



March 19, 2020

Dear Friend,

El Salvador, like many countries around the world, is reeling from the effects of COVID19. To clamp down on the spread of the virus, on March 15th, the government declared a state of emergency and approved a partial suspension of constitutional rights. What does that look like?

- Foreigners are prohibited from entering the country by land, air or sea. All who enter illegally or legally are subject to a mandatory quarantine in a government run facility.
- All educational activities are suspended, private and public.
- Crowd sizes exceeding fifty people, such as concerts or sporting events are canceled.
- All bars, cafes and discos are closed; restaurants can only offer delivery or take out.
- Trade will continue normally. Commercial activities will remain unchanged, including imports and exports, under the proper sanitary control at customs.
- People are told to shelter in place and only venture out if truly necessary.

On March 18th, El Salvador registered its first single confirmed case of the virus, from a Salvadoran returning from Italy, who defied the barrier the President put in place around the perimeter of the country. Because of citizen denunciations, he was picked up and tested positive for the virus and subsequently the entire municipality of Metapan, in the department of Santa Ana has been cordoned off for the next 48 hours in an effort to find his line of infection.

Impacts on the Salvadoran Society

The majority of the population has reacted with panic, no matter how many calls for calm are made. Supermarkets are crowded and supplies are beginning to become scarce, partly because there is hoarding and price inflations. For example in some places bottled water is selling for three times its normal price.

Bukele has said that the department of labor will do what it can to make sure employers and workers are economically supported during the quarantine, but every hour labor abuses are being called out via social media of workers being indiscriminately laid, off, mistreated or made to work when they aren't supposed to.

The sectors most economically impacted by this national quarantine are the service industry, domestic workers, day laborers, street vendors, factory and sweatshop workers. Also affected are those Salvadoran families who already live in El Salvador's precarious situation of water shortage. For young girls and women who face abuse at home, the situation of isolation becomes even more serious. It encourages victim control and greater submission of the victim.

Impacts on VOICES' work

VOICES, like other NGOs, is having to adapt to these measures. For example, this situation forced us to cancel the annual South Bay Sanctuary Covenant delegation this March, as well as suspend the special delegation of teachers from Amando López to the United States in April. Likewise, the SBSC fundraising event scheduled for April 26 in California, at which our director was to speak, was canceled.

Also with the suspension of classes the reproduction phase of the ECHO project workshops in Morazán is on hold; likewise, some community activities, workshops and meetings.

It's safe to say that human rights don't simply go away because of a national quarantine, and neither will VOICES' commitment to accompanying our local partners as best as we can. As an organization, VOICES' staff are adhering to the rules put in place by working from home.

This involves catching up on programming materials and fine tuning our evaluation frameworks, but we are also finding other ways to support our partners in the following ways:

Women's Network of Morazán (9 municipalities served)

- Providing 15 *canasta basicas* for the Network's most vulnerable members and their families.

Amando Lopez grade school (9 communities served)

- While some students may enjoy the meal provided by the school, other families may see it as a lifeline. The school's staff compiled a list of 88 students who are most at risk from malnutrition and we will work with them to find the best way to help feed these kids during the quarantine.

Youth Development Association of Morazán (3 communities served)

- This inspiring youth group has had to cancel all of their programming including their special activities, community events, workshops and schools like their school of nutrition, which not only serves as a means to teach recipes, but also supports families' ability to practice food sovereignty through the family farms component. We will work with AJUDEM to ensure that those most affected will have access to plants, seeds and compost to keep their farms growing.

El Salvador is a resilient country full of ingenuity and as long as we continue to practice true solidarity, we will all be able to come out of this pandemic with heads high and the prospect for a brighter more sustainable future.

Atentamente,
The VOICES Team