

**PEACE CORPS/MALAWI
A CASE STUDY OF EFFECTIVE
PEACE CORPS PROGRAMS**

EMBRACING THE WARM HEART OF AFRICA



OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

**PEACE CORPS/MALAWI
A CASE STUDY OF EFFECTIVE
PEACE CORPS PROGRAMS**

EMBRACING THE WARM HEART OF AFRICA

September 2006

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of stylized, overlapping loops and curves, positioned above a thin horizontal line.

H. David Kotz, Inspector General

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
PC/MALAWI: EMBRACING THE WARM HEART OF AFRICA.....	2
THE FOUNDATION OF A GOOD PROGRAM	3
THE STAFF: TECHNICAL COMPETENCE AND TEAMWORK	3
THE COUNTRY DIRECTOR: LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT SKILLS.....	5
PEACE CORPS PARTNERS: COLLABORATION AND COORDINATION	5
VOLUNTEER INPUT: PROJECT DESIGN MEETS THE REALITY OF LOCAL CONDITIONS...	7
PRE-SERVICE TRAINING: TAILORED TO MEET THE NEEDS OF THE VOLUNTEERS	7
SITE DEVELOPMENT: THE EFFECTIVE USE OF PARTNERS.....	12
SITE VISITS: FINDING WAYS TO CONNECT WITH THE VOLUNTEERS.....	14
PHASE II: THE VOLUNTEERS' PERSPECTIVE.....	15
MALAWI IS A WELCOMING CULTURE.....	16
A DEDICATED STAFF	16
PROGRAM SUPPORT	17
EFFECTIVE PEACE CORPS/HOST COUNTRY RELATIONS.....	17
PRE-SERVICE TRAINING (PST)	18
IN-SERVICE TRAINING	18
SITE VISITS ARE INVALUABLE	18
CONCLUSION: EMBRACING THE WARM HEART OF AFRICA.....	19

INTRODUCTION

This report is one of nine in the Office of Inspector General's (OIG) Study of Effective Peace Corps Programs. The study consists of nine case studies of Peace Corps programs – three in each region: Africa; Inter-America and Pacific; and Europe, Mediterranean, and Asia. Chosen in consultation with regional management, the posts selected were Niger, Malawi, Mauritania, Panama, Paraguay, Honduras, Georgia, Ukraine, and the Philippines. The purpose of the study was to document what these posts do to effect high quality programs.

We defined high quality programs as:

- Programs that prepare and place Volunteers in sites where they can be productive and are hosted by communities and organizations organized to be their partners in achieving the purpose of their assignment (goal one).
- Programs and assignments that bring Volunteers satisfaction, provide a healthy cross-cultural exchange (goal two), and inspire them to bring the world home (goal three).

The study of these programs was conducted in two phases. In phase I, OIG staff conducted extensive interviews with the staff at each overseas post involved with designing and planning programs; training Volunteers; developing sites; providing technical, medical, emotional, and administrative support to Volunteers; and managing the operational aspects of ensuring that these functions are performing effectively. Initial reports were then drafted and sent to the staff for their review.

In phase II, we spoke with Volunteers, mostly in small groups, about the same subjects: training, site development, site visits, support, and satisfaction with their Volunteer experience. In this phase, we asked Volunteers for their perspective on what the staff described they did in phase I. In three posts, Paraguay, Honduras, and Panama, we also interviewed counterparts during phase II for their viewpoints on implementing an effective Peace Corps program and a mutually beneficial Volunteer site placement and assignment.

The purpose of this study is to describe how some of the agency's best programs are led, managed, and administered: the procedures they use, the management approaches, the staffing assignments, and the programming and administrative details that distinguish one post's operations from another. The objective was to use real life examples as the basis for setting expectations for assessing program effectiveness and as a resource for staff to understand what it takes to run an effective program, as well as to provide some tools and ideas for establishing high-performing programs.

In some of our discussions with Volunteers in phase II, they felt that some of what the staff described to us in Phase I was not actually being done, was not being done effectively, or was not having the intended positive effect. This is not reflected in this

report, because of its focus on describing what the posts do well. But we did we report this information to the staff on an informal basis, and the instances of this type of feedback were not common. In general, the Volunteers' views did not contradict the staff in terms of the principal elements represented in well-run programs that are described here.

In writing these case studies, we decided not to name staff we credit for what we found to work well, but only to make reference to staff position titles. Our intention in doing this was to put the emphasis on the actual accomplishments, rather than who performed them. We do not mean in any way to minimize the credit that many individuals rightfully deserve for their excellent work. What we want to demonstrate is that there are actions that anyone can take or make an effort to initiate that are shown to effect positive Peace Corps program outcomes.

The PC/Malawi case study was conducted by James Scanlon.¹ Mr. Scanlon was in Malawi September 11 -18, 2005 for the first phase of the study and returned May 9 - 23, 2006 for the second phase.

PC/MALAWI: EMBRACING THE WARM HEART OF AFRICA

Tourist books describe Malawi as "The Warm Heart of Africa," a title taken from a series of books about the country. The extraordinary warmth and friendliness of Malawians draws Volunteers into the culture. Behind the warm smiles, however, lies an immense burden of poverty, hunger, lack of education, and pandemic diseases that threaten the well-being of this nation of 10 million people. Yet, it is the opportunity to work with the people of Malawi to address some of their problems that motivates the Volunteers.

Table 1. Volunteers by Project

Project	Education	Natural Resources Management	Community Health and HIV/AIDS
Number of Volunteers	35	30	40

Source: FY 2005 PC/Malawi Project Status Reports

Over 2000 Peace Corps Volunteers have served in Malawi since 1963. There have been two breaks in the history of PC/Malawi: from 1969 to 1973 and from 1976 to 1978. The Peace Corps returned to Malawi in 1978 and has served continuously since then. Prior to 1994, when President Hastings Banda stepped down from office, foreigners were not allowed to live in rural areas. After 1994, the opening up of Malawian society made it possible to place Peace Corps Volunteers at the community level. Presently, Volunteers serve in the areas of education, natural resources management, community health, and HIV/AIDS as a part of the President's Emergency Plan for HIV/AIDS Relief.

¹ Mr. Scanlon was hired as an expert to assist with this study. He is a former country director twice, a former regional Chief of Operations, and a former Director of Recruitment.

THE FOUNDATION OF A GOOD PROGRAM

The staff of PC/Malawi attributed their success to the quality and dedication of the staff and country director, their excellent working relationships with the Government of Malawi and private-sector partners, well-designed programs, effective training, and the Volunteers.²

THE STAFF: TECHNICAL COMPETENCE AND TEAMWORK

Technical Competence. The staff have an array of experience and technical expertise that benefits the programs and the Volunteers (see Table 2). They have strong educational backgrounds in their areas of expertise, most have worked with international development organizations, and several have worked for the Government of Malawi. The Associate Peace Corps Director (APCD) for education, for example, was a teacher in the secondary schools in Malawi, served as inspector of schools for the Ministry of Education, and worked at the Institute for Education as a curriculum specialist.

Table 2. Background and Experience of Staff

POSITION	BACKGROUND AND EXPERIENCE
Country Director, USDH	RPCV Cameroon, PTO in Russia and Armenia.
APCD/Environment, USDH ³	RPCV Haiti, two+ years in current position; three years as consultant with Malawi Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry; Professor of Agriculture, Youth Development and Home Economics and university extension agent at West Virginia University.
APCD/Health	Ten years as APCD/Health; nurse/midwife degrees; experience as Public Health nurse; taught at college of nursing 14 years; postgraduate training in community health in South Africa; graduate studies in health and community development work at Howard University, Washington, D.C.
APCD/Education	Six years as APCD/Education; teacher in Malawi secondary schools; inspector of schools at the Ministry of Education; Curriculum Specialist at Institute of Education; Bachelors degree in Education from Halifax University, Canada; and Masters of Education at the University of Illinois.
Training Officer	Five years as training manager; education in training and social science; taught language and community studies at university; and worked as a program and training officer for Save the Children.
Program Assistant for Health	Two years in current position, eight years with Canadian Physicians for Aid and Relief, and two years with Action Aid, a British NGO.
Program Assistant for Education and Environment	Six years as a program assistant. Previously with the Ministry of Justice, local courts, and as the personal assistant to the Chief Executive of the Medical Council of Malawi

Source: Staff interviews

² All references to staff are to those at post at the time of our visit for this study.

³ Present at the time of this study.

Teamwork. The staff described themselves as working well together as a team. They believe that their commitment to open communication and careful planning has helped them to be creative in trying new approaches to programming and training strategies and adjusting to significant changes, such as the shift from center-based to community-based training and from placing Volunteers in mostly urban to mostly rural sites. The APCDs operate openly and invite each other to review and participate in their project plans and activities. They participate in each other's pre-service trainings (PSTs) and in-service trainings (ISTs) and support and visit each other's Volunteers on site visits. They support each other's programs through cross-sector collaboration and work together to integrate program and training through activities such as Girls Clubs (education sector), Wild Life Clubs (environmental sector), and Life Skills Clubs (health sector).

The spirit of cooperation across the projects extends to the Volunteers as well (see Box1).

Box 1. How they collaborate. . .

Volunteer cross-sector collaboration has provided support and a positive attitude for Volunteers at site. Volunteers assist one another with activities, such as Health Volunteers organizing Life Skills Clubs or Environment Volunteers organizing Wild Life Clubs for the development of the school communities.

PC/Malawi PSR, Education, 2005

Some examples of cross-sector cooperation include environment Volunteers sharing their sector expertise and experience in gardens and income generation with the health and education sector; and the health and education sector Volunteers working with the environment sector on Life

Skills, Gender and Development, Girls Club activities, and skits and theater presentations.

Staff share information at regularly scheduled staff meetings and develop a yearly calendar of events. Senior staff meet weekly in a management meeting. There is a monthly programming and training meeting for APCDs, training staff, and program assistants and a monthly meeting for the entire staff. The calendar, available to all staff, outlines the major events and helps them coordinate activities and share common resources, such as drivers and vehicles. It is updated regularly and it helps staff to plan and work efficiently. Events on the calendar include:

- Pre-service trainings, in-service trainings, and close- of- service conferences.
- Integrated Planning and Budget Strategy (IPBS).
- Project plan reviews.
- Staff retreats.
- Travel plans.
- Site visits.
- Staff annual leave.

The routine sharing of information and cooperation allows the staff to create opportunities that maximize the use of staff and resources.

THE COUNTRY DIRECTOR: LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT SKILLS

The staff attributed their ability to build strong programs and grow professionally to the country director's leadership and management skills. They described the country director as supporting them in constructive ways and taking a participatory approach to decision making that has created an empowering work environment. They described the country director's management processes as transparent, offering the budget process as an example of transparency and participatory decision making. The APCDs participated fully in developing the post's IPBS. As a result, the APCDs know what resources they have to do their jobs and can plan their activities accordingly. Staff felt that this style of decision making contributes positively to the sense of teamwork, to the positive staff morale, and to their more effective and efficient use of resources and time.

The staff also described the country director as "a great listener who trusts the staff to manage and do their jobs." She has worked with staff on improving their performance and gives credit to staff for a job well done. She has supported their teamwork by holding all-staff retreats once or twice a year to address key issues, which, according to staff, renews their commitment and boosts staff morale. The country director's knowledge of programming and training issues and her advocacy for programming has helped staff to build strong programs.

PEACE CORPS PARTNERS: COLLABORATION AND COORDINATION

The Peace Corps has been in Malawi since 1963 and has an excellent reputation; many of today's high level ministry and NGO officials were taught by Volunteers. Their appreciation for Peace Corps' previous work and investments has increased the government's readiness to cooperate and support Peace Corps' operations today. As a result, PC/Malawi enjoys good working relationships with the Government of Malawi, from the Ministry level to the local government officials, and with its partners in the NGO sector. The program and training staff work closely with ministry officials over project design, they coordinate with local government officials over the selection of sites for Volunteers, and invite government officials as technical trainers for pre-service and in-service training.⁴ The staff also consult with its partners in the NGO sector on its health and agroforestry projects.

The staff feel this has strengthened the caliber of their programs and made technical training more relevant to the needs of the Volunteers and the communities they serve. This ongoing partnership and constant communication also helps staff better meet the needs of the government and the Malawians. The country director and APCDs work hard to ensure that the government is on board, has the information it needs on Peace Corps activities, and stays involved in programming and training issues and activities. In return, the Government of Malawi is responsive to PC/Malawi's requests (See Box 2).

⁴ Invited officials are paid an honorarium.

Box 2. Partnership with the government

PC/Malawi has excellent working relationships with its partners – ministry officials, district government representatives, local/community leaders, and NGO officials. Peace Corps' significant and positive historical presence here has helped our programming efforts. The students who Volunteers taught here in the past are now high level government and NGO officials (the former Vice President of Malawi was taught by Volunteers, and he was a Peace Corps language trainer), and Peace Corps is now reaping the benefits of what they sowed in the past. Our partners come forward to support us when needed and come to our PST, swearing-in, ISTs, and COS conferences.

Country Director, PC/Malawi

The process that staff and their partners use to revise project plans, identify appropriate sites, and place Volunteers in the villages involves coordination over numerous details. While staff acknowledged that the steps they go through from revising project plans to placing Volunteers at site is a labor-intensive process, they feel that the time they invest in the details makes a difference in the quality of their programs. According to the staff, the process unfolds as follows:

- Peace Corps staff coordinate with ministry officials on project plans. Any revisions to project plans are discussed with the ministry and do not proceed until the relevant officials at the ministry have signed off.
- The Ministries also review the resumes of prospective Trainees. The Government of Malawi has never disapproved any Trainee, but PC/Malawi requests the Trainees' resumes from headquarters two months prior to PST to be able to honor the government's request to review them.
- After the ministry has approved the project plans, the Peace Corps staff meet with government representatives at the regional and local levels to get their input and to begin identifying work sites for the Volunteers.
- The APCDs work with local representatives to identify housing, transportation needs, and potential supervisors and counterparts.
- Local leaders, most of whom understand Peace Corps' mission and know of the positive work that the Volunteers have done in Malawi, work with the APCDs to secure the commitment of village communities to support a Volunteer.
- Once a community has agreed to host a Volunteer, district and local leaders work with those communities to make sure they understand the mission of Peace Corps as well as their shared responsibilities with Peace Corps for that Volunteer's work, support, and safety.
- The Peace Corps staff and their partners in the government and the NGO sector also work together to design and implement a comprehensive training program that equips Volunteers with the skills they need to be effective at their sites.

VOLUNTEER INPUT: PROJECT DESIGN MEETS THE REALITY OF LOCAL CONDITIONS

PC/Malawi involves Volunteers in its program development processes to ensure that the goals of the projects fit the reality of the Volunteers in their communities. The APCDs invite six Volunteers from each of the three projects (education, natural resources management, and community health and HIV/AIDS) to participate. The Volunteers formulate questions about each project's goals, activities, and outcomes that they pose to their fellow Volunteers. The Volunteers are asked to reflect on the proposed goals and objectives and to offer suggestions on how they might be modified to address the issues the Volunteers face in their daily work. The committees of Volunteers collect the responses and make presentations to the APCDs.

This brings the Volunteers, as a whole, into the planning and monitoring process. Their involvement gives them ownership over their work, renews their enthusiasm as Volunteers, but also helps staff respond more effectively to local conditions. For example, the shift of Volunteers in the natural resources management project from government-provided housing in urban areas to housing in the villages was in response to the trouble that Volunteers had learning the language and culture. Without a grasp of these two elements, the Volunteers were less effective in the promotion of community-based natural resource management techniques. According to the Project Status Report, Volunteers have:

“... become more productive and have provided better protection of reserves by moving out into the villages and living with the resource users (and abusers) directly. The PCV has a more satisfying cultural exchange experience; is safer due to our use of the acceptance model of Safety and Security (rather than a protection model); has a greater chance of working side by side with key informant/positive defiant/innovators as they are direct neighbors; and, as a result of being happier in their experience/work, our ET rate has dropped significantly.”⁵

PRE-SERVICE TRAINING: TAILORED TO MEET THE NEEDS OF THE VOLUNTEERS

According to the 2004 Survey, Volunteers in Malawi rated the quality and effectiveness of technical and language training as exceeding that of other Peace Corps countries.

Table 3. Evaluation of PST Topics

PST Training Topics	Malawi Ratings 2004	Global Ratings 2004
Use the language needed in work and social interactions	3.63	3.37
Perform technical aspects of your work	3.20	2.79
Work with project goals and objectives	3.08	2.83

Source: Volunteer Survey, 2004

Average Rating (1-5 scale, 1=Not Effective, 5=Very Effective)

⁵ PC/Malawi Project Status Review, Environment, 2005.

Targeted Technical Training

The program and training staff attribute their success to several facets of PST that make it possible for staff to meet the needs of the Volunteers:

- Sector-specific PSTs make it possible for staff to tailor training to the needs of the Trainees.
- Close collaboration between program and training staff so that project goals and training activities are closely integrated.
- The determination of site placements by the third week of PST lets Trainees focus on technical and language needs specific to their sites.
- The continual presence of program staff at PST gives staff and Trainees a chance to know each other.
- The involvement of experienced Volunteers gives the Trainees insights into what is possible.
- Post-PST training provides the Volunteers with ongoing opportunities to hone their technical skills.

Staff felt the most important feature that made their technical training effective was holding separate PSTs for each of its three sectors. By focusing on a single group of Trainees, the staff felt that they could pay greater attention to the technical components and design lessons and activities that help the Trainees attain the right competencies for their work. The October training for the education Volunteers, for example, has been tailored to respond to Volunteers' need for more classroom teaching experience. It is 10 weeks in comparison to the 8-week PST held for the natural resources management and the community health and HIV/AIDS projects. With a smaller number of Volunteers, the technical trainers are able to provide more individual attention and have greater flexibility in developing specialized activities required to meet the competencies of each sector.

The environment Trainees arrive in March, the health Trainees in June, and the education Trainees in October. The March and June PSTs are eight weeks long, and the October PST is 10 weeks.

Another benefit of separate trainings is that the almost continuous cycle of training makes it possible for PC/Malawi to retain a core group of highly qualified training staff. The continuity of staff is important in a post that emphasizes teamwork and values a high degree of integration between project goals and training design. While the training manager is responsible for the overall development and management of the training program, the planning and implementation of PST involves the entire staff and a handful of selected Volunteers. "The training only gets better and better," stated a program assistant.

In all three projects, PC/Malawi invites skilled and experienced trainers from the relevant Ministries, who, subsequent to PST, serve as resources for the Volunteers. In the health projects, for example, the Ministry of Health recommended that Peace Corps hire the technical experts who train the Health Surveillance Assistants (HSA). The HSAs work

with the health Volunteers at the district health clinics and are responsible for outreach to the surrounding communities.

APCDs work closely with the training staff to outline the elements of their projects and identify the technical, linguistic, and cultural competencies that Trainees need to perform the major tasks. Together, they review the evaluations of previous PSTs and any additional feedback from the APCDs, Volunteers, supervisors, and counterparts to identify past strengths and weaknesses and make adjustments to the current program. One goal is to ensure that technical training directly addresses the goals of the project.

Box 3. Hands on technical training. . .

Specific hands-on creation of these techniques during weekly sessions is coupled by Self-Directed Learning time for practice with home stay families. Each Trainee is expected to dig gardens, build mud stoves, plant vetiver grass, build compost, etc. during time spent with family. Host families are chosen with this in mind.

PC/Malawi PSR, Environment, 2005

PC/Malawi uses a modified version of the community-based training (CBT) model. For approximately the first week, the Trainees live and receive training at the training site, the Malawi College of Forestry and Wildlife in Dedza. This period is for orientation, welcomes and introductions, medical and APCD interviews, presentation of objectives for training, policies and procedures, and three days of specific technical information. For the next four

weeks, the Trainees live with families in nearby villages where they continue to work with their language and cross cultural trainer, who lives with them in the village. They also participate in tasks related to their projects that represent experienced technical training (see Box 3).

A significant focus of the technical training for all Volunteers is on adjusting to a village community. The Trainees learn how to carry out the community assessments that they will conduct during their first three months of living and working in their villages. In the sixth week of training, the Trainees travel to their assigned sites and stay there for one week. If the site is a replacement site, the Volunteer helps to introduce the Trainee to the community and provide an orientation. At the end of the week, the Trainees return to the Training site at Dedza to complete their final two weeks of training. This time is spent reviewing site issues, studying for the final language assessment, and discussing any concerns with the APCD and training staff so that they can make an informed decision about swearing in.

The 10-week training for the education Trainees includes five weeks of practice teaching in a rural school. According to the APCD/Education, “Using community day schools for practice teaching and increasing the number of weeks those Trainees are in the classroom builds their confidence. Trainees get a feel of what it is like to teach in a community school before finally going to teach at site. Their five weeks in the classroom exposes the Trainees to life in a Malawian classroom. This helps reduce their shock when they get to their site because they are familiar with a Malawian classroom.”

Early site selection

Program staff organize their site development process so that sites are selected well in advance of PST. This allows staff to match the Trainees to sites in the third week of PST so that they have sufficient time to learn the local language and cultural practices of their site. The training staff evaluate the Trainees to determine their learning style and then group them accordingly. They also select PST host families who they feel can best support the learning process.

The process is described by the training manager in the 2005 Training Status Report:

Soon after PCTs arrive, the PCMO and APCD conduct intake interviews to determine site placements based on trainee's health needs or restrictions, and/or trainee's personal preferences. The interview results are passed on to the TD [training director] and Language Coordinator [LC]. The TD and LC conduct a learning skills inventory to identify trainees with similar learning styles before grouping them into specific language classes. The results are used by the Homestay Coordinator to pair up trainees with prospective host families for community-based language learning.

The effort pays off in the language level achieved by the PC/Malawi Trainees. The 2005 Training Status Report states that of the last three training groups, only one Trainee reached less than an intermediate low level of language competency required. Volunteers were also highly satisfied with language training. They rated the language classes more favorably than did Volunteers worldwide.

A principal role for program staff at PST

Finally, the continual presence and occasional participation of the program staff at PST helps the APCDs and Trainees to get to know each other. The APCDs are able to be present at PST because they finish selecting and preparing sites before the Trainees arrive in country. Their time interacting with the Trainees helps the APCDs make informed decisions about site matching. They can also monitor the progress of the Trainees and participate in the weekly feedback, reporting, and assessment meetings.

Role of Volunteers at PST

Staff invite a handful of Volunteers, selected for the quality of their work and sector expertise, to participate in PST. They assist with technical, language, and cultural sessions and can form strong bonds with the Trainees. Their presence at PST, the opportunity to demonstrate their expertise to the Trainees, and talk about their experiences helps the Trainees envision the possibilities and understand what it takes to integrate culturally.

Post-PST technical training

PST is the first in a continuum of training events. Three to five months after PST is a 10-day Reconnect IST, followed by a three-day mid-service training. The 10-day Reconnect IST has two parts. After the first four days, the Volunteers are joined in the training by their counterparts. The education sector is slightly different in that their Reconnect is six days long, while their mid-service is five days and includes counterpart teachers.

The development of the IST design and its implementation rests primarily with the APCDs and their program assistants. The focus is on technical training. The new Volunteers identify their areas of need for technical training, and these assessments are supplemented by feedback from their counterparts and supervisors and from the PST. The Volunteers' counterparts attend and participate in the IST.

The technical trainers at IST are primarily professional trainers from the relevant ministries, and several outstanding Volunteers who have demonstrated success in their projects. Additionally, in the environment project, officials from the Departments of Forestry and Parks come to lead individual sessions. As noted previously, the other project APCDs participate in all the ISTs, make presentations, and occasionally bring designated Volunteers from their sector who have worked well in their communities. The sessions focus on "hands-on" and "how-to-teach" presentations where the Volunteers work with the Trainers on the practical steps of how to accomplish their assignments. As in PST, there are feedback and assessment briefings at the end of the IST, and reports are circulated to all senior staff.

The mid-service conference usually takes place toward the end of the first year of Volunteer service. Again, the emphasis is on technical training and relevant project activities for their second year of service. In the environment sector, all second year Volunteers who are soon to close service are invited to join on the last day for what becomes the All-Environment Conference that brings together Trainees, one-year Volunteers, and COSing Volunteers. A variety of sharing and bonding experiences highlights the event and builds Volunteer (and staff) morale. According to the APCD, the health program also has started this practice recently and is finding similar value in having all Volunteers from a given sector gather even if it is only for one day.

A three-day close-of-service conference is used by staff as an opportunity to learn from the Volunteers—a kind of reverse training.

SITE DEVELOPMENT: THE EFFECTIVE USE OF PARTNERS

Box 4. PC/Malawi site development

Our site development methodology now has all CBNRM [community-based natural resources management] Volunteers living in villages outside protected areas Private village housing is often much more rudimentary, but successful community integration and use of village home as demonstration area for gardens, water conservation, “sustainable living/permaculture” has been key to successful Volunteers.

PC/Malawi PSR, Environment, 2005

The staff successfully employ the same collaborative process for developing sites that they use to craft effective project plans. PC/Malawi Volunteers rated the post’s efforts to provide housing the highest of the nine posts selected for this programming study. The experience of the Volunteers validates special excellence in PC/Malawi’s site selection and preparation (see Box 4). In response to a question asking for PC/Malawi contributions to the quality of the Volunteer experience, one Volunteer wrote: “Good site

preparation—they made sure I was put in a site with people who wanted me there and who were prepared for me when I arrived.”

The APCDs work closely with officials in their partner ministries, as well as regional and local officials. The staff feel that government officials are good sources of information about areas of need, available resources, and how the Volunteers can best be used. According to the staff, the site selection procedure is a multi-step process in which they collect information from multiple sources before making their final selections:

- The APCD meets with ministry officials to obtain their input and recommendations for potential sites.
- The APCD then meets with regional government representatives, local officials, and community leaders to discuss the mission of Peace Corps, the respective responsibilities of the Peace Corps and the community, and clarify expectations regarding the work of the Volunteers. See Box 5.
- Based on these conversations, the APCD selects preliminary sites and shares this with ministry and local officials for comment, other Peace Corps staff (country director, other APCDs, PCMOs, the safety and security coordinator), and Volunteer Leaders.
- Following the feedback, the APCD makes another assessment and shares with all of the above and, as necessary, negotiates the final site selections.

The staff begin their site development process 5-6 months prior to PST. By the start of PST, the program staff have made their final selections of sites and are able to participate in PST. The process of consultation and collaboration appears unwieldy, but the APCDs feel that the process generates considerable support for the Volunteers. The APCD, program assistants, and community partners monitor the progress for completion of any last-minute site preparation.

Box 5. Stakeholders meet

Meeting with all the stake holders in the community during site development is helpful for the support of PCVs when they come to site. The meeting needs to include discussions of the role of the PCV in development and most important their role in supporting the volunteer if she/he has to succeed. The explanation should include written information in local language for community members who do not speak English. The key is to follow up with the community members to find out if they understand their role so that they do not let the volunteer make obvious mistakes due to their encouragement of inappropriate behavior.

PC/Malawi PSR, Health, 2005

No detail is too small

Program staff feel strongly that it is their job to ensure that Volunteers are productive, safe, and healthy, and they take personal responsibility for the same. To meet this goal, the staff believe it is necessary to pay attention to every step that goes into creating a successful Volunteer experience – from recruiting a potential Volunteer, to finding the right site for them, to witnessing a successful close of service. An example of their commitment to detail is the role of the VADs in preparing Volunteers for their service, especially their expectations toward their work and living conditions. The APCDs work closely with the Placement Office on the selection of recruits to serve in Malawi. According to the APCD/Environment, “...not just sending the VAD, but sending clarifying emails about specific degrees, job needs, skills that are needed by PCVs to ENJOY their work and overall experience.”⁶

PC/Malawi pays equal attention to matching Trainees to sites, attempting to match the skillset, personality, and desires of the Trainee to the skill needs and personality of the site. The APCDs conduct several interviews with the Trainees throughout PST. The key, acknowledged the APCD/Environment, “is to carefully prepare the Trainee and the host agency with realistic expectations.” The staff feel this helps to lower early termination rates and to increase overall satisfaction (not necessarily “happiness”) of the Volunteer at site.

Table 4. Volunteer Early Termination

	PC/Malawi	Africa Region	Global
FY 2001	16.1%	12.6%	12.3%
FY 2002	9.0%	11.4%	11.7%
FY 2003	8.8%	10.6%	10.5%
FY 2004	11.8%	11.7%	11.3%
FY 2005	7.6%	10.6%	11.7%

Source: Office of Planning, Policy, and Analysis, 2006

⁶ PC/Malawi Program Status Report, Environment, October, 2005.

Effective Volunteer support

PC/Malawi's senior staff believe that the most important aspect of Volunteer support is to design, develop and implement quality programs (project frameworks) that place Volunteers in a safe, productive, and satisfying site within the project framework.

Volunteer support includes a constructive and positive approach to Volunteer requests. This is not always easy for individual staff. Some requests become demands. Wants can become confused with needs. Staff have to balance between pampering and supporting. To do this effectively, PC/Malawi emphasizes a positive relationship between staff and Volunteers based on respecting each other's role and being clear about expectations. This begins in PST. Throughout their service, Volunteers hear from staff that they have volunteered to do a job in a culturally distinct and diverse environment. They have to accept responsibility to learn how to do that, how to work effectively and live in a culturally sensitive manner. "It is not called 'the toughest job you'll ever love' for nothing," as one senior staff observed.

Staff strive for balance. Staff may sometimes help the Volunteer secure supplies, materials and technical support information from ministry and local representatives or to put them in contact with someone who might be able to help. Other times, they may leave it to the Volunteer to explore the possible resources available within the community and to gain access to the appropriate individuals and materials. When there are personnel issues on the job with supervisors and counterparts, the local staff may help resolve the issues in cases where Volunteers have tried and failed. Staff try to coach Volunteers in solving their own problems wherever possible.

Peace Corps staff respect the work and the difficulties that Volunteers face. A visit to the office from a Volunteer takes priority. The staff recognize that such occasional trips are helpful to Volunteers' morale and supportive of their commitment to their assignments. Requests from Volunteers to leave their sites to come to the capital and the Peace Corps office are usually approved, and their reception at the Peace Corps office is friendly and supportive. Mondays from 7:30 a.m. – 12 noon is Volunteer support time, and all senior staff are in the office. Being available demonstrates their support and helps build collaborative relationships with the Volunteers.

SITE VISITS: FINDING WAYS TO CONNECT WITH THE VOLUNTEERS

The staff spend a great deal of time on the road visiting the Volunteers. Sites visits are a primary mechanism for supporting the Volunteers and giving them feedback on their work. This responsibility is not limited to the APCDs: the country director, program assistants, medical officers, and the safety and security coordinator all undertake site visits. The APCDs visit all new Volunteers at their sites during the first three months after PST and visit all Volunteers at their site once a year; the health program assistant visits about 30 Volunteers per year; the education/environmental program assistant visits about 20 sites per year; the PCMOs visit all Volunteer sites in a two-year period; and the safety and security coordinator visits about 60% of all Volunteer sites each year. Once

the schedule for site visits is set, the staff see the schedule as a serious commitment to the Volunteers.

The APCDs have developed distinctive approaches to finding ways of connecting with Volunteers during site visits. The APCD/Environment feels it is important to create a bond of empathy with the Volunteers, in addition to checking on their safety, adjustments to the culture, and progress in their work:

I plan for an overnight stay in the Volunteers' village and take my bicycle. I often have the driver drop me off on the side road or path going to the village and I bike in the rest of the way. While I am there, I travel everywhere with the Volunteer on my bike. I stay overnight with the Volunteer and spend as much time as I can with his neighbors, counterparts, and other villagers. We inspect his projects, talk to the villagers about the successes and failures they experience, and spend long evening hours listening to the Volunteer.

All staff members who have conducted site visits share the results with the rest of the staff. Action items are delegated with responsibility to report resolution of action items to the program assistant. The program assistant follows up with the Volunteer periodically to report progress and verify results.

PHASE II: THE VOLUNTEERS' PERSPECTIVE

"Malawi may be the 'Warm Heart' but it sure isn't for the 'Faint of Heart!'"

A PC/Malawi Volunteer

Approximately seven months after recording the staff's view of the post's elements of programming success, we spoke to the Volunteers. With the assistance of the post, we convened small groups of Volunteers to learn what factors contributed to their service in PC/Malawi. Forty-four percent of the Volunteers in the country at the time gathered to describe their experience as a Volunteer. We met in small groups of 6 to 15 Volunteers in each group, and we conducted some individual interviews. The meeting sites were in Lilongwe, Mchoka, Ntakatoka, Zomba, Ntoja, Blantyre, Dzalonyama, Kangoma, Nkhoma, Diamphwe, Molomo, Chinthembwe, Mzuzu, Erukweni, Mhuyre, and Nkhomboli. The sessions lasted from three to five hours.

The Volunteers spoke positively about their experience in Malawi and about the Peace Corps' contribution to that experience. Many of the Volunteers expressed pride in serving in Malawi and gratitude for the structural support that the Peace Corps provides to make this possible. From our discussions with the Volunteers, the following factors stand out as contributing to the impression of Peace Corps/Malawi as a well-run program.

MALAWI IS A WELCOMING CULTURE

Volunteers spoke widely of the people of Malawi as friendly, supportive, and engaged in the Volunteers' work. One Volunteer commented, "I really enjoy Malawi and very much like the Malawian culture and its people; they have broadened my world view." Another agreed: "Some have become very good friends to me, and we were there for each other."

Most Volunteers agreed with their colleague who stated: "The Malawian people are aware, friendly, and supportive and really look out for you. The people in the villages have contributed much of their time and effort on ensuring that the project we work on together succeeds." Another Volunteer wrote, "I have managed some success in my projects in large part due to unusually high motivation in two counterparts." Many of the Volunteers spoke of the unexpected insights their Malawian counterparts expressed about the conditions of their own country. One Volunteer described her experience:

In our discussions about development issues in Malawi, they [the Malawians] analyze their situations, articulate their thoughts, and entertain new ideas. One of the biggest rewards of this work is to see and experience the growth of the people with whom you work. In working and living with the village people, you learn from them and through them the values of their culture and the beauty of their persons in living life so joyfully in a very harsh and poor environment.

A DEDICATED STAFF

The Volunteers' positive feelings about Malawians as people was also true for the staff, whom they characterized as wonderful, caring people interested in their success. The Volunteers praised the staff's cross-sectoral cooperation and collegial approach. They felt this not only helped the staff be efficient in their work but also benefited the Volunteers.

There was overwhelming praise and confidence from every Volunteer for the PCMOs. The medical services and treatment of the Volunteers is outstanding, and the timeliness of the PCMOs responses and feedback were also positive highlights in the minds of the Volunteers. Program staff, the Volunteers believe, work hard—perhaps too hard; many expressed concern about staff members who give up much in their personal lives to address Volunteer needs. The Volunteers singled out the post's drivers for their special support efforts on behalf of the Volunteers.

The Volunteers recognized the country director for her leadership and support; wrote one Volunteer, "Our Peace Corps director is amazing." They emphasized that "she listens and cares about us; she tries to find answers and gets back to us with feedback promptly; she is great at welcoming Volunteers and opens her home to us frequently." "The country director is seen as a strength, keeps people here with her enthusiasm, and fills a gap between Volunteers and other staff as necessary," stated another. The Volunteers also appreciated the computer resources in the Volunteer lounge. Overall, the Volunteers described the office operations as a "well-oiled machine."

PROGRAM SUPPORT

Volunteers stated that they appreciated the particular projects that Peace Corps designed that gave them the opportunity to serve in Malawi. Wrote an education Volunteer: "My work assignment as a teacher is very clear.... I am the third Volunteer at my site, so I had housing and the teachers knew why I am here." Not only do they see the value of their particular assignment, but appreciate the flexibility to adapt: "The needs of the community change and Volunteers should be flexible."

Working in the rural and remote sites of Malawi has provided special rewards for the Volunteers, and they appreciate the work that the staff do to complete site selection and site preparation. One Volunteer expressed succinctly the staff's efforts to provide a safe environment for the Volunteers: "They found me a site where I feel safe because the community takes care of me." Another stated: "The Volunteer's job depends on the cooperation of two groups: Volunteers and the host community. Getting both just right is no easy job."

Volunteers are clear that they would not have had such a meaningful cross-cultural experience without Peace Corps' help. Wrote one Volunteer, "I very much appreciate the structure and support Peace Corps has provided for me in this country." Another wrote: "Staff have been receptive and responsive to requests for help and support."

The Volunteers, especially the women Volunteers, feel that they have achieved some success demonstrating a more positive role and view for women in this culture. There are not any dramatic changes affecting the entire country, but through the Gender and Development program, AIDS education and awareness efforts, and work to develop income generating programs for the women in the villages, Volunteers feel they have helped to promote self-esteem and independence among the Malawian women.

EFFECTIVE PEACE CORPS/HOST COUNTRY RELATIONS

The Volunteers value the fact that Peace Corps and the respective Ministries and NGOs were working together and trying to improve the quality of life for Malawians relating to the education, health and agro-forestry programs. They also were impressed with the program knowledge and ministry contacts of their APCDs. While the Volunteers were sure that the people of their community understood and appreciated the Volunteers, they believed that the relationships between the staff and the government levels of Malawi also appreciated the work of the Volunteers. For example, 43% of the environment Volunteers reported they felt their time and effort is valued "well" or "very well" and 46% of the education Volunteers reported they were "well" or "very well" effective in their role as a Volunteer.

PRE-SERVICE TRAINING (PST)

The Volunteers we interviewed frequently mentioned the value of the training. The Volunteers identified the language and cross-cultural training as the key contribution made by PC/Malawi to the quality of their experience. They acknowledged that community-based training was challenging but admitted that it was effective in introducing them to another people and culture and providing a rich environment in which to learn the language. Wrote one Volunteer, “I valued the PST training as the most important contribution to the quality of my experience. PST provided a solid foundation for establishing a productive presence in the rural community, which is unlike anywhere I have lived.”

Wrote one Volunteer: “The language component of PST has been invaluable and without a doubt is the greatest asset of the pre-service training.” The significant factor explaining the quality of the language and cross-cultural training, according to the Volunteers, was the trainers. They were competent, confident, accessible and willing to spend additional time with individual Volunteers to address their language needs. The Volunteers understood the value of the language and cross-cultural skills achieved in training; 58% of the environment Volunteers reported they spoke the local language “well” or “very well.” The real outcome of good language and cross-cultural training is in the Volunteers’ ability to integrate into their community; and 67% of the environment Volunteers report also being “well” or “very well” integrated in their communities. The Volunteers also spoke appreciatively of the training skills and presentations of the second and third-year Volunteers. “The presentations were thoughtful and very practical.”

The education Volunteers spoke of their experience observing and teaching in the Malawi classrooms during PST. These practice/model schools definitely prepared them for their new exposure to teaching in Malawi. This hands-on, practical experience in a Malawi classroom while being observed by the Malawian teachers and the seasoned education Volunteers was a highlight of their technical training and, they reported, served them well.

IN-SERVICE TRAINING

The technical training during IST received high marks. They considered the participation of their counterparts in IST to be the most helpful aspect of the IST.

The scheduling of the IST three months after swearing in is important, according to the Volunteers. They believe the timing of this event gave them the opportunity early on in their service to highlight and articulate the skills they needed to perform the tasks of their assignments and to work through some of the unclear aspects of their work assignments.

SITE VISITS ARE INVALUABLE

The Volunteers value the site visits as an important communication and programming tool. They consider it an opportunity to discuss their personal and program issues. The

Volunteers thought the first site visit, which occurs after their IST (about 6 – 8 months after swearing-in), was very important. Site visits accomplished several important functions according to the Volunteers: the APCDs clarified their work assignments with their host country colleagues (supervisor and counterparts) and addressed other personal and program concerns before too much time was wasted. The environment Volunteers were particularly appreciative; 50% indicated that the site visits from their APCD were “well” or “very well” effective. The Volunteers agreed that to be most effective, there has to be ‘quality time’ devoted to each site visit.

CONCLUSION: EMBRACING THE WARM HEART OF AFRICA

The leadership of the country director, a commitment to teamwork, close collaboration with the Government of Malawi, targeted technical training, and Volunteer input are five factors that contribute to the strength of Peace Corps/Malawi. The staff credited the quality of their program to the participatory management style of the country director and her commitment to open communication. Her participatory management style extended to the Volunteers as well. The staff of PC/Malawi take seriously the perspectives and experiences of the Volunteers when revising project plans and training programs.

The Volunteers were positive about what they have contributed and gained through this experience. They credited their training, especially language and cross-cultural training, as the foundation for their service. They have worked hard in their assignment and feel proud of their accomplishments, not only in working in a very difficult situation but having made some very good friends in the process. They have not only learned a lot in living in this cross cultural environment but they have shared and transferred a lot to the people with whom they live and work. Many heads nodded in thoughtful agreement when one Volunteer stated:

“Every day there are frustrations and disappointments. Every month I wonder what I have accomplished. But when I need it most, I encounter a grateful and motivated student or a welcoming and humorous neighbor, and I realize that not only my job but my life is my work here. And that is overwhelmingly rewarding.”