture of corruption at microfinance companies. Except for the large ones such as CamCCUL, which have remained stable, microfinance organizations have risen and fallen in rapid succession. Deforestation has continued unchecked. Compared to 30 years ago, fewer Cameroonians are involved in farming, and the fish industry in the nation is almost extinct. Foodstuffs such as rice and fish, and consumer goods including clothing, are now imported from China. The February 2008 protests in Cameroon over shortages of foodstuffs, petroleum products and basic consumer goods pointed not only to failures of government policy but also to the ineffectiveness of development agencies such as the Peace Corps to address the most urgent economic and social problems of the day.

The Peace Corps may already have outlived its usefulness in Cameroon and other African nations. The needs of Africa in the twenty-first century are fundamentally different from what they were 50 years ago when the agency was established. Today, African nations need experienced and skilled people in health, sciences, engineering, technology, and water resource management. Given the Peace Corps' inability to recruit people with those skills, the agency has become increasingly irrelevant vis-à-vis Africa's development needs. The critical challenges of the continent are overwhelming, and the response must be comparably proportioned.

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## Dienst in Afrika: Das US Peace Corps in Kamerun

**Zusammenfassung:** Dieser Beitrag untersucht die Entwicklungshilfepraxis des US Peace Corps in Kamerun in den Bereichen Agroforstwirtschaft und Kleinunternehmen. Er basiert auf Primärquellen, wie erst kürzlich freigegebenen Dokumenten, privaten Korrespondenzen der Entwicklungshelfer („Volunteers“) und Interviews in Kamerun. Der Autor kommt zu dem Schluss, dass die fachliche Qualifikation der Peace-Corps-Entwicklungshelfer nicht angemessen war und dass sie auf ihre Aufgaben in Kamerun schlecht vorbereitet und nur unzureichend ausgerüstet wurden. Aus diesem Grund sei das vorrangige Ziel des Peace Corps – Entwicklungsländer bei der Ausbildung von Arbeitskräften zu unterstützen – gar nicht zu erreichen gewesen. Er stellt darüber hinaus die Frage nach der Relevanz entsprechender Organisationen in Kamerun und in Afrika generell. Der Beitrag konzentriert sich unter anderem deshalb auf Kamerun, weil dies eines der drei Länder Afrikas ist, in denen seit 1962 ununterbrochen Entwicklungshelfer des Peace Corps gearbeitet haben.

**Schlagwörter:** Kamerun, Vereinigte Staaten, Peace Corps, Entwicklungsprojekt, Agroforstwirtschaft, Kleine Unternehmen