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CREAR Status Report
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Introduction:

From 2002 to 2004, my wife Colleen Birner and I served as Peace Corps volunteers in the town of Rio Limpio, Dominican Republic, in the shadow of *Nalga de Maco* and its National Park (see photo below). We were assigned to collaborate with the *Centro Regional de Estudios de Alternativas Rurales* (CREAR), as well as other community groups within the town. The two years we spent in Rio Limpio were tremendously fruitful, both in terms of the work we accomplished alongside our Dominican and Haitian counterparts, as well as the long-term relationships we established with the people in the village. Upon completing our service less than two years ago, we both felt a sense of pride in the values we had taught and lived by alongside the teachers and students of CREAR. More importantly, however, we left with a deep sense of gratitude for what our fellow Rio Limpians, especially those in CREAR, had taught us about sustainable agriculture and the protection of precious natural resources.



A fire of hope still burns within me that CREAR will be recognized for its pioneering methods in sustainable agriculture in order to achieve a new level of influence on the island of Hispaniola. This hope was an important motivator in the return trip that Colleen and I made this past June. During the week of June 19 we spent 6 days in Rio Limpio. I had the opportunity to spend many hours reconnecting with the people of CREAR, and was able to observe first-

hand the current conditions of the center and understand the struggle to maintain the physical integrity of the demonstration plots and infrastructure. What follows is an informative report on the physical conditions I observed during my visit to CREAR, and a review of current funding and organizational structure of the institution.

Current Physical Conditions in CREAR:

The physical conditions of the center have deteriorated markedly since 2004. Although the integrity of the permanent infrastructure of classrooms, latrines, and dormitories is still sound, the agricultural demonstration plots have been largely unattended for approximately six months. This is due to the fact that there are no students currently studying in the center; the demonstration plots are typically maintained by groups of students studying under an instructor in each plot. Nevertheless, the semi-permanent infrastructure associated with terraces and other soil conservation practices remains intact despite their age (in many cases over 20 years old) and lack of maintenance. This is testament to the quality with which these soil conservation structures were constructed.



Horticultural Plot in 2004 With Active Maintenance by Students



Same Plot in June, 2006 Without Continued Maintenance



Given CREAR's current conditions, the potential of the center's farm plots for the demonstration of sustainable hillside agriculture methods and the support of the high-school agroecology program remains intact. During my peace corps service, I witnessed first-hand how the skills of the center's instructors, when combined with the tremendous potential of the farm's plots can result in tremendous food production (see photo).

I feel that this potential still exists near 100 percent, and given the proper funding to support the center's staff and a new cohort of high-school students, the center could be returned to its prior working condition within a matter of months.

Status of Institutional Funding and Support:

Since the Dominican Government's Ministry of Environment ceased the monthly funding of \$70,000 RD to CREAR in February of 2005, the everyday maintenance and educational activities in the center have waned. Center staff have not received a full month's salary since the cessation of these funds, which has caused a decline in the morale and motivation in the core working group in Rio Limpio. CREAR continues to receive a smaller monthly allocation of \$7,200 RD from the Dominican Government, however these funds are received irregularly and are used to support minimal maintenance activities in the center. Lack of a secure source of funding has meant that the technical high-school degree program can no longer be maintained, further exasperating the functionality of the center.

The Board of Directors of *Fundación CREAR* has also struggled to maintain itself amidst the death of two of its permanent members, and aging and health problems amongst those who remain committed to guiding the center. Despite these challenges, there remain three board members who continue to believe strongly in the potential of the institution: José Oviedo Mateo (President); Ángel Ripol (Secretary); and Domingo Alcántara (Staff Representative). The willingness of these three members to reorganize the board and pursue new sources of funding for CREAR is an important vital sign for the institution.

The President and Secretary of the board have continued to demonstrate that there remains a mechanism to transparently channel funding from abroad and within the country to the center, as these funds have become available.

Conclusions:

Although CREAR is struggling to maintain its organization and survive through financial hardship, its legacy as the first NGO to formally introduce organic-biodynamic agriculture methods to the DR in 1982 continues to be recognized throughout the island of Hispaniola. Indeed, recently compiled data and historical accounts from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization credit CREAR with this legacy, and highlight the importance of the DR's growing organic export industry (valued at over US \$20 million in 2000) and its place as the world's leading exporter of organic bananas (FAO website).



Since its inception, CREAR has also played a vital role in the training of Haitian Nationals in methods of sustainable hillside agriculture, including a USAID funded course in 2004 which I organized as a volunteer in center. Given the high degree of land degradation and low levels of agricultural production found in Haiti, especially along the border region (see photo to left), CREAR's training center will be

a critical resource in this region for future efforts to stabilize the economies of Haiti and protect the country's most valuable natural resource: the Artibonito River and Watershed.

As a recently appointed Advisory Member of the Board of Directors of *Fundación CREAR*, I feel strongly that the obstacles currently facing CREAR should not deter the institution from pursuing new sources of funding within the Dominican Republic and abroad. Failure to do so in the immediate future could result in the further decline of the center and would jeopardize the great potential that still exists in CREAR to help stabilize the soils, communities, and cross-border relations in the poor frontier region of Hispaniola.

References:

FAO website: <http://www.fao.org/DOCREP/004/Y1669E/y1669e0k.htm>