



## Report on Focus Groups Conducted as Part of NPCA's Social Action Campaign

NPCA conducted four focus groups in May 2020 among 37 Returned Peace Corps Volunteers as another step in its efforts to lay the groundwork for a community-based social action campaign for members of the Peace Corps Community. Each group had 9-10 participants ranging in age from their early 20s to mid-70s. Fifteen of the 37 participants were over 65. Just over half of the participants were women.

NPCA sought to recruit a diversity of RPCVs and former Peace Corps staff members living in rural and urban areas across the country who had served in the Peace Corps around the world including RPCVs familiar with global health issues as well as RPCVs who had seen the devastating impacts of climate change first-hand in the countries where they had served. Participants currently live in 19 states and have served in the Peace Corps in 26 countries including in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, Latin America and islands in the South Pacific. They included two RPCVs recently evacuated from their Peace Corps posts due to the pandemic as well as veteran NPCA members who currently serve as officers of state and city NPCA affiliates. In addition, participants included several RPCVs whose careers focus on global health and/or environmental protection.

The focus groups were designed to follow up on a national NPCA survey completed in January 2020 that found that climate change was the global issue RPCVs cared most about. **Note:** The full survey results – and a short analysis of the results – follows this focus group report.

The purpose of the focus groups was to:

- determine if climate change remains the top global issue for RPCVs in light of the current Covid-19 pandemic;
- explore actions RPCVs might be willing to take in their communities to address climate change; and
- help set measurable process and outcome goals for NPCA's social action campaign and inventory the resources needed to assist RPCVs in the campaign.

### **Here are six conclusions we drew from the four focus groups.**

Note: As part of this summary we have included direct quotes from participants in the focus groups.

- 1. Climate change remains the global issue that matters most to RPCVs, especially over the long term.** RPCVs described climate change as “an umbrella issue” affecting many other global issues and “a threat multiplier” that exacerbates all other threats. Many RPCVs see climate change as directly related to the greater likelihood of pandemics due to global warming and an increase in the planet's temperature, while they also said climate change impacted other global issues such access to clean water, mass migrations, women's empowerment and girls' education, even world peace.

RPCVs also noted that climate change plays a role in increasing extreme poverty and “lays bare inequities in the US and throughout the world.”

Several RPCVS encouraged NPCA members to think about climate change in a more holistic way and better understand its linkages and leverage points. Rather than addressing global issues as separate topics, which pits people who have different interests against each other, NPCA should encourage its members to connect their particular interest in a specific issue to the existential global threat posed by climate change. Two RPCVs noted that the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals provide a shared vision of how global issues interconnect with significant buy-in around the world.

2. **RPCVs have a unique role to play in addressing climate change.** As the survey itself indicated, many RPCVs are engaged in their communities – far more than most citizens. In the focus groups, RPCVs said serving in the Peace Corps gave them “a global perspective” and “credibility” with most Americans especially on human development issues such as climate change and global health. An overwhelming number of focus group participants said RPCVs should draw on their personal experiences in the countries where they have served to humanize issues such as climate change and global health and communicate the urgency for action without being overtly political. They said that RPCVs also have experience in community mobilization, coalition building and fundraising; and they have learned to listen to diverse perspectives rather than jump in with their own solutions.
3. **RPCV’s need to encourage global collaboration and work from the community level on up.** RPCVs noted that neither climate change nor the pandemic respect borders. There was broad consensus among focus group participants that American’s poor understanding of global affairs and its withdrawal from diplomacy have become serious barriers to addressing global issues. At the same time, RPCVs said we need local action to build resilient communities that can survive a pandemic as well as survive and reduce climate change impacts.
4. **NPCA is well-positioned to help the RPCV community apply its unique skills, connections and lifelong commitment to service in more effective ways to achieve its shared goals.** Several RPCVS saw NPCA as playing an important role in providing the tools and infrastructure necessary to mobilize its affiliates, individual members and the larger Peace Corps community around a larger vision for Third Goal service. Focus group participants said that the problem for RPCVs is not so much a lack of awareness of importance of addressing climate change, but feeling powerless, not knowing where to start or what will be effective.

RPCVS said NPCA could serve as clearinghouse to connect and share ideas and experience among groups all over the country. It can provide toolkits, information, webinars, podcasts, options for digital organizing strategies, and help in connecting people to specific opportunities for action in collaboration with other organizations working in the field (e.g., Citizen’s Climate Lobby). Having manageable projects and highly praised advocacy tools such as those already provided by NPCA can make it easier to get people involved. Writing letters to the editor and writing members of Congress were actions that RPCVs cited as easily undertaken given the constraints of

time. Other options discussed were using social media to share what's happening in other countries and collecting stories from evacuated RPCVs that we can amplify to give those different perspectives.

The survey results and focus groups showed that many RPCVs appreciate NPCA's recent efforts to play a larger role in providing cause-related affiliates the tools they need to advocate on specific issues. At the same time, however, the survey also found that some officials of NPCA affiliates are hesitant to get involved in issues considered potentially divisive because such advocacy efforts could distract from what their RPCV members have in common. Creating materials that could be easily adapted to meet such concerns would allow RPCVs around the country to use these resources to tailor actions and messages that are relevant to their local context.

5. **As the NPCA survey in January showed, RPCVs remain split in their use of – and interest in – social media.** Since the pandemic, many members of the Peace Corps Community, especially volunteers recently evacuated from their Peace Corps posts due to the pandemic, have utilized social media and other web-related strategies to stay engaged and active with each other as well as within their communities. Several participants expressed increased use of social media to disseminate information and virtual group meetings that have included a larger, more diverse audience than would have existed before the pandemic. RPCVs also suggested using Zoom and related technologies to bring people overseas into conversations about global issues in their U.S. communities. Several RPCVs said they were using social media so much in their work that they were exhausted at the end of the day and tried to limit their use of social media in non-working hours.
6. **Covid-19 has raised the importance of global health as a major issue of interest to RPCVs since the survey in January.** While a majority of RPCVs in the focus groups said climate change remained the top issue for them, especially over the long term, several RPCVs also said that Covid-19 presented an opportunity for RPCVs to get involved in addressing the pandemic in their own communities through activities like contact tracing and educating and motivating others about the importance of safe health practices such as washing hands frequently, wearing masks and maintaining a safe social distance from others. RPCVs noted that many RPCVs have worked on advocating safe health practices in the developing world. As one focus group member put it, "Global health has always been a big issue in the Peace Corps Community, and it has certainly taken a bigger spotlight now for obvious reasons. I think in the short term, 1-5 years, global health may have an even bigger spotlight." In addition, several RPCVs who are leading national experts on global health participated in the focus groups and may be willing to serve as experts in Zoom presentations about Covid-19 and global health targeted to local health leaders and concerned citizens in communities in both the United States and developing countries.