

**Employing the AIC Methodology in Peace Corps Training Programs:
Reflections on a Vanuatu Experience**

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Abstract

Serving in a developing country as a Peace Corps Volunteer is a unique, challenging experience with incredible potential, both to contribute to the country's sustainable development and to develop strong bonds of friendship which transcend culture, language and worldview. However, the success of a volunteer is closely linked with his/her ability not only to integrate into the community in which he/she is placed, but also to inspire community ownership of the projects that he/she promotes so as to ensure their sustainability after the volunteer has left the country. To that intent, training of new volunteers in the use of a methodology, such as the AIC framework² would be highly beneficial, as it would help them better understand the interplay of the various actors they will encounter in the local society, as well as more appropriately structure the design steps for their projects. This paper is based on the author's experience as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Vanuatu from 2002 to 2005 and was written with the hope that it would benefit both the Peace Corps Vanuatu office and other Peace Corps offices worldwide.

1. Background

In 1961 John F. Kennedy founded the Peace Corps to promote world peace and friendship.³ President Kennedy encouraged Americans to serve in the cause of peace, taking their skills, idealism and enthusiasm throughout the world to promote sustainable development at the grass roots. By focusing on the community level, Peace Corps envisioned its volunteers partnering with those populations often neglected in the aid process. The Peace Corps was accordingly established on the basis of 3 main goals:

Helping the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women.

Helping promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served.

Helping promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans.⁴

Consistent with these principles, volunteers are deployed to local communities and villages not only to transfer skills, but also to exchange values, ideas and cultures. The Peace Corps goals envisage burgeoning friendships as a result of these close

¹ Final paper prepared for the PIDP seminar "Institutional Design for Sustainable Development", Fall 2008 and edited by Professor Francis Lethem.

² See section 2 below for a description of the methodology.

³ Peace Corps Website. <http://www.peacecorps.gov/index.cfm?shell=learn.whatisp>. Accessed November 18, 2008.

⁴ Peace Corps Website. <http://www.peacecorps.gov/index.cfm?shell=Learn.whatisp.mission>. Accessed November 18, 2008.

collaborations. Living and working in a developing country, however, is often fraught with difficulties. Language, culture, custom and a different worldview may pose initial barriers to cooperation. A volunteer, then, must not enter such situations blindly, but only after benefiting from an intensive, specific, and targeted cross-cultural training prior to community entrance. By actually living with the communities they are serving, Peace Corps Volunteers are in a unique position to traverse the cultural divides and bring about positive changes. While language training is obviously important, emphasis must also be given to cultural preparation to ensure that volunteers will understand the environment in which they will serve and develop an appropriate “entry strategy”.

The first group of Peace Corps Volunteers arrived in Vanuatu in 1989.⁵ This island nation in the South Pacific is made of over 80 islands, many of which are sparsely populated with villages spread over long distances. Securing independence in 1980, Vanuatu had previously existed under a colonial condominium government under both France and Britain, the effects of which are still seen today. A country strongly linked to ancestral customs, Vanuatu’s citizens are primarily subsistence farmers with little access to education or other resources for development. The job of the Peace Corps volunteers is to establish themselves in the country’s remote islands and villages where they are expected to provide grassroots support and promote the communities’ and the country’s development.

2. The AIC Methodology

The AIC methodology offers both a design framework and a design process and it should be particularly useful for a volunteer who is coordinating projects in a new culture such as can be found in the remote villages of Vanuatu⁶. For the purposes of this paper I will be using two of its prominent features: the AIC chart and the AIC stages of design.

a. The AIC chart (Annex 1) provides a graphic representation allowing to explore how a volunteer and the community relate to each other. The chart is generally constructed from the viewpoint of a specific individual, group or organization and describes the power relationships of all stakeholders involved. In particular, it specifies what such individuals or organizations have under their control, what or who they need to influence to achieve their purposes, and what is the policy, economic, institutional and cultural setting which cannot be modified in the short run and over which they have little or no influence, but which they will need to take into account and “appreciate”. It is also useful to use AIC charts to represent evolving relationships over time, and from the viewpoint of different actors. For this paper, for instance, different AIC charts will be drawn respectively from the perspectives of the volunteer and the community and will serve to illustrate the power shifts that occurred over the duration of the volunteer’s service. For learning purposes, it will also be helpful to consider the charts of both successful and ineffective volunteers, juxtaposing the two in order to formulate criteria

⁵ Peace Corps Vanuatu Website <http://www.peacecorps.vu/history.html>. Accessed 18 November 2008.

⁶ For an application of the AIC methodology to remote villages in Thailand, see William E. Smith. The Creative Power: Transforming Ourselves, Our Organizations and Our World. Routledge, December 2008 (pp. 86-91)

that would help in determining what behaviors and methods would contribute to a volunteer's success.

b. Regarding the institutional design process under the AIC methodology, its three stages provide relevant cues which would serve volunteers well in the field as they prepare and implement community projects (Annex 2). The first stage of design (or appreciative stage) is critical for the design success and thus should never be overlooked by volunteers when beginning new projects. It is indeed during the appreciative stage of design that the volunteer will begin to identify key stakeholders, learn from their past experience, establish common purposes with them, and develop a consensus vision for any projects or goals to be pursued during his assignment. These observations become especially relevant when the enabling environment is completely foreign to the US volunteer as is the case with the ni-Vanuatu culture and lifestyle. The second stage of design flows from the first and requires establishment of coordination (or influence) mechanisms of various strengths with the key stakeholders. Finally the third stage deals with internal organizational arrangements, action plans, and feedback mechanisms.

3. Applying the AIC methodology in the Vanuatu setting.

a. Stakeholders

It is critical to gain a solid understanding of the key stakeholders involved prior to drafting an AIC chart or designing a project. Failure to identify all stakeholders and properly assess the power relationships among them will pose substantial difficulties to a volunteer when he/she begins to develop and implement projects. From the viewpoint of a volunteer in Vanuatu the relevant stakeholders include: the volunteer, the community or village, the provincial government, the Vanuatu government, the surrounding villages, the Peace Corps Vanuatu staff, the Peace Corps Headquarters and potential donors (including but not limited to the Australian, New Zealand and British High Commissions.) These stakeholders will have varying degrees of interest and influence in development projects at the community level. It is the volunteer's duty to protect and assert the interests of the community and serve as a liaison with unfamiliar stakeholders on the community's behalf. Oftentimes remote villages lack the necessary knowledge, training or funds to deal effectively with donor agencies or government officials. For example, in the village of Tasiriki on the island of Espiritu Santo, the community did not have a phone or alternative means with which to rapidly communicate with the provincial government or project donors. In fact, the community did not even have any funds to travel continuously to town (approximately 3.5-4 hours by truck) in order to monitor the status of their project applications or the availability of funds for approved projects. The village then relied heavily on its Peace Corps Volunteer to maintain consistent communication with all relevant parties – thus allowing the village to bring many of them from the village's "appreciated" to its "influenceable" environment.⁷

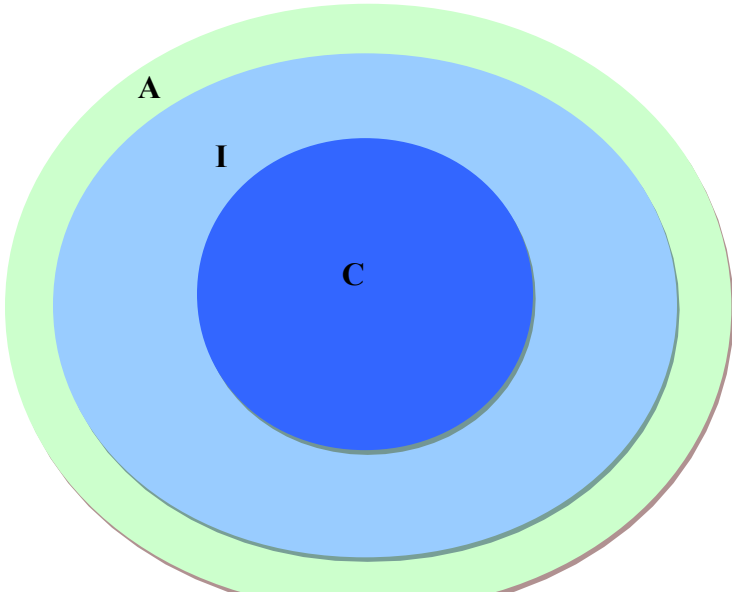
b. AIC Charts

⁷ This example is based upon the author's experience as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Tasiriki from 2002-2005.

The charts below harbor tremendous pedagogic value and would be helpful in explaining to incoming volunteers the power relationships at play over the course of their service in Vanuatu. The AIC charts developed for this paper explore the relationships between these stakeholders and the relative patterns of interaction between them. They provide a general outline, or macro representation, which volunteers will encounter. In addition, at the micro level a volunteer will need to map out the specific stakeholders at play within a particular village. For example, a micro level analysis might divide a community into several subcategories such as elders, chiefs, youth, women’s groups, etc. These will fluctuate depending on the specific village and island or the particular issue about which a decision must be taken. In practice thus the overarching AIC methodology will be helpful at both the micro and macro levels.

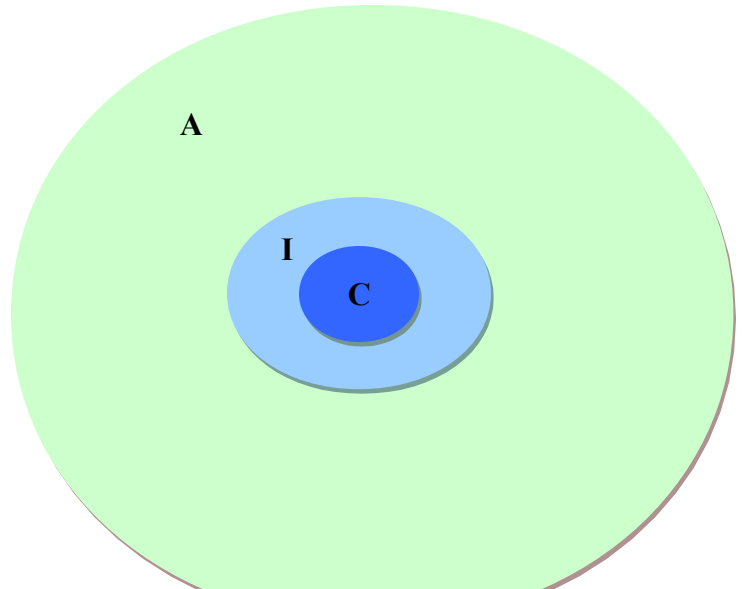
The shape and construction of the AIC chart will be a direct reflection of how a volunteer relates to his community. The amount of control or influence experienced by each actor will have profound ramifications for the duration of the volunteer’s service and the success and sustainability of the development projects with which he/she is associated. The following charts illustrate an imbalanced relationship which will ultimately prevent community ownership of the projects designed and/or implemented by the volunteer.

CHART A
Volunteer’s perceived perspective



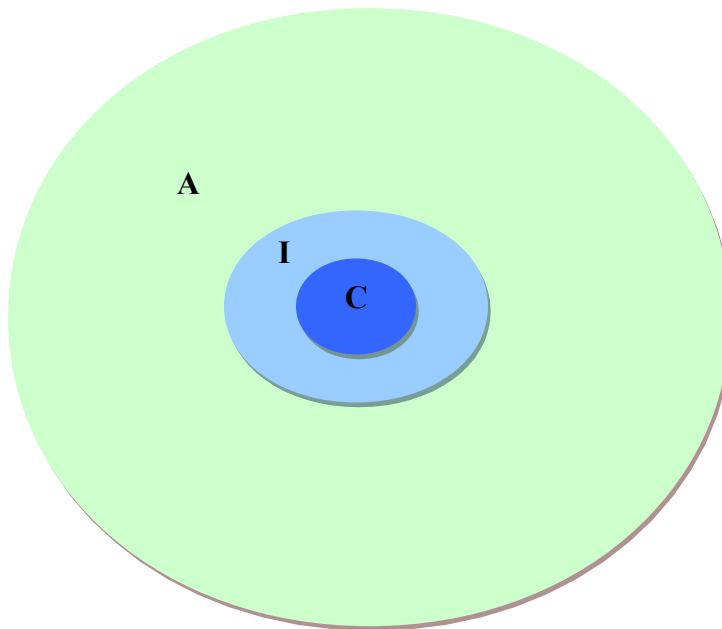
- Chart A**
- A- Peace Corps Headquarters
Vanuatu Government
 - I- Peace Corps Vanuatu Staff
Possible Donors
Provincial Government
Surrounding Villages
 - C- **COMMUNITY** &
VOLUNTEER

CHART A (bis)
Volunteer’s actual situation



- Chart A (bis)**
- A – **COMMUNITY**
Peace Corps Headquarters
Vanuatu Government
 - I - Peace Corps Vanuatu Staff
Possible Donors
Provincial Government
Surrounding Villages
 - C - **VOLUNTEER**

CHART B
Community's Perspective



- Chart B**
- A** - Peace Corps Headquarters
Peace Corps Vanuatu Staff
Possible Donors
Provincial Government
Vanuatu Government
VOLUNTEER
- I** - Surrounding Villages
- C** - **COMMUNITY**

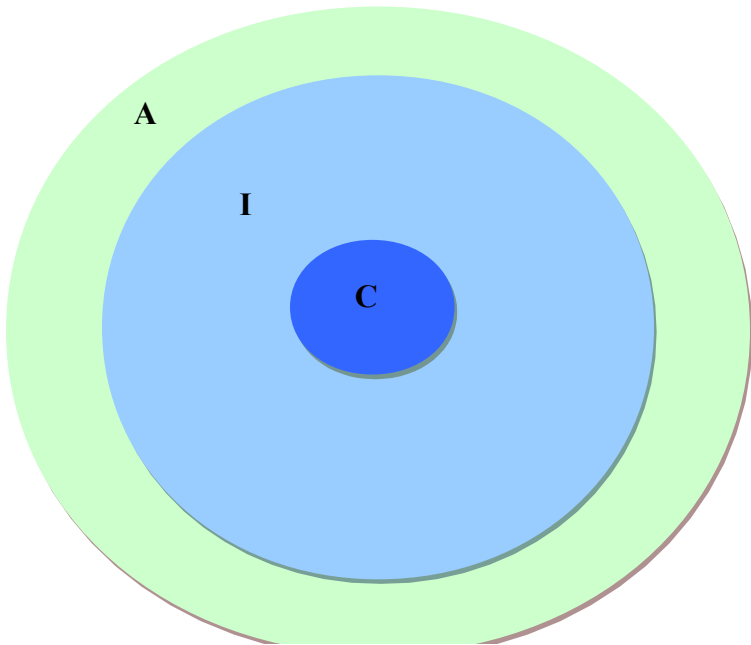
Chart A, which was drawn from the volunteer's perspective, shows a controlled environment that is far too large and appears to encompass in his mind the community itself. In this representation the volunteer sees himself as determining what the community needs and unilaterally designing and implementing projects. The volunteer does not solicit or expect community feedback or suggestions. Rather, he determines on his own the community needs and trajectory of development projects. Either for reasons of expediency or as a result of a genuine lack of awareness, he begins to impose his own view of development and drives the projects forward without any attempt at garnering community support. Such an attitude vis-à-vis the community is bound to pose a serious threat to project viability, but it is encouraged by the ni-Vanuatu culture according to which one should avoid questioning outsiders and risk confrontations with them. Unaware of this cultural trait, the volunteer will pursue his own projects, while the community will appear to silently assent -- though in reality it does not support his initiatives. Their critique however will undoubtedly take place, but only in informal circles to which the volunteer will not be invited. Chart A (bis) shows the actual situation on the ground.

Chart B on the other hand represents the corresponding landscape as seen from the community's perspective. It shows that the village retains a disproportionately small amount of control. In addition, its relatively small influenceable environment which includes only the surrounding villages, implies that the majority of actors (the volunteer included) fall into the appreciated environment, i.e., outside of the village's influence. Under these conditions, the community has little power or autonomy in determining the course of its development and becomes an observer rather than an active participant in the process. The position of the volunteer in the appreciated environment (rather than in

the community's influenceable environment) should pose significant concerns for all parties involved. Indeed, in this situation, the volunteer will be unable to sense the pulse of the village and by extension be unaware of the community's genuine goals and interests -- and therefore will miss the opportunity to lobby effectively on their behalf with Government and donors. Conversely, the community will feel no sense of ownership regarding the projects conceived by the volunteer without their inputs and approval, and will not be invested in their final outcome. Though they may have looked like passively agreeing, they will not have the motivation necessary to sustain the completed projects after the volunteer's departure from the country. **The reality of this situation in AIC terms is thus one where both the community and the volunteer have a very small controlled and influenceable environment.**

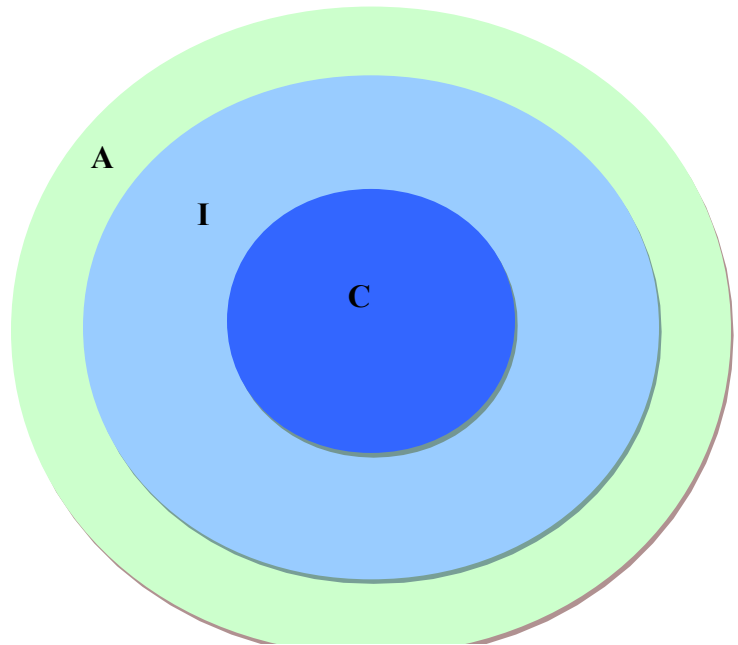
An effective, efficacious service and the sustainability of projects, demand that both Charts A and B be modified. For any projects to be viable and sustainable upon a volunteer's departure, the community must have the primary role in project design. The volunteer should serve more as a facilitator rather than as the sole driving force. The initial thrust of any projects should come from the community. Similarly, the momentum and sustained focus of all projects must have the community at the center of all activity. The revised AIC charts below display the key relationship dynamics which will promote effective cooperation and sustainability:

CHART C
Revised Volunteer Perspective



- Chart C**
- A- Peace Corps Headquarters
Vanuatu Government
 - I- **COMMUNITY**
Peace Corps Vanuatu Staff
Possible Donors
Provincial Government
Surrounding Villages
 - C- **VOLUNTEER**

CHART D
Revised Community Perspective



- Chart D**
- A- Peace Corps Headquarters
Peace Corps Vanuatu Staff
Vanuatu Government
 - I- Possible Donors
Provincial Government
Surrounding Villages
 - VOLUNTEER**
 - C- **COMMUNITY**

A, the controlled env

significantly shrunk in Chart C. From the volunteer's perspective, the village has moved from the controlled environment to the influenceable, representing the fact that the volunteer has now learned how to become accepted by the village and how to obtain their views directly or indirectly, as a result of which he will be able to consider and weigh the community perspective throughout his service. His relatively small area of control will mandate that any of his initiatives involve the community's genuine and active participation and guidance. As the volunteer's area of control decreases, the community's controlled environment increases, as shown in Chart D, dramatically displaying its greater autonomy in matters of project design. This shift or transference of power with regard to development projects will instill a sense of efficacy and capability within the community, catalyzing momentum and driving forth project goals. From the community's perspective, the volunteer has moved out from their appreciated environment and may now be influenced by the community (and reciprocally). In his shift to the influenceable environment, the volunteer will retain his own connections and influence over donors and provincial governments but will now be able to act as an effective intermediary representing the village's actual interests. The sounder and more equitable distribution of power represented in Charts C and D will greatly benefit project outcomes and the overall effectiveness of the volunteer's service.

When a volunteer consciously works to ensure that the relationship framework follows that of the revised charts, his cooperation with the village will substantially evolve. As this cooperation strengthens and trust deepens, the likelihood of community ownership will increase together with that of project success. The community will begin to work towards its own goals and ideals rather than those imposed upon them by a foreigner who lacks a genuine understanding of their culture and needs.

c. Appreciative Stage of Design

Turning now to the process of institutional (and project) design, and as already mentioned under section 2 above, the appreciative stage of design is absolutely critical for the success of any projects undertaken by Peace Corps Volunteers. A volunteer must have a strong understanding of the enabling environment in which he will operate in order to successfully maneuver throughout a new culture and achieve an accurate assessment of the community's goals and objectives. As stated previously, the appreciative stage of design is the opportunity for the volunteer to develop a vision with all appropriate stakeholders with regards to any projects. The volunteer and the community should establish common ground and begin to speak the same metaphorical language as it relates to the needs of the village.

During their initial training in Vanuatu, new volunteers are instructed to refrain from beginning or implementing projects during their first six months of service. Peace Corps Vanuatu has a strong and justified rationale for such instruction. It generally takes a minimum of six months to build and foster the relationships of trust and friendship necessary for open and honest communication. Through normal conversations and even through what may seem like banal activities, a volunteer will begin to recognize village priorities and be able to identify what sorts of programs the village will actively take

ownership of. Carrying buckets of water to the hut with a family, washing clothes at the river with the women of the village, or other culturally appropriate activities provide ample opportunities for discussions and probing of community goals. Through laughter and participation in routine, daily activities the volunteer weaves strands of trust which are essential for full community participation. These relationships will form the foundation for all projects attempted throughout a volunteer's service. In addition, they provide opportunities for the volunteer to identify those projects for which there is a demand and to discard project ideas which he had assumed would be helpful, but for which there would be little or no demand. Of course, visions and goals and felt needs may alter over time and it may be worth revisiting the subject at a later time, but if demand is not actively present a program cannot successfully go forward.

While the Peace Corps Training Program in Vanuatu does not specifically invoke the phrase "appreciative stage of design" the concept remains the same. When entering a vastly different culture such as that in Vanuatu a volunteer must put in the time and energy to understand the appreciative environment in which he/she is serving. Only through a solid understanding of the environment and identification of all stakeholders and their relationships will a volunteer be able to discover the actual thoughts and dreams of the society as well as their constraints, and help to design and implement projects accordingly. This is also the time when the volunteer should become acquainted with past success stories as well as failures of previous Peace Corps Volunteers so as to make use of such experience in their own work⁸.

All the above ideas can best be illustrated by the experience of one of my friends who came to Vanuatu in 2002 with what he recognized later as idealistic and preconceived notions of development. By that time he had already outlined in his mind specific project ideas which he honestly believed would be relevant for a village that he had not even visited and for a culture that he did not yet understand. During his initial three months of training he further developed his project ideas and built into their design certain technologies that were not common to Vanuatu. At the time, Vanuatu was experiencing a dearth of basic utilities such as running water and electricity. Many villagers lived by the light of a hurricane lamp and had to travel long distances to transmit even a short message. Technologically advanced products or services were completely foreign to many rural locations. Eventually our volunteer was assigned to such a village located on a remote outer island where the community had no familiarity or use for the technologies he intended to introduce. But he was unaware of this and came to the village as an active proponent of this new project, continually detailing its benefits to the community while failing to recognize their lack of interest, or even attempt to objectively assess community demand. Though they weren't interested, community members were culturally bound by their notions of respect to avoid intimating their objections or feelings to their well-meaning guest. Though demonstrative in other settings, the community did not feel at ease, or free, to express its views. The foundation of reciprocal

⁸ Ideally, Peace Corps offices should keep a data base with past project histories as recorded by former volunteers. Part of any initial training of new volunteers should include informal visits to the sites/communities of such past projects so as to help the new volunteers find out by themselves about the reasons for the projects' sustainability or otherwise.

trust had not yet been laid and more open and free communications had not developed yet. Thus the volunteer inadvertently overlooked the appreciative stage of design when he should have fostered common purposes and gained common ground with the community. Worse he did not even have an understanding of who were the key stakeholders and other influentials in the community.

Reflecting now on this experience, and with the insights I gained from the AIC methodology, I can better see that the kind of single minded action-oriented focus which works so well for innovators and entrepreneurs in the US must be preceded by a patient process of learning, understanding and negotiation in the profoundly different cultures where Peace Corps Volunteers have to operate. Otherwise, when projects fail in such circumstances, there is all too often a tendency to ascribe blame to the community and to cite laziness as the primary factor for incompleteness -- all of which misses the root cause of the problem, namely that the outside designer essentially by-passed the appreciative stage of design.

In sum, carefully and patiently carrying out the appreciative stage of design adds legitimacy and accountability to the volunteer's service. In this example, the volunteer should have stored his grand ambitions until he had arrived and settled in the village, and made an accurate assessment of its inhabitants' perspectives and goals. He should have spent time building friendships and asking questions as outsiders are fortunately allowed to do, thereby gaining a strong sense of village and cultural dynamics. Armed with such awareness he would have begun to identify the actual needs of the community and worked towards generating a village consensus in response. And ultimately the process would have helped to develop community ownership, cooperation towards implementation, actual use, and the project's ultimate sustainability. And it could have even led to an additional benefit: by becoming involved with all stages of project design and implementation, the community might have learned how to approach regional and national authorities as well as donors, and thus no longer depend on the temporary services of a foreign volunteer to promote their interests.

4. Recommendations

The Peace Corps Vanuatu Training Program already implicitly incorporates much of the AIC methodology, but there is still room for substantive improvement. Enhancing the training process will not require a paradigmatic shift. Rather, it will necessitate the systematic inclusion of specific aspects of the AIC framework. The program places strong emphasis on cross-cultural lessons and the need for volunteers to be cognizant of cultural and social mores. The addition of AIC charts and explanatory descriptions of the design process, with particular focus on the appreciative stage, will contribute greatly to the overall effectiveness of the program. Successful volunteers have no doubt intuitively employed the basic principles of this methodology, though without an awareness of the theory and experience behind it. On the other hand, there are many volunteers, as in the case described here, who do not automatically sense how the interplay of the stakeholders and their relative power will affect their service and success. The Peace Corps Vanuatu Training Program would be well served to systematically build these aspects of the AIC

methodology in the training of new volunteers, including through use of the case method and field visits to former projects. In this manner, the AIC methodology will be added as a useful tool to the arsenal of strategies which volunteers draw upon to maximize their effectiveness in the field. And its use may also contribute to the success of their subsequent professional career,

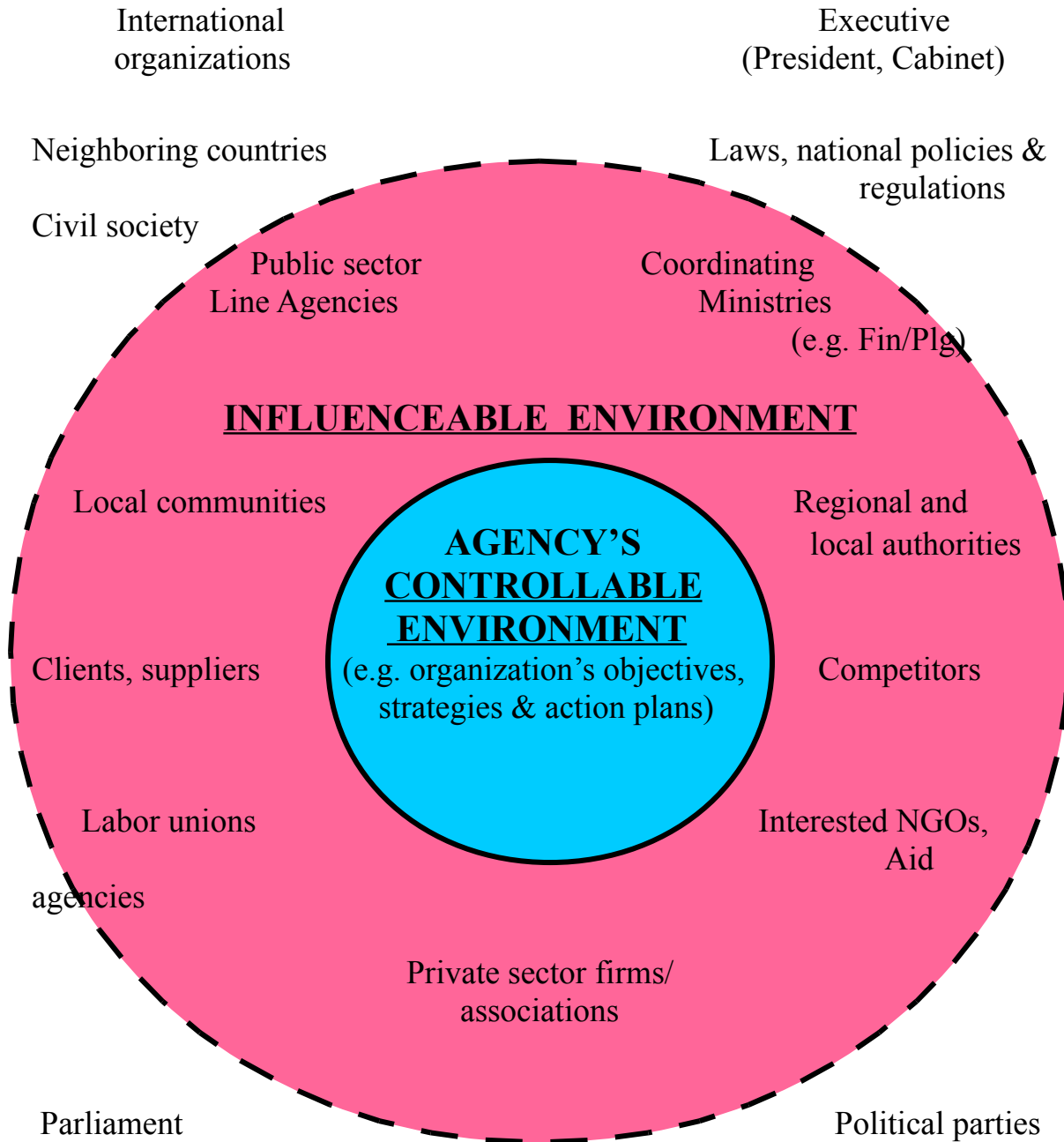
5. Conclusion

An understanding of the AIC methodology, and particularly of the appreciative stage of design, is absolutely critical to one's Peace Corps service. While not explicitly stated or referenced, the inherent ideals of the AIC framework are weaved throughout the training of new volunteers. However, it would be helpful to encourage volunteers to graphically represent on an AIC chart the power relationships of the communities and organizations in which they will be embedded. Those volunteers who understand and practice these principles will enjoy a more productive and fruitful service, building strong ties with their communities as they effectively partner to achieve common goals. Should Peace Corps Vanuatu and the Peace Corps as a whole incorporate the AIC methodology into the standard training process, volunteers will gain a strong understanding of how their initial behavior may affect the design and impact of any future projects. And since the AIC methodology should be relevant for the design process of any new venture, my hope is that at some point it will be tested and adopted by other Peace Corps offices around the world.

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A PUBLIC SECTOR AGENCY'S RELATIONS TO ITS INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENTS⁹

APPRECIATED ENVIRONMENT



⁹ Annex I and II are excerpted from Francis Lethem. Towards an appropriate institutional design methodology. October 2004. Available at <http://www.odii.com/>

ANNEX II

THE AIC INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN FRAMEWORK

