

# Atlas Corps celebrates 10 years of bringing leaders from developing countries to the US

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Atlas Service Corps celebrated its 10th year anniversary. Photo by: [Atlas Service Corps Facebook](#)

[Peace Corps](#) volunteers have been donating their time and skills for decades by serving abroad before returning home to apply their newfound talents and experiences. But how often do you hear of someone from Kenya coming to the U.S. to offer their services? Not very.

But [Atlas Service Corps](#) is changing that by acting as a “reverse Peace Corps” which brings promising nonprofit leaders from around the world to the U.S. for a year or so to volunteer within local organizations, before returning to their home countries.

Now in its 10th year, the Atlas Corps, which is based in Washington, D.C., has seen 500 leaders from 79 countries pass through its program and alumni have gone on to advise presidents, lead nonprofits, run for parliament, and more. The program’s first graduate went back to Colombia and became an adviser to the president, while another alumni became country director for [World Vision](#) in Armenia.

Scott Beale, the nonprofit’s founder and CEO, plans to grow the program so that it can accept 1,000 fellows a year and place them in more countries including Malaysia, Kenya and India.

Currently, Atlas Corps recruits approximately 100 fellows per year — up from just six in 2008 — and sends them to volunteer at organizations in the nonprofit and for-profit sectors across U.S., Colombia and Australia for between 12 to 18 months. All are committed to causes in their home countries and have an ambition to “go back home and move the needle on social issues,” Beale said.

It is a competitive program. Beale and his team receive approximately 10,000 applicants every year. Devex sat down with Beale to find out more about Atlas Corps’ work. Here are the highlights of the conversation:

### ***What is the idea behind Atlas Corps?***

Our theory of change is that the most effective way to address social issues is by developing leaders, and the most effective way to create lasting social change is to create networks of leaders.

But far too often in the development space leaders don't get the support they need domestically, much less internationally. They are trying to tackle extremely difficult challenges and if they are doing it in solitude then they're more likely to burn out. That's where the Atlas Corps comes in; we know that by investing in individuals and putting them in a network, this will not only help them with the work they do now, but it will help them for decades to come.

### ***How is Atlas Corps doing development differently?***

There are many aspects of international development and one of them is international service, but when the primary approach is people going from the north to the south, not only does this send the wrong message, but it's also missing a huge opportunity.

For 55 years, Americans have served abroad with the Peace Corps or in U.K. through [Voluntary Service Overseas](#), but the idea of someone from Kenya serving in London or D.C. just doesn't really happen.

While some of this is to do with visas and financial restrictions, historically it has more to do with traditional assumptions that in the West we have the resources, ideas and the talent and all we need to do is simply send enough of these resources to the "global south." I think that idea is reducing over time but it still manifests itself in how many international development agencies are run by expats as opposed to local talent, for example.

I believe development should be seen as something that's done in partnership with communities, countries and people around the world as opposed to some of the more "top-down" approaches we've seen in the past.

### ***What does the recent U.S. election mean for Atlas Corps?***

Recent events, not only in the U.S. but all around the world, have shown just how important it is to have mutual understanding and cooperation across borders.

The reality is the world is extremely interconnected, especially when you look at today's social challenges — refugee crises, climate change, global health — immediately these issues affect many countries, economies, and governments, and so we need an appropriately interconnected international development response. To do that we need development leaders to already be networked before these crises happen.

Furthermore, often the best solutions to a problem may not come from a laboratory or a capital building somewhere, but from someone working on the ground. So to the extent that we can get those people with solutions interacting and networking with the people making funding and policy decisions, the better off we are going to be.

### ***How does the Atlas Corps experience develop networks of leaders?***

When you go through a common shared experience of volunteering overseas for a year, you develop a common level of trust and understanding with someone who has been through the same experience, even if you've never met that person. It's the same concept as people who go to business schools. You could have served 30 years before someone else but still feel a kinship toward them.

Now in Atlas Corps we have this cadre who've given a year of their lives and experienced the same competitive selection process and rigorous training program to graduate, so it means something when they meet another Atlas fellow at a conference, and if they have to collaborate they know who they're dealing with.

### ***How will Atlas Corps fare under the next U.S. administration?***

We existed before President Barack Obama and we will exist after. There's a strong bipartisan consensus around this idea of developing leaders, and there's actually a conservative argument to be made if you consider that what we really need in this world is for leaders overseas to have the skills experience and networks to be address to address their own problems.

My concern has nothing to do with the next presidential administration, it has more to do with whether Atlas Corps will be able to grow to meet the rising challenges in the world. There is growing chaos and division in this world and there are also increasing development challenges. We need a rising development network to tackle those challenges.

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