

An 'Iowa Outreach Corps' could, and should, change the world

We all have our areas of interest and expertise. There are many ways Iowans can continue our state's proud history of helping those in need. Dedicated volunteers from all walks of life can contribute.

Jerry Perkins
Guest columnist

- Jerry Perkins has been a member of the board of directors of Self-Help International since 2018 and has traveled to Ghana and Nicaragua for the organization.

“From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.” ([Luke 12:48](#))

Iowans have, for many years, been leaders in international outreach through agricultural assistance, disaster relief, and economic development.

The list of Iowans who have lent their skills to helping others is long and includes Norman Borlaug, Henry Wallace, Herbert Hoover, Roswell Garst, and many others. Nor is the list confined to politicians and agribusinessmen. Iowa has, for many years, sent thousands of its sons and daughters to the Peace Corps. As depicted in the [recent Iowa PBS documentary, “Citizen Diplomacy.”](#) Iowans have responded many times in the past with generosity when confronted by an international crisis, deploying a skillful practicality for solving problems and overcoming barriers in reaching out to others in need.

One Iowa-based organization, Self-Help International, has been working for more than 60 years to fight malnutrition and hunger in Ghana and Nicaragua. As a member of Self-Help's board of directors, I have seen how Self-Help promotes agricultural practices that boost agricultural yields and promote the cultivation of crops with improved nutritional qualities to ensure that children and other family members are better fed so they can be healthier and more productive. Self-Help also provides small loans at nominal interest rates to farmers (both men and women) so they can grow improved crops such as high-protein corn to feed their families more nutritionally and sell the rest in the marketplace.

Small loans also are made to women entrepreneurs, who also are taught business skills so they can successfully earn income that many of them use to improve their children's diets and finance their schooling. In Ghana, Teen Girls Clubs promote educational opportunities for adolescent females. (The surest way to curb population growth, it has been shown conclusively, is to educate girls.) Self-Help's “Growing Healthy Food, Growing Healthy Children” program

demonstrates that providing infants in their first 1,000 days of life with an adequate diet is vital in promoting health and success in life. In Nicaragua, Self-Help provides communities with chlorine tablets to purify their water supply, staving off water-borne diseases. Community leaders in other parts of Ghana and Nicaragua have seen what Self-Help has accomplished and reached out to the organization to expand. When people ask you to work with them, you know you are doing something right.



An important element in Self-Help's success is that the organization's staff members are all, respectively, Ghanaians and Nicaraguans. A small staff of four people runs the organization's Iowa headquarters, keeping administrative costs low and providing ample "bang for the buck" for Self-Help's donors.

The time has come for Iowans to follow the lead of Self-Help International and other Iowa-based international organizations to ramp up their efforts to promote increased agricultural production in Africa, Central America, and other parts of the world where children go to bed hungry, stunted by a lack of adequate nutrition. The ramifications of that stunting are many and are compounded by a changing climate, government corruption, religious conflict, and organized criminal activities.

[More: Combating COVID-19 with better nutrition: What an Iowa organization is doing in Central America](#)

There are many ways Iowans can continue our state's proud history of helping those in need. For example, Iowans with a background in agronomy could boost agricultural production in Central America and Africa where corn and beans are staples of the human diet. Or Iowans with experience in the grain industry could show farmers living in tropical climates how to preserve their harvests from pestilence and spoilage. These are but two examples of the types of expertise that Iowans could lend to people living in countries in need of assistance.

An "Iowa Outreach Corps" should not be restricted to those with a specialized skill. We all have our areas of interest and expertise. There are many ways Iowans can continue our state's proud history of helping those in need. Dedicated volunteers from all walks of life can contribute. Furthermore, businesses will find that "loaning" some of their employees to an international endeavor will add experience and knowledge to those employees that can't be acquired anywhere else. Living and working in a foreign country can be incredibly enriching. The primary skill needed is an open mind.

As the quote from the Bible that precedes this article says, those of us who have been fortunate enough to live in Iowa should become citizen diplomats in extending our good fortune to others. We Iowans should feel blessed that we've been given so much because of the lucky happenstance of living in this land of plenty. The verse from Luke says to me that we should give back as much, if not more, than we have been given.

But just feeling blessed doesn't necessarily prod one to reach out to others who have not been as fortunate as we have been. Reaching out, spending time, money, and whatever skills we possess to boost the economic well-being of others also needs to come from a recognition that what improves the lives of our brothers and sisters around the world improves our lives, as well.

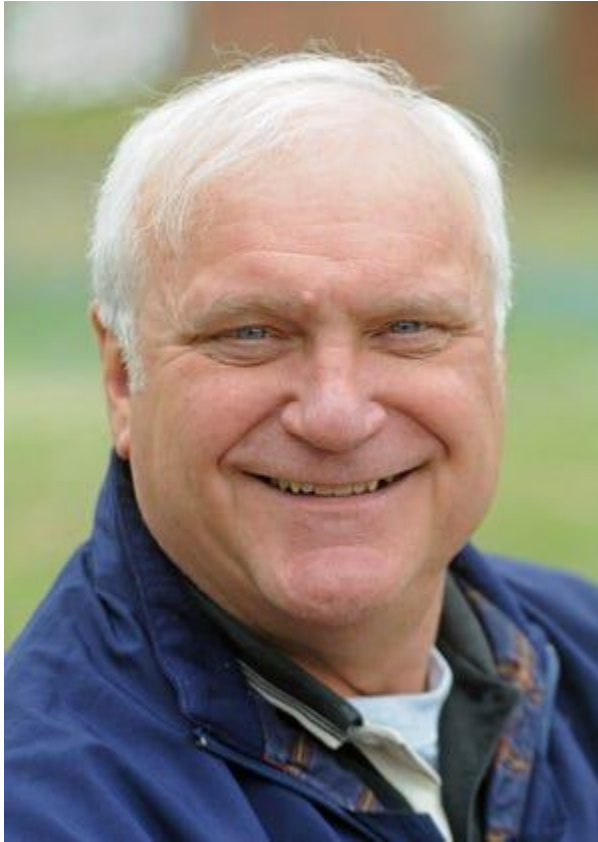


As John Kennedy once said: “Those who make peaceful change impossible, make violent revolution inevitable.” I have firsthand knowledge of the accuracy of this quote because, as a Peace Corps Volunteer working and living in Nicaragua in 1971-72, I witnessed the Somoza family dynasty’s five-decade long reign of autocracy and kleptocracy. The appalling poverty in Nicaragua was a result of the Somoza family’s misrule and led, just as Kennedy said it would, to a violent revolution in 1977-78 that killed an estimated 50,000 people. A U.S.-financed proxy war that followed the revolution killed still more. Peaceful change wasn’t possible in Nicaragua, so violent revolution was inevitable, just as JFK stated.

Wars caused by poverty and desperation also inevitably lead to consequences that reach across borders and oceans to impact all of us. The tragic circumstances occurring at our southern border and in the countries bordering the Mediterranean show just how desperate people can be. Helping prevent wars and violent revolutions is in each of our best interests. When we lend a helping hand to others, we are also helping ourselves.

That kind of enlightened self-interest should guide us in all we do, as Iowans, to help others help themselves.

So, let's band together as Iowans in our state's long and proud tradition and reach out to a world in need. We have much to give. Let's start right away.



Jerry Perkins is an Iowa native who graduated from Roosevelt High School in Des Moines and George Washington University in Washington, DC. He was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Panama and Nicaragua and returned to Iowa in 1976 to raise a family with his wife, Peggy. They have three grown sons and two grandchildren and live in Des Moines. In 1992, he was the manager of the Russian-American Agribusiness Center in Stavropol, Russia. He was a journalist at the Des Moines Register for more than 25 years and was the Register's farm editor from 1993 to 2008. He wrote and edited BioFuels Journal magazine from 2009 to 2018. He has been a member of the board of directors of Self-Help International since 2018 and has traveled to Ghana and Nicaragua for the organization.

About 'Citizen Diplomacy'

In November 2023, Iowa PBS released a new documentary, "Citizen Diplomacy," that features heartening acts of person-to-person contact between Iowans and individuals from: Russia, at the height of the Cold War, Japan, in the wake of World War II; and China, in 1985. The documentary movingly illustrates the consequential impact individuals can have on international relations. The documentary can be viewed at iowapbs.org.