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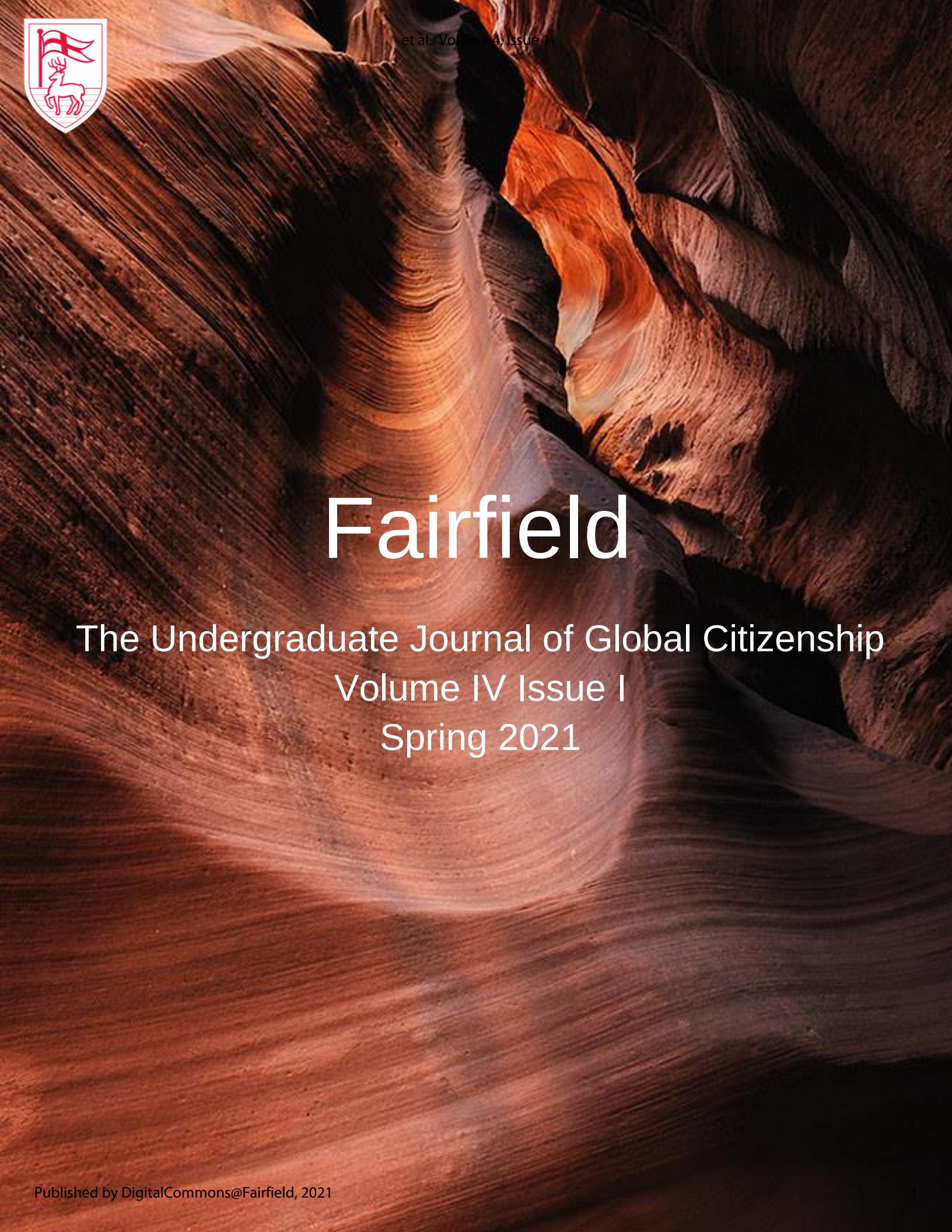

# Fairfield

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# Evaluating Environmental Degradation as a Cause of Burma's Rohingya Crisis

HELENA S. LONG

## Abstract

Over the course of the past decade, persecution against the Rohingya ethnic group in Western Burma has escalated to the point of genocide. Since August 2017 alone, more than 730,000 Rohingya have fled their homes in Rakhine State to neighboring Bangladesh[1]. Previous studies on the causes of this crisis have focused on the colonial legacy of discrimination toward ethnic and religious minorities in Burma, themes of identity and citizenship, and role of social media in fueling the violence. Over, this paper will consider what may be an overlooked factor: the role of environmental stress in inciting the conflict. After outlining commonly understood causes of the crisis, this paper seeks to evaluate the extent to which environmental stress factored in by (1) examining the status of environmental degradation and natural disasters in Burma, (2) considering how environmental pressure may exacerbate violence against the Rohingya, and (3) comparing this crisis to ethnic conflict in Sudan, where environmental stress was undoubtedly a cause of violence. By establishing where and how environmental stress played into the Rohingya crisis, recommendations to reduce the likelihood of environmental factors inciting similar conflicts can be made.

## Introduction

Over the course of the past decade, persecution against the Rohingya ethnic group in Western Burma has escalated to the point of genocide, with the United Nations Human Rights Council finding genocidal intent in a 2019 factfinding mission[2] and a trial in the International Court of Justice ongoing.[3] Since August 2017 alone, more than 730,000 Rohingya have fled their homes in Rakhine State to neighboring Bangladesh[4]. Previous analysis on the causes of this crisis have focused on the colonial legacy of discrimination toward ethnic and religious minorities in Burma,[5] themes of identity and citizenship,[6] consequences of the 2011 democratic opening including the emergence of Buddhist extremist groups,[7] and the contribution of social media in escalating violence.[8] However, this paper considers what may be an overlooked factor: the impact of environmental stress. After outlining historical context and the commonly understood causes of the crisis, this paper evaluates the extent to which environmental stress played a causal role by (1) examining the status of environmental degradation and natural disasters in Burma, (2) considering the relationship between the environment and violence, and (3) comparing this crisis to ethnic conflict in Sudan, a frequently cited eco-conflict. After establishing where and how environmental stress is related to the Rohingya crisis, policy recommendations for lessening this factor's role in Burma—as well as in other conflict regions— are offered and assessed.

## Background and Historical Context

Burma, also known as Myanmar, is a country of approximately 55,600,000 people located in Southeast Asia (see Figure 1for

map) with an extremely ethnically diverse population; the most populous ethnic groups are Burman (68%), Shan (9%), Karen (7%), Rakhine (4%), Chinese (3%), Indian (2%), and Mon (2%).[9] For most of the region's history, various ethnic groups maintained independent city-states and kingdoms, but in the 19th century, Britain conquered Burma and incorporated it as a province of the Indian Empire.[10] In 1937, Britain began administering Burma as a separate, self-governing colony, and in 1948 it gained independence.[11]

Figure 1: Map of Burma administrative districts[12]

From independence until recently, Burma has been governed by a series of right-wing military and one-party regimes. [13] In 1989, following a year of violent unrest, a new ruling junta changed the country's name from Burma to Myanmar, although many countries including the United States still do not recognize the name change due to the illegitimacy of the government that made the decision.[14] In the 1990 election, the National League for Democracy, a pro-democracy party led by Aung San Suu Kyi, won a landslide victory, but the junta refused to hand over power and Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest.[15] In 1991, Suu Kyi gained international recognition when awarded the Nobel Peace Prize while still under house arrest; in total, she would spend 15 of the next 21 years under house arrest and was most recently detained in February 2021 during the country's latest coup.[16]

Following the 1990 elections, General Than Shwe became the paramount ruler of the country for almost two decades until the 2011 general elections, when the military junta was officially dissolved.[17] In the wake of this democratic opening, President Barack Obama became the first U.S. president to visit Burma in 2012, meeting with Suu Kyi, who had been released from house arrest and elected to the national legislature.[18] President Obama commended her as a champion of democracy and human rights, thus launching Burma's progress into the international spotlight.[19] In 2015, the first credible election in decades was held, with the NLD emerging with an overwhelming victory and Suu Kyi becoming the de facto head of state.[20]

Reforms over the past decade were marred by the continuing control of the military (also known as the Tatmadaw) in daily and political life and proven to be short-lived in the aftermath of the latest coup.[21] The current Commander in Chief, Min Aung Hlaing, was recommended for investigation into crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide by the UNHRC in 2019[22] and assumed all state power after leading the Tatmadaw in arresting Suu Kyi and other senior NLD leaders in February 2021.[23]

The 2019 investigation into Aung Hlaing primarily regarded the intense violence against the Rohingya people on the western edge of Burma.[24] The government of Burma recognizes 135 "national races" in Burma based on a list compiled in 1962.[25] The Rohingya—all 2.5 million of them—are

not one of these, constituting the world's largest stateless population, meaning they are not citizens of any country.[26] In fact, most Burmese (including Suu Kyi) do not even use the word "Rohingya," rather, they consider the group to be illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.[27] The exact origins of the Rohingya are not known, but there is evidence that this group has been present in the region since the 13th century.[28] The Rohingya are not the only Muslims in Burma—about 4% of the population is Muslim, compared to more than two-thirds who are Buddhist.[29] However, Rohingya are distinct from other Muslims in the country, living in rural areas of the country's Rakhine State, speaking a dialect of Bengali, and having Muslim rather than Burmese names.[30]

There have long been divisions between the Rohingya and other ethnic groups in Burma. During WWII, the Rohingya, along with the Karen and Kachin minority groups, sided with the Allies and engaged in guerilla warfare while the Burmans sided with the Japanese.[31] Following independence in 1948, the Rohingya were gradually excluded from state institutions. In 1974, the Rohingya were labelled foreign citizens and mandated to carry registration cards to distinguish them from Burmans.[32] The 1982 Citizenship Law then effectively rendered the Rohingya stateless by requiring all citizens to either (1) be a member of the 135 national races, (2) have a pending application under the 1948 Union Citizenship Act, or (3) have conclusive evidence of residence in Burma before independence.[33] The political upheaval around 1990 further worsened conditions for the Rohingya: a campaign against Muslims was seen as strengthening the military government's national credentials among Buddhists.[34] Nearly 300,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh in the early 1990s, claiming the military forced them from their homes,[35] and the Tatmadaw restricted the population's movement within Rakhine state.[36] In 1995, the UNHCR pressured Burma into providing "Temporary Registration Cards" to the Rohingya, but violence continued past the turn of the century with attacks on Muslim schools and places of worship.[37] In 2005, a two-child policy was introduced in Rakhine State, solely for the Rohingya population.[38]

Violence worsened after the democratic opening of 2011.[39] In June 2012, the alleged rape and murder of a Rakhine woman by three Muslim youths incited a killing spree.[40] The Rakhine are the largest ethnic group in Rakhine state, and are predominately Buddhist; in 2009, insurgents formed the Arakan Army seeking self-determination for the Rakhine people, adding another complicated dimension to the conflict as the army clashes with both the Tatmadaw and Rohingya.[41] The violence in 2012 between Rakhine and Rohingya communities left at least 100 people dead and left thousands of buildings including homes, mosques, monasteries, and schools burned down.[42]

2015 is generally considered the start of the Rohingya refugee crisis, as increasing "ghettoization, sporadic massacres, and restrictions on movement" of the Rohingya caused thousands to flee on rickety boats to other Southeast Asian countries.[43] In 2017, the Tatmadaw began a "clearance operation," which included "extra judicial killings, gang rapes, arson—all argued to constitute genocide, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity."[44] Some 700,000 Rohingya fled Burma to refugee camps in Bangladesh, leaving just about 200,000 Rohingya in Rakhine State by October 2018.[45] In 2019, Burmese authorities claimed the Rohingya could return, and began operating "reception centers" near the border, but these centers are often empty due to the displaced people's deep distrust that

they will return to safe conditions.[46] Findings from the 2019 UNHRC factfinding mission found that although "clearance operations" on the scale of 2017 ceased, "the Rohingya remain the target of a Government attack aimed at erasing the identity and removing them from Myanmar...With another year having passed without improvements to their dire living conditions, prospects for accountability or legal recognition as citizens of Myanmar, their plight can only be considered as having deteriorated."[47]

## Established Causes of the Conflict

Most existing scholarship on the causes of the Rohingya crisis focuses on the long history of ethnic conflict and discrimination in Burma. Jobair Alam argues that this discrimination is rooted in the British colonial era, stating that before the arrival of the British, "the different groups that make up the complex ethnic tapestry of Burma were never under the authority of a single government."[48] The British era created the majority-minority divide and deep nationalism tied to Buddhist identity that exists to this day.[49] After independence, discrimination was solidified into laws such as the 1982 Citizenship Law which rendered the Rohingya stateless and deprived them of access to education, health services, and employment.[50] This stripping of citizenship "largely (re)shaped the identity of the Rohingya in Myanmar as a non-Burman Muslim religious minority," compared to minorities who "strictly comply with and fit absolutely in the Burmese-constructed ideals, belief and identity."[51] Even disregarding acts of violence against the Rohingya, their rejection from the state has led to restrictions on travel, marriage, birthing rates, and freedom of religion.[52] The Rohingya are not the only minority group to face discrimination in Burma; the UN has investigated the Tatmadaw for violence against groups including the Shan, Kachin, Karen, and Chin[53] (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Image by Author *In 2018, I briefly visited the city of Tachileik in Burma's Shan State while studying abroad in Thailand. The Shan battle for independence is another example of ethnic conflict in Burma.*

However, while there are multiple ethnic conflicts ongoing in Burma, the campaign against the Rohingya has been the most systematic.[54] A 1988 regime document recently uncovered by the International State Crime Institute exposed a long term plan for eradication of the Rohingya, with steps including forbidding land ownership and finding the Rohingya at fault in all court cases—but avoiding mass killing "in order not to invite the attention of the Muslim countries."[55] This document embodies one of the main established causes of the current crisis: discrimination against the Rohingya is deeply rooted in laws and practices under the military regime, and the Tatmadaw has simply been waiting for an excuse "to totally wipe them out from Rakhine."[56] The extent to which the ethnic conflict is civilian as well as military based is debated; for example, there is deep animosity between Rakhine and Rohingya locals, but at least part of this resentment may be attributed to manipulation by the Tatmadaw in turning the groups against each other.[57]

Beyond ethnic discrimination, religious discrimination is pertinent to this crisis. Islamophobia is common among many Burmese Buddhists, and Rakhine

state's location bordering Muslim Bangladesh makes some consider it the "'western gate'... the last line of defence protecting the pure, Theravadda Buddhism" of Burma from Islam.[58] Some Buddhists hold the view that, "If the gate breaks, the tens of millions of Muslims from Bengal will overrun not only Myanmar but also mainland Southeast Asia, much as is narrated to have occurred centuries ago in island Southeast Asia."[59]

Nobody disputes that a long history of ethnic and religious discrimination against the Rohingya underlies the latest violent campaign against them. What is less certain however, is the specific events that triggered the unprecedented bloodshed of the past decade. Waves of violence have hit Rakhine State before, but recent years are distinct in their display of "undeterred propagation of hate speech coupled with clear political coordination."[60] One theory is that the democratic reopening triggered the violence. The most recent Constitution, written in 2008, "is notable for the degree to which it has not only conjoined the state and national races lexically but also institutionally."[61] The Constitution emphasized the idea of "taingyintha," or "national races" of Burma, and suggested that belonging to one of the recognized races was of even greater importance than citizenship.[62] The Constitution frames taingyintha as creating a "mythic unity that has never emerged and could be read as a defiant repudiation of ethnic diversity."[63]

In addition to constitutional changes, when the military junta lifted limits on free expression and assembly in 2011, it allowed for a wave of populist mobilization where "deep, pent-up societal division and hatred, which was repressed by authoritarian rule" was unleashed by the democratization process.[64] Two Buddhist extremist groups emerged in the aftermath of the 2011 transition: the "969 Movement" and "Ma-Ba-Tha," both of which have been tolerated and even promoted by the government.[65] Many westerners consider Buddhism a pacifist religion; however, certain monks are at the forefront of the violence. For example, U Wirathu, the monk leader of the 969 movement, was called the "Face of Buddhist Terror" by Time magazine in 2013.[66] These extremist groups successfully campaigned the government to revoke the Rohingya's temporary registration certificates in 2015 and have spewed hate speech, including calling Islam "a faith of animals with uncontrollable birthrates."[67] Additionally, fearmongering and discrimination have become campaign tools in the era of democracy, and both "hardliners and so-called reformists find incentives in being complicit in the anti-Muslim conflicts."[68] Thus, while democratic developments in Burma over the past decade promised reform from the years of junta control, they may in fact have helped incite the conflict in Rakhine State by releasing "hard-core and deeply felt grievances about Buddhism being under siege from the forces of modernity, globalism and Islam."[69]

A final factor commonly cited as amplifying the violence is the use of social media in Burma. In Burma, Facebook is so widely used by the country's 18 million internet users that it is often equated with the internet itself.[70] In 2018, a *New York Times* investigation revealed that not only were extremist groups using Facebook to disperse hate speech, but the military itself was behind turning "the social network into a tool for ethnic cleansing."[71] Military personnel created fake accounts and flooded them with hate speech, including posting pictures of corpses they said were evidence of massacres by the Rohingya, and stated that Muslim attacks were imminent.[72] Facebook took down accounts after the investigation revealed ties to the military but received criticism for its response and

commitment to preventing similar situations in the future.[73] The internet provides a means of propaganda beyond anything in the past, and the systematic use of it by extremists and the military to instigate violence contributed to the crisis' outbreak and intensity.

## Environmental Factors in Burma

With an understanding of the prevailing causal theories, environmental factors in Burma can be discussed. The environment has long been studied as a "threat multiplier" for existing conflicts.[74] Thomas F. Homer-Dixon writes that environmental scarcity "can contribute to civil violence, including insurgencies and ethnic clashes."[75] However, its role is rarely direct, rather interacting with other factors to produce violence, and therefore analysts often overlook scarcity's role in flaring underlying stress and instead interpret economic, social, or political factors as the principal cause.[76] An example of interaction between social and environmental factors is "resource capture," when dominant groups within a society "shift resource distribution in their favor." [77] Moreover, environmental scarcity may strengthen group identities based on ethnic, class, or religious affiliations in a process known as social segmentation, as groups face intensified competitive for resources.[78]

While the role of resource scarcity in conflict is far from new, climate change, population growth, and economic development are expected to increase the prevalence of these circumstances.[79] Through catastrophic weather events, climate change, "will lead to new or more intense resource scarcities, which, in turn, will trigger more intense competition and conflict between states and local communities sharing common resources."[80]

This existing framework for the role of environmental scarcity and natural disasters in fueling conflict evokes the situation in Burma, which faces an increasingly vulnerable environmental state. A 2019 World Bank report concluded that Burma's ecosystems, fisheries, and forestry are under "tremendous pressure."[81] Burma's marine fish resources have declined as much as 90 percent since 1980, forest cover has declined by 10 million hectares since 1990, and urban waste, mining discharge, and air quality are all deteriorating as well.[82]

As Burma relies heavily on natural resource exploitation for economic development, environmental degradation affects not only the natural world and human health, but economic prosperity. Seventy percent of the labor force is employed in agriculture, accounting for 37.8 percent of GDP.[83] The government has prioritized short-term profit over long-term sustainability, with slash-and-burn and industrial agriculture methods promoted.[84] Burma's policies hostile to sustainable changes "can force the cultivation systems into suboptimal practices … or obstruct them altogether, leading to poverty and conflict, alienating cultivators and leading to degraded land." [85] Climate change will compound this threat, with the FAO finding that Burma is "highly vulnerable to climate change and extreme weather conditions," with significant risk for agricultural production and food insecurity. [86] The FAO and World Bank call for sustainable policy approaches to prevent a worse-case scenario.

Unfortunately, a different kind of worse-case scenario is already facing Rakhine State. Rakhine State is one of the most resource-rich parts of the country, despite being one of the poorest economically.[87] However, recent efforts aim to tap into the region's potential. For example, between 2000 and 2014, Rakhine state lost more mangrove forest cover than

any other state in Burma, causing an estimated ecosystem value loss of $946.87 million per year due to damages to fisheries and habitat.[88] When resource-rich Rakhine state is contrasted to conditions in Burma's central states, where the populous regions of Mandalay, Magway, and Sagaing display existing land degradation due to problems with erosion, desertification, salinization, and deforestation,[89] the question is raised: does the recent exploitation of Rakhine state's resources constitute a "resource capture" scenario as conditions deteriorate in primarily Burman states?

Burma's "Agenda 21" plan for sustainable development, a document submitted to the U.N., even hints at this intention. In it, programs for "the development of border areas and national races" and reclaiming "cultivable wastelands" are described.[90] This reference to *taingyintha* is alarming within a sustainable development plan, and the plan may be coming to fruition. In the midst of the Rohingya crisis, the government announced that Rakhine state would be transformed into a business hub, and countries including Japan and Korea have already invested in the state.[91] A.K.M Ahsan Ullah and Diotima Chattoraj claim that to implement this development plan, "the government needed to wipe out Rohingya from their homeland."

*New York Times* reporters in Rakhine state in 2019 witnessed this development in action.[92] The reporters noted "infrastructure development in Rakhine: new power stations, government buildings and, most of all, military and border guard bases ... built on land emptied by ethnic cleansing," and found that Buddhists had taken over Rohingya businesses, that the military continues to raze Muslim villages, and that the companies responsible for the building boom were "cronies of the military." [93]

Rakhine state is not the only ethnic minority state in Burma where resources have been seized by the Tatmadaw. For example, in Kachin state, "resource extraction has provided incentive and financing" for the Tatmadaw and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) to keep fighting in a state rich with precious stones and minerals.[94] In Karen state, the Tatmadaw has used "intimidation and coercion to seize land and displace local people" in an area that is appealing for tourism, extractive, and agriculture industries.[95]

If the Tatmadaw are similarly pursuing resource gains in Rakhine state, who stands to benefit? While the government was known to enlist "Rakhine Buddhist fundamentalists to safeguard their interests in the resource-rich state,"[96] the Tatmadaw's own ongoing conflict with the Arakan Army calls to attention that in other ethnic regions facing conflict in Burma, "armed groups have often been manipulated against each other, weakening their military capabilities, and often causing them to lose control of their natural resources."[97] This raises the possibility that both ethnic minorities, Rohingya and Rakhine, could be excluded from any Tatmadaw development plan in favor of enriching the military's own pockets or benefitting solely the Burman majority.

In addition to this development plan, specific environmental events may have fueled the crisis; in particular, the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis had secondary effects on the Rakhine region. On May 2, 2008, Cyclone Nargis struck Burma's Irrawaddy Delta, located primarily in Ayeyarwady Region bordering Rakhine State.[98] Approximately 140,000 people were killed, making it the worst natural disaster in Burmese history.[99] The cyclone additionally destroyed much of Burma's rice crop, as the Irrawaddy Delta was one of the primary

regions of production, and saline water from storm surge contaminated about one million acres of cropland.[100] This caused severe food shortages and high prices, with one analyst predicting that due to "the historical connection between rice shortages and popular unrest … the cycle of explosive protest and regime crackdowns is likely to continue."[101] While Cyclone Nargis is the most severe example, other natural disasters such as 2010's Cyclone Giri and 2017's Cyclone Mora also worsened conditions. Cyclone Giri destroyed an estimated 97, 125 hectares of farmland in Rakhine State,[102] and Cyclone Mora—which hit the region after the refugee crisis began—tore through refugee camps. These natural disasters likely had a destabilizing effect on the region and intensified competition for resources.

The evidence in Burma of environmental scarcity, resource capture in ethnic regions, and devastating natural disasters aligns with the existing framework for how environmental stress may fuel violence, particularly as a threat multiplier on top of deep-rooted social and political elements. To further explore this claim, this crisis can be compared to another where environmental factors are frequently cited as playing a role: Sudan.

## Comparative Case Study: Sudan

While the decades-long conflict in Sudan (and now South Sudan) began as an ethno-religious civil war between the predominantly Arab Muslim north and the African Christian south, the war has grown in layers of complexity over the years, and now environmental factors including drought and desertification are commonly recognized as exacerbating the violence.[103] Sudan gained independence from Britain in 1956, and like many other postcolonial states, Sudan was left with few routes to economic development beyond its natural resources.[104] An overconcentration of people in central Sudan led to severe degradation and overexploitation of the region, contributing "to intensifying ethnic hostilities and competition for limited resources."[105] Additionally, this motivated the northern-based government to drive southward to extract natural resources, jeopardizing the livelihoods of southern citizens and contributing to the formation of the Sudan People's Liberation Army in present-day South Sudan.[106] While violence in Sudan is still best characterized as an ethno-religious conflict, "eco-conflicts have clearly protracted the Sudanese war" as advantaged groups monopolize resources at the expense of the majority, resulting "in environmental destruction, economic decline, social disintegration, population displacement, and protracted conflict.[107]

How well does Sudan's situation align with Burma's? In both cases (see Figure 3 for a comparative flowchart) a former British colony with extreme ethnic and religious diversity was left with few tools for survival beyond natural resource use. For both countries, this led to overexploitation of resources in the central/majority-group-controlled regions, causing a drive for development in minority regions. Finally, in Sudan and Burma, these drives for development were followed by waves of intense violence within a longer history of conflict. However, there are some differences. For one, environmental pressure in Sudan is more severe, with a 2007 U.N. Environmental Programme report declaring that the scale of climate change was "almost unprecedented: the reduction in rainfall has turned millions of hectares of already marginal semi-desert grazing land into desert."[108] In comparison, Burma is in "a region less vulnerable to desertification," although aforementioned issues including soil erosion, salinization, soil fertility depletion, and alkalinization affect about 17


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percent of the country, primarily in the central regions.[109] Another difference between Sudan and Burma is the presence of climate migration. In Sudan, drought, desertification, and flooding are *direct* causes of migration and internal displacement, as these issues force people to seek more arable land.[110] In Burma, there is little evidence that environmental factors directly cause IDPs and climate refugees, but environmental pressure may intensify the conflicts that produce refugees. Finally, the role of natural disasters is different in these two countries: Burma is vulnerable to unpredictable, one-time events such as cyclones, earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, and landslides, whereas Sudan is more vulnerable to long-term events such as droughts.

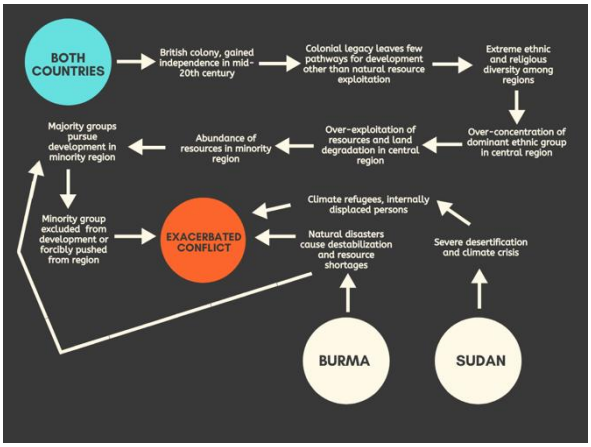

Figure 3: Infographic by Author

The case of Sudan helps exemplify how the Rohingya crisis fits the framework of a conflict with environmental layers, even if degradation in Burma is less severe than Sudan. While there is limited prior research on the role of environmental pressure in Burmese conflicts, there are clear similarities between Burma and Sudan where more scholarship on eco-conflict exists, thus displaying how a combination of ethnic tensions, unequal distribution of power, and resource scarcity fuels violence.

**Environmental Impacts of the Crisis**

Not only have environmental problems in Burma seemingly contributed to the past decade's flare-up of violence against the Rohingya, but the crisis itself has impacted the environment. As of August 2019, more than 730,000 Rohingya refugees are living in the world's largest refugee encampment in Bangladesh, a "teeming, squalid settlement" where landslides, rampaging elephants, and disease are common.[111] These camps put tremendous pressure on local ecosystems. About 4,300 acres of hills and forests were cut down to make shelters and to use as cooking fuel, and every month an additional nearly 6,800 tons of firewood are collected.[112] This deforestation causes biodiversity loss and increases the risk of landslides.[113] Additionally, air quality is declining as a result of increased vehicular traffic and smoke from cooking fires, and there are no long-term solutions for waste management including fecal matter and plastics.[114] This has resulted in the contamination of already-limited water resources, with about 70 percent of groundwater samples in a 2017 study found to be heavily polluted.[115] The poor environmental outlook for areas around the camps not only negatively impacts ecosystems and creates even worse conditions for the already suffering Rohingya, but risks additional conflict. A summary of physical impacts of the camps in a U.N. Development Programme report concluded that, "In particular the impacts on groundwater may give rise to significant social conflicts between the host communities and Rohingya over the use of water resources."[116]

**Analysis of Causes**

Few, if any, conflicts are one-dimensional. Conflicts consist of "numerous root causes interacting or stimulating each other and

finally escalating into the explosion … conflict is a process, not a fixed state of crisis."[117] In the case of Burma, the root causes of the Rohingya crisis are ethnic discrimination stemming from the British colonial era and religious discrimination intensified by the civilization "fault line" between Burma and Bangladesh. These root causes have resulted in systematic exclusion of the Rohingya from Burmese society, with a system of laws and policies denying them citizenship and basic rights. With this long history of exclusion, what factors incited the recent phase of violence, which peaked in 2017? While prior scholarship primarily cites societal changes caused by the 2011 democratic opening, the emergence of new Buddhist extremist groups, and propaganda efforts made possible by social media, increasing environmental pressure in Burma should be considered a factor as well.

In Burma, overreliance on natural resources, unsustainable government policies, and natural disasters including the devastating Cyclone Nargis have contributed to a situation of environmental stress, with the country's ecosystems, fisheries, and forestry coming under tremendous pressure.[118] One sign of this stress is land degradation in the populous central regions, and there is evidence that the Tatmadaw's solution to securing resources (whether to fund its own operations or for the majority ethnic and religious groups) is to exploit resource-rich ethnic minority states. For instance, Burma's Agenda 21 plan lists development of border areas and national races as a sustainable development program,[119] and resource capture is evident within conflicts in both Karen[120] and Kachin States.[121] That a similar seizure—rather than pure ethnic conflict—is unfolding in Rakhine state is evidenced by a recent harvesting push in the region for resources such as mangroves and an announcement by the government after the "clearance operations" of 2017 that Rakhine State would be transformed into a business hub.[122] This infrastructure development on land cleared by ethnic cleansing, with Buddhists moving in where the Rohingya were killed or forced out, has been witnessed by reporters in the region.[123]

Therefore, while violence against the Rohingya is mired in deep ethnic and religious division, codified in discriminatory policies, and has been foreshadowed for decades—most explicitly by a regime document with a long-term eradication plan for the Rohingya—environmental scarcity in Burma fits the framework for eco-conflicts as an "aggravating cause in a highly complex, multicausal system."[124] The environmental layer likely not only interacts with the long-term causes of the crisis, but also with other inciting factors. For example, Homer-Dixon's social segmentation process of heightened group identity in the face of resource competition may partially explain the emergence of players within the conflict such as Buddhist extremist groups or the Arakan army. Additionally, in the wake of the democratic opening, the Tatmadaw may have sought ways to strengthen itself after losing junta control, with lucrative foreign contracts for infrastructure development in ethnic regions a possible solution. And further, the Rohingya crisis' own environmental impacts including degraded land, water, and air in areas around the refugee camps risk a circular effect of starting new conflict with the host community. These are examples of the ways in which environmental factors may weave throughout a conflict to inspire new points of tension or exacerbate existing ones. While "because the relationship between environmental scarcity and contextual factors is interactive, it is often impossible to determine the relative weight or power of environmental scarcity as a cause of violence in specific cases," the evidence in

Burma leads to the conclusion that environmental factors must be considered within the dimensions of the Rohingya crisis.

## Recommendations

The Rohingya crisis is often called a hopeless one. While in April 2018, Burma agreed to begin "voluntary and dignified repatriations," almost no Rohingya have returned.[125] The Rohingya are terrified to return to the site of mass killings, and Burmese officials still fail to even recognize them as a distinct ethnic group, much less citizens.[126] The September 2019 UNHRC factfinding mission on Burma found that there is a serious risk of genocidal actions recurring, and that it is impossible for the Rohingya to return in current conditions.[127] Meanwhile, the Bangladeshi government, struggling with overpopulation and poverty, is under pressure from its citizens to ensure that funds are not diverted to refugees, who have not been given official refugee status to ensure their placement is not permanent.[128]

General recommendations for addressing this conflict include repealing the 1982 Citizenship Law and offering an accessible path to citizenship for the Rohingya.[129] Additionally, Burma should close its internal camps housing Rohingya and provide them with adequate land and freedom of movement.[130] The UNHRC does not recommend returning refugees located in Bangladesh to Burma until adequate provisions for their protection exist.[131] International acts such as prosecuting Burma for crimes against humanity, severing relations between the international community and the Tatmadaw, and instituting sanctions to prevent the flow of arms and other military equipment into the country may pressure the government into action. The UN factfinding mission on Myanmar listed 14 known international suppliers of arms to Burma, which included companies based in China, Russia, India, and Singapore (see figure 4 for a chart of suppliers[132]). However, the practical limitations of these recommendations must be acknowledged, particularly in light of the February 2021 coup when the Tatmadaw regained control of the government. Despite being alienated from much of the global community and with genocide proceedings ongoing in the International Court of Justice, the Tatmadaw has only doubled down on suppression—not just for ethnic minorities, but all opposition.[133] In a country where officials still claim "'Rohingya' is not real,"[134] a better future within Burma's borders for the Rohingya seems far from reality.

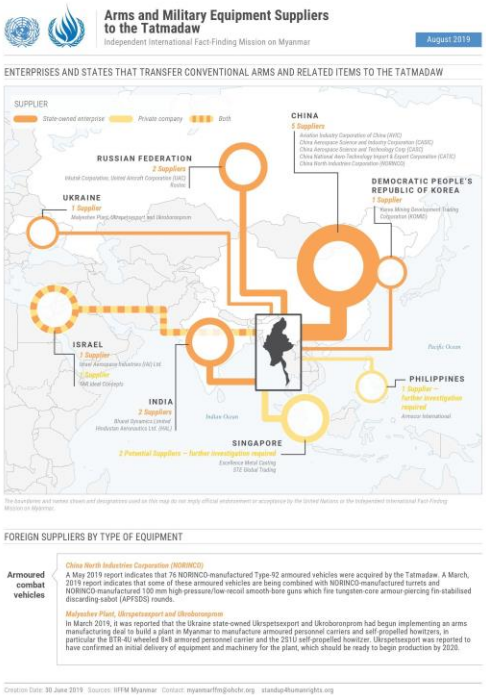


Figure 4: Infographic on arms and military equipment suppliers to Burma

Recommendations specific to environmental causes begin with addressing the underlying degradation. As Homer-Dixon writes, "if severe environmental damage becomes irreversible, it can become

a permanent source of social stress; even if the political and economic factors that originally produced the damage are fixed."[135] Between continued overexploitation of resources, population growth, and the accelerating threat of climate change, Burma must take action now to prevent permanent harm to the land and resources its people depend upon for survival. Actions such as restoring productivity to land through sustainable agriculture methods, diversifying crops, combating illegal logging and poaching, and improving urban conditions through waste management and air pollution projects can help improve Burma's environmental status. Additionally, Burma should move away from a largely natural resource-based economy as outlined in the country's Sustainable Development Plan. However, development projects must benefit all residents; specifically in Rakhine state, development programs "should take the necessary steps to ensure that their actions, first, do not enrich the Tatmadaw and, second, are of benefit to all the ethnic communities of Rakhine State on the basis of equality."[136] By addressing underlying environmental degradation, curbing climate change, and developing sustainably and inclusively, environmental issues could move far down the long list of factors causing conflict in Burma. Additionally, to prevent the degradation caused by refugee camps from perhaps fueling more violence, international aid should be directed to refugees to supply resources such as alternative fuel options and safe drinking water. Whether in a Bangladeshi camp or in the central regions of Burma, unmitigated deterioration of environmental conditions can only be expected to increase tensions in the region, possibly leading to further social segmentation, resource capture, and violence.

## Conclusion

In this paper, environmental degradation in Burma has been examined as a factor in the ongoing Rohingya crisis. While the root causes of this conflict are long-term and systematic ethnic and religious discrimination, Burma's declining environmental status should be considered alongside the fallout of the 2011 democratic opening, a wave of Buddhist extremism, and propaganda spread through social media as an inciting factor. Limited prior research exists on the Rohingya crisis as an eco-conflict; however, through examining the location and extent of degradation and natural disasters in Burma, the government's stated plans for development, and the current situation in Rakhine State, a portrait of the environmental layers of the crisis can be painted. Additionally, the situation in Burma can be placed within the existing framework for the role of environmental scarcity in ethno-religious conflicts, with the Tatmadaw's actions in ethnic regions of Burma aligning with the concept of resource capture and showing how competition may contribute to social segmentation. Finally, a comparative case-study to conflict in Sudan sheds light on how while "environmental stress results in violent conflict only when interacting with other political, ethnic, economic, and social causes,"[137] (Lee, 1997), in both Burma and Sudan, resource scarcity and inequality led to worsening violence along existing fault lines. With few signs that Burma will soon turn to more sustainable resource use, and with climate change certain to aggravate natural disasters and land quality issues, action needs to be taken now to prevent the intensification of conflict in an already conflict-ridden country. The situation of the Rohingya in Burma provides further warning for other countries facing upheaval in how environmental stress may lace itself through

fracture points—a warning that must be heeded as environmental threats accelerate and intensify worldwide.

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# Neocolonial Discourse in the Peace Corps: Problematic Implications for Intercultural Relationship-Building

NICOLE E. WOOD

## Abstract

For those familiar with the field of international development, the Peace Corps has become a well-recognized source of American aid, service, and intercultural relationships. While many would call Peace Corps service honorable, it is important to recognize the agency's roots in neocolonialism. As I demonstrate in this article, the Peace Corps was established so that the United States could interfere in the self-determination of foreign countries, influence their development, and ensure the creation of Western democratic and capitalistic structures worldwide—all under the guise of altruistic aid. My challenge for the Peace Corps is the following: in order for the agency to continue promoting the peace, sustainable change, and intercultural relationships it prides itself on, the Peace Corps has to reckon with its intentionally deceitful past, neocolonial structure, and current position as a federal entity exerting power in developing countries around the world.

First, I provide some background information about the Peace Corps, their goals, and their model of service. Then, in Section 2, I discuss the historical context of the Peace Corps' establishment and reveal how colonial rhetoric was used to justify a need for the agency. I do this by exploring the "East vs. West" divide in development discourse through an application of Edward Said's "Orientalism" theory. Next, I uncover how notions of Western superiority furthered neocolonialism by drawing upon the concept of "positional superiority," which Michael Latham discusses in his book *Modernization as Ideology*. In the fourth section, I demonstrate how racist and ethnocentric ideologies have shaped the Peace Corps narrative.

In Section 5, I examine current Peace Corps values by reviewing agency training materials and the work of their Intercultural Competency, Diversity and Inclusion (ICD&I) Team. Here, I highlight how the Peace Corps is promoting equitable relationships through improved intercultural training and from an application of "postcolonial self-reflexivity"—a theory covered by Jenna Hanchey, a returned Peace Corps volunteer. Finally, I provide an overall analysis of the agency, detailing three negative aspects of its structure I believe pose the biggest challenges, as the issues pertain directly to neocolonial development work, equitable partnerships and intercultural relationships.

Ultimately, I argue no amount of intercultural awareness, sensitivity training, or integration measures can override the "positional superiority" that the Peace Corps benefits from as a U.S. government entity.


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Only when one considers the agency's neocolonial roots, their unwillingness to change problematic aspects of their structure, and the Eurocentric notion that is "development", can the problem be fully realized. I argue true equity between the Peace Corps and the countries it serves cannot be attained until the agency separates itself from the U.S. government, hires only technically-skilled applicants, and begins incorporating more host country national leadership into their grassroots work.

## Brief Peace Corps Overview

Founded in 1961 by President John F. Kennedy, the Peace Corps (PC) serves to work alongside developing countries and provide them with trained volunteers in sectors of agriculture, community economic development, education, environment, health, and youth development. Peace Corps volunteers live abroad for a total of 27 months as they work on community-level projects designed to "modernize" and "elevate" developing host nations—projects that, for example, improve literacy rates, lower child mortality rates, and increase sustainable farming practices.[1]

Prior to service, volunteers undergo 10-12 weeks of pre-service training that equips them to work in their sector, teaches them the language(s) spoken at site, and provides cultural context to prepare them for life in their host country [1]\. During service, volunteers are paired with local civilian counterparts who help volunteers address their communities' needs (GAO 1990, 48). The three goals of the Peace Corps are to provide countries with trained assistance, for volunteers to represent the United States and American culture, and for volunteers to learn about their host countries.[2] This mutual exchange of practices, norms and values is an integral part of Peace Corps service and the knowledge volunteers bring back to the U.S. after their service is said to benefit the whole U.S. population by promoting a better understanding of cultures around the world.[2]

## Historical Context

In order to understand why the Peace Corps was created in 1961, one must recognize the historical context of the Cold War and the United States' perspective going into it. Following World War II, communism in the Soviet Union posed the next great danger to American society. This intangible threat of communist ideology, and the goal of ultimately containing it, became the United States' main concern leading into the Cold War.

No president better exemplified anti-communist rhetoric and liberal "Western" ideals than the young John F. Kennedy. Upon being elected to office in 1961, Kennedy put forth a comprehensive containment plan to focus on periphery regions around the Soviet Union, rather than interfering directly with the superpower[3]. The Kennedy Administration saw young, emerging countries in "the East" as opportunities for the United States to suppress the spread of communism and ensure the establishment of Western political and economic structures in the U.S.' own image. Kennedy's foreign policy advisors believed that developing countries

"lacked the type of integrative values that theorists identified with […] stable, Western democracies," making them "extremely vulnerable to communism and its seductive claims of social reform, political order, and economic growth".[4]

This language is nearly identical to that used by British colonist Arthur James Balfour, in his 1910 address to the British House of Commons, famously critiqued in Edward Said's *Orientalism*.[5] "Orientalism," as Said describes, "is the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority. [It is] a political version of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them')". [5] An early proponent of the "Orientalism" theory, Balfour defends British colonization and occupation in "Oriental" countries by stating "the facts of the case" [5]: Western nations as soon as they emerge into history show the beginnings of those capacities for self[-]government having merits of their own… You may look through the whole history of the Orientals in what is called, broadly speaking, the East, and you never find traces of self-government. […] never in all the revolutions of fate and fortune have you seen one of those nations of its own motion establish what we, from a Western point of view, call self-government. [5]

Balfour does a number of things in his assertion. First, he divides the world in half by distinguishing a strong binary between the "East" and "West". Second, he associates "the West" with moral prowess and leadership, while labeling the less-developed "East" as incapable. Lastly, Balfour reduces the historical, cultural, and political achievements of Egypt to nothing more than a country deserving of foreign domination. This condescending attitude fueled imperialistic practices, as it empowered Western nations to colonize and exploit developing countries and rebuild according to their own ideals. Sadly, these processes persist today, although no longer demonstrated through physical military imposition as it was in earlier centuries. Instead, many Western countries continue to exercise influence over parts of the world through economic, political, and social pressures—practices known as neocolonialism.

This type of neocolonialist discourse was present in the Kennedy Administration during the early 1960s. Walt Whitman Rostow, one of Kennedy's top economic advisors, argued the new challenge for U.S. foreign policy "was to disguise development in a way that was desirable for those who had previously been under colonial rule".[6] Rostow recognized that America needed to create a model of development that stressed "national liberation" and economic independence in order to entice newly-independent countries away from communist ideals. [6]

By reiterating Balfour's belief that developing countries were incapable of self-governance, the Kennedy Administration wished to extend American "assistance" overseas to subtly exercise control over periphery states in the East. This sense of American authority comes from the belief that the American experience (its colonial history yet subsequent rise to power) is exceptional—a belief that "establish[ed] a

polarity between the United States and the rest of the world".[7] This exceptionalism was reinforced after World War II, when the U.S. began exercising a more dominant presence around the world and in "the Orient"—a feat historically reserved for European powers (Said 2003, 11-12). In doing so, the United States solidified its position as a fully-developed, Western country and began to apply this sense of entitlement to its relations with the Eastern world.

This East/West dichotomy equated terms like "development" and "progress" with American notions of democracy, capitalism, and equality, while "undeveloped" and "traditional" societies elsewhere became synonymous with the opposite—thus implying they were prime targets for communist infestation. Here, it is clear how notions of development were (and continue to be) based on European societal values and disadvantages other ways of measuring life, health, economy, and happiness. This divide in development theory still exists today, though terms like "First vs. Third World" and "Global North vs. South" more commonly refer to the divide.[7] By equipping this rhetoric and framing intervention as rescuing "backward societies" from communist ruin, America could defend its own international meddling through neocolonial tactics.[6] With this in mind, Kennedy established the two most recognizable U.S. development agencies within the first few months of his presidency—the Peace Corps and the U.S. Agency for International Development—both with the intention of preventing the spread of communism. In doing so, the Peace Corps provided a "friendlier, more casual alternative" to diplomacy, thus making it an ideal neocolonial cover for the United States' political, economic, social, and ideological overhaul in developing nations.[6]

## Neocolonial Rhetoric in Early Peace Corps History

Neocolonial discourse was heard by the American public in 1961, when President Kennedy proudly declared at his inauguration, "To those peoples in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required" ("Inaugural Address"). This reinforced the East/West divide and labelled people in developing countries as "helpless" by asserting that they lack the necessary tools to "help themselves". It also implied that "unless something American is brought in [or] unless Americans use their exceptionality to empower, […] the [other] culture will remain static".[8] In this course of action, the Peace Corps was established to "save" people in the East from their "huts and villages" and to provide them with the same opportunities, resources, and freedoms Americans enjoyed in the West.

Though portrayed as purely altruistic, Peace Corps methods of "helping others" operated within and perpetuated power differentials—a structure in which the United States had "positional superiority".[9] This "positional superiority" situated the U.S. on top, followed closely by European hegemons, with the rest of the "developing

world" trailing below. This hierarchy of power fit right into Kennedy's early development theories. Walt Whitman Rostow once famously said that "the development of nations is a little like the development of human beings," suggesting "a mature, advanced society could take the hands of wayward, childlike ones and guide them into the adulthood of modernity". [9] By comparing newly independent countries to helpless children in need of care from older, more established democratic nations, Rostow asserted that development could not occur without Western guidance and influence.

This echoes Edward Said's analysis of the Oriental-European relationship. To quote Said, the key "feature of [these] relations was that Europe was always in a position of strength [...] True, the relationship of strong to weak could be disguised or mitigated […] but the essential relationship [would always be] between a strong and weak partner".[10] By attempting to "disguise" and "mitigate" American influence through development, the United States was able to justify self-asserting itself into the affairs of developing countries in an effort to modernize them.

In truth, this process of modernization was simply "a means for the continued assertion of the privileges and rights of [the] dominant power" onto a colonized people.[9] By placing Peace Corps volunteers in countries with colonial histories, it was easy for the U.S. to use neocolonial tactics to encourage their dependency. This is where the process is intentionally deceitful. "In order to make [neocolonialism] attractive to those upon whom it is practised it must be shown as capable of raising their living standards," however, the ultimate "economic objective of neo-colonialism is to keep those standards depressed in the interest of the developed countries. It is only when this contradiction is understood that the failure of innumerable 'aid' programmes [...] can be explained" (Nkrumah 1966, xv). In this way, the United States was able to demonstrate a public "commit[ment] to self-determination for all", while using the Peace Corps to reinforce relationships of dependency around the world. [11]

## Ethnocentric Arrogance Within the Peace Corps

It was President Kennedy's "help them help themselves" declaration in 1961 that best exemplified the problem in international development. While it appeared noble on the surface, his statement perpetuated the East/West divide and equipped patronizing phrasing that has propelled the field of development for years. With his statement, Kennedy placed the duty of assistance on American citizens—essentially creating a 20th century equivalent to the "White Man's Burden". Named after the poem by Rudyard Kipling, the "White Man's Burden" concept "assumes the American as the standard of perfection" and states that those with this privilege must help the "Other to develop both economically and culturally" in order to share their liberties and freedoms.[12] For the Peace Corps, this "Burden" is "coupled with the idea of American exceptionalism" and applied within the Eurocentric framework of

development, making it additionally problematic. [12] As a result, Kennedy's promise of mobilizing Americans to "break the bonds of mass misery" sent the message that Americans had the inherent ability and responsibility to reduce the world's inequities, reinforcing the belief that those in developing countries needed a savior. [13]

Though the term "White Savior Complex" wasn't officially coined by Teju Cole until 2012, early PC rhetoric had been fully embodying this term since 1961. [14] Just like the "White Man's Burden," the "White Savior Complex" is demonstrated when white people (often those in Western countries) and set out to "save" others (predominantly people of color in less-developed countries) that they have deemed less fortunate. Here, race is an important factor because it acknowledges that self-righteous assumptions in development (for instance, the assumption others need your help and that the "world exists simply to satisfy the needs […] of white people") are all deeply rooted in white supremacist ideologies. [15]

These racist and Eurocentric sentiments remain on full display in current Peace Corps materials. As former volunteer Michael Buckler points out, "a prime example" of the Peace Corps' "hallmarks of saviorism" is the agency's official motto: "Make the Most of Your World". [16] "The message is clear: The world is yours, go forth and fix it". [16] This phrasing literally tells American volunteers they are entitled to the world and when one considers how PC recruits are predominantly white, while host countries consist primarily of people of color, it reinforces notions of white supremacy. [17] This motto affirms the belief that any American, regardless of qualifications, can provide assistance to and "save" those in developing countries, simply because of their American privilege.

These racial dynamics are entrenched within development work. Just as the East/West binary instilled a hierarchy between developed and developing countries, so too has an imbalance of power been established between white and non-white people. As a result of years of conquest and colonization by white Europeans, "the West" has become synonymous with "white", while places in "the East" are "Othered" and labeled "non-white." "This brings us back to the fundamental bias [that] Europeans conquered the world because their nature was predisposed to it, while non-Europeans were colonized because their nature condemned them to it".[18] "Racism appears, then, not as an incidental detail," Albert Memmi writes, "but as a consubstantial part of colonialism". [18] Because white supremacy plays a significant role in development theory, the "positional superiority" the U.S. benefits from is now dually compounded by race, as a majority-white nation.

This intersection of power, nationalism, and race is consistent with the findings made by Jenna Hanchey, a returned Peace Corps volunteer who researched the impact of race and colonization on stories of service from former volunteers [19]. In her graduate dissertation, Hanchey reveals "the intricate connection that postcolonial theoretical issues have to issues of race and ethnicity. Though colonialism should never be reduced to racism," she writes, "the act is

intricately tied to race". [19] These racial ideologies were not abandoned when physical, militaristic colonization was traded for more discreet neocolonial tactics. Instead, racism continues to be perpetuated within neocolonial development structures.

Eurocentrism is another ideology upheld in the field of development. Similar to ethnocentrism, which judges one's own cultural norms and values as the only "correct" or "moral" way to behave, Eurocentrism believes any behavior outside of European or Western norms "is wrong and misguided[,] that other cultures are decidedly inferior". [20] This belief echoes all previous assertions made by Balfour and Rostow. Additionally, the interchangeability of "democratic values" and "capitalistic economies" with the developed "West" and opposite qualities with the undeveloped "East" allows one to conclude that the notion of "development" is inherently measured in Eurocentric ways.

Despite its inextricable ties to development, Eurocentric behavior does clash with current PC goals of integration. By demonstrating these attitudes in service, volunteers risk offending their host communities, damaging local relationships, and being interpreted as elitist and narrow-minded. Instead, it is crucial for volunteers to practice cultural relativity as they learn to integrate into their host communities and build positive intercultural relationships—two markers of successful Peace Corps service. [20]

The first critique that identified this type of problematic behavior in Peace Corps service came in 1968, when Harvard University's student-run newspaper published a scathing op-ed written by former volunteers. [21] The article read, "We now see that the Peace Corps is arrogant and colonialist in the same way as the government of which it is a part. […] It is a blindness produced by the arrogance of a nation that thinks itself capable of solving all the world's problems with its own techniques". [21] Here, former volunteers condemned the agency for perpetuating American superiority and admitted, that instead of "the antithesis [of] American colonialism" that Kennedy had promised, the Peace Corps truly was "imposing the United States' political and cultural values" on developing countries through neocolonial means. [21]

Today, the Peace Corps has put more resources towards cultural sensitivity, intercultural communication, and integration, as they recognize effective service cannot occur without these skills. In the following section, I discuss how the agency has begun to address issues of American superiority, ethnocentrism, and racial ideologies through mandatory staff trainings that improve intercultural competency and address topics of equity, diversity, and inclusion.

## Present Discourse: Intercultural Competency, Diversity, and Inclusion

I turn now to the current discourse within the agency to show how they are tackling ethnocentrism through improved intercultural training. To do so, I draw from their official cross-cultural workbook, *Culture Matters*, and assess two popular training models: the Self-Other Bridge and

Intercultural Code-Shifting. Here, I specifically highlight the Intercultural Competency, Diversity & Inclusion (ICD&I) Team for their work to identify workplace inequities, resolve conflict, and provide support to the international Peace Corps community.

The ICD&I Team is part of the agency's Office of Overseas Programming and Training Support (OPATS), which supervises the development, implementation, and evaluation of all Peace Corps training materials. In addition to addressing themes of diversity, the Intercultural Competency, Diversity & Inclusion Team also addresses common cross-cultural interactions that occur during service. These can include adjustment issues faced by volunteers, a lack of support for minority and/or marginalized Peace Corps staff, and communication setbacks between Americans and host country nationals. [22]

For three months prior to service, soon-to-be volunteers receive language, technical, and cross-cultural training in order to prepare them for service. During this period, each prospective volunteer receives a copy of the official PC cross-cultural workbook, *Culture Matters*, and begins to gain the skills necessary to navigate their new surroundings and the cultural differences that arise "between the volunteer and the people they're working with". [22] To aid the adjustment process and encourage best practices among volunteers, ICD&I specialists use two popular models within the field of intercultural communication: the Self-Other Bridge and Intercultural Code-Shifting. [22] In a 2019 training webinar, ICD&I Specialists Emily Clawson and D'Lynn Jacobs explain these two models and apply them to common Peace Corps settings. [22]

First, the Self-Other Bridge Model requires the self-analysis of "one's own reactions and worldview," in addition to the consideration of others' perspectives in a given scenario. [22] By asking oneself if adjustments could be made to achieve similar behaviors to others in the interaction, these strategies can help to "bridge" the "self-other" divide and create a more inclusive and equitable space (2019). While intercultural communication goes beyond simple verbal exchanges, language-learning is a common bridge method. This is an important bridging tool, as Albert Memmi points out, because "two tongues are in conflict" in places with colonial histories: "those of the colonizer and the colonized". [23] By using language to bridge the colonial power divide and communicate with others in their native tongue, volunteers often report better interactions and improved feelings of cultural adjustment. [22]

Jacobs, who also serves as the Director of Programming and Training in Vanuatu, finds that speaking the local language of Bislama is a "great way to develop effective and healthy relationships with [her] team," earn their trust, and allow her coworkers to feel "valued" and "seen". [24] Clawson, a Supervisory ICD&I Specialist, agrees and says she always tries to "learn the basics of greeting people in their own language because that can allow me to […] create a space where it's not just one group of people who always has to speak a language that's not their first" (2019).

The second intercultural model PC uses is the Code-Shifting technique. [24] Code-shifting refers to "intentionally modifying one's own behavior to be appropriate and effective in a particular context" and often happens when one person recognizes a difference in engaging with another and alters their own approach in order to peacefully or more effectively interact with the other. [24]

It is important here to reiterate the role that power plays in international interactions. As stated throughout this paper, the Peace Corps wields a great deal of power in host countries as a U.S. government agency. Even with attempts to balance out this power, American volunteers and staff still benefit from this "positional superiority"—whether they are conscious of this dynamic or not. The problem that occurs, Clawson admits, is that HCN staff then constantly code-shift to fit American norms and make their American coworkers feel more comfortable (2019). Over time, it is not only exhausting for them to keep conforming to norms that are not their own, but it reinforces power inequities that stem from histories of colonization, imperialism, and racist ideologies like white supremacy. To best balance these power inequities, the Peace Corps has highlighted the "need for [volunteers] to code-shift culturally in relation to their own communities" and adapt to host culture norms, rather than the other way around. [24]

Both the Self-Other Bridge and Code-Shifting techniques require constant deliberate effort to be sensitive to cultural differences and to be aware of existing power dynamics. This is crucial, Clawson explains, because "when you're aware of what's going on, you can be intentional about the choices that you make" (2019). Jacobs echoes this, recognizing that by asking her staff to speak English during meetings instead of the local language of Bislama, "[I] would be leveraging my power as a U.S. American staff member, in this U.S. American organization, in their country". [24] Instead, Jacobs finds that speaking the local language is "more appropriate for me to do my work and be equitable […] because this is the country in which we serve". [24]

As demonstrated by these ICD&I Specialists, PC intercultural training requires a great deal of self-reflection, or as Hanchey calls it, "self-reflexivity". "Self-reflexivity," the former Peace Corps volunteer writes, "requires an acknowledgement and challenging of our own structures and structural ideologies". [25]Furthermore, Hanchey argues that a postcolonial approach is necessary when working in international development as it analyzes "the underlying Eurocentric assumptions of both one's field and one's own research, in order to root out 'latent ideological structures that inform our scholarship and practices'". [26]The damage, Hanchey claims, occurs when volunteers "perform the role of 'development' without bringing into question the global power differentials upon which development work is based". [26]

Here, ICD&I Specialist Clawson demonstrates postcolonial self-reflexivity as she analyzes her own identity "as an English-speaking white woman" and position "in the facilitator space of privilege" when conducting ICD&I

workshops in host countries (Clawson 2019). "When I'm going to countries that have a history of being colonized by English-speaking white people (or other white people), I think it's really key to […] do that Self-Other Bridge process and ask myself, 'what cultural norms am I privileging?' [Do] I make everyone code shift to me or do I intentionally look for ways to honor a diversity of ways of being?" [27]

By exemplifying the standards set in ICD&I practice, Clawson demonstrates how important it is to name the power structures present, recognize how one's identity exists within those structures, and consider the perspectives of others in the interaction. This work from the Intercultural Competency, Diversity and Inclusion (ICD&I) Team demonstrates how the Peace Corps has been prioritizing better cross-cultural training, intercultural communication, and awareness around power dynamics to create equitable and inclusive relationships. These ICD&I practices are incredibly impactful as they promote self-reflexivity and awareness on an individual level, while also ensuring the broader PC community shares a common vocabulary that reflects intercultural competency standards. [27] That said, I argue intercultural training is not enough to neutralize the systemic damage caused by the agency, or enough to alleviate the "positional superiority" the Peace Corps benefits from as an extension of the U.S. government working to develop the international community.

## Overall Agency Analysis: Three Structural Issues to Address

In this section, I reiterate how the Peace Corps is perpetuating harm by analyzing three structural issues within its framework that must be addressed. First, I examine the lack of accountability offered by the agency as a result of its position within the U.S. government. Second, I explore the organization's affinity for hiring unqualified applicants, which perpetuates issues of Western superiority, American exceptionalism, and white saviorism. Third, I question the agency's failure to provide proper support or compensation to host country staff, as well as notice the lack of local involvement in Peace Corps countries. In each of these three sections, I propose possible solutions to combat these structural deficiencies and draw from outside scholarship and critiques for support.

## Structural Issue #1: PC's Position as a U.S. Government Entity

The biggest problem facing the Peace Corps and its future, I argue, is the agency's own position as a part of the United States government. The Peace Corps' close ties to the U.S. government has helped solidify its "positional superiority" in the field of international development and the power that accompanies this privilege—no matter how "nonlegitimate" the privilege is—has affected every aspect of the agency, including each intercultural interaction made by those in service. [28] This power has also prevented the organization from taking true accountability for the harm it has caused,

whether through deceptive neocolonial tactics, the imposition of Eurocentric measures of development, or through the extension of U.S. foreign policy interests. As a result, I argue that while the Peace Corps remains connected to and funded by the U.S. federal government, it cannot begin to take responsibility for damage it has caused, nor can it boast of the "equitable intercultural relationships" it helps to form, when its structure remains one of neocolonialism.

The presence of the federal government within PC structure allows the agency a sort of "untouchable privilege." The Peace Corps would never acknowledge its role in foreign interference because, by doing so, it would implicate the United States government. This allows the agency to be entirely complicit. This "privilege" and resulting lack of accountability is exactly why Kwame Nkrumah, the former Prime Minister and President of Ghana, despised neocolonialism. "For those who practice it," he writes in his book, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, "[neocolonialism] means power without responsibility and for those who suffer from it, it means exploitation without redress".[29]

The former volunteers of Harvard Crimson's article made this crucial observation in 1968 when they found "the bureaucratic loyalty of these administrators is to Washington" only, and not to the volunteers, staff, or communities the agency is supposed to serve.[30] Sadly, nothing has changed in the decades since that article was published.

For these reasons, we cannot expect the Peace Corps to suddenly take full accountability for the harm it has caused, acknowledge the role it has played (and continues to play) in the neocolonial oppression of developing countries, attempt to remedy its structural inequities, or trust the agency to conduct a deep, meaningful, and lasting reform. Instead, many argue the ideologies that helped establish the Peace Corps are too integral within PC structure to be removed. Of these in dissent, the group "Decolonizing Peace Corps" (a collection of former PC volunteers who criticize the "unethical" system they participated in) is vocally advocating for the agency's abolition. [31]

In a slightly different approach, the former volunteers in the Harvard Crimson piece advocated for a separation of the organization from the U.S. government and suggested the Peace Corps be turned "into an internationally administered agency," "where administrative power is shared by representatives of various societies [and] where the interplay of their differing interests produces truly flexible programs that can be transferred from culture to culture, rather than imposed by one culture on another". [32]

Merely privatizing the agency will not solve its problems but the suggestion of internationalizing it makes a great deal of sense. By having better oversight and external assessments, it would allow for more accountability, greater local input, and fewer Americans in positions of power in foreign countries. However, for as long as the Peace Corps remains a mechanism of the U.S. government and benefits from the "positional superiority" it receives as such, the agency cannot effectively demonstrate

equitable intercultural partnerships on a large-scale international level.

## Structural Issue #2: Inexperienced and Unqualified Hires

One of the most consistent gripes against the Peace Corps has been for their fondness in hiring inexperienced volunteers who lack the specialized skills that developing countries often request, like "doctors, education specialists, and crop extensionists,".[33] While all volunteers undergo training prior to service, this instruction is sometimes the first technical experience some receive in their sector and it is insufficient for many: the agency's own 2009 Annual Volunteer Survey revealed 1 in 4 volunteers reported their job-related training as ineffective or poor and that "technical training [ranked] the lowest of the five training areas".[34] This technical training should not be the first experience volunteers have in their sector; however, this is often the case, as PC recruits "B.A. generalists," or young college graduates with liberal arts degrees, who still lack "the specific training or professional employment sought by the host nations". [35]

Despite other agency-wide reforms, the Peace Corps' recruitment of inexperienced volunteers remains consistent and, if anything, has gotten worse. In 1965, 70% of recruited volunteers were generalists that lacked specialized skills[36], whereas this number had increased to 85% in 2019. [37] This hiring trend reflects a deeply-held belief that unskilled and inexperienced Americans are still qualified enough to provide new insights and assistance to developing countries. This is a dangerous and arrogant assumption that connects directly to Western superiority, American exceptionalism, the white savior complex, and colonizer behavior.

I argue this hiring trend will not significantly change for two reasons. First and foremost, the trend and its accompanying belief in Western superiority is inseparable from PC values and early goals: it was President Kennedy's original belief that "all volunteers were capable of giving the 'underdeveloped' nations 'a hand in building a society'", regardless of their actual qualifications. [36] Secondly, recommendations to hire more qualified applicants and focus resources on the "improvement of technical training" and "additional training days for volunteers" have been previously made by the agency's own internal assessments, but to no avail.[38] In order to show their values are no longer in line with arrogant notions of Western superiority, the Peace Corps needs to rebrand their recruitment materials, come up with a more equitable and culturally-sensitive motto (as opposed to the current "Make the Most of Your World" which is thick with American entitlement), and hire only technically-qualified applicants with relevant field experience in the future.

## Structural Issue #3: Failure to Prioritize Local Leadership

As mentioned earlier, there are two elements of the existing Peace Corps model that incorporate host country national input: the assignment of a local civilian counterpart to each volunteer during service and the host

country national hires that staff Peace Corps country offices. The goals of these two elements were to prioritize the "partnership" between Americans and host country nationals; to reduce ethnocentric assumptions of development by informing volunteers of pre-existing community needs; and to provide the agency with local representation to ensure a cooperative and equal environment.[39] While these goals are great in theory, they have not worked well in practice. Below, I discuss three problems that exist in the PC model, as they relate to local host country national staff.

The first issue here is that the Peace Corps does not pay civilian counterparts in the way that host country staff receives reimbursements or salaries.[40] This fundamentally devalues their input, dismisses their efforts to assist volunteers in establishing community projects, and reinforces the idea that HCNs are less important than the volunteers they serve alongside. In order to repair this, "Decolonizing Peace Corps" has outlined demands for financial compensation and increased counterpart involvement, urging that "counterparts [be] paid on the basis of 2-5 year fellowships" and "be responsible for completing community assessments, identifying projects, [and] applying for and managing grants" so they have more control over the projects and finances in their local communities. [40]

The second issue that arises is the dual responsibility of host country nationals. Host country staff are hired to both provide support to volunteers and provide HCN representation. This is problematic because, when locals play a secondary "supportive" role to volunteers, it centers Americans when volunteers should be the ones supporting local community leaders. Additionally, mere host country representation does not automatically create beneficial multicultural spaces, just as the recruitment of diverse identities does not solve racism. Instead, the Peace Corps must prioritize ICD&I measures to ensure its workplaces are safe for non-Americans and that HCN suggestions, concerns and efforts will be heard and appreciated.

The third issue that exists is the lack of employment opportunities for host country nationals to serve the Peace Corps. Only Americans are eligible to become Volunteers or Country Directors, yet even HCN staff positions are often limited in what they can offer the agency. [40] This deficiency in the organization's structure fails to encourage more local input, guidance, and feedback (something PC would highly benefit from) and reinforces the idea that the Peace Corps exists primarily for Americans. Following their suggestion to "internationalize the Peace Corps," the former volunteers of the Harvard Crimson piece envisioned a model where locals could "plan and direct programs in [their own countries]" and Americans, if they still wanted to serve, could "put themselves in subordinate positions, [and] allow themselves to be really used by the people who live [there]".[41] While this is far from the current PC structure, I argue the benefits of an internationalized plan like this one would allow for more HCN staff positions and leadership roles—thus allowing locals to


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play a substantial role in their own development.

## Conclusion

The most pressing steps the Peace Corps can take towards accountability include separating itself from the United States government and federal funding; acknowledging its intentionally deceitful past and role as a neocolonial actor; and working to address several structural issues within its model—like answering to the countries and communities it "serves", hiring only qualified applicants as volunteers, and incorporating more host country leadership and input into its organizational structure.

That said, I acknowledge how even if the agency were to take these steps and rebrand itself entirely, its fundamental nature as an international development organization operates within a field based on Eurocentric values and relies on "global power differentials".[42] Here, I reiterate the problem that is the Peace Corps in and of itself—a United States government agency that was established with clear neocolonial intent and uses federal funds to exploit developing countries in the name of American foreign policy interests. It is their "positional superiority" as a U.S. government entity within the field of international development that prevents the agency from being held truly accountable for the harm they have caused.

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# The Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Border: A Legacy of Soviet Imperialism

LIAM ABBATE

## Abstract

Kyrgyzstan, a small country in Central Asia, shares a complex border with its neighbor Uzbekistan. While these borders were created during the Soviet era, and were drawn by leaders in Moscow, in the post-Soviet years new problems have arisen from the complex borders. A number of different ethnic groups are spread amongst the five Uzbek exclaves and two Tajik exclaves that are located adjacent to Kyrgyz territory. This difficult set of national borders also complicates sharing the water that flows thru the Ferghana Valley.

## Introduction

In this paper, I will analyze the international border dispute between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and how the contemporary Uzbek-Kyrgyz border's division of the surrounding ethnic groups remains as a legacy of the Soviet era. I start by explaining the complicated border which is the basis for the dispute. I then examine the origins of the dispute back in the Soviet era, before moving on to developments in the dispute since Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan gained their independence in. Finally, I explore the wider geopolitical implications of the dispute, particularly in relation to the U.S.-China rivalry.

## Background

Kyrgyzstan is among the poorest of the nations of Central Asia: its per capita is a mere tenth of its larger neighbor Kazakhstan.[1] Formerly a constituent republic of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics, the Kirghiz Soviet Socialist Republic declared independence as Kyrgyzstan on August 31, 1991. Between 1924 and 1927 Soviet officials drew curly borders for their then-constituent republics, and in the process, they separated groups of Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, and Tajiks inhabiting the Ferghana Valley:[2] home to nearly one quarter of Central Asia's population.[3]

Unlike the other former Soviet republics of Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan has largely experienced democracy since independence. Revolutions ousted the Kyrgyz presidents in 2005 and 2010; the former revolution was peaceful, while the latter included carnage in its chronology.[4] Furthermore, a competitive election in 2017 resulted in a peaceful transition from President Almazbek Atambayev to his protégé Sooronbay Jeenbekov, without a revolution. However, despite handing over power, former President Atambayev continues to harshly criticize the actions of his successor. President Jeenbekov has also worked to consolidate his power, as he has threatened to imprison a political opponent of his – Ömürbek Babanov – on the charge of inciting conflict between the ethnics Uzbeks and Kyrgyz.[5]

Kyrgyzstan lies between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in the west and south, China in the east, and Kazakhstan in the north. The country is covered in mountains with 88 mountain ranges.[6] These mountain ranges separate communities within Kyrgyzstan, contributing to regional differences and national instability.[7] The capital of Bishkek is the main population center for northern Kyrgyzstan, while the area between Jalal-


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Abad and Osh comprises the most populated part of southern Kyrgyzstan. As seen in Figure 1, the former lies just South of Kazakhstan while the latter area lies just east of Uzbekistan; Osh and Bishkek are two cities the lie outside of the seven oblasts (regions) and hold an equivalent status as the oblasts.[8]

The Ferghana Valley is an area divided among Kyrgyzstan and its neighbors: Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The valley's fertile agricultural land produces a large amount of food for Central Asia, while subject to the availability of water.[9] The twisting borders and narrow stretches of land are relics of Soviet rule and continue to cause disputes between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Its 10 million inhabitants include ethnic Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, and Tajiks.[10] However, during the Soviet era, residents became accustomed to their ability to cross the inter-Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), as the Ferghana Valley lacked the border controls present in other areas of the Soviet Union.[11]


**Figure 1.** Political Divisions of Kyrgyzstan, map from Bigstock (Richard Weitz, "Kyrgyzstan and the Afghan Campaign's Logistical Challenges," *Second Line Defense*, last modified November 16, 2011, https://sldinfo.com/2011/11/kyrgyzstan-and-the-afghan-campaigns-logistical-challenges/.).

## Misaligned Ethnicities in the Ferghana Valley

While many countries have borders that were drawn arbitrarily, Kyrgyzstan's borders are especially problematic. There are five exclaves where portions of Uzbek territory are completely surrounded by Kyrgyzstan: Sokh, Shohimardon, Chon Qora/Qalacha, and Jani-Ayil (Halmiyon), as well as two Tajik exclaves.[12] At 350 km$^2$, Sokh is the largest of these exclaves, and according to Baumgartner, has experienced several conflicts between its 50,000 Uzbek citizens and the guards securing the Kyrgyz border.[13] To complicate matters further, Sokh's residents are 99% ethnic Tajiks.[14] This mismatch of residency and identity is not unique to the Sokh exclave; national borders separate divide ethnic groups of the Ferghana Valley while pushing together other distinct groups (fig. 2; fig. 3).[15] Furthermore, this disconnect between ethnic identity and location within national boundaries is especially pronounced in northern Tajikistan, where Uzbeks and Tajiks are interspersed[16] like chocolate and vanilla in a marble cake.


**Figure 2.** Political Map of the Ferghana Valley (Sabatar, "Normalization process between.").

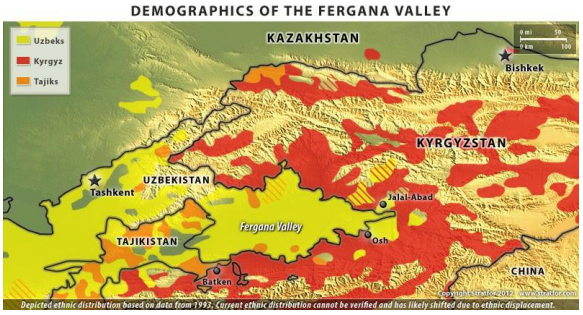


**Figure 3.** Demographics of the Fergana Valley ("Central Asia: Tensions.").

Ethnic tensions in the region are nothing new and most recently flared up in 2010 when clashes between the two ethnic groups left hundreds of locals dead.[17] The Soviet era infrastructure impacts contemporary disagreements over water resources and the border itself. A Soviet-built network of canals connects the water supply systems of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, causing disagreements over how much water each of the three "stans" should receive.[18] In general, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have an abundance of water but lack electricity, while Uzbekistan (and Kazakhstan) have excess electricity but a scarce amount of water.[19] There have been multiple efforts to improve the water distribution system in the Ferghana Valley. The world bank funded improvements and modernizations in Uzbekistan's water infrastructure from 2010 to 2016.[20] Similarly, the International Water Management Institute had a project started in 2001 which sought to respect local needs for water resources and improve the soil fertility in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.[21] In 2017, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan were able to agree on a dam on the Naryn River, while in 2018, Uzbekistan's president announced his support for the Rogun dam in Tajikistan. Continued cooperation is possible, provided the three nations are willing to overlook the "deep-seated mistrust"[22] that currently exists.

Throughout history the Ferghana Valley had been subjected and inhabited by numerous cultures, such as the Greeks, Arabs, Mongols, and Turks, all of which affected the socio-political landscape of the valley.[23] In the mid-19th century Tsarist Russia conquered the Ferghana Valley from the Khanate of Qo'qon.[24] Also known as Kokand, the Khanate was not ethnically-based, but rather was a "dynastic and feudal entity."[25]

Many of the issues from the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border and other borders in the region are a product of Russian imperialism – first in the way of the Russian Empire, and later by the hand of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Before 1924, when the creation of the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border began, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan had not existed as sovereign states. According to Megoran, there were not Kyrgyz and Uzbek ethnic groups quite the way there are today.[26] Before the creation of the border in the 1920s, ethnic identification was not familiar to many inhabitants of Central Asia.[27] The history of migrations in the region had not provided clear, geographically segregated ethnic groups. The Uzbeks, Karakalpaks, and Kazakhs likely all descended from the people inhabiting the Uzbek confederation of the fifteenth century.[28] The origins of the Kyrgyz people are less clear, but the consensus is that part of the Kyrgyz population migrated from southern Siberia to modern Kyrgyzstan in the fifteenth century, but that another portion of the Kyrgyz population is descended from nomads who had arrived in the region long before the fifteenth century.[29] When considered on the basis of language, the Tajiks are distinct from the other four large ethnic groups of post-Soviet Central Asia: the Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, and Turkmens,[30] who all speak Turkic

languages.[31] The Tajik Language, however, is a relative of Persian.[32]

The Soviet Union selected historical designations and used them as the basis for ethnicities, by codifying distinct languages, selecting capitals for the union republics, and compiling national historiographies.[33] The ethnicity names created by the Soviet Union did not match the self-identification of residents of Central Asia: boundary surveyors reported confusion about matching people to ethnic labels if their own labels were not on the official list of Central Asian ethnonyms. Perhaps most consequentially, the Soviet officials drew borders between the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), the Kirghiz SSR, and the other central Asian SSRs. Even after the creation of these borders, many residents did not "distinguish between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan".[34]

## A New International Border

Kyrgyzstan's most important relations are with its neighbors: Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and China, as well as nearby Afghanistan and Turkmenistan. Uzbekistan has accused both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan of inadequately protecting their borders, allowing an unlimited flow of drugs to travel across the latter two countries.[35] Uzbekistan relied on its authoritarian dictator Islam Karimov to strongly enforce its borders – Karimov died in 2016.

Upon independence in 1991, the border between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan became an international border overnight. Initially, the border was not tangible and the respective countries made a minimal effort to demarcate the border.[36] However, over the next few years, political and economic differences between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan caused the lenient border practices to disintegrate. In 1993, Uzbekistan temporarily closed its border to Kyrgyzstan and introduced its own unique currency. Later on, Uzbekistan abandoned daylight savings time and adopted the Latin alphabet, all the while Kyrgyzstan kept daylight savings and the Cyrillic alphabet.[37] Disagreements have pitted the Ferghana Valley portion of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan against the remainder of the respective countries. During the 1990s, the Ferghana Valley played an important role in Tajikistan's civil war,[38] providing many anti-regime fighters.[39] Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan also experienced regional instability in the 1990s, in which their portions of the Ferghana Valley experienced unrest. During that period, there were extremists from the Ferghana Valley who executed sporadic attacks in southern Kyrgyzstan.[40]

The situation between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan became more tense in 1999. In January 1999, Uzbekistan closed its border for an indefinite amount of time. On February 13, 1999, President Karimov declared that "Kyrgyzstan is a poor country, and it is not my job to look after the people".[41] In August 1999, The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) – an organization of "dissident Islamist guerillas headed by Ferghana Valley exiles linked to militant Islamist groups in Tajikistan and Afghanistan"[42] – invaded southern Kyrgyzstan and adjacent areas of Tajikistan. As a consequence of the IMU's actions, Uzbekistan began erecting a fence – which is two meters high - along its Ferghana Valley border; factories in Uzbekistan were required to fire any employees who were ethnically Kyrgyz. The creation of a borderland continued as President Karimov decreed that all visitors to Uzbekistan staying longer than three days needed a visa.[43] Understandably, this did not go over well with Kyrgyzstan, for as Karimov knew

quite well, most Kyrgyzstan's residents were already struggling economically.

**The Chinese and the Americans**

The other important state actors interacting with Kyrgyzstan are the U.S. and Russia, who vie with China for influence in Kyrgyzstan. The U.S. global war on terror has affected Kyrgyzstan, albeit not as severely as Afghanistan, and pressured it to strengthen its border security.[44] However, Russia, China, and the U.S. do not place Kyrgyzstan as a high priority, meaning each state does not have the goal of eliminating the influence of the other two.[45] Nevertheless, these three major powers have reasons to maintain an interest in Kyrgyzstan.

China has the greatest reason to worry; its officials fear that instability in the Kyrgyz Republic could contribute to unrest in China,[46] particularly the autonomous territory of Xinjiang which is home to a large number of ethnic Uyghurs. Uyghurs and Kyrgyz are both Turkic ethnic groups. The U.S.'s concerns regarding Kyrgyzstan derive from its proximity to Afghanistan: only Tajikistan separates the two countries. The short distance separating Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan has allowed the U.S. to use Manas International Airport in the former for its military operations in the latter.[47] The U.S. found this arrangement necessary after Uzbekistan expelled U.S. military officers from its territory in 2005.

## Conclusion

The Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border dispute has taken a century to develop into something threatening enough to make the two neighbors adversaries of one another. The borders as drawn by the Soviets fail to align with the distribution of persons of differing ethnicities; the enclaves only make negotiations more difficult.[48] Perhaps the national borders could be redrawn by the countries themselves, allowing the borders to align with the ethnic groups in the valley. It would also be beneficial for the countries of the Ferghana Valley (Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) if they could devise a plan to share the water in the valley. The situation would also benefit from Uzbekistan being more understanding of Kyrgyzstan.

Yet, perhaps Uzbekistan is not the biggest threat to Kyrgyzstan's well-being. Megoran argues that middle-class Kyrgyz people worry most about the elites destroying the country. Uzbeks agree, and one Uzbek told a researcher that the 'big ones,' or the wealthy elites, "keep gobbling [up] [Kyrgyzstan] the way they are at the moment, the mountains themselves may disappear".[49] This reasoning suggests that Kyrgyzstan's income inequality is causing issues that should not be neglected. Logically, the residents hope for no continuation of the environmental degradation that occurred under Soviet rule, although the Soviet environmental damage persists in Kyrgyzstan[50] – and other portions of the former U.S.S.R. This hope of theirs opposes any plans to exploit the land and the common people of Kyrgyzstan for the benefits of the wealthier elites. Creating a more just and equitable society could improve the socio-economic stability within Kyrgyzstan.

The first step in decreasing income inequality is to decrease corruption in the Kyrgyz government. If the politicians in power ceased imprisoning their opponents or purging governmental officials they quarreled with, government transparency and fairness could emerge. If international aid was permitted to reach the communities it is intended to benefit, better economic opportunities could emerge for all residents of Kyrgyzstan. Providing more economic opportunities for the economically marginalized residents of Kyrgyzstan is the

most promising solution to this border dispute, because a major source of tension over the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border is the movement of migrants from Kyrgyzstan to Uzbekistan in search of better-paying employment.[51] Like many border disputes, this dispute is a proxy: a proxy for the sources of distress causing residents of Kyrgyzstan to leave their homeland in search of economic improvement in their lives.

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# Reforming the Unreformable: The Peace Corps, Neocolonialism, and the White Savior Complex

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## Abstract

The Peace Corps has existed since the 1960s, and its goals – "to help the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women, to help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served, and to help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans" – have remained unchanged since that time. Because the United States' government determines the funding of the organization, the Peace Corps cannot be fully independent of the country's foreign policy. It must be examined critically to ensure that the work of the Peace Corps is ethical, as it is an extension of American soft power. This paper draws upon previous research about the history of the Peace Corps as well as the theories of neocolonialism and the white savior complex to argue that the organization needs serious reform. Using the framework of transformative justice, this paper recommends different ways in which the organization must be reformed to divorce itself from its neocolonialist legacy. The organization currently prioritizes surface-level change in host communities. If the Peace Corps' ultimate aim is to create global equity, it must first make structural changes to its funding and leadership models and introduce the white savior complex and sustainable allyship into the training curriculum for its volunteers.

The Peace Corps Cross-Cultural Workbook tells many stories of Peace Corps volunteers who overcome prejudice and discomfort to fulfill their obligations to their host communities and learn about themselves, actualizing Peace Corps founder John F. Kennedy's dream of the American frontiersman.[1] However, one story in the workbook stands out because it does the opposite. An unnamed Peace Corps volunteer who worked in Guatemala details how much he struggled in his role in the community. He was mocked by local kids who constantly called him ugly, no one attended the meetings he organized about farming techniques, and trees he planted for the community were intentionally uprooted.[2] While this story is presented in the workbook to remind volunteers that working in another culture can be a challenge, it also undermines the idea that the Peace Corps is effective. If a volunteer can be so unwelcome in their host community, it seems obvious that the Peace Corps needs changing.

The Peace Corps is an integral thread in the fabric of American foreign policy.[3] As criticism of the U.S. military for excess intervention in foreign countries becomes more mainstream, it is important to look at the Peace Corps with a similarly critical lens. While the Peace Corps is a largely well-liked organization domestically, their mission of uplifting so-called developing countries can be interpreted as unnecessary, unwanted, and harmful. There are many negative aspects to aid and development, which are often overlooked in favor of the inspirational stories of those who lift themselves up by the bootstraps with the helping hand of an American volunteer.[4] Development and aid are temporary


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solutions that do not result in meaningful change because the problems they try to solve are systemic.

The Peace Corps is an institution that helped create a system of reliance on the Global North during the development era of the 1960s, and it therefore has an obligation to shift its goals to help dismantle this system. This paper will explain the theory of neocolonialism, argue that the Peace Corps is a neocolonialist institution, and discuss the systemic and individual reforms that the Peace Corps should take to divorce itself from its harsh legacy.

The legacy of colonialism has created a lasting power imbalance between formerly colonized countries and their former colonizers, often represented by the terms the Global South and Global North.[5] Based on the economic categorizations of the United Nations and the World Bank, the Global North includes most high-income countries, and the Global South includes most low and middle-income countries, while also accounting for geography.[6] This language represents a dichotomous—and therefore not totally accurate—picture of world economies, but the terms are more appropriate than First/Third World and Developed/Developing Countries—distinctions that imply a clear inferiority. The language of the Global North and Global South fit this paper best because they represent the geopolitical dynamic most respectfully and are founded on the research of prominent international organizations that are relevant to discussions of development and aid. The Global North and Global South will be used in this paper to describe colonialist and formerly colonized countries in general terms.

The empires of the Global North lost their political grip on territories in the Global South during the period of decolonization in the 1950s and 60s.[7] Colonialism was an economic boon for the Global North, imposed through direct occupation of the Global South, and decolonization threatened to wreak havoc on western economies. As former colonies became independent, colonialist countries lost capital and sought new ways to control the Global South.[8] Looking for a solution to these ails, former colonialist countries adopted the practice of neocolonialism, which used economic and cultural means to control formerly colonized countries.[9]

Neocolonialism's roots in culture and the economy allows it to masquerade as a positive practice that leads to development in the Global South and equity with the Global North. This phenomenon is described by French Philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, who originally coined the term and the idea of the "neocolonialist mystification." In his 1956 essay "Colonialism is a System," Sartre argues that neocolonialists are those who have a positive perspective of the colonialist system as a whole, viewing themselves as messiahs. These neocolonialists blame the failure of the colonial system on a select few ill-intentioned colonists.[10] Based on his critique of French colonialism in Algeria in this text, Sartre outlines several key features of colonialism.[11]

First, colonialism is an explicitly capitalist system, designed to benefit only the colonists. The ultimate goal of the colonial system is not to create new industry in colonized lands; the goal is to enable colonists to take advantage of the land and the existing industry to benefit their home country.[12] Algeria had a thriving agriculture industry that sustained the country's population before the French occupation. The focus of the French agriculture industry in Algeria was the exportation of goods back to France to make a profit.[13] The French forced Algerians to less fertile lands in the south and overtook their fertile lands in the North. In the northern lands, the French

developed wine grape crops and overtook the grain market. These crops had no use to the Algerians because it was against their faith to drink wine. While French colonists exported their products back to France, Algerians starved as their grain crop diminished in the south and they were forced to work for the French to survive.[14]

Additionally, the colonial system disempowers workers. During the industrial era, modern technology was accessible to French colonists in Algeria, and employing machines was cheaper than employing Algerians. Algerians were already impoverished by the French system and could not benefit from the technological advancements of the modern era themselves. The final act of the colonial system, after the occupation of native land and exploitation of the worker, is the complete redundancy of the worker.[15]

Sartre also touches upon the imposition of culture as a tool of colonialism. Language and education are tools of empowerment, and the French outlawed the use of Arabic in Algeria to oppress the Algerian people. In 1956, 80 percent of Algerians were illiterate after France made French the primary language of Algeria.[16] Additionally, the French pushed their values of individualism onto the Algerian population, undermining the country's original collective living system.[17] Colonialism assumes a hierarchy of both knowledge and values that places the colonist on top without considering those who are colonized.

The colonial system relies upon the exploitation of the colonized to benefit the colonist. The neocolonialist who believes that the colonial system can be reformed is wholly incorrect because injustice is inherent to colonialism.[18] Sartre argues that there are three potential outcomes to any attempt at reform: the reforms will benefit the colonists and not the colonized people, the colonialist government will deceptively undermine the reforms, or the colonialist government will patently undermine the reforms.

To explain the first outcome, Sartre brings up the potential irrigation of the less-fertile, southern lands left to the Algerians. Ultimately, this would benefit the French because French law in Algeria stated that colonists had the right to three-quarters of irrigated land. This conundrum proves that exploitation is built into the system. The second outcome manifested when the government required that French colonists return small portions of their land to be mortgaged to Algerians to repay the State for the added benefit of irrigation. Rather than enacting aggressive reforms that actually helped Algerians, the government opted to keep themselves in control of land redistribution so not to hurt the colonists. To prove his third point, Sartre references French elections in Algeria, which were openly corrupt to benefit the French.[19]

While Sartre's "Colonialism is a System" focuses explicitly on colonialism, rather than neocolonialism, the two systems have a similar focus—economic and cultural control. Colonialism emphasizes direct exploitation of labor and land, and neocolonialism depends upon the grooming of economies and value systems of other countries to serve the Global North.[20] While colonialism is clearly an oppressive system, it is harder to see the negative effects of the reformed system due to the neocolonialist mystification.

Neocolonialism allows colonized states more autonomy, but, as Sartre argues, only those who have been colonized truly understand how to counteract the negative effects of the colonial system.[21] An example of this dynamic can be found in the map of development aid distributed by the World Bank. The distribution of aid is concentrated in many countries that were formerly under

a colonial regime, which have had to rely upon the assistance of the global hegemony following decolonization.[22] Formerly colonized countries need aid to repair their countries from the harms of colonialism, but that necessary reliance fuels neocolonialist attitudes. Neocolonialist countries do not fully cede power to formerly colonized countries, and the same assumed hierarchy of values remains in place.[23] That harmful hierarchy is evident in the development projects that were established during the period of neocolonialism in the mid-20th century and still last today.

Historically, the first two outcomes of ineffectual reform—benefit to the colonist rather than the colonized and deceptive undermining of reforms by the colonialist government—have befallen the Peace Corps. Its foundational motivation was to win the Cold War, while masquerading as an altruistic organization that heralded "modernization" in the countries in which it intervened.[24] The Peace Corps was founded following the collapse of traditional colonialism, but its failings reflect the outcomes that Sartre cautioned of colonialism.

The Peace Corps is one such development project that has lasted into the 21st century and is considered as an organization of the highest caliber.[25] Nevertheless, it is still marked by its neocolonialist history, and the remnants of its nationalistic beginnings still shape its modern mission. Some have argued that the United States cannot be considered a neocolonialist country because it did not traditionally hold colonies; however, other countries do have an economic and cultural dependence on the United States, fulfilling the criteria for neocolonialism.[26] It is not necessary for one country to have a history of colonialism to subsequently become a neocolonialist country.

In his essay, *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, former President of Ghana Kwame Nkrumah defines neocolonialism as the subjugation of one country by another through either "economic or monetary means" or "through culture, politics, ideology, literature and education."[27] Nkrumah critiqued the United States as a neocolonialist country heavily in this essay, arguing that traditional foreign policy organizations were supplemented by international aid organizations like the Peace Corps.[28] Nkrumah described the Peace Corps as a "new instrument to cover the ideological arena," of the United States' "plan for invading the so-called Third World."[29] Nkrumah, who is considered one of the foremost scholars of neocolonialism, designated the United States as a neocolonialist country in spite of the fact that it never traditionally held colonies and included the Peace Corps in his critique.

The Kennedy administration founded the Peace Corps during the Cold War in 1961 as a tool urgently needed to combat the spread of communism and bring more countries into the United States' fold.[30] As Kennedy administration officials brainstormed how to create an organization of such scale and importance, Warren Wiggins, a State Department official, turned to John F. Kennedy's own words from his 1961 State of the Union speech. Speaking of the United States, Kennedy argued:

> Our role is essential and unavoidable in the construction of a sound and expanding economy for the entire non-communist world...the problems in achieving this goal are towering and unprecedented—the response must be towering and unprecedented as well.[31]

This quote was the backbone of Warren Wiggin's memo, "A Towering Task," which became the founding

document of the Peace Corps, illustrating that the motivation for founding the Peace Corps was hardly altruistic. Instead, foreign policy and economics were driving factors, which allowed neocolonialism to shape the organization.

Modernization theory of the 1960s justified the Peace Corps' development work as altruistic assistance that would bring so-called developing countries into the 20th century, giving the organization an excuse to intervene in the Global South for the United States' benefit. Modernization promised economic parity with the superpowers of the Global North, albeit under the watchful eye of the United States. Gendered language permeated the Peace Corps' arguments for modernization. Developing countries were marked either as the "little brother" waiting to be taken under the wing of the United States, or as shamefully effeminate, needing the masculine United States to bring them into the capitalist brotherhood of the West.[32] The United States used the seductive idea of development to convince other countries that American involvement in their affairs was the best way forward, embodying the same principles of the neocolonialist mystification. Modernization theory presented the United States with an alternative to traditional colonialism, which allowed the United States to become a global superpower through social control of developing countries.[33]

The rhetoric of American masculine stewardship pushed by modernization theory was rampant in the fight against the Cold War and is best represented by the debate about the concept of domestic containment. President Nixon argued that domestic containment, the idea that embracing rigid gender roles, the nuclear family, and traditional American values, would propel the fight against the Soviets in the Cold War.[34] In his presidential campaign against Nixon, Kennedy strongly rejected the domestic containment ideal and campaigned upon the fear that the United States was losing its masculine ruggedness, a quality that the Soviets wholeheartedly embraced. Kennedy's establishment of the Peace Corps was an attempt to remedy the growing American "softness," which he thought would cost the country the Cold War.[35] The motivations for the foundation of the Peace Corps were to benefit the American volunteer more than their host country, embodying the same principle that Sartre argues is the outcome of failed colonial reform.[36] Peace Corps host countries became the playgrounds at which 20-something-year-old American men could embrace their masculinity through physical labor and leadership, while lifting up their host countries into the American capitalist brotherhood.[37]

Entry into this brotherhood was contingent on the adoption of American values by host countries. The economic structure of the Peace Corps embodied the idea of individualism, and the Kennedy administration used the person-to-person development work of the Peace Corps to push this value onto host countries. If the foremost goal of the Peace Corps was the economic development of host countries, the organization would have been a tool to redistribute the United States wealth equitably. Instead, the organization was shaped around volunteers doing development work for their own betterment. Person-to-person work sent the message that economic growth started on an individual level and did not recognize the structural inequality of the world economy shaped by centuries of colonialism.[38]

This individualistic practice prevented the Peace Corps from making significant changes in the communities volunteers entered. Nanda Shrestha, who wrote about his experience with the Peace Corps when they came to his Nepali village

in 1962, describes that he felt "bewitched" by the new Peace Corps school, which was nicer than any classroom he had ever seen. Nevertheless, Shrestha returned home to hunger and poverty. Because of the stark contrast, "Poverty had rarely been so frightening, or so degrading, in the past."[39] Volunteers who worked in the school in Shrestha's village did not have the systemic understanding of problems that would have allowed them to help the whole community. Issues were treated individually, which led to further degradation in communities that did not have the tools they needed to create holistic change. These misconceptions of modernization theory and the organization's Cold War roots allowed neocolonialist practices to become the center of the organization. The early Peace Corps was both a publicity stunt and a foreign policy tool for the United States.

The Peace Corps has three specific goals that have not changed since its founding in 1961. The first goal is "to help the people of interested countries in meeting their need for skilled individuals."[40] This goal, although paternalistic, made sense during decolonization in the 1960s. Many countries did not have well-established university systems following the end of colonial rule, and Peace Corps volunteers could provide support in fields that required additional training. However, this is no longer the case. Now, most Peace Corps host countries have university systems, yet jobs that could be done by host country nationals are still filled by Peace Corps volunteers.[41] In the current system, only United States citizens can serve as Peace Corps volunteers, further limiting options for host country nationals who could perform skilled work.[42] Karen Rothmyer, who served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Kenya, outlines the problem. Following her Peace Corps volunteer experience, she went on to teach at the well-established University of Nairobi, where she found that university graduates struggled to get jobs, while Peace Corps volunteer positions were constantly filled.[43] One of the main principles of colonialism, argued by Sartre, is the disempowerment of the native worker.[44] The Peace Corps delegitimizes the skill of citizens of host countries and prevents sustainable development by continually placing Americans in the roles of Peace Corps volunteers.

The second goal is "to promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served."[45] When looking at the motivations for the founding of the Peace Corps, this goal is more harmful than it seems. This goal ties back to the early motivations of the Peace Corps, which hoped that interpersonal relationships with Americans would strengthen Cold War allegiances to the U.S. Now this goal perpetuates neocolonialism in a more discreet way. Americans disrupt the cultural stability of their host communities. Through their work as Peace Corps volunteers, Americans become associated with wealth and education, solidifying the hierarchy of values that is central to neocolonialism.

Finally, the Peace Corps hopes "to promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans."[46] This goal shows that Americans, and Peace Corps volunteers by proxy, tend to think of other cultures as different and underdeveloped. The placement of Americans in the role of educators working to lift host country citizens out of poverty is a manifestation of the idea of the white savior complex.[47]

The white savior complex is the view of citizens of the Global North as themselves as a messiah for the Global South as they embark on "voluntourism" trips.[48] This perspective is rooted in colonialism, which began the common portrayal of the Global South as inferior to the Global North.[49] "Voluntourists" partake

in overseas charity work often for selfish purposes and without considering the true effects of their actions, effectively supporting the neocolonialist system.[50] While voluntourism is often used to describe short-term work or missionary efforts, humanitarian aid and development also encounter similar problems relating to the motivations and outcomes of their work. By nature, they perpetuate the white savior complex because they depend on the paternalistic good will of the Global North towards the Global South.[51]

The white savior complex is evident in the testimonials of Peace Corps volunteers—66% of whom are not minorities—and example perspectives written by the organization itself found in the Peace Corps' pre-departure workbook.[52] One volunteer who worked in Turkey describes how his experience was tainted by local conventions, which he found were not "natural and logical."[53] While the Peace Corps workbook points out these perceptions to combat them, the idea that other cultures are different is ingrained in the third goal of the Peace Corps.

The second and third goals are positive in intent, but not necessarily in impact. The organization hopes to break down cultural barriers by sending American volunteers into foreign countries. This would work if the Peace Corps was a volunteer exchange. Because it is not, it perpetuates the idea that host country nationals cannot do worthwhile work in the U.S. and allows the American volunteers to fill the role of the white savior.

Currently, volunteers apply to work in one of six sectors for the Peace Corps—agriculture, community and economic development, environment, health, youth in development, and education.[54] Agriculture volunteers work with host country citizens to teach farmers sustainable farming techniques with an emphasis on climate change and conservation, as well as food and nutrition education.[55] Volunteers who work in the community economic development sector teach entrepreneurship and business best practices to host country locals, often working with other development organizations and NGOs. Environment volunteers teach about climate change and sustainability in host communities.[56] The health sector focuses on HIV/AIDS prevention and education, as well as hygiene, water sanitation, nutrition, and maternal and child health.[57] In Youth in Development, volunteers educate young people from host communities about social, health, and environmental issues.[58]

Finally, in education, the largest Peace Corps sector, volunteers teach a variety of subjects in schools of all levels. There is an emphasis on English language education, and volunteers can become certified in Teaching English as a Foreign Language.[59] As Sartre points out, assimilation through language is a common tool of neocolonialism, which reinforces the hierarchy of ideals that values the culture of the Global North.[60] While teaching the English language is not negative in itself, it is important to recognize the assumptions that the program makes about the weight of one language over another. Volunteers do learn local languages, but that is out of necessity for their two-year assignment. In contrast, the locals learning English is seen as a necessary tool for modernization.

The language used in the Peace Corps' description of these sectors emphasizes the idea of empowerment. Volunteers are there to empower host country communities, an aim that was not present in early Peace Corps documentation.[61] Through language, the organization subtly recognizes its past failings. If empowerment had always been the goal of the organization, the organization would no longer be necessary. Despite this

turn in language, the organization still has not escaped its paternalistic past, and some volunteers still harbor this attitude. Common issues that Peace Corps volunteers have is the perception that they know better than the locals with whom they work.[62] The Peace Corps emphasizes teaching in the language used to describe volunteers' roles without emphasizing the learning they will do. As Sartre argues, local people know their communities best—neocolonialism assumes the opposite.[63]

By pushing capitalism on developing countries with the promise of becoming a member of the U.S. economic brotherhood and by promoting American ideals through education and the other sectors of the Peace Corps, it is clear that the Peace Corps perpetuates neocolonialism through both the economic and cultural control of other countries. The Peace Corps must be reformed using the theory of transformative redistribution and recognition to divorce itself from neocolonialist attitudes and better serve host countries.

Scholar Nancy Fraser theorizes that justice can be broken down into calls for either redistribution of wealth or recognition of culture.[64] Issues of cultural injustice seek remedies of recognition, the practice of revaluing particular groups that are culturally marginalized. Alternatively, the solution to economic issues is redistribution of wealth to rid the system of economic injustice.[65] Development and aid are functions of the liberal welfare state, which recognizes the need for redistribution and recognition but attempts to solve immediate rather than structural issues, embodying the theory of affirmative redistribution and recognition. This approach to change means that development organizations cannot truly solve the problems they claim to address. The alternative to affirmative redistribution and recognition is transformation, which is more effective because it takes a systemic approach to combating injustice.

Affirmation is ineffective because it provides surface-level solutions to problems rooted in structural inequality, essentially informing the principles of the liberal welfare state. It also values the concept of multiculturalism without acknowledging the ways in which economic problems prey on it.[66] Wealth is redistributed to those who have less of it, but the structural reasons behind the imbalance of wealth is not examined. Multiculturalism is valued without understanding the harms that are produced by emphasizing differences. Cultural value is ingrained into unjust economic structures. By maintaining identity groups, there is room for groups to be othered, and the root of economic issues remains untouched. Affirmation creates an "aid addiction," through which the Global North controls developing countries economically.[67] The Peace Corps is a tool that perpetuates aid addiction in the form of human capital outsourced from the United States. The organization continually supplies host countries with aid and American Peace Corps volunteers, who are essentially employed by the United States' government and take roles that could be filled with qualified candidates from host countries. This furthers the perception that the Global South is inferior to the Global North, when it is actually the fault of unjust economic structures.

The Peace Corps should be reformed to embrace the theory of transformative redistribution and recognition. Transformation is a more serious restructuring of society, which entails deconstructing identity dichotomies to achieve true economic parity.[68] Transformation recognizes that sustainable change cannot happen without restructuring the economy to rid it of cultural injustice. The Peace Corps depends on the dichotomy

of the rich Global North and the poor Global South to justify its affirmative work. To create sustainable change in host countries, the organization should focus on combating this perception of superiority and focus on collaboration with its host country partners. Economic parity cannot exist while the Peace Corps fuels the aid addiction system.

If the Peace Corps wants to function as a tool for achieving economic and cultural equality, its ultimate goal should be that the organization becomes obsolete. It should work to redistribute capital in a sustainable way, rather than attempting to solve structural economic problems without changing the structure itself. Actions like teaching agricultural techniques or business skills are helpful on a small scale but do not address the economic inequalities and cultural hierarchy between the Global North and Global South that remain from the colonial era. While this structural inequality remains, the Peace Corps will continue to inadvertently other the cultures and individuals of host countries due to entrenched perceptions about the Global South.

The Peace Corps is a function of neocolonialism and the liberal welfare state associated with affirmation, and it is ingrained in the American consciousness, so it is unlikely it will be completely abolished anytime soon. Realistically, change to the system will happen gradually, so the American public can acclimatize to the idea of transformation of the Peace Corps. There are three policies that the Peace Corps must adopt to divorce itself from the neocolonialist system.

The Peace Corps could do significant good by redistributing the country's wealth with the resources of the United States' government at hand. As of 2010, estimates show that even a 2% redistribution of wealth could eliminate extreme poverty.[69] However, organizations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, which were created to address economic inequality, fund foreign governments with the expectation that they adopt neoliberal economic policies, while fueling their aid addiction and preventing true global equity.[70] If the Peace Corps pivots to redistributing wealth to other governments, it will likely fall into the same pattern of promoting aid addiction by providing conditional loans like the IMF and the World Bank, rather than how it does now through the practice of sending volunteers. It would not be able to avoid the critiques of capitalism while under the charge of the United States government. In order to radically rethink redistribution, the focus of the Peace Corps should first be transformative recognition. By confronting its neocolonialist past and altering its organizational structure to become more collaborative, the Peace Corps will be better equipped to supply monetary aid and volunteers to host countries in ways dictated by host countries. As Sartre argues, only formerly colonized countries—not formerly colonial countries—can undo the damage done to their countries by colonialism.[71]

The Peace Corps insists that it is an independent agency that does not carry out the foreign policy goals of Congress or the White House, but critics acknowledge that it is in fact a form of American soft power.[72] It does not function like a traditional foreign policy tool because it is collaborative in some ways with foreign governments—host countries must agree to be a part of the program. However, the goals of the Peace Corps show that it is an attempt to promote a positive image of the United States, bolstering traditional foreign policy objectives through public relations. While the American government does not write the organization's goals, its financial capacity for good is regulated by the budget set by

the federal government, and therefore it is not fully independent.[73]

Many critics argue that the Peace Corps should transition to a mixed funding model in which it would be partially government-funded, and partially funded through private grants and donations.[74] In this scenario, the federal government would still have a financial stake in the Peace Corps, and the agency still would face the dilemma of—at best—reflecting or—at worst—carrying out American foreign policy. Complete privatization is also an untenable solution. If the Peace Corps was in the hands of private American citizens, the issue of cultural misrecognition would likely go unaddressed. The worst outcome of privatization would lead the Peace Corps further down the damaging path towards the white savior complex or cause it to become more similar to damaging missionary organizations. The best outcome would see it still solely in the hands of the American people who alone cannot rectify the organization's past or their own misconceptions about host countries. If the Peace Corps becomes a private institution, it will not be able to embrace the structural change needed to comply with the principles of transformation.

To solve both the issues of cultural misrecognition by the Peace Corps and the issue of its funding, the United States government and the governments of host nations should work collaboratively, similar to the structure of the Fulbright Program.[75] As an international institution based on the principles of partnership and representation, the Peace Corps will be able to combat misrecognition and structural inequality within the organization. While international institutions can still carry out neocolonial missions, the checks and balances established in a cooperative international institution will help mitigate this. The Peace Corps should be funded by the government of the United States and the governments of participating countries, so that it cannot be regulated by the foreign policy objectives of the United States alone. As the organization functions now, it is unlikely that other governments would consent to this. Host countries receive aid from the Peace Corps, but their citizens do not participate equally in the organization.

The Peace Corps would benefit from having host country nationals in Peace Corps leadership and volunteer positions within their own country, which would give host country governments more reason to back the Peace Corps economically.[76] This would help to solve issues of misrecognition by the U.S. Peace Corps volunteers and of the first goal of the Peace Corps, which aims to supply skilled individuals to Peace Corps host countries. The language of empowerment that the Peace Corps uses to describe their own work should be translated into real change. The organization should empower host country locals by putting them in leadership positions, rather than relying on the myth of the benevolent American volunteer who knows best. In this case, the American volunteer would become unnecessary, furthering the Peace Corps towards its own dismantling.

As an agency that works collaboratively between countries, the Peace Corps should set up an exchange program with the ultimate goal of dismantling the United States' Americentric mentality.[77] The Peace Corps faces the problem of the white savior complex; the goals of the organization allow volunteers to see themselves as superior to the locals with whom they work in their host countries. If cultural exchange becomes the norm, Americans who volunteer with the Peace Corps will have a more complete understanding of cultures other than their own. Misrecognition can be combated through familiarity, which will blur the lines

drawn to distinguish culture and prevent economic disparity from again taking root based on cultural prejudices in the fashion of transformative justice.[78]

Once the Peace Corps becomes a collaborative, multinational organization, it can be reformed in the manner of transformative redistribution. Armed with the resources of the United States' government and the guidance of decolonized countries, the Peace Corps will be able to fulfill Sartre's expectation that formerly colonized countries dictate their own healing from the harms of colonialism.[79] As an international organization, the Peace Corps must work towards transformative recognition that dismantles the hegemony of the United States and the Global North. Effective redistribution must be dictated by each host country without the threat of neoliberal capitalism and with any American volunteers under the supervision of their host country. Additionally, American leaders within the partnership of the Peace Corps must undergo a complete shift in mindset regarding neocolonialist hierarchy. The organization's transformation cannot afford to be hindered by the backwards thinking of a few American leaders mystified by neocolonialism.

Individual actors within the Peace Corps system, including the leaders who work collaboratively with host countries, must be educated on sustainable allyship in addition to systemic change, so they can work within the system to create global equity. For the institution of the Peace Corps to undergo transformational reform, American neocolonialist mindsets must be shifted. International organizations have the tools to prevent neocolonialism but are not neocolonial by nature. Without the cooperation of leaders who have decolonized their perception of global politics and economics, neocolonialism could take hold through the influence of the countries deemed powerful.

Thorough education on the white savior complex and sustainable allyship for American Peace Corps volunteers and leaders will be essential to ensuring that the organization can undergo its transformation. Additionally, because transformation will not happen overnight, this education will help prevent issues of cultural misrecognition by American Peace Corps volunteers who serve before the organization is reformed. While the Peace Corps does conduct three months of training before Peace Corps volunteers begin their work, the white savior complex is not mentioned once in their 266 page workbook.[80] Training emphasizes how to combat ethnocentrism and practice "cultural sensitivity," but the workbook does not acknowledge how it systemically perpetuates those problems.[81]

One way to combat the white savior complex is to increase training on sustainable allyship for Peace Corps volunteers. Effective social justice allies are "members of dominant social groups who are working to end the system of oppression that gives them greater privilege and power based on their social-group membership."[82] Becoming a social justice ally requires constant meditation about one's role in systems of oppression, and Peace Corps volunteers who wish to force the hand of the organization in favor of transformation must be trained on the statuses of social justice ally identity development.[83] Peace Corps volunteers must reject the idea of dominant cultures and use their privilege to work with oppressed groups to dismantle the system, achieving autonomy status as a social justice ally.[84]

To combat the harms of the white savior complex and voluntourism, Peace Corps volunteers and leaders must work towards being an ally for social justice

rather than for self-interest or altruism. The white savior mentality is a key part of both self-interest and altruism-motivated allyship. Those who are motivated by self-interest have a sense of pride in their work that prevents them from seeing systemic oppression and view themselves as a savior due to the work they are doing.[85] While those who are motivated by altruism have little more awareness of systems of oppression, they understand how it functions without recognizing their role in it. Their guilt about systems of oppression manifests in their attempt to be a hero, treating the oppressed paternalistically.[86]

Allies for social justice work collaboratively with the oppressed group and are held accountable by those with whom they work. They understand the ways they benefit from the systems of oppression and understand that dismantling the systems is also an act of self-liberation, in accordance with the principles of transformative justice.[87] Peace Corps volunteers and leaders who embody the practice of social justice allyship will be essential to the transformative recognition and redistribution that the Peace Corps must undergo.

The question then remains, are current and aspiring Peace Corps volunteers perpetuating the harms of neocolonialism themselves? While they have a hand in the system, they do not control the system. Sartre writes, "I do not consider as colonists either the minor public officials or the European workers who are at the same time innocent victims and beneficiaries of the system."[88] In this scenario, Peace Corps volunteers are comparable to the minor public officials or European workers, who have only ever known the system.

The Peace Corps has been touted as a noble way to demonstrate patriotism, gain global cultural experience, and serve others since its founding in 1961. As it stands, the Peace Corps has a good reputation, and in the 21st century it has changed very little. The Brookings Institution published their first critique of the Peace Corps in 2003, and yet the most recent article, written in 2017, called for much of the same reforms.[89] To reform the Peace Corps and dismantle the economic and cultural systems of oppression that it perpetuates, there will need to be leaders from within the system, acting as social justice allies with a vested interest in the organization. Current and aspiring Peace Corps volunteers must differentiate themselves from colonists by calling for change because of their knowledge of the system.

There is hope for the Peace Corps yet, and that charge must be taken up by those who do care for a globalist future set on equitable terms. While the Peace Corps' legacy may be rooted in neocolonialism and the white savior complex, it has the capacity to lead the charge against those maladies through its reform. The Peace Corps must not be an American institution, but rather an international institution, which will be held accountable by its formerly colonized partners and rebuilt on the principles of international cooperation. American leaders and volunteers in this institution must be educated on sustainable allyship to ensure that the Peace Corps does not fall into the same pattern of neocolonialism regardless of its new international status.

The organization should be a tool for the redistribution of the wealth of the United States into the hands of host country communities, rather than the inefficient practice of person-to-person development. Host country locals should be placed in Peace Corps volunteer and leadership positions, as host countries do not lack in so-called skilled volunteers. The organization should send volunteers from host countries to the United States to dismantle the perception that the Global South must rely

on the Global North for survival. As such, the organization should be funded by both the United States and host countries to separate the organization from the sway of foreign policy. The Peace Corps can have a part to play in the dismantling of the harmful legacy of neocolonialism.

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