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INTERNATIONAL FOOD
POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

sustainable options for ending hunger and poverty



PERU

COMMUNITY KITCHENS

IFPRI analyzed Peru's comedores populares (community kitchens) and associated programs to identify lessons for future urban projects.

Peru's *comedores populares*, or community kitchens, arose as a survival strategy among urban residents around major cities in Peru during the 1960s and 1970s. Massive migration from rural to urban areas in Peru produced large impoverished squatter settlements on the outskirts of large cities, including Lima. Rural migrants and the urban poor banded together, eventually forming clubs and service organizations to improve their conditions. Members of some of these clubs began buying food in bulk and preparing meals as a group to feed their families. These clubs became the *comedores populares*. Their popularity steadily increased and, by the late 1970s, government and donor agencies began providing them with food aid and other assistance. The kitchens multiplied and eventually became a major channel for distributing food to the urban poor, particularly during Peru's economic crisis of the early 1990s.

CARE's Proyecto de Desarrollo Integral con Apoyo Alimentario (Integrated Development and Food Assistance Project), or PRODIA, was one program that aided the community kitchens. A principal objective of PRODIA was to strengthen community organizations in urban areas primarily through food aid and seed money for credit funds for members. PRODIA also worked with the Ministry of Health to sponsor nutrition education.

PRODIA not only channeled food and other resources received from the U.S. Agency for International Development's Title II program to the community kitchens, but also worked hard to empower the women to manage the kitchens on their own. CARE staff assisted and trained PRODIA participants to maintain the kitchens, keep accounts, monitor finances, and develop nutritious meals. CARE also worked with Ministry of Health staff to develop training programs on food preparation and nutrition. In the mid-1990s, CARE changed PRODIA into MIFA (Mejoramiento de Ingresos Familiares, or Household Income Improvement Project), which aimed to transform the strongest kitchens into financially self-sustaining restaurants.



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RESEARCH FOCUS AND KEY FINDINGS

Project Leader: James Garrett

IFPRI's study reviewed the operational experiences of PRODIA based on interviews with participants and CARE staff in Lima.

PRODIA seems to have reduced hunger during times of crisis in Peru. Specifically, PRODIA provided:

- subsidized or free meals for participants' families;
- enhanced opportunities for women to obtain credit and generate income; and
- training in administration, management, food preparation, and nutrition.

Participants also reported that PRODIA gave them important intangibles:

- improved self-esteem and a sense of empowerment among women; and
- stronger social connections among friends and workers.

In the long term these program elements supported broader community and economic development, particularly through the empowerment of women.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The experiences of PRODIA offer the following lessons:

- *Programs should take advantage of existing organizations and social networks.* Existing groups have a demonstrated ability to deal with problems caused by social disunity, weak management capacity, or lack of resources. The work of these groups in itself strengthens social ties in the community.
- *Programs should take advantage of legal structures and have clear legal agreements to protect themselves from politicization.* Legal structures, including formal incorporation as a nonprofit or business entity, protected the community kitchens from political manipulation and provided important benefits, such as the ability to deal with donors directly.
- *Effective programs understand and fill niches. Programs may not need to be permanent but may not be sustainable without some form of permanent assistance.* Program staff and beneficiaries were unanimous in urging agencies like CARE to be certain they understood community needs, context, and resources before beginning to work in the area. By knowing the community, donor organizations can navigate political relations, focus on strategic interventions, facilitate processes, and mobilize human and financial resources to support the program in the short and long term.
- *Empowerment of the staff, partners, and beneficiaries is a keystone of effective, sustainable programs.* PRODIA management gave its staff significant decisionmaking authority



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and room to learn without fear. This approach empowered the staff and increased their own sense of value and accomplishment. The staff carried out this philosophy of empowerment through close work with the women of the community kitchens. The participants' own skills and self-esteem also increased, giving them confidence as they tackled other household or community problems. The empowerment of individuals also softens the impact of changes in the program context. Although the program itself may not continue, participants do not lose knowledge or capacity.

- *Respect for other people—staff and beneficiaries—is essential.* Again and again, CARE staff talked about the “misticismo”—the mysticism—surrounding the time they spent with PRODIA. They knew they were doing something special by working for and with the poor women of the urban slums. The relationships between project staff and beneficiaries, which were productive as well as professionally and personally fulfilling, were based on mutual respect and shared commitment to bettering the lives of the poor.

DONORS AND COLLABORATORS

- CARE-Peru
- CARE-USA

PUBLICATION

“Comedores Populares: Lessons for Urban Programming from Peruvian Community Kitchens,” by James Garrett (IFPRI, Washington, D.C., 2001), mimeo.