

A Survey of Returned Peace Corps Volunteers

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This is a report written by two current Masters International students at North Carolina State University, following a survey conducted on Returned Peace Corps Volunteers. The Masters International program allows students to combine a Peace Corps assignment with a masters degree program. The program is offered through the College of Forestry at NCSU.

INTRODUCTION

This past semester, we undertook an independent study course in agroforestry, in preparation for our intended Peace Corps (PC) assignments in this discipline. Agroforestry is a planting system that combines crops with woody perennials and/or livestock to create a more sustainable and healthy agricultural system. It is being promoted in many developing regions as an alternative to shifting cultivation. During the first half of the semester, this independent study course consisted of a series of lectures from faculty at NCSU and researchers in the triangle area and addressed the scientific, political, economical, and social sides of agroforestry. During the second half of the semester, we conducted a survey of Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCVs) who had served in agroforestry.

The purpose of this survey was to gain information on how agroforestry was implemented by PC volunteers and its effectiveness. As upcoming volunteers, we had many questions about how agroforestry was taught to incoming volunteers and how volunteers disseminated their knowledge to their community; we wanted to know how interested local communities were in adopting agroforestry and what methods worked best or what didn't work; we were also curious about some of the other projects volunteers participated in and how effective they felt they had been to their community and to PC; lastly, we wanted to seek advice from these RPCVs on possible research that could be conducted in the field.

METHODS

A survey was designed to address the different topics we were interested in finding information about. Questions were written and revised, and a pre-test was conducted with a RPCV. We decided to conduct our survey via email so that we did not have to limit our sample to people in the immediate geographic region. Our target population was RPCVs who had preferably served in agroforestry, or a similar assignment. Names were gathered from Internet databases, PC registers, and through word of mouth. In total, we selected 30 RPCVs. The surveys were sent out with a brief introduction to the purpose of our study and contact information in case there were any questions.

RESULTS

In total, we received 11 completed email surveys. While this did not provide enough data for a quantitative study, we were able to draw many qualitative comparisons and conclusions. Our population was representative of 4 regions where PC volunteers serve. From South America, we interviewed volunteers from Paraguay and Ecuador; from Africa, we interviewed volunteers from Cameroon, Kenya, and Madagascar; from Asia, we interviewed volunteers from the Philippines; and from the Pacific Islands we interviewed a volunteer from Samoa. Length of service also varied considerably among those interviewed. Months served ranged from 10 to 41. The assignments for the 11 people we received interviews from were predominately agroforestry, the only exceptions being one forestry and one agricultural assignment.

Due to the wide range of geographical placements for our participants, there were many site-specific variations in their answers. However, excluding these site-specific differences, the experiences and ratings of the participants were strikingly similar. These similarities and conclusions will be addressed in sections similar to those presented in our survey: preparation, training, implementation, adoption, impact, and additional questions.

Preparation

PC volunteers are not required to have an expertise, or even experience, in the area they are placed. The majority of those who completed this survey had an undergraduate degree in the natural or biological

sciences; several others had a degree in the liberal arts. Most PC volunteers come into the program with the same general desires: to live in a new culture, to help others, and to grow personally. Still others are motivated by their professional goals and hope to accomplish some impact in way of sustainable land uses. Whatever these past experiences and motivations may be, all volunteers must undergo a three-month in-country training to prepare them for the task ahead.

Training

Technical skills are taught to volunteers through a variety of classroom lectures, demonstrations, and site visits. The skills learned during this period vary according to site and assignment; however, some standard skills taught to the respondents of this survey were tree propagation, grafting, nursery management, gardening techniques, and species identification. It would seem that the effectiveness of this training would go a long way in terms of how the volunteer succeeded in their assignment, and most RPCVs interviewed felt that their training was quite adequate. We had RPCVs rate how effective (on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest) they felt their training was in preparing them for their fieldwork. Five volunteers rated their training at a four, the most for any one number. Other responses ranged from a two to a five.

Implementation

A number of challenges lie ahead as a PC volunteer completes this three-month training and is assigned to a village. PC outlines the goals of the assignment for the volunteer, but these goals cannot always be carried out and often the volunteer must improvise and respond to the nature of their community. We were particularly interested in the ways that agroforestry skills were implemented and adopted in the local communities, and so our questions focused on this area. While most volunteers interviewed had a PC assignment in “agroforestry”, this did not mean that the bulk of their time was spent doing “agroforestry” work. Instead, most volunteers estimated the time they spent on agroforestry work to be less than twenty-five percent. Of course, this varies according to country and community, and there were a few volunteers who did feel like they spent as much as seventy-five percent of their time on agroforestry work.

For the most part, PC volunteers were most successful and encouraged to work with either home gardens or agrisilvicultural systems in their communities. The goals set forth by PC most often involved encouraging farmers to plant species in some type of new combination or to encourage locals to plant unfamiliar species. Almost all of the respondents agreed that their choice of which agroforestry technologies to disseminate came from the community itself. Other influences on what to introduce came from the individual’s preferences and on the availability of publications or technical materials. Since this last item, the availability of outside materials, was not provided by us on the survey but written in by several respondents, it can be concluded that access to technical information and resources can play an important role on agroforestry technologies in the PC.

Another important factor of agroforestry implementation is whom the PC volunteer works with in the village. The majority of PC volunteers in this survey indicated that males were more receptive to agroforestry technologies than women. However, the volunteers were split on whether low income or high-income peoples were more receptive to agroforestry. They were also split on whether small landholders or large landholders were more receptive. What was obvious was that transfer of technologies took place most readily and most often at the individual level. Groups, clubs, and demonstrations were good to get the word out, but real impact came when working individual-to-individual.

Adoption

Many volunteers go into an assignment with high expectations for the work to be done. Yet, it must be understood that progress takes time and the ideas and developments implemented by one volunteer might take years to take shape. At other times, ideas and projects are rejected all together, for it is the community that ultimately decides if they will accept the new technology. In light of this, about one-third of our respondents felt that at least one new agroforestry technology was adopted during their service. Another one-third felt that there was not adoption of any new technologies and the last third was unsure as to whether there had been any adoption of agroforestry.

There are many reasons given in the scientific literature as to why agroforestry is or is not adopted in a community. This survey also sought these conclusions from the RPCVs and with striking similarities they

told us why they thought they had or had not seen adoption of agroforestry. One of the stated reasons why agroforestry was adopted in a community was that there had been prior exposure to agroforestry. Volunteers in older agroforestry programs felt that their predecessors had implanted the ideas and demonstrations well enough to perk the community's interest. There were often community leaders already established in these areas and the transfer of agroforestry technologies was enhanced. Another cited reason for adoption was that the positive benefits of agroforestry had been demonstrated, this could have been from a past volunteer or other organization. The community had already seen that agroforestry systems could be beneficial to their farms and were much more willing to participate. A last reason for successful adoption was contributed to the fact that the agroforestry system being introduced met the needs of the community. The system was appropriate for the community and beneficial to the community.

Reasons that a community did not adopt agroforestry were also pretty consistent across volunteers. The primary reason for lack of adoption was that the farmer lacked the resources to do so. This could mean that the farmer did not have the time to invest in planting agroforestry systems, that the farmer did not have the land to allocate to such a system, or that the farmer did not have the money to invest in such a system. Another common reason for lack of adoption is the obstacle of getting the farmer to switch to a new planting system. There is automatically a risk associated with switching from the farmer's normal planting system to something new and foreign to the farmer. Even if the farmer has seen positive evidence that agroforestry has some benefit over the current system, there is still often a reluctance to switch from a known way of life to an unknown. A third reason for a lack of adoption is that the time needed for positive results to be procured from an agroforestry system can sometimes be too long to grab the interests of the farmer. A last reason for lack of adoption is prior exposure through government, industry, or non-governmental organization planting programs that were negative or forceful. Past government land policies, cultural beliefs, and even some religious beliefs can all influence a community's perception of agroforestry. These obstacles can only be overcome over time and through demonstration of the positive benefits of agroforestry.

Impact

What any PC volunteer should expect is that they will be involved in a multitude of projects and activities in their community, all contributing to their overall impact. As we indicated earlier, many "agroforestry" volunteers spent little time on agroforestry. Instead, many other innovative and beneficial programs were carried out in conjunction or in lieu of agroforestry. Some of these projects included: providing health education and services, teaching English, working on watershed and soil conservation projects, and introducing new cooking technologies. PC volunteers reach out in many ways in their host village and can provide a number of beneficial opportunities and projects that go beyond just those stated in the PC assignment.

Because of the multitude of projects a volunteer can be involved in, we wanted to know how the RPCVs felt their agroforestry extension work and overall presence impacted the community. Most volunteers felt their overall impact was higher than that for agroforestry. Volunteers were asked to rate themselves on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 5 being the highest) or they could choose no impact. Most volunteers gave themselves a 4 out of 5 for overall impact on the community and a 3 out of 5 for impact on agroforestry technologies. We also asked RPCVs to rate how effective they felt they had been at achieving the goals that PC outlined for their assignment. Using the same scale as above, most volunteers rated themselves at a 4 out of 5.

Additional Questions

As Masters International students we wanted to know what RPCVs felt were some areas of research that would be practical and beneficial to do in the field. Such topics would help improve the efficacy of PC programs in agroforestry or related fields. The research could also be easily conducted by MI students or other interested PC volunteers. One of the most common answers was to establish research plots. These plots could be used to test the beneficial and/or negative effects of agroforestry technologies on crop yields. They could be used to demonstrate the beneficial or negative functions of agroforestry systems for crops. Research plots could be established to test the efficacy of a nursery technique or silvicultural treatment for trees. Another use would be to test different green manures and their effects on soil fertility. Some additional research ideas involved assessing the attitudes and the adoption decision-making process of villagers toward agroforestry. Another identified topic was the need to translate technical documents into

the native language. Lastly, there was the potential for studies on community interactions with forests as well as ethnographical and historical studies of the village.

CONCLUSIONS

The survey results reflect the overall goals for and impacts of Peace Corps agroforestry volunteers. The results indicate that long-term volunteer participation in locally initiated programs experience the most success. Approaches that tried to change community lifestyles were not as successful, nor were they always in accordance with the stated goals of Peace Corps' programs. The goal of Peace Corps is to work within the needs and constraints of the community, while seeking to improve their livelihoods with more sustainable technologies. From the 11 surveys reviewed here, it was obvious that programs that had been established for some time were starting to make positive impact and other newer ones were struggling to become established for various reasons. Programs faltered when they did not have community support, lacked a series of supportive volunteers, or lacked demonstrable effects. Some of the same results indicate that success as a Peace Corps volunteer is not measured by assignment (agroforestry) impact. Instead, it is measured by the knowledge and understanding that both the volunteer and the community gain about each other and about the challenges and hopes of implementing a sustainable future.

Recommendations that can be drawn from the survey results include revised outreach strategies to efficiently use volunteers' time. In particular, emphasizing creation of local demonstration plots and focusing on development of productive, one-on-one personal relationships within the community seem to be highly effective strategies. As well, volunteer participation in other types of programs allowed success outside of the realm of agroforestry, but within the mandate of Peace Corps. Accordingly, a reevaluation and redirection of some agroforestry placements may be appropriate.

In conclusion, research needs run the gamut of establishing research plots applicable to an ecoregion, efforts to translate appropriate technical materials, and participating in fieldwork that ties into larger, ongoing social research projects. Research and experimentation established during the 27 months of service of one volunteer may be continued by the community itself or future volunteers. The contribution, by Peace Corps volunteers, of over two years of fieldwork could add a lot of credibility to many scientific studies that are usually financially and temporally constrained when conducting research. As well, capable volunteers can very coherently integrate the applied research into ongoing Peace Corps assignments.

Given further funding and time the results of this survey could be verified and rounded off by contacting communities that have hosted Peace Corps volunteers and researching successful and failed projects.

A special thanks to all those who took the time to participate in this survey—your candidness and reflections have been most helpful as we prepare to embark upon our PC experiences.