

**COMEDORES POPULARES:
LESSONS FOR URBAN PROGRAMMING
FROM PERUVIAN COMMUNITY KITCHENS**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Comedores populares arose as a survival strategy among many residents as urban settlements grew around major cities in Peru in the 1960s and 1970s. CARE began support of these *comedores* in 1988 with the USAID-funded project, Proyecto de Desarrollo Integral con Apoyo Alimentario (PRODIA). The PRODIA program ended in 1995.

CARE supported the *comedores* by channeling USAID-funded food to them. PRODIA also provided supervision and training to *comedor* participants. The Peruvian government provided additional food and some funds. Volunteers prepared meals at the *comedor*, and received meals as in-kind payment for their labor.

In general, PRODIA seems to have reduced hunger during times of crises; enhanced opportunities for women to access credit; provided training in administration, management, and food preparation, and nutrition; improved self-esteem and a sense of empowerment among women; and strengthened social connections among friends and workers. In the long term, these program elements contributed to broader community and economic development, particularly through the empowerment of women.

This paper reviews the operational experience of PRODIA in an attempt to glean lessons about urban programming. It does not attempt to evaluate PRODIA in terms of direct effects or impacts. It focuses on PRODIA primarily as an urban program rather than a food program. The findings presented here are based on interviews carried out in May 2001 with CARE staff and PRODIA participants in Lima.

Key Issues

Certain issues repeatedly arise when considering programming for urban areas:

- Will a lack of social cohesion, exacerbated by high mobility and insecure tenure, undermine the project?
- Will government authorities create problems?
- Do the extent, nature, and diversity of urban needs overwhelm any attempts at assistance?
- How can CARE deal with these issues successfully?

PRODIA's experience sheds light on all these areas.

Social Cohesion

Although some aspects of urban living encourage "independence," others, such as relatively high education levels and ease of communication, encourage group action. In addition,

contrary to some thought, urban dwellers do have social networks. These may be different, but they are not necessarily weaker, than those in rural areas.

PRODIA built on existing instances of community work (such as the *comedores* themselves, which existed before PRODIA began to provide additional aid). Providing a shared community experience also strengthened social networks and the community's ability to work together.

Mobility and Tenure

Mobility among residents can challenge program functioning and effectiveness. In this case, many of the residents had fought for the land and for later improvements, such as in water and sanitation. Most had been in the area 15 to 20 years and had no plans to move elsewhere. Because the most important contribution of the participants was their own labor, mobility of some of the volunteers did not significantly affect the functioning of the *comedor*, especially since at least a core of women continued to participate throughout the period.

Interestingly, land tenure was important to the sustainability of the *comedores*, even though this was a social, and not an infrastructure, project. One might have thought that tenure security would not have mattered. Instead, by owning its own space, the organization could defend itself against political interference (if, for instance, local authorities tried to claim that the *comedor* was a government organization that served at their behest). This also confirmed its apolitical service nature to community residents.

Targeting

The program did not have an explicit targeting strategy, but the voluntary nature, or self-selection, of membership in the *comedores*, along with their work requirement, provided a reasonable response in the face of diversity and mobility. This self-selection meant that neither CARE nor the *comedor* had to use any explicit means-test to determine participation. Those who participated probably were needy, a probability enhanced by the fact that joining a *comedor* carried some stigma of being poor. It is possible, however, that the *comedores* excluded those who had to work elsewhere or whose partners forbade them from working at the *comedor*. Other programs may be needed to reach these last groups.

Working with Authorities

In urban areas, government authorities tend to play larger roles in daily life than in rural areas. Authorities can cause problems for a project, but they can also help. In cities, informing local authorities and organizations is inevitable; involving them is often beneficial, as this can reduce the opportunity for mischief and leverage resources they may be able to offer.

PRODIA extended its reach, activities, and resources by collaborating with the Ministry of Health. The Ministry of Health had an extensive presence, and a generally good reputation, throughout the marginal neighborhoods of Lima. CARE could partner with the Ministry's own

outreach programs to ease its entry into an otherwise potentially suspicious community and to provide complementary nutrition education to the women. The Ministry could use the *comedores* as a basis for its own activities, such as health campaigns.

However, because of a lack of support from the highest levels, CARE had to convince *local* health administrators of the benefits of cooperation. In some instances, they were successful; in others, not. Much depended on how well the individuals involved got along.

Sustainability and Effectiveness

Although this study did not focus on PRODIA's impact on hunger or other outcomes (no formal evaluations nor time-series data were available), the enthusiasm of former staff and participants to discuss the program was palpable. At least in its time, PRODIA had filled a need. In the long term, it had created relationships. A large part of PRODIA's "success" in this way seems to have depended on PRODIA's philosophy and approach.

PRODIA took qualified, dedicated workers (almost all had training and experience in social work) who respected and believed in the capacities of the poor with whom they worked. PRODIA management followed some additional fundamental principles to heighten the probability of success. PRODIA:

- built on existing, well-functioning organizations, which, by their existence, had already "overcome" basic management obstacles, including social disunity;
- started with small activities familiar to the participants (such as cooking) and trained them in additional tasks over time;
- scaled up slowly; and
- at the same time, provided organizational mechanisms and a supportive environment for the staff to make mistakes, share experiences, and modify their approaches;

Lessons Learned

➤ Programs should take advantage of existing organizations and social networks.

These groups have an already-demonstrated ability to deal with problems caused by "social disunity," weak management capacity, or lack of resources. These programs should also recognize that they themselves can strengthen social ties in the community.

➤ Programs should take advantage of legal structures and have clear legal agreements to protect themselves from politicalization.

Implementing parties need clear roles and responsibilities. Legal structures, such as incorporation, protected community kitchens from political manipulation and provided important

benefits, such as the ability to deal directly with donors. CARE was less successful in obtaining the cooperation of government agencies, largely because government workers had little incentive to give priority to their work with CARE and the community kitchens. Close cooperation and mutual benefit did occur when personal relations were good.

CARE's own conduct fortified the perception that CARE was interested in service and not taking advantage of the residents. CARE's philosophy of empowering the poor informed staff's mission and guided their actions. CARE had an established set of selection criteria and treated each community without regard to politics. From such transparency and respect, the community came to see CARE as an apolitical facilitator that was on their side.

➤ **Effective programs understand and fill niches. Programs need not be permanent and may not be sustainable without some form of permanent assistance.**

The urban poor seem to suffer from deprivation of almost every basic need. Their livelihoods are diverse, which seems to complicate planning an effective response. Yet diversity need not be an overwhelming challenge.

Program staff and beneficiaries were unanimous in urging CARE to be certain that it understood community needs, context, and resources before beginning work. By knowing the community, an outside organization like CARE can navigate tricky political relations, focus on strategic interventions, facilitate processes, and mobilize human and financial resources.

➤ **Empowerment of staff, partners, and beneficiaries is a keystone of effective, sustainable programs.**

Empowerment, including increased capacity, is an important legacy of any program. But it also greatly assists with project implementation.

PRODIA management gave staff significant decisionmaking authority and "room" to learn without fear. This empowered them further and increased their own sense of value and accomplishment. Management instilled a sense of mission in staff: staff carried out a shared philosophy of empowerment through close work with and training of the community kitchen women. The women's own skills and self-esteem also increased, giving them confidence as they tackled other household or community problems. Empowerment of individuals also softens the impact of changes in the program context because, although the program may not continue, participants do not lose knowledge or capacity.

➤ **Respect for other people – staff and beneficiaries – is also essential to success.**

The importance of relationships is a recurring theme when speaking to staff and beneficiaries about PRODIA. Commitment to the poor and to one another seemed to be an important basis for productive relationships and the "mysticism" that motivated intense dedication to the program. Interestingly, when asked about the benefits of PRODIA, beneficiaries did not talk much about hunger but about their relationships with one another and

with program staff. Learning together and forming lasting, empowering relationships shine as brilliant outputs of PRODIA – and this was made possible only through PRODIA management’s own dedication to creating the environment for that to take place.

I. Introduction

Massive rural-to-urban migration in Peru, beginning in the mid-20th century, soon produced large, impoverished squatter settlements on the outskirts of large cities such as Lima. By the 1960s and 1970s, *comedores populares*, or community kitchens, arose as a survival strategy among many of the residents of these *pueblos jóvenes* or “young towns.” By the late 1970s and early 1980s, governments and donor agencies had begun to assist these *comedores* formally by providing them with food aid and other assistance.

CARE began its support of these *comedores* in 1988 with the USAID-funded project, PRODIA.¹ The first phase of PRODIA ended in 1993, but a second phase ran from 1993 to 1995. In 1995, some of the *comedores* supported by PRODIA transitioned to other programs, such as MIFA and MENU.²

This paper reviews the operational experience of PRODIA in an attempt to glean lessons about urban programming. This paper does not attempt to evaluate PRODIA in terms of direct effects or impacts.³ Beyond that, it focuses primarily on PRODIA as an urban program rather than a food program.

The insights presented here are based on interviews carried out with CARE staff and PRODIA participants in Lima in May 2001 (Annex 1). The interviews asked specifically about how PRODIA confronted concerns others frequently express about urban programming. Comments by those interviewed highlight the multifaceted nature of urban issues and suggest strategies for dealing with these issues that other country offices may find useful for design and operation of their own urban programs.

II. Objectives and Timeline

This paper focuses on PRODIA, but CARE-Peru has operated other programs in urban areas that complemented or “extended” PRODIA. MUJER, a credit program for women, for example, functioned at the same time as PRODIA and sometimes worked with the same groups. MIFA and MENU were “extensions” of PRODIA that began after PRODIA ended in 1995.

The objectives of PRODIA I (1988-92) were to strengthen community organizations in marginalized urban areas through

- *food aid,*
- *nutrition education,*
- *infrastructure,*
- *credit, and*
- *gardens and livestock-raising.*

¹ Proyecto de Desarrollo Integral con Apoyo Alimentario, or Integrated Development and Food Assistance Project.

² MIFA, Mejoramiento de Ingresos Familiares [Household Income Improvement Project]; MENU, Mejoramiento Nutricional [Nutrition Improvement Project].

³ In fact, we could not locate copies of the formal final evaluations that CARE had commissioned in either the Peru office or Atlanta headquarters.

Under PRODIA I, CARE partnered with the Ministry of Health (MINSA) and PRONAA (Programa Nacional de Asistencia Alimentaria, or National Food Assistance Program). PRODIA I operated in Lima and five other cities in Peru. The objectives of PRODIA II (1993-95) were much the same as those of PRODIA I, although the project document focused more explicitly on *comedores populares*. Planned activities also expanded to include centers for nutritional rehabilitation and day care for children.

CARE did not widely implement all these activities. In PRODIA I, CARE channeled food to the *comedores*, funded improvements in *comedor* infrastructure, sponsored classes in nutrition and administration, and established credit funds. They did not implement urban gardens in Lima. PRODIA II functioned much the same, without the urban garden component. The nutritional rehabilitation centers never got much beyond the planning stage, largely because malnutrition did not turn out to be a significant problem among the children of the women of the *comedores*. This component shifted to support homeless children and children in large institutions, such as parochial schools and orphanages.

III. Key Issues

This paper focuses on a number of concerns that CARE staff and others have raised about work in urban areas. These include:

- *How to create sustainable programs in the face of social disunity, mobility and the often illegal status of residents?*
- *How to partner and interact with local government officials and other authorities?*
- *How to work in a complex political and social environment?*
- *How to support urban livelihoods when they are so diverse?*
- *How to meet apparently overwhelming urban needs?*
- *How to confront rampant crime and violence?*
- *How to deal with the rapidity and unpredictability of change in urban areas?*

We can trace many of these worries to two main concerns about urban conditions: the heterogeneity of the urban population and the potential for intervention or influence of local authorities. With so many needs and so much diversity, how can CARE decide what kind of projects to focus on? How can a project that depends on community commitment succeed if residents are not used to working together? And how can residents come together if they do not know each other well and have few community connections? They may move often and have their closest social relations with households and organizations outside the neighborhood.

In addition, many different layers of political actors exist and clash in urban areas. How can CARE work with these different organizations and actors? How can CARE take advantage of the resources and skills these actors offer, but also avoid potential political manipulation or conflict? How can CARE empower project participants to deal with these organizations and authorities once the project ends?

Dealing with these basic issues of heterogeneity, participant empowerment, and influence of local organizations and actors has important implications for the sustainability and impact of urban projects.

IV. A Brief History of the *Comedores*

Residents already had significant experience in working together by the time CARE arrived. Through their own grass-roots movements, rural migrants and the urban poor had established many *pueblos jóvenes* during the 1950s and 1960s. These residents had banded together to invade lands and, later, demand public services from the municipality and national government.

After the invasions, as part of continuing efforts to improve conditions, these communities formed functional organizations, such as *clubes de madres* (mothers' clubs), youth organizations, and women's committees (1)⁴. By the 1970s, various *clubes de madres* had already begun to buy food in bulk and prepare meals as a group for their families. Sometimes these were termed *ollas comunes*, or "common pots" (3NJ, 4LV).

In the late 1970s, the wife of then-President Belaúnde began an official program to sponsor these *ollas comunes*. Under Belaúnde's program, the government built the *comedores* and gave the groups a small operating fund. The groups themselves began to add activities, such as childcare (5).

In the late 1980s, President Alán García made *comedores* an explicit part of his social strategy and, perhaps, of his political strategy to organize poor communities (7). García made the *comedores* part of the Program for Temporary Employment Assistance (Programa de Apoyo al Empleo Temporal, or PAET), as the women describe:

Fourteen years ago we started an *olla común*. We got donations from [PRONAA] with 20-25 of us in a group. There was a fixed amount [of money given] to buy inputs, and we bought our meals. Later we started to get a subsidy from the government (3NJ).

The kitchen began in 1984 with Belaúnde. The government gave us materials, and the *club de madres* donated labor. The government gave the land and built our kitchen. These people were connected to Belaúnde. APRA⁵ wanted to take everything from us, but Sra. Violeta, Belaúnde's wife, said no. Those women from PAET came and wanted the place, but we [didn't let] them (4SM).

We were surrounded by pastures. Thirty to thirty-five women formed the club in 1983. The candidate [Belaúnde] helped us to have our own *comedor*. We had sewing and a bakery and an oven, with the help of PRONAA. In 1982 we got water and a road (6SR).

⁴ Numbers in parentheses represent the identification number of the interview as noted in Annex 1.

⁵ APRA was the party of Alán García, and different from that of Belaúnde.

In addition, García used the *comedores* to channel most milk, controlled by a state monopoly, to residents. If residents wanted milk, they had to participate in the *comedores*. “It was with the distribution of milk, that they only did through the *comedores populares* during Alan’s government, that they really grew, because it was the only way to get milk. [The residents] came for the milk, and then they went scurrying away (3).”

Under García, Peruvians had suffered hyperinflation and economic crisis. In the early 1990s, under President Alberto Fujimori, Perú underwent sharp macroeconomic adjustment. For many of the poor, the harsh effects of hyperinflation that had systematically reduced purchasing power suddenly paled against widespread loss of jobs and the overnight multiplication of food and energy prices. Instead of rising prices and low incomes, Peruvians now confronted high prices and no income. The *comedores* came to the forefront as a critical element in the survival of many poor urban families. “With the Fujishock,” said one woman, “we started lining up at 5 in the morning. Ooooooh, we saved a whole mountain of people who were dying of hunger (6SR).” By buying in bulk and using community labor, the *comedores* offered food at lower cost than almost anywhere else and probably cheaper than an individual household could prepare it (1).

The government and USAID used a number of organizations to channel food to the *comedores*, including CARE, Caritas, and PRISMA, a local NGO. Under PRODIA, CARE channeled the donated food to the *comedor*, but the *comedor* was responsible for everything else, such as the infrastructure, the cooking utensils, stoves, and complementary foods (14). *Comedor* workers took care of food preparation, including cleaning and sanitation. In some cases, the *comedores* used the proceeds from food sales to improve their infrastructure or buy land for their building (8, 6EC).

Sometimes *comedores* attempted to get assistance from more than one organization. The assistance organizations ultimately coordinated among themselves, organizing a roster of *comedores* and forcing them to choose to participate in only one program (11). “We [CARE] told them it wasn’t fair for some to get [aid] 2 or 3 times when others got none. From scarcity, [we produced] equity (11).”

The organizations offered slightly different versions of assistance (4LV, 4FV). CARE staff believed that CARE offered a greater variety and quantities of food than other programs and had an excellent operating system that assured regularity of delivery (1). Most significantly, CARE also provided training and oversight – and, according to CARE staff, had a certain “mysticism” in its work.

CARE’s work had a very special dynamic. It had a wider vision, of sustainability, of capacity-building. It was oriented toward consolidating democratic organization, of greater participation by women in the process, and [emphasizing] values like honesty and responsibility, along with an understanding that the work was temporary (8).

The work was fulfilling but hard for staff. Said one CARE staffer, though with a touch of pride, “It was horrible work because the area was huge, and we were only three. We followed up [with the *comedores*] on everything: with their money, their production, their training (5).”

Comedor Operation

The number of *socias* in each *comedor* varied, but was usually somewhere between about 30 and 80 (5). Generally these women were housewives from the surrounding neighborhood; few had work outside the community (14).

Customarily, PRODIA provided each *socia* with a basket of rice, soy oil, and dry milk. Sometimes PRODIA would provide other items, like vegetables (1, 3ST, 3SR). The *comedor* complemented these items with its own purchases to make complete meals, or *menús* (3ST, 3SR, 1). The women sold meals but also made sweets, for example, to raise money to buy these complementary foods and pay salaries (14).

Deliveries were made about twice a month. Sometimes deliveries from PRODIA were delayed, or they did not have all the usual items. The *comedores* then had to “adjust their meals to reality.” “We’d just have soup,” said one (5).

Specific arrangements varied by *comedor*, but generally a *socia* worked one or two shifts at the *comedor* per week. In return she received a fixed number of *menús* free or at a subsidized price (4SV). *Comedores* would allow a daughter or a neighbor to work if the *socia* could not make it. The amount varied by *comedor*, but, women in two group interviews said their *comedores* provided five free *menús* for each shift worked (3, 6). One *comedor* currently charges members 1 sol for additional *menús*; it charges students 0.5 soles and the general public 1.50 soles (6MU). Others charge similar amounts (3ST).

Each *comedor* had an administrative structure, with an elected president and other officers. However, it was not uncommon for the president to continue for years in this position “if no one else wanted it” (5). Of course, another explanation is that the president discouraged others from contesting her for it. Financially, while CARE also provided management training, it would also audit the books every three months (6SR).

In addition, one of the association presidents said that her *comedor* waits for two years before giving a new member voting rights (*que tiene voz y voto*). “If they want to belong, I want to see their work,” she said (4FV). “It gives us time to throw her out.”

In the mid-1990s, CARE phased out PRODIA, accepting the strongest *comedores* to a new program, MIFA, which aimed to transform them into financially self-sustainable restaurants. Of about 1,600 *comedores* in PRODIA, only about 400 remained after CARE determined which ones had the greatest chance of being self-reliant (1, 10). In fact, in an interesting but rather sad twist, those *comedores* that “did not need CARE” were those selected for MIFA because they were the strongest ones most likely to succeed as independent restaurants (10). These *comedores* became part of the pilot project MIFA.

Many viewed MIFA positively. It tried to give the *comedor* “another image,” that of a profitable microenterprise, without leaving the poor behind. Some of the *comedores* actually tried to increase their service to the poorest, even as they began to open their doors more widely to the public so they could be financially self-sustainable (14). CARE provided training to those in MIFA on how to become “food microenterprises” (4FV). Still, sometimes it was difficult to have the women in the *comedores* change their mentality from that of a nonprofit service provider to a profitable enterprise (2). On the other hand, some stated that under MIFA, the *comedores* had improved their management and services but had declined as “women’s groups” (10).

The major benefits that PRODIA provided to participants were subsidized or free meals for their families; opportunities to access credit and generate additional income; training in administration, management, food management, and nutrition; improved self-esteem and a sense of empowerment, including an ability to make decisions freely; and stronger social connections among friends and fellow workers. In the long term, the project assisted with community and economic development, most importantly through empowerment of women.

V. Meeting Challenges in PRODIA

Social Unity and Community Cooperation

The success and sustainability of projects depend on the active involvement, and ultimately ownership, of the community. In the experience of the *comedores*, the dedication and the teamwork of the participating women themselves were obviously critical. Although sometimes communities can coalesce around a particular project, residents must initially have some sort of bent toward cooperation.

The diversity of livelihoods, networks, and interests among urban dwellers potentially can weaken the social cohesion thought essential to effective community work. In a key difference from rural dwellers, urban residents appear to lead relatively independent lives and know less about their neighbors.

Many aspects of urban living encourage this “independence,” which favors individual action, rather than group cooperation. For example, urban residents may have migrated from different regions of the country and not share cultural or ethnic ties. Many residents, including women, work outside the neighborhood. They have less time, opportunity, and incentive to forge community connections. Urban dwellers live in closer proximity to one another than rural residents. Combined with better transportation and communication, they extend their social networks beyond the geographic confines of their neighborhood. Urban dwellers, who often do not own their land or their houses, may also move frequently from one place to another. Such mobility can hinder project staff’s ability to understand, identify, and reach the target population. The PRODIA experience shows, however, that these conditions may not pose great barriers to effective cooperation and that some of these assumptions may, in fact, be wrong.

First, urban dwellers do have social networks. These networks may be different, but they are not necessarily weaker than those in rural areas. Contrary to assumptions, it is likely they do share ethnic and cultural experiences. Many of the women of PRODIA, for instance, originally

came from the highlands of Peru, bringing their customs and their culture with them (5). Residents also maintain ties with rural relatives or with relatives abroad. Additionally, even if overall levels of participation are low, they do participate in numerous political, social, cultural, religious, and athletic organizations, although they need not be bound by geography as they usually are in rural areas.

As one former CARE staff member said, “The social links may not be continuous, but they are strong. [Urban residents] form strong, sporadic relationships, with mutual and permanent collaboration. But in the rural areas it’s [also] more or less like that. I don’t think that [social links in urban areas] are weak (1).”

Second, in general, urban residents are more educated and have a wider array of skills than rural dwellers. Their better access to transport and communication networks actually enhances group formation. They can draw on talents and resources of a wide range of individuals and organizations. Women can more easily take leadership roles because the urban environment presents them with a greater diversity of “role models,” opportunities, information, and opinions. As a result, urban residents may not consistently work together, but they can quickly come together to act as an effective group when necessary.

Third, for these Peruvians, PRODIA was not a unique experience in community collaboration. Substantial experience with community organizing already existed before PRODIA arrived. As described above, residents even had substantial experience with the *comedores* themselves.

As noted, many of these residents had organized and invaded lands as to establish *pueblos jóvenes*. Women had played major roles in these invasions and protests. “Historically, we have the capacity to organize ourselves (1),” remarked one CARE staffer. As an organized group, over time these residents had protested for their right to live on the land and substantially improved their living conditions, developing very strong relationships and organizational abilities (1, 2, 10). Now, for example, “each *club de madres* had its list of members. The clubs are very close to each other; everybody knows each other. They have federations of the *comedores*, for the *vaso de leche* [glass of milk] program, health promoters...there is a lot of organizational capacity. For them, organizing wasn’t anything new; everything had already been a fight (5).”

Fourth, the economic conditions of the time provided a strong incentive for collaboration. Food, and the very survival of their families, gave women of the community a big incentive to join the *comedores*. Whereas in the 1970s and early 1980s, the *comedores* appealed to relatively small numbers of the poor, in the face of economic crisis and adjustment, the *comedores* became essential to survival. “They came together because of their needs,” said one woman. “Food more than anything (6SR).” The *comedores* themselves, then, were not an outcome of the PRODIA, but of earlier social commitments, political opportunities, and economic crises.

In sum, PRODIA’s experience shows that social cohesion often does exist in urban areas. Various factors may even make organization in urban areas easier than in rural areas, and ties may, in fact, be quite strong. Staff suggested that projects look for instances of social cohesion and align themselves with one organization and strengthen it. PRODIA built on and had

procedures to enhance existing community organizations, so it did not have to “create” social unity to support the *comedores*. In addition, the programs themselves can strengthen the cohesion that does exist. “Just the fact of having the *comedor* contributes to strengthening social links” (1). “The *comedor* is a kind of social network,” said one (2). “Workers form their social lives around it; they’re there from 6 in the morning until 6 at night” (13).

Participation and Empowerment

Heterogeneity and the nature of social cohesion in urban areas have implications for residents’ participation and commitment. Urban dwellers have a wider range of opportunities for work and play than rural residents. Livelihood strategies are likewise more diverse. With such a range of opportunities, participation in and commitment to programs may be fleeting, as interests or time demands pull people away. Success in the shorter term relies on securing the participation of the intended beneficiary groups; in the longer term, sustainable success may depend on their empowerment.

Low rates of participation may indicate problems with the “positioning” of the program. The program may not address a significant need or its structure may clash with the social, political, or economic context. For example, if mothers do not think child malnutrition is a significant problem, they may not be interested in a nutrition education program. Or they may not attend if classes take place during the day, when mothers are at work. CARE must invest in understanding the demands and rhythms of urban lives as well as the strategies the poor use to survive and the rationales behind them in order to design effective programs.

Livelihood assessments are one way to do this. Assessments can determine the importance and priority of the problem among residents and potential beneficiaries; the resources available to the community and the beneficiaries to address the problem; and the restrictions on community and beneficiary actions to address the problem. Still, in such an assessment, CARE must be wary of only addressing “felt” needs, such as infrastructure, which the poor generally articulate, and not “invisible” needs, such as health care or nutrition, which many simply accept as part of their condition.

Participation and commitment arise not only from whether the project addresses an important need but also how it does it. CARE and the community need to design the project to meet households’ needs in ways that make sense to them, that fit with their daily rhythms and resources. At the same time, residents and the community need to have confidence in CARE and its partners.

Participation in the *comedores*, however, has decreased in recent years. Some of this has occurred because of a relative increase in well-being and income-earning opportunities (5, 14). But this is a good sign; participation dropping due to economic improvement is not a failure of the program: women are participating less because they can earn more income elsewhere. Economic improvement, though, combines with the stigma of the *comedor* as a place that poor people go to reduce participation. “Some say, ‘It’s for poor people. My status has improved so I don’t go anymore’” (14).

There are a lot of people that need the *comedor* but don't go because their pride doesn't let them. They're ashamed to take their meals from the *comedor*. We haven't overcome that yet. There are some who leave because of their children, they are also ashamed; and some are just lazy (3CAC).

Some want to be in the *comedor* but they don't want to work. It's hard work. And, yes, they still have the problem of wondering 'what will others say?' (3NJ).

Others, however, continue to participate, not only because they get cheaper meals but because of other benefits, such as self-satisfaction, camaraderie, or credit to start their own business. Women understood from the beginning that although some women would continue with the *comedor*, for most this was a temporary strategy.

At the same time, some women commented that the nature of society had changed. Now, they said, people don't have time to participate in the *comedores*. "It's a different way of looking at life. It's not only the organic composition of society but also its dynamism" (10).

This isn't going to be going on your whole life. You don't look at this as a survival strategy. Now they earn more in informal jobs. The organization got tired; they got tired. It had its good times.... And before, the rations were better. Now the donations have declined, costs and prices have increased (5).

Empowering Beneficiaries and Staff

Obviously PRODIA responded to a need. But why did *comedores* often choose to work with CARE, rather than other organizations who also channeled food to the *comedores*? Staff and beneficiaries cited the fact that CARE staff expressed a genuine concern and respect for the workers.

It was our capabilities, our honesty, our sharing in the work that gave CARE prestige. This was a just cause. We never manipulated them or created false expectations. Poor people recognize that (7).

CARE facilitated access to resources and monitored activities. Most importantly, the PRODIA team possessed a work philosophy that insisted on empowering and building up the capacity of the neighborhood women (10). Empowerment was a basic philosophy that guided PRODIA staff.

This approach required that CARE inculcate this philosophy in its own staff and build up their own abilities. The program head held a feedback meeting every month. These meetings became very important for staff. In these meetings, the program head created an environment for learning. Staff brought and shared their problems and ideas in these meetings. Importantly, the staff, who were already experienced in community work, began with simple activities and then

added complexity over time. The staff acquired expertise and confidence as they went along. Additionally, they themselves felt empowered because program administration and decisionmaking power had been given to them (13).

It gave me a lot of security. I could do [what I needed to do] and later report [to my supervisors and to this meeting] about it. At first [the *comedores* saw us as] having an attitude of monitoring their finances. We explained to them that that wasn't necessary. Our vision was to help them (13).

CARE staff provided guidance, mentoring, and training. They built up concrete managerial skills and nutritional knowledge among the women of the *comedores* and also their confidence in making their own decisions. Training included food service management (employee relations, shifts, food logistics); dealing with authorities (especially local leaders but also national agencies); understanding, respecting, and implementing democratic principles (how to manage assemblies, management, and administration); and communications, especially as some of the women were illiterate. CARE especially emphasized the development of transparent governing and administrative processes. CARE staff adapted the training and the level of assistance to the needs of each *comedor*. Importantly, they trained *groups* of women, allowing others to take over if someone left the organization.

Alternative providers apparently did not emphasize capacity-building and empowerment so much, but the women recognized how important it was for their own self-development and the sustainability of the *comedor*. The fact that women felt themselves in control and saw rapid results from their cooperation encouraged participation. Rapid results came about because PRODIA relied on basic skills that the women already had (cooking, for example) and resources that the community already possessed. CARE did not attempt to radically change what women were already doing but, rather, provided additional direct aid that helped the women to do better what they were already doing.

This empowerment and CARE's close relationship with the communities meant that although basic organization and principles remained the same in each neighborhood, the women could adapt the structure to local needs. From this empowering experience, the women became more confident of their abilities to meet and conquer new challenges. This cooperative work in itself built important social networks and social capital among the women. As something they had built themselves, they became even more committed to the *comedor*.

Self-Esteem

With time and a sense of empowerment, the *comedores* were recognized by the authorities (14). These women would make their own decisions, for example, putting a quick halt to any demands that they provide free meals to community residents (14).

Many of the staff and women in the focus groups explicitly acknowledged the self-esteem that they had acquired simply through participation in the *comedores*.

With the program, our self-esteem, our own value of ourselves, increased. The training was the good thing. They built up our capacities a lot through that. You could reach the point where you could be independent (6EC).

We learned to defend ourselves. No one had any reason to be humiliated any more. Before, [the women] didn't speak, they didn't have an opinion, they didn't protest. Now even the most humble [woman] knows what her rights are, that she respects others and others respect her (6SR).

They threatened us with taking away the subsidy. But [the *comedor*] has woken me up to defend myself. We've learned to value ourselves, and the men have learned, too (4FV).

The esteem garnered through their work in the *comedores* translated into greater authority within the home as well. Many of the women told stories of how their husbands protested, or even beat them, when they first began to work at the *comedor*.

At first [we] fought. We had economic problems and problems with my husband. [He thought that I went] to chat, to gossip. Once we had problems at home, [at the *comedor*] you just spill yourself out to a friend, like therapy, like support (3NJ).

I escaped and went anyway. Now *I* say what goes on at home. We have a business, a little restaurant. I feel I am a woman, that I am fully capable (3CAC).

[I] was president, but [my] husband didn't know it. Oh, yes, it's cost me a lot of tears. Five children to get to school to dress. I was very timid, very quiet, I was afraid. I had to get home before 9 at night, when I would change [back into my home clothes before my husband got home] (6SR).

The psychologist would ask, 'And you, *señora*. Why did you abandon your children?' [I'd answer:] 'Because my husband doesn't work and also to improve the little things around the house, to improve my self-esteem, and to learn how to value myself' (6EC).

But things had changed by the time the women had participated for a few years, some of them using the credit obtained through the parallel program, MUJER.

Now I just say, 'Okay, old man. See you later. I'll be back soon.' The mentality changed when [the men] didn't have any work. Now they help their wives (6MU).

Now they come to buy in my little shop. Now, my husband...well, at least he makes me a good security guard (6SR).

Strengthening and Sustainability

CARE's philosophy of empowering the women of the *comedores* was also an important factor that contributed to the sustainability of the *comedores* once PRODIA ended.⁶ Staff would think through options with *comedor* participants, but leave the decisions to them. Said CARE staff: "We defended their independence and their decisionmaking power. We would orient them, but the final decision was theirs" (14). "We would lead but not impose."

Training gave *comedor* leaders the opportunity to grow and develop their own analytical and managerial capabilities, which empowered them and supported long-term sustainability. But this alone could not ensure sustainability of the program. CARE confronted this question principally by only working with already existing operations. *Comedores* selected for PRODIA had to have at least one year of operation, and the *comedores* had to provide complementary resources (14). Working through existing organizations that were functioning well assured CARE that residents had already overcome many barriers to working together.

The volunteer nature of members also meant that those who joined had a desire to form and function as part of a group. This heightened probability that they shared similar needs and backgrounds, that they were "in the same condition," and so strengthened social cohesion among the workers (14).

In addition, CARE insisted only women who lived in the neighborhood could participate, a rule that apparently most *comedores* already had (14). This was organizationally smart because distance had caused problems in rural areas. The effectiveness of a *comedor* depended on the ability of women to come to the kitchen and work. But if women could not easily access the kitchen, they would not come. In rural areas, women lived far from any central point. There, the program began to give out food itself, rather than having the women cook it, because the women simply easily couldn't arrive at these central points (13). By allowing only women who lived in the neighborhood to participate in any particular *comedor*, urban *comedores* "imposed" ease of access on the participant.

Finally, PRODIA staff provided close supervision and assistance, especially in the initial stages of collaboration with any new *comedor*. Said one staff member, "People will work together if given support." PRODIA did give the women of the *comedores* support – in food, funds, and friendship.

With the *comedores*, it's not just the economic part but the humanitarian part. The 'confessions' we receive [from one another] also, like we're a priest. We guard them inside ourselves, what I have to share. Now they come and they tell [us things]. I feel calm. It's a family (6EC).

⁶ While true, it should be noted that CARE's support of some *comedores* continued after PRODIA ended through the MIFA program. MIFA transitioned the *comedores* with the strongest commercial potential to neighborhood restaurants.

They could provide such close assistance in part because, in a city, *comedores* were not far apart. Staff could easily check in to see how the project was progressing.

Lack of funding frequently posed the greatest challenge to sustainability. Even after transition of some of the strongest *comedores* to MENU, these *comedores* still struggle with the question of financing. They want to charge enough for a varied, tasty meal to draw in local customers who use the *comedor* as a restaurant, but they find the amount they need to charge to cover costs may be “too much” for the poor. As economic conditions change, some of these “restaurants” may revert to a simpler *clubes de madres* structure that once again will provide “cheaper” food for poor families by buying food and preparing meals in bulk.

Some *comedores* continue to receive subsidies from the government. Another study should investigate the question of sustainability in more depth. Yet we should recall that sustainability is not the same as permanence. Conditions change. Other needs arise. People find new challenges or interests. A program may fill a particular need at a certain time, and then the need may fade away for some, if not all, the potential beneficiaries. This is simply a natural part of the *dynamics* of life. And it must be understood and welcomed in its context, not seen as a particular threat to the “sustainability” of any one program.

Working with Authorities

Rural households are often far from markets; they often derive much of their food, shelter, and fuel from their surroundings. In an urban setting, government intervention is practically essential. Generally, government must provide public services, such as roads, water, sewage, education, and health facilities. In urban areas, not only do authorities play larger roles in day-to-day life, they are also physically closer. Technology is more accessible; communications are easier. Consequently, urban authorities can more easily find out what is going on in neighborhoods and more easily intervene.

As a result, political relations are more complex in cities than in rural areas. Multiple levels of authority, official and unofficial, operate across multiple spheres of action. Neighborhoods face potential intervention not only from national and municipal authorities but also from local actors, including local elected officials, party leaders, and even criminal “bosses” or gangs. Residents can also have ties to authorities and organizations outside the community. Although these authorities can cause problems for a project, they can also help it. Informing local authorities and organizations is inevitable; cooperating with them is often beneficial.

PRODIA, in fact, embraced cooperation with the government. Of course, since the government was already closely connected to the *comedores*, some cooperation was unavoidable. PRODIA’s distribution of U.S.-government food aid complemented the Peruvian government’s program of support to the *comedores*.

But PRODIA did more than just distribute food. It extended its reach, activities, and resources by collaborating with the Ministry of Health (MINSA) (1, 4FV, 10, 14).⁷ MINSA had

⁷ PRONAA, MINSA, and CARE formed the coordinating committee for PRODIA (1).

an extensive presence throughout the marginal neighborhoods of Lima and could use a *comedor* as a base for health ministry activities, such as mass health campaigns. MINSA provided 1 health worker for each 30 *comedores* or so and trained *socias* in food preparation and nutrition. CARE complemented this by training *comedor* leaders in organizational administration, including bookkeeping, money management, food management, budgeting, and scheduling (4FV). In general, this arrangement created important synergies, especially in that the MINSA workers could relieve CARE of some of the training and supervisory responsibilities. “If we hadn’t worked with Health, it would have been kaput (10),” said one CARE staffer.

Still, the collaboration with MINSA sometimes created confusion. “We had to combat the idea that these were the Ministry’s *comedores*. People from the Ministry did the books, and CARE audited them randomly (14).” By working with the women closely, CARE was able to convince the women that PRODIA was not a program of the Ministry of Health (13) but that they received the donations through CARE and, more importantly, that in the end it was *their* program.

Under Alán García, sometimes the *comedor* would give space to PRONOI [Programa Nacional de Orientación Inicial, or National Program for Initial Orientation] and PAET. Under PRONOI, the government’s early childhood education program, children 3-5 years old would attend the center in the morning; in the afternoon, as part of PAET, women would participate in women’s workshops, taking inputs donated by the government, particularly wool, and making clothing like uniforms or sweaters (4FV, 11).

Challenges in Working with Authorities and the Community

Some problems in working with the government did arise. Although an operational agreement existed between MINSA and CARE, MINSA never officially incorporated training courses into the work plans or evaluations of its health workers (8, 10). The Ministry itself placed more emphasis on preventive and curative health, like vaccination programs, not health education.

Since the highest levels did not place much priority on the collaboration, CARE had to work closely with local health administrators to convince them of the benefits of cooperating with PRODIA. The response varied by individual, and so could change over time as personnel changed. In some areas, health officials welcomed the opportunity to tie nutrition education to a particular program and to use the *comedores* as a community base to reach their own target populations fairly easily. Others saw PRODIA only as a burden.

In [my zone of] Lima we didn’t work in a coordinated way with Health. Health didn’t always agree with what CARE wanted to do. We didn’t understand each other. The counterpart was a medical doctor. He had the idea that [the food] was just a gift. But in Callao [the port city near Lima], the director was fully informed and we could go to talk to him anytime. We spoke with Health so they would understand that the agreement would help them. We did a work plan jointly with them. In Callao we had the support of the Director, sub-director, and the director of community participation, while in Lima at the end we worked well with the

Directorate of Nutrition, but it wasn't the best way. All these things should be in the memorandum of understanding (13).

It depended on the character of those that made the decisions. You had to win over the Director General of Health. In the field [with the health workers], it went well, but horrible with the directors. CARE had to win them over not only at the institutional level but also the personal level. In the North Zone, we had to update the director; we had to negotiate. We had to sell the idea to those in Health. They had to train people, but they didn't know how to bring people in the community together (8).

Sometimes the lack of synergism was due to a lack of resources or government supervision. The childcare program under Fujimori, known as *wawawasi*, suffered because, among other problems, teachers would not show up or the program would not secure the necessary space or infrastructure and materials (5).

At times, local leaders tried to use the *comedores* for political gain. After elections, officials sometimes tried to throw the *comedores* out of their space, claiming it was community property. Others attempted to replace *comedor* management.

The local leaders come to 'coordinate,' but we stop them. We say 'We don't answer to you, nor you to us.' We don't ask them for anything. We want to have our own work so that no one bothers us. One time a group of leaders came and threw all our stuff in the street, all the pots and pans. I just gave them a plompf in the head (3CAC).

Attempts to politicize the program appear to have been greatest during the Fujimori period.

Fujimori organized a whole system. He put in people, brainwashed them, that they had to support the President. 'He's the President; we have to do it for the President. Look, [if we don't,] he's not going give us anything.' That he doesn't give them a t-shirt! What do I care? *Que se vaya!* (6EC).

The government needed to buy votes, but once it had done that, it left. It was a government of 'interests,' of corruption. It wasn't a problem to share the same ground with them, but they never fulfilled their promises. [With PRONAA] they could take away the subsidy. They had women terrified. The women said, 'I have to vote for Fujimori. If I don't, they'll take away the subsidy' (5).

Comedores often successfully resisted such pressures.

In some communities, they feel that they have their rights; they're more independent, more solid. But in others, the communities feel that they're the owners of the place, and they try to impose themselves (7).

Except with Congressmen, I haven't had problems with politicians. We weren't political, ideological, religious. By being small, we can be in meetings and they recognize us (13).

Well, *we* declared that we are independent. And they've never taken away my rations! (6EC).

Interestingly, one action pushed by a politician actually protected the *comedores* from these political influences. President Alán García encouraged the *comedores* to incorporate as an organization, to obtain what is known as *personalidad jurídica*. This enabled the *comedores* to enjoy a legal status independent of any government or party and to receive aid directly from foreign assistance organizations (6SR). This benefited the *comedor* in a number of ways.

First, it strengthened the independence of the *comedores* because they no longer had to rely exclusively on the government for financial support. The *comedores* also learned how to deal with donors. Second, *personalidad jurídica* allowed them to fight any attempt by political actors to close the *comedor*. The women compared it to the national ID card or a birth certificate because "without it, no one recognizes you" (6MU, 6SR).

Third, it strengthened the *comedor's* own view of itself as an apolitical organization that was committed to the community, regardless of political affiliation. "We're not a political organization" (6MU). "In our statutes it says that we have no creed or race. We take [those statutes] out every now and again to show them" (6EC).

Personalidad jurídica gave the *comedores* legal standing in front of which purely political claims withered. As a result, the *comedores* in fact became a political force with which political figures *wanted* to have good relations. The *comedores* could use this standing to strengthen their position. Some *comedores* bought land for their buildings (3SR), which made them even less susceptible to political machinations.

CARE also attempted to remove politics as a factor by requiring each *comedor* to apply for aid and employing a set of established selection criteria. CARE also audited each *comedor* periodically. Most importantly, CARE staff worked closely with each *comedor* and treated each one without regard to politics. The women of the *comedores* then came to see that CARE had a commitment to *them* and not to any particular party.

Some of the *comedores* also belonged to the federation of *comedores* that brought together the separate *comedores* in an umbrella group (3CAC). Those *comedores* that did not receive subsidies from PRONAA were apparently more likely to belong than others (3CAC). Although theoretically the federation could help the *comedores* negotiate with the government and donor agencies, the women did not generally feel it was very helpful and, in fact, felt, if the government controlled the leadership of the federation, it actually increased the politicalization of the *comedores*.

Overall, PRODIA's experience mirrors that of urban programs in other countries. Urban programs will almost always have to deal with government officials. They are an essential part of urban life. These officials can cause problems, or they can be of great assistance.

The nature of the interaction to a large extent depends on personal relations. CARE may need to convince the authorities of the usefulness of the project and its political or institutional benefit to them. Collaboration with these actors may allow CARE to leverage its own resources and skills, and reduce pressure on CARE to address every need.

CARE may need to use different strategies and tools to confront or cajole different authorities. This is not always easy, as the personnel in those positions can change: "If the personnel change, the program can change. A lot depends on who is heading up the programs" (14). Political strategy would suggest that CARE work to identify key stakeholders, those currently heading up programs and those who might, and gauge their sentiment and work with them or actors who can influence their disposition toward the program.

Interactions may not always be positive or even possible. Still, at a minimum, CARE needs to make sure it has identified the relevant authorities and kept them informed, addressing their concerns insofar as possible. By being flexible and maintaining principles of transparency and participation, especially at the community level, CARE can allow government authorities to take appropriate credit for the program without hesitation. They are, after all, partners who supported the project.

The key is to avoid overt political connections. CARE need not avoid political links, but should avoid politicalization. The program itself should not favor any particular individual or party. As PRODIA's project coordinator said, "Work with everyone or they will cause you problems!" (2).

In addition, CARE should work with the community, set out clear rules and regulations for operation, especially use of project resources, and employ staff who are approachable and committed to the community. In this way, CARE is responsive to an empowered community, and not any political authority. The community will see CARE's connection with political authority as it sees its own: as a means to claim and use additional resources and not as political manipulation. The PRODIA experience suggests that its apolitical nature is one of the principal reasons for the preference of the community to work with CARE.

Targeting

The heterogeneous urban environment poses a special challenge to identifying and reaching the appropriate population. In countries with large degrees of personal freedom and without significant social control, without significant marketing campaigns urban dwellers may not know about programs. They may not interact much with neighbors, and they may work long hours outside the area. They may move often. Residents may not know each other well, so relying on them to identify program participants may improperly exclude some of them. Because of the large variation in household-level conditions, including income, geographic targeting in particular may unintentionally exclude the neediest households or include those who do not need the program.

PRODIA did establish geographically based management units to cover the various compass points of the city. Staff and MINSA workers then worked within those areas to let existing *comedores* know about the program. Those *comedores* could then apply to participate in PRODIA. PRODIA accepted those *comedores* that had been established for some time and were “stable,” whose members were active, and whose location was within a priority target zone, as identified by a poverty map (10).

Still, targeting, by geographic area can cause problems if the well-functioning *comedores* serve a more affluent clientele, have more affluent women as members, or have better access to information (and so are better able to find out about CARE’s programs). Perhaps poorer women are not as capable, without initial assistance, of keeping a *comedor* in operation for a year. Alternatively, perhaps the government provided assistance only to certain areas, and excluded some of the poorest. There is no indication that these concerns apply to PRODIA, but CARE should be aware of such potential biases.

The next potential level of exclusion is at the level of the *comedor*: Does the *comedor* accept the poorest women in the area? Again, we should ask whether even the poorest women will be able to find out about the program, and make sure no exclusionary policies exist within the *comedor*. Women leaders did not indicate any bias in the selection process among participants; anyone could join, “as long as she worked.” And residents knew about *comedores* in their area, so it is likely that anyone who wanted to join could. Because women joined their neighborhood *comedor* voluntarily, they “self-selected,” depending on their needs. Those who did not “need” the subsidized meals, then, probably would not join, enhancing targeting efficiency. Exclusions could result if husbands did not let wives participate or if the women did not have time. This suggests that the *comedores* may meet the needs of some but not all families, especially those where women work or face domestic difficulties.

The self-selection of both *comedores* and volunteers seems a reasonable way to target such a program, so long as information about PRODIA was widely available in the communities. Requiring a contribution – in this case, labor – may be a particularly good way to reach *pockets of poor* in a heterogeneous environment. In effect, *the neediest women for whom the program is most appropriate target themselves*. CARE does not have to worry about identifying indicators or excluding anyone. Although perhaps less-poor women will also get the benefits of “free meals,” the bottom line is that they still have to work shifts to get the food and they must face down the stigma of being labeled “poor” in order to work at the *comedor*.⁸ In addition, we should remember that PRODIA did not provide only food; among this vulnerable population; PRODIA and the *comedores* also improved women’s self-esteem and provided an opportunity for learning, for social interaction and companionship, and for strengthening social networks that could be useful for coping or finding jobs.

⁸ A negative perception of the poor is certainly not a positive thing, but in this case it probably did serve, in general, to reduce the participation of the less needy.

Mobility

Some people have cited mobility as a barrier to participation and program effectiveness in urban areas. It certainly poses a challenge to targeting. For instance, residents moving into an area might not be aware of the program. If they are in the neighborhood only temporarily, they might not be willing to commit to participation in a *comedor*. Residents moving out could undercut the level of participation required to support the *comedor*. Programs also have problems where enforcement or sustainability depends on trust among members (for example, credit circles) or where the length of the intervention is long and effectiveness depends on duration of participation (for example, if members can't stay for the entire cycle of an educational course).

The women interviewed, however, said mobility among residents caused few problems (8, 13). First, they pointed out that these were largely areas that had been settled for 10 to 15 years. Most of the residents had invaded these lands to claim them as their own; they had no motivation, and perhaps no real opportunity, to move somewhere else. Second, they said, participation was voluntary, and there were always enough volunteers to do the work (6SR, 6MU). Third, at least a small group continued consistently over the years. "People come and go, but it doesn't affect us. Twelve or fifteen form a group that stays, another group guides [the work]. In that way, it doesn't affect us" (8).

Land Tenure

Urban residents often cite tenure security as a significant challenge to sustainability. The possibility that the government or landlord will evict residents can undermine efforts to get residents to work together. Residents uncertain of tenure security may not feel a commitment to the community and not participate in community activities. Longer-term residents may also distrust their commitment. In general, this concern applies to projects that require land, such as infrastructure projects that may be made totally useless by eviction, but it permeates even social projects like PRODIA.

The women of PRODIA made clear that land tenure security *was* important to them. They cited their possession of *personalidad jurídica* as key to their ability to defend themselves from political attack (3SR, 3CAC, 3NJ). Owning their own space made it difficult for others to make them move, to claim that they were a community organization that simply served at the behest of a political administration. In PRODIA, then, the *comedor* itself needed tenure security. By owning land the *comedores* gained important physical and social "space" within the community. They no longer had to pay rent, and they established themselves as permanent community service organization.

Physical Security: Crime and Violence

The *comedores* also had to deal with crime and urban terrorism. Thugs would snatch purses or members of Sendero Luminoso would put threatening notices under their doors (3ST, 3NJ, 4, 6SR). "They came from the highlands," one woman said, "fully armed" (3ST). The women became especially frightened when Sendero killed the president of one of the non-PRODIA *comedores* (10). The presence of Sendero Luminoso declined after the capture of

Abimael Guzmán, the founder and mastermind of Sendero, in 1992 and of additional leaders in 1995.

PRODIA staff and the women of the *comedores* handled these threats in various ways. Sometimes they denounced them (6MU). In other *comedores*, when individuals thought to be members of Sendero arrived, the women would answer their questions politely and treat them as they did other guests, although they might let them slip out without paying (4). If Sendero asked for the president of the *comedor*, the women would inevitably say she was not there or that they had no president (3SR). In one instance, a youth gang menaced the *comedor*. A CARE staff member spoke directly to the leader of the gang causing problems in the area. At the end, the ruffian said, “Don’t worry, *tia* [auntie], we’ll protect you.” “We ended up uniting with the enemy,” she said (13). One CARE staffer contended that other organizations suffered much more from attacks by Sendero or neighborhood gangs, than the *comedores*. Her explanation was that “[we] were impartial. We didn’t discriminate. We only asked that people do good work. We didn’t favor people or give food away free” (7).

The PRODIA experience shows that it is possible to operate even under threatening conditions likely to be found in urban slums. To deal with these threats, it was important to gain credibility in the community, by working directly with community residents or others known in the community (such as the health workers of the Ministry of Health), by being transparent, and by knowing the community well, so that the staff knew risks and how to deal with them (14).

VI. Lessons of PRODIA

CARE’s experience with PRODIA provides a number of lessons about working in urban areas, and about working in community development in general. This section on lessons draws not only on the experiences described above but also on staff and participant responses to specific questions about differences in urban and rural areas and about what elements are essential to the success of urban programs.

Among these the respondents cited:

➤ **Establish and Promote a Philosophy of Participation, Empowerment, and Respect.**

Although CARE staff did not use words like “empowerment” or “participation,” in our discussions they did make clear their belief that the beneficiaries and program participants should take the lead in making decisions.

A certain philosophy of “assistance” also pervaded the discussions: in Peru, it was important that any assistance be seen primarily as leading to self-sustainability and not creating dependence. The national dialogue, then, informed the strategy as well; many staff insisted that although they were giving food to the *comedores*, it was as part of an overall development strategy and not “*asistencialismo*” (14). Partnership, and not *asistencialismo*, also meant that communities had to put in their own resources. In this case, women worked and bought additional food and provided labor.

One CARE staff member said it this way: “We initiated a process, and then let them walk on their own” (5). The important point here is that CARE staff did not see their work in an “input-output framework” but rather as initiators of a *process* that the community would continue after CARE withdrew.

These populations are poor, with lots of problems, with responsibilities. They have to feel supported, that they are getting some orientation to make decisions. You have to have good judgment to know how to respond to the needs of each one (14).

Staff members emphasized the importance of fair, open, and participatory processes – and respect for the women as partners in this enterprise. Respect meant valuing their ideas and experiences and more than not treating them rudely. “We came as friendly, transparent, sincere individuals, that weren’t going to impose ourselves on them” (5). Success occurred because of “an attitude, not a recipe” (2).

This earned the trust of the community. “People are constantly evaluating you,” said one CARE staff (1). For the *comedores*, “we set out clear criteria for selection and administered them with justice. Treating everyone fairly and with respect [was important].”

Empowerment can soften the effects of change in program context. For instance, USAID and CARE priorities changed over time, causing changes in PRODIA, but the fundamental need for a *comedor* did not. The program must be resilient enough to weather such changes. In PRODIA’s case, the *comedores* had to become more self-reliant if they were to continue. Some did; some did not, and failed. Empowerment meant that participants could decide how best to proceed as funding declined, and they could seek funding from elsewhere. In addition, training – in kitchen management, diets, and other topics – also helped to sustain the *comedores* once outside funding ceased. Knowledge, once given, could not be taken away.

On the other hand, realistically, some interventions, just like many government social programs, are not profit-making ventures and require some means to sustain financial support. Charging for services and building up an operational fund are two ways to deal with this challenge.

➤ **Promote a Philosophy of Teamwork and Commitment.**

This philosophy of empowerment and respect carried over into project management’s relationship with staff. PRODIA’s leaders had a management style that encouraged teamwork and learning. This led to increased commitment on the part of CARE staff. Many of those interviewed mentioned the camaraderie and “mysticism” of working with PRODIA. Some mentioned a “level of enthusiasm that was contagious” (1). “We didn’t work bureaucrat hours; we worked on the schedule of the community” (2). “You need to be flexible with your work hours; that’s dedication” (5).

Staff met frequently to discuss problems and share solutions (14). “It was a group in process of learning” (1). “It’s much better to work together. We are going to have less work if we help each other than if we work separately” (13).

Many of them had similar educational backgrounds in social work (13). Consequently, they “spoke the same language” and used the same conceptual frameworks.

The training that we had received, above all in human relations. We used the same framework, the same terminologies (13).

This facilitated communication and action among staff. This was important to acquiring the trust of the community. “It’s very discouraging for the poor if you all work at the same thing, but [you’re] saying different things” (13).

➤ **Understand the Community.**

Staff insisted on the need for CARE to understand the community. Before starting, CARE should diagnose local needs (5, 7, 10). Program staff should enter the community and work closely with potential partners and beneficiaries. Having a project office *within* the community earns the respect of the community as well (2).

These are humble folks. They don’t even have enough money for a [bus ticket]. With a little bit of humility, that’s how we were. It’s going to be costly for them to show up. You have to look for them (6).

Understand that they have a limited amount of time for ‘group life.’ And that it is a heterogeneous population; many of them are well-educated (2).

This enhances the trust and respect of the community for the staff, and staff acquire essential awareness of the culture and rhythm of the community, that is, its values, customs, and psychology, as well as people’s daily schedules and movements (1, 10). “You need to know who works, what they do, what kind of institutions there are to know what they already have” (5). Designers of programs must take these aspects of lives and livelihoods into account.

This understanding of the community must also carry over into the design of the project. Staff must consider the ways in which the interventions work and affect lives. This includes both positive and negative, and perhaps unintended, consequences. For example, if women took turns cooking, this freed up some time for income-generating activities. And if they served in the *comedor*, they needed some way to take care of their children. And while the focus of the *comedor* was on relief from hunger, arguably the largest gain came from the increase in women’s knowledge, managerial capacity, and self-esteem.

➤ **Understand, Respect and Build Up Partners.**

➤ **Utilize Local Networks and Organization.**

Understanding the community naturally helped in understanding how to select partners. Some have argued that a major difficulty with working in urban areas is that social networks are weak or non-existent. But CARE staff contended that that wasn't so: networks do exist and they can be strong; they are just different from rural areas. CARE staff believed that it was important to take the organizations that are present in the community into account, and not replace them with parallel structures (2). "Creating new organizations doesn't make much sense" (10). Furthermore, existing community organizations have generally emerged from local needs and may be particularly strong and have more trust than new organizations created by "outsiders" such as CARE.

Understanding the community means you *can* build on existing networks, and strengthen them. The work does not have to start from zero (14). "You can look for instances of social cohesion," said one worker. "The Church is organized to channel [aid] through municipal institutions. You can begin with a mini-network" (5). Another suggested building on *clubes de madres* (6).

In PRODIA, the *comedores* themselves formed part of the social organization and network already present in the community when CARE arrived. And the *comedores* formed the basis for entry into the community and community partnerships.

The *comedores*, though, needed strengthening. CARE worked to build up management through hands-on training and initially close supervision (14). Importantly, staff placed the training within the context of respect and empowerment.

There was a lot of monitoring. We would sit down and talk with them, about human affairs, about the community. [It was] a very close relationship, honest, open, to detect problems early (14).

The women in the *comedores* did not just receive training; they lived it.

Others noted that in urban areas it was impossible to work without the government, and that programs should take advantage of existing organizations where possible.

Like it or not, we have to strengthen the organisms of the state: through roundtables, working with the mayor, the director of health, representatives of NGOs, representatives of local groups. The idea is to have a plan and [understand] how each one of them influences this plan. This way we avoid duplicating efforts. You have to work with the state but you have to be aware of political manipulation. But you can develop a strategy to reduce the political pressures (10).

At the same time local leadership and acceptance, not just legal guidelines, were even more critical:

Much depends on how the work goes at a personal level. At the field level, a lot depends on personal relations (13).

➤ **Take Advantage of Legal Structures and Opportunities.**

CARE staff felt that it was very important to make sure that all partners were clear about responsibilities. Legal agreements should outline activities and responsibilities clearly.

The terms of the agreement should be clear. In PRODIA the terms of the agreement with Health were very general. We had to sit down and talk with them like we did in Callao (13).

The legal independence of the *comedores* was important to their ability to withstand political pressures and access foreign assistance without government approval. This independence was used, and enhanced, in many cases when the *comedores* bought the land on which their buildings stood.

This study also shows that program initiation and expansion can take advantage of moments of opportunities, which are often moments of crisis. The economic context gave shape to CARE's intervention and fortified its own internal cohesion.

VII. Urban Challenges and Rural-Urban Differences

Interviews with women of the *comedores* (even if not representative) and with many of the key staff of PRODIA provide important insights into the operation of an urban program. It was clear that these women, staff and beneficiaries, felt that PRODIA had been a life-changing experience.

What light does PRODIA shed on the following usual assumptions about urban programs?

- *Urban problems are overwhelming.*
- *Political and social relations are too complex to deal with.*

These are the realities that the urban poor and vulnerable deal with every day. Certainly they have great and multiple needs. And they operate in a political and cultural environment that is complex and can pose additional obstacles to improving livelihoods. To work with them, we

must also understand their reality and constraints. Staff, however, did not attempt to meet every need; they focused on food assistance and the *comedores*.

PRODIA staff illustrated that getting to know the community and the beneficiaries well, to earn their trust, was a key foundation for further work. This also helped staff, who were outsiders, to navigate tricky political relations, although they were not always successful. More importantly, working with the women gave the women additional confidence and organizational skills with which they themselves could counter political and cultural pressures. CARE needn't do it all - but can focus on select interventions and *facilitate* processes and mobilize financial and human resources.

- *Urban areas lack social cohesion/ social structures are weak.*
- *Mobility of residents makes targeting and impact difficult.*
- *Legal status of residents is questionable and undermines sustainability.*

This case study shows that even poor urban neighborhoods possess some social structures. Outside organizations should build on the most stable of these where possible, for their existence shows that they have learned how to operate in that environment. If an organization has emerged organically from the community, the organization is probably also meeting a need felt by the community, which gives the community more commitment to its operation.

In general, urban areas are certainly more individualistic and heterogeneous than rural areas. There is less social pressure to conform (14). At the same time, women have more opportunities and there is more information shared among residents. It is true, then, that participation in organizations may wax and wane, as needs and opportunities change. But that is the rhythm of urban life that CARE should be aware of.

Although mobility of residents may be a problem in other sites, it was not a problem in these areas. In fact, though poor and initially squatters, these individuals had won their right to these places and had built up the area over time. Most of them had lived in the area 10 to 20 years, and they were not planning to move.

While land rights are commonly a problem in urban infrastructure projects, land rights also emerged as an important issue in this project. The key point was that the women needed legal status to ensure continuity. They could secure (buy) land only if they existed as a legally recognized organization. Legal recognition (*personalidad jurídica*) was, therefore, very important to them.

- *Rampant crime and violence undermines social cohesion and affects worker safety*

The women of the *comedores* faced serious threats from the terrorists of Sendero Luminoso, but managed to deal with them. Here it was most important to show Sendero that the

food distribution process was fair and that elites were not being favored. Following CARE's philosophy of transparency, the *comedores* were already doing this. By working through community structures, CARE staff minimized the threat of danger to themselves.

In conclusion, from this study, PRODIA emerges as a "mystic" project, one that exerts its aura over staff and beneficiaries even years after its end. The project itself does not seem to have run up against any insurmountable obstacles because of being an "urban" project, although the operational structure does not seem "sustainable" for most of the *comedores*. As noted, however, requiring such financial sustainability may not be realistic nor effective in establishing social programs. PRODIA does suggest that challenges to programs operating in urban areas are not overwhelming, even when they are as serious as terrorism or as inhibiting as cultural restrictions against women's work. It is hoped that these insights will allay some of the concerns that other CARE offices may have about establishing urban programs and permit them to go forward in their partnerships with the urban poor.

Annex 1. Individuals Interviewed

1. Yolanda Jara, PRODIA Coordinator, Central Office, and Food Support Management Trainer
2. Eva Guerrero, PRODIA National Coordinator (1989-92), and Food Support Manager
3. Group 1, Eastern Zone: San Juan de Lurigancho
Representatives from the *comedores* of:
Santa Rosa (SR)
Santa Teresita (ST)
Cáceres (CAC)
Niño Jesús (NJ)
4. Group 2, Southern Zone: Lima
Representatives from the *comedores* of:
Fomento Vecinal (FV)
Santa Rosa (SR)
Luciana Victoria (LV)
Villa Solidaridad (VS)
Señor de los Milagros (SM)
5. Teresa Cosar G., PRODIA Assistant, Northern Zone
6. Group 3, Northern Zone: Lima
Representatives from the *comedores* of:
Santa Rosa (SR)
Madres Unida de Valdivieso (MU)
El Condor (EC)
7. Roxana González, PRODIA Northern Zone Assistant, and MIFA Field Coordinator, Southern Zone
8. Ruby Cervantes, PRODIA Field Coordinator, Northern Zone
9. Aida Navarro, Field Coordinator, PRODIA National Trainer (1993-95), and MENU National Coordinator
10. Antonieta Flores, PRODIA Field Coordinator, Southern Zone
11. Miriam Castro, MUJER
12. Fanny Ferrer, MUJER
13. Gladys Ballivian, PRODIA Field Coordinator and Head, Callao Zone
14. Ana Alvarado, PRODIA National Coordinator (1992-95) and PNI National Coordinator



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