

# THE DEMING HEADLIGHT

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## Peace Corps in a bottom-up and troubled era

By Yossef Ben-Meir

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Considering the economic and political challenges facing the United States and the world today, and given the lessons learned in foreign assistance since it began after World War II with the Marshall Plan, now is the time that the Peace Corps should amend the role that its volunteers play in international development.

The Peace Corps, founded in 1961 by President John F. Kennedy, currently supports more than 8,000 American volunteers who live with local communities in 74 emerging countries around the world, where they promote community development and international friendship.

In the current issue of WorldView magazine, a publication of the National Peace Corps Association, President-elect Barack Obama states his support for doubling the number of volunteers to 16,000 by 2011. He also recognizes great opportunities that might have been realized for the United States and other countries around the world had President Kennedy's vision of a corps of 100,000 volunteers been fulfilled. The NPCA recently spearheaded a campaign to double the Peace Corps' size and move closer to Kennedy's expansion goal.

Now is the moment to at least double the current number of Peace Corps volunteers. Peace Corps can easily be part of the new economic stimulus package being fashioned to address America's quickly rising unemployment. Volunteers are U.S. federal

government employees and receive a modest living stipend and health care coverage.

The spreading economic crisis is challenging the stability of developing nations and putting them in greater need of international assistance.

There is nearly universal agreement that the United States needs urgently to rebuild its image in the world. Volunteers, as good neighbors and in their dedication to meeting human needs, contribute to public diplomacy and to goodwill among nations.

Foreign governments also understand, today more than ever, the promise of bottom-up development to decrease poverty, and the potential contribution volunteers can make to its processes. But achieving this potential will remain elusive until volunteers can act as third-party facilitators to help organize community meetings and apply planning activities that help groups prioritize and implement socio-economic and environmental initiatives.

The Peace Corps has been a forerunner of the gradual shift toward community-driven development and away from top-down decision-making and control.

The global proliferation of bottom-up development strategies is due to their efficacy, including the sense of ownership local communities come to feel toward initiatives because they reflect their own interests, which in turn encourages project sustainability and the attainment of goals.

It is often perceived as ironic, however, that for new self-reliant development projects to be implemented, third-parties outside the benefitting communities are needed to spearhead local development planning meetings in rural villages and neighborhoods. Outsiders do not have a personal vested interest in the community initiatives. Outside

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facilitators are often better positioned than local individuals to help work through conflicts and draw in government and civil groups to partner with communities to advance development.

Peace Corps volunteers are ideally positioned to fill this essential third-party role. They are regularly assigned to host-government ministries to help advance social service plans related to health, education, natural resource management, and economic development.

The Peace Corps goals of cultural exchange and international development are most effectively achieved when volunteers are trained to elicit and respond to the deep interests of communities and community members' own visions of change. It is on this basis that President Kennedy's and NPCA's ideal expansion to 100,000 volunteers is well justified.

Yossef Ben-Meir is a former Peace Corps volunteer and program director in Morocco. He is president of the High Atlas Foundation, a nonprofit organization founded by former Peace Corps volunteers who served in Morocco and dedicated to community development in that country.

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