Development makes for an interesting double-edged sword. Many would agree that it is perfectly natural to want to lend a hand when one possesses the means to do so. But, does the attempt at the alleviation of suffering, injustice, systemic issues, or past wrongs justify the roles of benefactor and recipient forced on the participants? Are we to consider the reduced sovereignty of the nations or peoples receiving developmental aid? What about dependency? Corruption?

The Peace Corps represents a unique middle ground on the helpful-harmful spectrum. On the one end, it is an institution of a hegemonic superpower that deposits its citizens in foreign nations with minimal training in order to “aid” indigenous populations. Sounds a bit colonial, doesn’t it? That being said, I understand why people write off the Peace Corps as another example of the United States forcing its global agenda down the throats of other nations and peoples. But, leaving it at this takes a stance too simplistic and reductive to be worthy of unquestionable merit, as it ignores the efforts the organization and the people within it have taken and continue to take to ensure that their hosts are empowered and informed. In short, their efforts to be advocates.

First, the Peace Corps is not “forced” onto anyone. The organization must be invited in by a host country. And this is no open-ended invitation, either. If host countries want the United States out, relations sour, or anything in between, the contracts aren’t renewed. Once a country *does* establish a Peace Corps post, the Peace Corps does not just fill it with its own people: they hire host country nationals, experts in their chosen fields, to develop and implement programs that would benefit communities in the most effective, sustainable way. But what really sets the Peace Corps apart from other developmental organizations are its volunteers.

Peace Corps Volunteers are some of the nuttiest people America has to offer. (I would know – I’m one of them.) It really takes a certain kind of grit to raise their hand and say, “Yes, I will move thousands of miles from friends and family, to a place where I don’t know the language or culture, to be a tool for people I’ve never met before, for over two years. Oh, and I’ll do it all for very little.” Some are socially conscious, well-aware of their country’s colonial roots, and are far more concerned with doing right than doing good. More often than not they are young, energetic, and eager to be the best volunteer they can be. But the road to hell is paved with good intentions, and even the most well-meaning of volunteers can be problematic. Some volunteers come to their host countries with preconceived ideas about what they want their service to be, about the kinds of projects they want to implement and how they want to meet the perceived needs of their communities. Through fault of their own and not of their own, volunteers enter their service with prejudices perpetuated by our nation’s media and our generations can-do attitude. But it is only once the volunteer gets to their community that this is all tested.

The Peace Corps is, above all else, about the community. No matter how well thought out a volunteer’s initial plans may be, they will be trumped by the needs and desires of the community. This can lead to some interesting circumstances. You might be posted in a community where 12.7% of children under the age of five have the malaria parasite prevalent in their bodies—which for the Eastern Province of Zambia, is the actual average. Seeing a need to target the 0-5 age range, you might devise the most intricate, detailed malaria-prevention program the world has ever known. But if the community doesn’t want it, then tough toenails. It’s not happening. Or, worse, what happens if the national supply of mosquito nets is experiencing a mass shortage because the country is dependent on receiving it through foreign aid, a notoriously precarious relationship dogged down by bureaucracy. Learning to work within a community is one of the most nuanced parts of a volunteer’s service. It takes countless failures to get right, and often results in several fruitless months of effort, which is part of the reason a Peace Corps service is as long as it is. It is, in essence, what sets the Peace Corps apart from other developmental aid organizations: it is, at its core, a community endeavor.

Take my own community, for example. I am currently posted in a rural village in the Eastern province of Zambia. My primary assignment is to work on capacity development at our primary school, which centers around teaching English, but also, most importantly, includes facilitating teacher trainings, working with adult literacy, and gender equality. My secondary assignment is to work on a community level to develop programs aimed at combating HIV, malaria, early marriages, and gender-based violence. These are my *stated* objectives, but my actual service has been dictated by the desires of the community, as well as the resources they have at their disposal, which, in my case, is the school itself.

School infrastructure in rural Zambia tends to be a little rough around the edges, and my school is no exception. We have three classroom blocks of three rooms each, giving us a total of nine classrooms, but not all of them are functional. The classrooms used for grades 1-4 are currently out of commission for a variety of reasons. Built in 1954, my school is old., and not much has changed since then. The result is two classroom blocks that look as if someone took a jack hammer to them in the middle of a tornado. Consequentially, our school has had to divide up the school day between grades: grades 5-9 use the working classrooms in the morning, while grades 1-4 use them in the afternoon.

It is this which has crippled our school’s ability to engage the students in much needed extracurricular development; because the only usable classrooms are in use during both the morning and afternoon, we are unable to carry-out educational programs such as GLOW (Girls Leading Our World), GRS (Grass-Roots Soccer, an HIV/AIDS program) or even programs designed to increase literacy. And this is to say nothing of the condition of the classrooms that *are* being used. The floors are covered in chips and cracks that leave the desks at variety of weird angles. The chalkboards are useless, their surfaces so glossy they produce nothing more than a ghost of what’s been written on them. The windows have no glass, and the classroom walls have holes in them, leaving students exposed to the elements. Rain pours in, soaking their notebooks. The wind is a constant distractor, blowing loose pages across the room like tumbleweeds in a desert, and during the hot season, the classroom *is* a desert: dry, dusty, insufferably hot. These conditions are inconducive to learning and have impacted my ability to carry out my service goals, let alone the goals of my fellow-teachers.

So, this is part of what my service has become: rather than being about just teaching and implementing the extracurricular programs that I feel would be beneficial to the community, it has become about restoring the school. My biggest undertaking will be a community-driven school restoration grant that will allow us to buy the materials needed to bring our school back up to working order: new cement for the floors and walls, paint for the chalkboards, new frames and panes for the windows. But even here my role is sidelined by the community. They are the ones writing lists, creating a budget, organizing volunteer workers, telling *me* what needs to be done. I am not the driving force behind this endeavor – I am simply a cog in the machine, working together with the community towards a common goal.

Peace Corps Partnership Program grants (or PCPPs) are common amongst Peace Corps Volunteers and are about the safest ways for people in America looking to donate to a good cause to be sure their money is being put to good use. They are written by Peace Corps Volunteers who have worked with their communities to identify a need that the community itself wants addressed but lacks the resources to do so. Often, they are based around infrastructure—building libraries or new school blocks, or in my case restoration. What’s great about PCPPs is that you know the money is going directly to the community. It isn’t being filtered through a committee of sticky-fingered bureaucrats, and it isn’t being spent on well-intentioned but futile programs. So, if you have some spare change burning a hole in your pocket, there are few better options than to donate to a PCPP. If you wish to do so, you can visit https://www.peacecorps.gov/donate/projects/primary-school-rehabilitation-pp-19-611-020/ (my own project is listed as “Primary School Rehabilitation”, but feel free to pick your favorite and donate to that.)

The Peace Corps is far from perfect. It has the same flaws that plagues any institution of its scale and scope. So do its volunteers. Some of them *are* “white saviors” and some of them do a poor job of readjusting their world lens when viewing their communities. It’s easy to write the Peace Corps off as another misstep in the futile goal of development. But based on what I’ve seen, and what I’ve experienced, Peace Corps and some of its’ volunteers are working to correct this, and to instead amplify the voice and capabilities of their communities and host countries.