



THE NEWSLETTER

Fondo Quisqueya



“To provide for low income Dominicans in the Dominican Republic, grants for educational and training purposes designed to assist them in bettering their lives and designed to help them attain personal development, skills and advancement.” Fondo Quisqueya Bylaws 2005

In This Issue

- Peace Corps Leaves Dominican Republic
- Peace Corps Worldwide
- Letter from Peace Corp - DR
- Covid-19 Hits the DR
- Economic Impact
- Musings on Life in the DR
- Send Money...Maybe Not
- A Message from Tito
- Closing Thoughts

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Peace Corps Leaves Dominican Republic

The past several weeks have been quite unique in PCDR's history. Evacuation of all 149 volunteers in the country was announced late in the afternoon of Sunday March 15th, in the midst of municipal elections. This was the first time in the 58-year history of the Peace Corps in the Dominican Republic that such an evacuation had been ordered. PCVs were brought together in Santo Domingo and left the country between March 17th and 18th. Although heartbreaking for staff to say goodbye to the PCVs and for PCVs to say goodbye to their communities, it was in the best interests of the health and safety of the Volunteers.

Although the Volunteers have left, they continue to keep staff busy. The PCDR office went to telework on March 18th and continues to support RPCVs as they close out their service remotely. In addition, staff are in regular contact with the communities where Volunteers served. PC Washington has sent a clear message that Peace Corps has only suspended its operations. Many DR Volunteers are interested in returning to service to complete unfinished work. That plan and timeline are still to be determined by the agency.

Increased internal travel restrictions were implemented on April 3rd prohibiting travel between municipalities. Exceptions are made for certain vital services (healthcare, food transportation, etc.). Travel for Easter week, always a popular time to travel in the DR, is extremely limited.

The government is in the process of discussing a possible delay in the May 17th presidential elections. Private schools are trying to continue remote education with Zoom and online platforms, but public schools are struggling.

Many thanks to Peace Corps staff Jennifer McGowan and Laura Sundquist for this article.

Peace Corps Worldwide

All Volunteers worldwide were terminated and returned to the United States in mid-March. They received a severance stipend, two months of healthcare coverage and were required to self-quarantine for two weeks. They are ineligible for unemployment and must look for a job in this complicated environment. They have been told that

Continued on Page 3



Santo Domingo
April 9, 2020

Fondo Quisqueya

Dear Board of Directors, Members and Supporting RPCVs,

We want to extend our deepest sense of solidarity due to the health situation that is affecting the entire population worldwide (COVID-19) and thank you for your support and dedication to community development in communities of the Dominican Republic where Peace Corps Volunteers serve. As you know, on March 15th, 2020, Director Jody Olsen announced a temporary suspension of all operations worldwide and evacuated its Volunteers.

It has been a trying 3 weeks. While we continue to support our Volunteers as they close out their service remotely, we are also concentrated on our host families and community partners who too are experiencing serious disappointment.

We are incredibly grateful for your collaboration through all these years and we want to thank you on behalf of the communities which have benefited from the projects you supported. Please understand that the evacuation is a temporary suspension of volunteer activities and that we will be ready to resume our operations when the conditions are favorable. When this will be, we do not know. But we understand that discussions are actively taking place in Headquarters in determining what that might look like. Our office and staffing patterns will remain the same.

We deeply appreciate your patience and understanding as we wait for the situation to normalize. Our staff continues to work remotely so rest assured that we stand strong as a team and as a Peace Corps family during this difficult time.

We send this letter to those of you who Magdalena regularly contacted and recognize that many others, both board members and other RPCVs, form part of the amazing organization and network that is Fondo Quisqueya. We ask that you please forward and share this letter with them as we are so very grateful for each and every one of you.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jennifer McGowan".

Jennifer McGowan
Directora Interina
Cuerpo de Paz República Dominicana



P.O. Box 1412. Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic

once the crisis has passed, they may reapply to Peace Corps but are given no guarantee of acceptance or return to the country where they were serving.

NPR reports the following: "Sarah Heyborne, who returned to the U.S. in 2019 after her two-and-a-half year stint in the Dominican Republic, helped organize a Facebook group of over 8,000 people to provide evacuees with money and other resources, like supplies, transportation and housing." The Facebook page is "Returned Peace Corps COVID-19 Evacuation Support [Community-Generated]."

Also, "The National Peace Corps Association is hoping to create and fund a group that draws on the evacuated volunteers and their skills to respond to the COVID-19 crisis in the United States."

Covid-19 Hits the DR

There have been many changes in Peace Corps and the Dominican Republic since our last newsletter. The coronavirus, which no one had even heard of back in January, has now ravaged economies and our sense of well-being around the world. Obviously, the Dominican Republic has not been spared. The first case, an Italian tourist, was diagnosed on March 1st in Bayahibe. As of this date there have been 1,956 cases diagnosed and 98 deaths. The Italian tourist is still in the DR, alive and in treatment.

Our man in Santo Domingo, Mike Benson, reports that there has been a lockdown in place since March 18th, which has been largely respected. It's currently scheduled to remain in place until April 30th. "Critical" businesses are allowed to be open from 7 AM to 4 PM and there is a curfew from 5 PM to 6 AM. Mike says it's a quieter city and the air is much cleaner.

As to travel to and from the DR, The New York Times reports the following: "Flights from Milan into the Dominican Republic have been canceled, according to the U.S. Embassy, and all travelers arriving in the country must complete a travel history form. Passengers from China or Italy, including those without any sign of Covid-19 symptoms, may have to quarantine at home. Incoming cruise ships also may be barred from docking." This having been said, the word from the DR is that borders, for all practical purposes, are now closed.

The unemployment rate is at about 80% as most businesses have suspended operations to freeze all expenses which leaves many with no income. Rents are not being paid and so on down the line.



Economic Impact

As mentioned above, the Dominican Republic had its first positive test result for Covid-19 on March 1, 2020 – A 62 year-old Italian tourist in a Dominican hotel, near Bayahibe. By Friday, March 27, every last tourist had left the country, leaving approximately 80,000 hotel rooms empty. Much is unknown about how this pandemic will evolve, and what kind of policies might be applied, but the short-run economic effects in the Dominican Republic will be substantial.

Between 1985 and 2018 the Dominican Republic grew faster than nearly any other country in Latin America, with growth driven by a steadily expanding tourism sector and boosted by steady increases in remittances. The prevalence of undernourishment, for example, had fallen from about 28 percent in 2000 to under ten percent in 2018. Inequality diminished, the middle class grew, and this spurred further growth in many other sectors. Yet employment in hotels, restaurants, and bars (as of 2016) made up just 6.3 percent of all jobs – this is on par with employment provided by the construction sector. Employment in the commercial sector had been about 20 percent of the total jobs, and agriculture provided about 11 percent of jobs. So, all is not lost. But tourism has provided stimulus throughout the economy – in construction, in retail, and in agriculture. Remittances from Dominicans residing abroad have been providing nearly as many US\$ as tourism receipts and these will certainly be hit as well.

Hotels purchase about 25 percent of the value of agricultural production, so agriculture will be hit as well. Hotels are big consumers of fresh fruits and vegetables and these will be produced in surplus and sold at low prices – or perhaps not harvested in some cases. Other agricultural products – staples for domestic consumption -- will be in greater demand as consumers stock up. The good news is that the Dominican Republic is relatively self-sufficient in food, and we're also likely to see a "back to the conuco" effect as out of work labor tries to find a way to eat.

The tourism sector will eventually bounce back, once the Coronavirus is under control. Some hotels are committed to reassigning work and retaining as many employees as possible. They may take advantage of opportunities to invest in property maintenance. In the meantime, stimulus measures at the national level to provide credit, make up for lost wages, and encourage investment are urgently needed.

This article was contributed by Dr. Carrie Meyer, former DR Volunteer, former Fondo Quisqueya board member and professor of economics at George Mason University.



Musings on Life in the DR

A national curfew from 5pm to 6am (announced by sirens) is strictly enforced, and violators with no excuse have been incarcerated. Schools and universities have been closed. The middle and upper classes are, with some exceptions, adhering to "stay at home" defensive strategies and closing their businesses. Thousands of micro-enterprises in the barrios and (presumably) the campos, however, seem to be operating as normal, but adhering to the curfew. People who live from hand to mouth with small businesses simply can't shut down.

The practice of hiring *servientes*, both male and female, for cooking, maintenance, laundry, and other domestic chores is almost universal in urban households that are middle or upper class. Some are live-in, but most probably commute, and the live-ins go home on weekends. Many families have sent the *servientes* home during the epidemic. Many of those families continue paying them.

The schools are closed. But most Dominican children, particularly those in public schools, do not have the hardware required to access online teaching and learning as is done in China and much of the U.S. There are middle class households in which the mother has tried to "home-school" children. Some have given up in frustration.

The infamous *taponas* in the capital that force you to spend over an hour stalled in traffic for a trip that should take less than 15 minutes are momentarily a thing of the past.

As to the borders, it is usually the Dominicans who are trying to control the entry of Haitians. On March 15, however, the Haitian government announced it was closing the border to prevent infection from entering from the DR. (That may be a historical first. Barriers traditionally go in the opposite direction.) Before the closure took effect, hundreds of Haitians flooded the binational market in Dajabòn to purchase food and other items. For some reason the infection rate in the D.R. is much higher than that reported for Haiti. Haiti may simply lack testing supplies and data.

These markets open twice a week along the border. For decades Haitians have been allowed to come in without a passport, but not to travel (openly) beyond the border towns themselves. Most purchases are made by Haitians buying Dominican products, not only agricultural but also plastic chairs and other items produced in the DR but not (as much or at all) in Haiti. Dominican *intermediarios* with produce to sell come all the way from Santiago and other places deep inside the DR. The closing of these border markets negatively affects both the Dominican sellers and Haitian purchasers.

The shopping malls in the capital and other cities -- whose store owners are middle to upper class -- are closed except for pharmacies, supermarkets, and banks. The once crowded malls are empty. Restaurants are closed. The colmados of the barrios and campos, in contrast, largely remain open -- legally (because they sell food). The Listin Diario reports expressions of concern by some colmado owners that (1) the customers are crowding in and not keeping the required social distance; (2) the panic buying focuses heavily on the purchase of alcohol, mostly by males, stocking up for "stay at home" days; and (3) some men, at least during the day, continue to consume beer in groups right in the colmado as per usual. However, the traditional colmado nighttime *bebentinas* over dominoes and loud music have been momentarily discontinued in light of the curfew.

Dr. Jerry Murray was a DR Volunteer in the mid '60s and is professor emeritus of anthropology at the University of Florida. He has strong personal and professional ties to the DR and Haiti and sent these observations.

Send Money....Maybe Not

On March 23rd the Junta Monetaria announced a set of regulatory measures that seek to protect financial markets and payment systems, facilitate the provision of liquidity to companies and households and maintain macroeconomic stability. These measures include reduction in interest rates, greater access to liquidity, easing of reserve requirements, and easing of other financial regulations. While this easing of regulations is all well and good, 80% of Dominicans operate outside of the banking system and 70% of households are totally or partially dependent on the informal economy. Therefore the majority of the population is likely to be financially stressed during the quarantine period.

We have seen a huge drop in the volume of remittances being sent into the country. This is likely to be due to the fact that most remittances originate with Dominicans in New York, Spain, and Italy, all areas which are severely impacted by the coronavirus. These remittances are critical to the Dominican economy, and the remittance banking community is lobbying for changes in regulations that will ease the movement of these vital funds. The negative impact of current restrictions will be widely felt.

Mike Benson's daughter Lizzie works for one of the remittance banks in the DR and contributed this article.

A Message From Tito, FQ President

It seems like every newsletter is marking massive changes to our world, and this current one sets a new threshold for change with all PCVs repatriated and terminated as of this past month. At Fondo Quisqueya, we will not stop our work while we wait for good news and rebirth from Peace Corps. We will continue to support our partner organizations in the DR, most notably the Instituto Tecnico with travel grants, and our current grantees in educational and university programs.

Additionally, the Fondo network is a broad one, and we invite any returning PCVs to reach out to us for support and brainstorming as you re-enter and consider your next best steps. We have all been in some version of limbo along the way, and together can offer a significant brain trust and networking potential. Just reach out to us via DominicanRepublicPCV@gmail.com with a short summary of what you have been and would like to be doing, and we will try to connect you with a matching resource.

Welcome back, and don't be strangers!!!

Closing Thoughts

Once this crisis has subsided, the DR will be a different place, as will the US. The economy will suffer, and unemployment will spike. For the tourism industry, the best case scenario is that the current season will be a bust but bounce back in the fall. But more likely, it will take much longer to recover. Fondo Quisqueya's mission is to support educational opportunities for Dominicans to help them realize their full potential. Any contribution you can make at this time will be much appreciated and will help the DR bounce back.

And this from the RPCV diaspora: We congratulate Roger Haring, PD/DR 93-96, on the publication of his PC memoir, *The Spirit of the Volunteer*, which shares his experiences and discoveries during his service as an Ag Volunteer in Pizarrrete, Peravia province. Portions of proceeds from the books will support community water projects in California. The link to this book is: <https://kp-pub.com/roger-a-haring-the-spirit-of-the-volunteer/>

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