

## **PETER HOFMAN**

**Country of Service: Peru**

**Assignment: staff member of the local office of the government's Development Corporation and Ministry of Agriculture**

**Service Tour: 1969-71**

**Contact info: [pdhofman12@gmail.com](mailto:pdhofman12@gmail.com)**

### **Service Description:**

I worked for the local offices of the government's Development Corporation and Ministry of Agriculture in Tacna, Peru's southernmost inhabited community (in a valley surrounded by desert). I was also involved in flood and earthquake relief. I arrived in country 4 or 5 months following a military coup, so I lived in a dictatorship my entire tour.

My initial work involved carrying out feasibility studies for the Government's Development Corporation, which was trying to attract businesses to a new – and empty – industrial park. Someone in the national government had read a book about industrial parks, and concluded “build them and they will come,” so there were new parks throughout the country – roads, utilities, the works. While the local staff seemed to have a long-term perspective, the staff at the regional office just wanted to fill the local park, so it altered a report I prepared for a local businessman to make an unfeasible opportunity look promising. My last task there was to set the record straight for him. I had the freedom to quit...and I did.

I then worked with the Ministry of Agriculture, helping with its first ever long-range (5-year) plan and trying to implement projects for local farmers, including a farmers market and part of a government program to improve the export of milk across the border to Chile to increase farmer's income. I also conducted research to find an export market for locally grown oregano. I got the McCormick Spice Company to agree to import our oregano if a sample shipment met its quality standards. Implementing this project would have been life-changing. But my term was up, my draft board scheduled my physical, so I couldn't stay in country. And my Peace Corps replacement left after 2 weeks because he said the work was too hard! So that project didn't go anywhere, which was truly frustrating and disappointing.

### **Career and Life Impact:**

Peace Corps service was a marked departure from the direction I had been headed and drove my career decisions for the rest of my working life. Before graduating from Tuck, I had received job offers from IBM and Mobil Oil. After the Peace Corps, I only wanted to work for non-profit or government entities. I wrote the first guide Tuck School had for these sectors. Most of my career was in these sectors and when I worked for private businesses it was in such areas as behavioral healthcare, affordable housing, educational assessment, alternative energy generation, or the environment. Environmental stewardship has been a consistent theme - job related, personally, and in my volunteer work. Many years after leaving the Peace Corps, my service had a direct impact on my work. I was a senior manager of a small company involved in groundwater development. *Yankee* magazine did a story on the company and mentioned I had been a Peace Corps volunteer. The magazine gets a lot of mileage: a manager with a DC-based company that

did a lot of US AID work saw the article while on a flight to Italy, and ended up hiring us to find water in northwest Somalia. We did!

### **Additional Observations:**

- Describe what motivated you to join the Peace Corps: because of the deferment and my interest in broadening my horizons and giving back.
- What experiences stand out most?
  - Early in 1970, our group helped clean up a town that had been flooded. I had never worked on flood relief – it was messy, gross work, but we made a difference.
  - The most memorable experience was the earthquake that hit Peru in 1970 and killed 50,000 people. I worked twice on earthquake relief. The first time was in the immediate aftermath to evacuate, treat, and vaccinate people. It was the closest I got to military service. The US Army and Marines were there to help. Our group (three current volunteers and two nurses who had been in the Peace Corps in South America) worked with the Marines. Those dedicated guys put in 20-hour days and we became really close, so much so that I was given a pair of boots by one of them. The second time I led a team, including prior PC volunteers who were engineers and architects, that traveled around the region explaining simple, earthquake-proof building methods to people. We were based in a regional capital with volunteers from around the world (including Russia) who were there to help. It made us wonder why nations couldn't get along when there weren't disasters!
  - Near where I was stationed, an entire riverbed was used to carry untreated wastewater (that looked like thick grey paint) from an Anaconda subsidiary copper mine to the Pacific Ocean – untreated! This was a major driver for me to work on environmental issues.
- What were the one or two of the most amusing or memorable experiences you had? My most memorable fun experience was going to Carnival in Rio. We weren't supposed to go, but the hotel that Peace Corps used was packed. On another front: Tacna was a 45 minutes' drive from the coast. We frequently went to the beach on weekends with our Peruvians friends – we were often the only ones there!
- What are the most significant cultural, socio-economic, and/or political insights about your host country and the Peace Corps itself?
  - The rich get richer - one family owned you name it - from grocery store to car/truck dealership, to buying, storing, and selling agricultural harvests.
  - Women were families' backbones, in so many ways.
  - Risk aversion hampers progress: identifying and working with "early adopters" was critical, but even after several years of collective success, if an early adopter leaves, progress ceases.
  - Dictatorships - if they're on your side - can be efficient, evidenced by a worthwhile program the Ministry of Agriculture wanted to implement.
  - The economy's inefficiency had an underlying purpose: to give the most people possible enough income to survive. Attempts to improve efficiency, for example

- farmers selling directly to customers, as opposed to using middle men (they were actually women) would put the women out of work, with no other earning options.
- Some very simple foreign aid was incredibly useful (pickup trucks provided by the Alliance for Progress were key for agricultural outreach). Some was a boondoggle - a sorghum plant provided by the WHO (I think) to a region that doesn't grow it; and a book full of one-page feasibility studies for new industries that had no basis in reality.
  - Volunteers are affected far more than the countries - makes sense, but then there's how we can affect the world after our PC service....perhaps the lifelong impact of our service is how we might balance the scale.
  - The character of volunteers reflects what's going on in the US at the time - early PCVs were the most idealistic; in the early 1970's, they just want out of the US – many were cynical, less committed, and there was super high burnout (as in my case).
- Describe any situation in which you were “thanked” for your Peace Corps service? The most humbling thank you came on our group’s first night working on earthquake relief in a small town 12,000 feet up in the Andes that had been devastated. Townspeople came to our tent with sacks of food and serenaded us! We were there to help them. They were the ones who had lost everything. We were all in tears. When we left the village after several days, the entire town came to thank us and give us a page-long declaration of their appreciation and a carved Condor with a piece of gold in its mouth. Again, tears.
  - Why should anyone here and now be interested in your experience, what relevance does it have on a personal or national level now? We lived for at least 2-3 years in different cultures and learned how to listen, value, appreciate, understand, and work with people with different perspectives, different backgrounds. We established productive relationships with them, and became friends. We developed these skills and awareness and together we realized successes – some large, some small. We were also ambassadors. The world needs more of this. Our nation needs more of this. We showed it can be done.
  - Based upon your experience, what are your thoughts about national service and about immigration? I’ve supported national service for decades, based upon my Peace Corps experience and collaboration domestically with VISTA and City Corps volunteers. The experience can be life changing and benefit not only the individual, but others....the nation as a whole. My grandparents were immigrants, I’ve worked with recent/current immigrants, and support immigrant organizations. Immigrants are a vital part of our communities. The nation needs a sound and reasonable comprehensive set of immigration policies that foster appropriate immigration.