

PEACE CoRPS SUPPORT OF INTERNATIONAL SUSTAINABLE LIBRARY DEVELOPMENT

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The creation of the Peace Corps is considered to be one of the signature achievements of President John F. Kennedy. As a candidate for the presidency, JFK first introduced the idea of a Peace Corps on October 14, 1960, to 5,000 students at the University of Michigan. How many of them, he asked, would be willing to serve their country and the cause of peace by living and working in the developing world? (Peace Corps 2011) It turned out that many would; since 1961 over 230,000 Americans have served in the Peace Corps in 141 countries (Peace Corps n.d.-b).

The mission of the Peace Corps (PC) is to promote world peace and friendship. This is accomplished through meeting three goals:

1. To help the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women.
2. To help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served.
3. To help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans. (Peace Corps n.d.-a)

Although there is no formal “library” work assignment for volunteers, library and book-related projects are some of the most common secondary projects of PC volunteers. Volunteers have been involved in library projects across the world since the first volunteers arrived in Ghana in 1961, and continue to support library development to this day.

Successful library projects need materials appropriate to the community, support of the residents, trained staff, and maintainable funding. Volunteers are involved in all aspects of library development. In many countries volunteers work with students to create picture dictionaries and books in the local language with appropriate cultural themes. Often volunteers provide training for library staff as well as information about developing a library.

Examples of Library Projects

Little Porch Library in Liberia

In Liberia Joan Komolafe developed the “Little Porch Library.” As Joan noted, the small library had a big impact on the community: “Lending a few books is a small thing, but I observed its impact in my community. Children are encouraged to read to each other, learn to read sight words, practice spelling using letters written on bottle caps, get help with homework, and cooperate and play with each other” (2017).

African Library Project in Lesotho

PC volunteers in Lesotho are partnering with the Ministry of Education and Training, and the African Library Project (ALP), a nonprofit organization working to develop and support libraries in rural Africa. As the ALP website describes the process:

Peace Corps volunteers request ALP applications from the Ministry of Education and help the area where they are serving apply for a library project. Each [community] must commit to providing a dry and secure location, as well as shelves for the books. The new library creates a

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library committee consisting of people who will be responsible for the library. The [Ministry of Education and Training] then reviews the applications to ensure that schools or communities have a workable plan to use the books. (2016)

The ALP assists U.S. volunteers organize book drives and ship books to a library in Africa. The Peace Corps volunteers on site help librarians develop the skills needed to keep the new libraries running after the volunteers leave the country.

Partnership Project Grants

The Peace Corps created the Partnership Grants Program to provide an opportunity for volunteers to work together with community members on specific local needs identified by the community. Partnership grants are written together by volunteer and community teams to support varied aspects of libraries. The community determines the amount of the grant request, which ranges from \$500 to over \$14,000. An essential component of each grant is that it has sustainable community help—ranging from space to resources to financial contributions.

A few examples of recent Partnership Grants reflect the diversity of the requests:

- A volunteer working at a government library in the Ukraine has written the Project Respect training grant to support the library's goal of providing resources to support educational needs in the community. Partnering with a local NGO, the library is providing training and workshops to help young women deal with HIV, AIDS, low self-esteem, and other social issues.
- In Ghana a volunteer is working with the community to develop a functioning library space for students, teachers, and community members to learn and improve their literacy skills. The goal of this Partnership Project is to construct a building consisting of two rooms to serve as both a library and a separate office space for librarian and teacher use. The community will provide the land for the structure as well as labor and materials. This volunteer will teach literacy skills while overseeing the project. Funds from the partnership grant will enable the project to be implemented.
- The High School Extension and Media Lab grant is designed to provide a rural high school in Madagascar with expanded space and programs to support the integration of technology and resources into classroom instruction. The goal is for the Peace Corps volunteer to work with local educators to provide technology and media literacy training for teachers. Contributions from the community include computers, a solar panel, labor, and land.
- The Local Library Project in South Africa is designed to provide a primary school with a larger library space and additional books to encourage a love of reading. An important two-prong second goal is training student assistants to

manage the library and arming teachers with the skills necessary to integrate library resources into classroom lessons.

These examples showcase the local buy-in of their projects and how Peace Corps Partnership Grants assist in the outcomes. You can help support the program and access more information about the Peace Corps Partnership Program at <<https://www.peacecorps.gov/donate/funds/>>.

Addressing the Need for Local Resources

A main challenge facing libraries in PC countries is resources in the local language. Volunteers often work with students to create books in the local language that can be shared in the library. Below, Janet Lee, who served in the Peace Corps in Ethiopia, shares a book-making project that meets this need.

Peace Corps volunteers are frequently assigned to remote areas of a country where resources are scarce and needs are great. They often teach in schools that lack libraries and trained librarians, and they want to instill a love of reading and literacy in their students. Oftentimes in a corner of a room they establish a library that may consist of a shelf or two of donated books, or they form a reading circle as an after-school club. Finding appropriate books that fit students' needs may be difficult, so why not write their own?

In 2013 I returned to Ethiopia to work with noted author and storyteller Anne Pellowski, author of *How to Make Cloth Books for Children*, and conducted several workshops with current Peace Corps volunteers and their teacher counterparts in the production of cloth books for children. Pellowski has given hundreds of these workshops around the world.

Why cloth books? Throughout time, books have been written on many



media: stone, leather, wood, papyrus, or paper. Cloth has the advantages of being universally available, durable, colorful, and easy to manipulate. Because the text of the story is written on the cloth pages by hand, there are no limitations on script or language, especially important in a country like Ethiopia with over eighty different languages in two major scripts.

Over the course of a single day or spread out over three, we held the full-day workshops, complete with tea breaks, lunch, and a small

per diem for participants' travel expenses. Supplies included a fine-tip marker, scissors (pinking shears desirable, but not mandatory), needles and thread, and colorful cloth, both solid and with patterns. Fusible web (a binding fabric) and an electric iron are handy, but not required. A healthy imagination is definitely a must.

We passed out already-prepared models of successful storybooks to serve as examples and small kits comprised of folded cloth pages,

cutouts of cloth images of animals or flowers or sports figures, and a strip of solid cloth to cover raw edges and serve as a book spine. The goal of this first exercise is learning to assemble the book. Page numbers are written on the fold and although counter-intuitive, text is written on the page prior to the next folded page so that when assembled the right pages face each other. The raw edges are stitched together and the solid strip of cloth covers the raw edges (see figure 1). Depending on the length of the workshop, be it a day or three days, this exercise can be repeated with multiple models.

The final book project is left to one's imagination, and the result of participants' work can be quite amazing. It is not necessary to be a grand artist; simple shapes—a cloud, a flower, a school house, a mom, or a dad—could take on a story of their own.

Most of the books were eight to ten pages long with one or two lines of text per page. Repetition of key words grabs the attention of children and reinforces language learning. Themes could include the importance of girls' education, manners, helpfulness, honesty, a positive work ethic, counting books, or alphabet books. It is possible to retell familiar folktales or stories of local heroes.

Then the fun begins as each new author reads a story aloud to another author or, ideally, in front of a group of children. Some of the authors were more animated than others, but all learned much from one another and were very supportive. The children loved hearing the stories, whether written in English or the local language. The authors were allowed to take back to their schools their completed products and also a few kits to complete on their own. Several books were selected to be scanned, translated into other languages, and digitized so they

PC LIVE

The Peace Corps has developed PC Live, an online collection of resources designed to support sustainable international library development. Resources available include print and video materials, website links, and e-books. While PC Live was created for PC volunteers and staff, anyone can search the collection. Many of the resources are available to the public and can be downloaded at <https://pclive.peacecorps.gov/pclive>.

One PC Live resource available to everyone is the Sustainable Library Development Training Package, designed to provide guidance to Peace Corps volunteers as they work with local communities to develop libraries. This package can be used to train community members on how to start, manage, and sustain all types of libraries from donkey libraries and box libraries to traditional libraries with shelves and chairs as well as books and computers. This resource can be downloaded at PC Live.

could be printed, read online, or copied to a file for later reading and distribution. A suitcase full of supplies, including pinking shears, was dropped off at the regional Peace Corps office and picked up and used by other volunteers. Facebook entries indicated that the supplies did, indeed, make the rounds.

Cultural Challenges

While serving as an education volunteer in Cambodia, Kelly Grogg encountered a locked library at her school, a situation many volunteers face. Overcoming and adapting to cultural challenges may be difficult, but success is most likely when community leaders are involved in a project right from the start. Her self-reflection follows.

The Peace Corps has been working in schools around the world for over fifty-five years. With schools come school libraries, and the Peace Corps has worked in a number of ways to support the work of volunteers in school libraries. The Peace Corps used to actively recruit librarians, but now a large variety of volunteers participate in library projects, no matter their primary project. With so many volunteers from so many backgrounds, it can be difficult to train them in developing sustainable libraries, but the Peace Corps takes on this daunting task. The first part of that task is working on the cultural conceptions

volunteers have of libraries. Whether or not we think about it on a regular basis, we each have our own cultural conception of libraries.

Like many Americans, I grew up with libraries. My family often visited the public library, as it was one of the community spaces that always had something for each of us. I moved between states six times before the sixth grade, but the library was always a constant. Whether it was through school libraries or public libraries, I knew I always had access to the books and resources I needed. It was never even a question. Due to these experiences, I had an established perception of what libraries were and how they should be used.

As a Peace Corps volunteer, I was very excited about the possibility of working with a library in my community. I envisioned giving my students the same library experience I had growing up. When I first arrived in my village the school library did have some books, but the doors were locked all the time, and the students were not allowed to take the books home. As an outsider I thought this was a real disservice and decided I wouldn't rest until we had a functioning lending library, just like the one I had.

The problem with making a library in rural Cambodia work just like a library in the United States is simply that it's not a library in America. All



Figure 1. Examples of cloth books made by workshop participants.

libraries' users have different needs, and, therefore, libraries in various communities function differently. You can see this even in libraries in the United States. Libraries in more rural communities might provide more computers since many of their residents don't have Internet access at home. Libraries in urban areas might lend out large tools that their patrons need but can't store in their small living spaces. A good library meets the needs of its community. It doesn't try to copy another good library in a completely different location, and that was a tough lesson to learn as an enthusiastic Peace Corps volunteer.

After I realized I wasn't going to be able to replicate my hometown public library, the process went a lot more smoothly. Students simply wanted a room containing books in English, Chinese, and Khmer where students could practice their reading in between classes. So that's what I created. There was no lending system. No Dewey Decimal System. No barcode scanner or computers. It was a simple library, but it worked. While that library would not have been appealing in many communities, it was a great starting point for this community, and the library was well used for the rest of the school year. The difference in cultural understandings about what a library does

can be a huge barrier to successful library development abroad.

These cultural differences make my current work as the Librarian for Peace Corps Headquarters so interesting, but also provide unique challenges when trying to train staff and volunteers in library development. As the librarian for the Peace Corps, I guide the programming and training for staff and volunteers in over sixty countries. This involves a lot of Skype calls and e-mails, as well as occasional in-person training sessions. Some countries have well-developed library systems and want to expand their programming and outreach options, while others are struggling just to put books on the

INTERNATIONAL SUSTAINABLE LIBRARY DEVELOPMENT INTEREST GROUP

When Barbara Ford was ALA President-Elect she encouraged returned PC volunteers to support her presidential theme "Global Reach, Local Touch." The result was the creation of the International Relations Round Table's (IRRT) International Sustainable Library Development Interest Group (ISLD). In the words of the interest group's webpage:

ISLD serves as a clearinghouse of sustainable community-based library projects in developing areas of the world. The group mobilizes the power of ALA librarians to raise awareness of and make significant contributions to international library development. Librarians in developing countries can tap into resources for training and projects in their libraries. (ALA n.d.)

Anyone interested in sustainable library development is invited to join ISLD. Returned Peace Corps volunteers, ISLD members, and guests interested in networking may attend a lunch at both ALA Midwinter Meeting and ALA Annual Conference. Contact Connie Champlin <conniechamplin@gmail.com> if you are interested in this lunch or the ISLD. For more information about this interest group, go to <www.ala.org/rt/irrt/irrtcommittees/isld/isld>.

shelves or provide access to computers. It's this unique situation that drives all of the Peace Corps' training materials to be thorough, yet vague. We go through many different scenarios and common problems, but leave room for the cultural differences in each community. When I talk to PC volunteers about their libraries I always remind them that I might know a lot about libraries, but they know more about their communities than I ever will. By putting our knowledge together with the community leaders who have lived in these communities far longer than any Peace Corps volunteer, library projects are destined to succeed.

While our training materials are written very generally to accommodate the different challenges each volunteer will face, they do address many of the same pain points developing libraries experience. The main pain point I've discovered since turning my ear toward international library development is an all too common problem in the library world: book dumping. We've all seen well-intentioned book drives for books to send to faraway lands. It seems very exotic and exciting for a school to bring books that will soon be in the hands of children who are eager to learn, but the reality of these book drives is that they oftentimes result in outdated and irrelevant

collections that are unappealing or inaccessible to communities. This is why our training materials urge volunteers to gather locally sourced books and involve their communities in the purchasing of books for their library. Volunteers often innocently refer to the libraries they work with as "my library project," but our materials urge them to remember that it's not their library; it's their community's library.

There is definitely a lot to consider when training Peace Corps volunteers how to effectively start and run a library, but it's certainly worth it when you find a library that's running long after a volunteer has left the community.



Connie Champlin was a Peace Corps volunteer in the Philippines and South Korea. A teacher and librarian in

the past, she is now a guide and consultant for Cultural Adventures. She chairs the International Sustainable Library Development Interest Group of the ALA International Relations Round Table (IRRT). She also cochairs the IRRT International Reception Committee. In 2017 Connie planned the celebration of the JFK Centennial at the John F. Kennedy Hyannis Museum.



Janet Lee served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ethiopia. She is the dean of the library at Regis University in Colorado but

currently on leave from that position to study as a Fulbright Scholar in Ethiopia. At ALA conferences she often presents programs on sustainable library topics, including "Collaborating for Sustainable Libraries: Working with the Diaspora" and "Multilingual Children's Book Publishing: A Developing Industry in Ethiopia," available at www.ala.org/rt/irrt/irrtcommittees/isld/isld. Janet has served as editor of both print and online publications, including Colorado Libraries, International Leads, Collaborative Librarianship, Jesuit Higher Education, and The Herald: News for Those Who Served in Eritrea and Ethiopia.



Kelly Grogg, a former Peace Corps volunteer in Cambodia, is now Peace Corps Librarian. She also serves on the Board of

Advisors for Libraries Without Borders. She recently presented a poster at the ALA Annual Conference titled, "The Peace Corps' Model for Sustainable Library Development."

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