Feed the Future Country Fact Sheet

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Those Extraordinary Ordinary Volunteers!

Peace Corps

A Peace Corps Volunteer trains his local community in Malawi on the nutritional benefits of growing soy.

*This week, we're celebrating our partner agency the **Peace Corps** during its annual Peace Corps Week. Today marks the anniversary of when John F. Kennedy signed the executive order to establish the Peace Corps. The following is a guest blog post by Jean Harman of the Peace Corps, highlighting Peace Corps volunteers' contributions to **Feed the Future's goal** to reduce global hunger, poverty and undernutrition.*

Ever since John F. Kennedy and Sargent Shriver created the Peace Corps in 1962, it had been my dream to be a volunteer. But by the 1980s, having finally completed my undergraduate degree at 29, I thought I was too old. Turns out, I wasn't too old for two years of volunteer service and I began my Peace Corps experience as an agriculture volunteer, helping villagers in Zaire (what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), raise sheep, goats, rabbits, and other small animals.

Peace Corps launched my career in food security. When I returned to the States, I went to graduate school and began a 25-year career as a resource and agricultural economist. Over the course of these years, I learned how many different facets there are to sustainable food security; a variety of issues help create or foster food security in households and communities. I've worked in trade, agriculture, natural resource management, and development, to name a few.

After retiring from USAID last year, I am finishing my food security career at Peace Corps. A fitting conclusion, given so much of what Peace Corps does in volunteer service is food security.

Volunteers are never called *ex-volunteers*, but rather *returned Peace Corps Volunteers* (RPCVs). And we're a diverse lot, with more than 200,000 RPCVs today. We often hear about RPCVs of note—a former Cabinet member, the president of a university, members of Congress—but there are a lot of extraordinary ordinary volunteers as well.

Take for instance, Elaine Bellezza, who served as a Peace Corps teacher in Cameroon. She ended up helping her community

develop an artisanal cooperative, which made bowls, bags, tools and other items out of leather, gourds and other local agricultural products. Through this cooperative, women in the community went from earning about $2 a month to between $60 and $100. Yes, this is food security! Increased income means more money to spend on quality foods. And women's income is more likely to be spent on food and children's goods, so increased women's income can significantly impact food security and improve nutrition.

Elaine returned to the United States in the mid-1990s but was soon overseas again, this time working in Mali. She eventually opened a high-end boutique of household articles and furniture. As a part of the private sector, Elaine worked with a range of women's cooperatives in Mali. She developed a staff capable of taking over the business for her and running it as a cooperative-owned, woman-led business in Mali—even to this day!

Elaine never left Africa or economic development for long. She now works as a consultant in a variety of countries. An extraordinary ordinary volunteer.

There's also Gordon Hentze, who served as a "fish" volunteer in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the late 1970s and early 1980s. He was my mentor when I started my Peace Corps assignment, even as his own service was drawing to an end. We quickly discovered when I arrived at my village that we had both attended the same college and lived close to each other in Oregon. Gordon worked with farmers to build fish ponds for raising fish to eat at home and sell for income. Another facet of food security: sufficient food to eat at home and income to purchase additional foods, pay school fees, or buy medicine when it's needed.

Gordon returned to Oregon after the Peace Corps. He owns a family farm in Junction City where he grows fruit, vegetables and nuts. He also caters to people who want to process their own fresh food: He developed small-scale processing equipment so a family can process its own fruits, vegetables and nuts in household-sized quantities. Innovation—a skill Gordon developed as a volunteer and now uses to foster food security through his business as a farmer in the private sector. Another extraordinary ordinary volunteer.

While many Peace Corps volunteers are extraordinary ordinary people, the same could be said of their service. Helping start a local cooperative. Training business owners. Teaching people to fish. These tasks are ordinary when taken at face value. But when you see each as a contributor to global food security, they take on an extraordinary quality. A local cooperative in a developing country that raises incomes of women so they can invest more in their children and families, sending both their sons and daughters to school. A business owner whose business sells nutritious foods and supplements in a community that sorely needed jobs and access to these items. A family that improves its diet with fish and is able to sell extra fish on the local market, sharing the nutritious value of the fish with the community and making extra money to invest in the family business, children's education, and healthcare for all family members.

All this is happening thanks to the extraordinary ordinary work of Peace Corps volunteers at the grassroots level of agriculture and economic development. Seemingly ordinary tasks, carried out by individuals in partnership with developing communities, that are helping lift communities out of chronic hunger and poverty and into sustainable food security.

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*Peace Corps volunteers have been working on **food security issues** in their host countries for decades. Recently, Peace Corps **teamed up** with the U.S. Agency for International Development to work on food security issues under Feed the Future. In name, this designates the volunteers as Feed the Future Peace Corps Volunteers. In action, it provides better coordination between USAID and Peace Corps' agriculture and economic development efforts and enables Feed the Future to benefit from one of Peace Corps' major competitive advantages: grassroots development activities that support global food security.*