

evivo e.V.

Anerkennung, Förderung und Schutz der Würde des Menschen

Newsletter 02/2020

August. Around this time of the year, evivo has usually just had the most eventful and turbulent month: around our program, the “old” volunteers would now have flown back home while the “new” volunteers would have arrived at their new deployment locations. Of course there would have been workshops for both groups of volunteers, questions, that might have been left, would have been clarified, etc..

But this year is very different for evivo, as well: Our north-south volunteers which went abroad a year ago have been back home in Germany for many months now, the reason being a decision of the program “weltwärts,” which was made in March and of which evivo is a part. According to this decision the volunteers had to return to Germany as soon as possible. This task was complicated by the regularly-changing regulations in the individual countries and all the flights, that had to be canceled. It was a very nerve-wracking time for both the people who were working on coordinating the flights back home and the volunteers who have had to say goodbye to their host families, friends and acquaintances and who could only get last-minute information on their flights back. It was a huge relief for everyone involved to see all the volunteers return to Germany.

On the other side, our new volunteers could not yet travel to their assigned location. Here, too, we have to regard the requirements of both weltwärts and the individual locations. We hope that things will soon be more clear for this new group of volunteers. Also, we have had to postpone the workshops that were planned for the new volunteers, while we have been able to complete our first online workshop for our returning volunteers. Doing our workshops online has been a new experience for all of us and it required some changes to our usual workshop methods. But we are very pleased to hear that it was received positively by everyone involved.

The Corona virus has of course also changed the life of the people in the countries where evivo and our partner organisations are active. Jonathan, a former volunteer from Panama, describes in the following text how Covid19 affects the daily life on site. The topic Panama will be continued in the coming newsletter with stories from the projects. We hope you enjoy reading our Newsletter, stay healthy!

Covid-19 in Panama

On March 19, 2020, health organizations officially announced Panama’s first case of Covid-19, even though it was hard to believe that it had been only one case until now since Panama is located on the American continent and since it is home to the Panama Canal as well as an international airport – which is known as the “hub of the Americas” - and harbors in both oceans.

The health ministry immediately took security measurements against the spread of the virus as it was too well known what could happen if measurements were taken too slowly, as seen in Spain or Italy: one of the first measurements was to suspend school classes for an indefinite period of time as well as to cancel commercial flights; Panama also implemented a curfew which forced all people to stay in their homes until 5pm and finally the majority of companies had to send their employees into home office. Initially, we thought that, due to these measurements, this would all be a matter of one month, but as soon as the health ministry registered the quick spread of the virus, it was forced to take new precautions.

Panama declared a state of emergency and a total quarantine: people were only allowed to leave their homes in order to buy groceries or medicine; additionally, women were only allowed to go outside on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, while men could do so only on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. On Saturdays there would be full quarantine: nobody was allowed to leave their home, except for two hours, which were indicated by the last digit of your identification card. In my case, the last digit is an 8, which meant that I could go outside between 7:30 am and 9:30 am.

Unfortunately, this was the reason why many shops had to close; the unemployment rate and the amount of suspended contracts increased drastically. Of course, the government tried to support all those affected by this situation but unfortunately it proved to be very difficult to grant quick relief to everyone. Many people in Panama follow an informal trade, e.g., they are street vendors or vendors with small stands of fast food; these were affected the most as they could not work at all and thus could not earn money to buy food or medicine. Such people were now depending on help from the government or from helpful people.

In May 2020, there were plans to try to suspend quarantine which were called the “new normal”. According to these plans, economic activities were divided into blocks: block 1 comprises stores which offer electronics, replacement equipment, industrial aquacultures, technical services and fisheries and repair shops. From June 2020 on, block 2 came into effect: this block includes miners, the industry, construction, public infrastructure, places of religion and sports facilities, albeit only with an average utilization of 25% of their capacity. At the same time, the restrictions based on gender and the times at which you were allowed to drive your car, were suspended: many people were now able to go to work or to drive freely with their car. But many people also used the suspension of quarantine to go out, travel the country, or to go partying and drink large amounts of alcohol without taking the necessary precautions. And understandably, many people which worked at informal trades were eager to earn money in order to be able to afford food and medicine.

The gradual suspension of quarantine precautions caused an increase of confirmed daily cases and only one week had passed until the government had to reinstate quarantine restrictions according to gender and time, albeit only in Panama City and in the province of East Panama. There you could only go to work or drive your car if you had an allowance (pass), to be issued by your respective employer. Currently, there are many concerns as the amount of COVID-19 cases is still rising and as it is uncertain whether the government decides to reinstate further precautions and to prevent further blocks from economic activity.

The culture and the level of education of the people has a big impact on this situation. One example is the place where I live, the neighborhood of El Chorrillo, home to many people: there were many cases of people not taking the virus seriously, which meant an extra amount of work for the police to keep everything in order and for the health organizations in order to prevent Panama’s health system from collapsing.

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Moreover, many people do not feel sufficiently supported by the government, which has led to many protests and demonstrations in different parts of the country as there is a shortage of food supplies and many people still have to pay for electricity, water, bank credits, etc. with the little money that they have left. You could say that the government is making the greatest possible effort to support the people, yet this is happening very slowly and the provided help does not reach everyone in need. It is quite contradictory to see how Panama – compared to its neighboring countries – has lots of income but now gives in to this situation and creates the impression that the governmental actions are rather bad. One example is the monthly “solidarity coupon,” that the government originally issued as a 80 Dollar help. After a lot of pressure, this coupon was increased to 100 Dollars a month. In this case, your identification card works as a Debit card, although you can only use it for payment in grocery stores and pharmacies. Generally speaking, this idea is very innovative but you cannot discount that this sum of money does not suffice to buy many essential items considering that food and medicine is very expensive in Panama. Just think of the average family in Panama which includes five members and which would only receive one coupon a month.

In my personal opinion, after I have been home for multiple months now, COVID-19 is a virus that is here to stay and I think that it is vital that we drastically change the way we used to live before it: The only way is to keep up the established precautions and to go on with live as well as possible.

06/20 Jonatan Concepcion (FW 16/17)



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