

# Women's Voluntary Groups in Lima, Peru **Comedores Populares**

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**Prepared for delivery at the 2001 meeting of the Latin American Studies Association,  
Washington DC, September 6-8, 2001**

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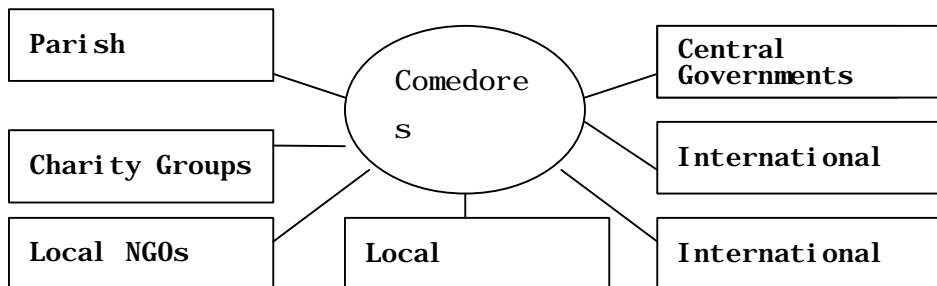
## I. Introduction

*Comedores Populares* (Communal Kitchens) run by the women's voluntary groups in the poverty-stricken areas in Peru is a unique example of mass women's popular participation that cannot be found in any other countries. It originated at the time of the beginning of economic crisis in the late 70s in one of the poor districts in Lima with a group of women being organized to serve meals. Since then, its number has grown, counting about 5,000 in Lima Metropolitan area and about 13,000 throughout the country in 1994. In Lima alone, approximately 120,000 women volunteer their efforts to support these *Comedores*. The *Comedores* became very crucial for poor families to survive during the period of serious economic crisis in the 80s and the following structural adjustment in the early 90s.

The *Comedores* eventually were converted from an alliance for survival to a massive social movement. Traditionally marginalized women began to take collective actions expressing their needs and publicly asking for changes. The local and national networks of *Comedores* have become important vehicles for women to challenge the existing social structure. This has contributed to projecting a new image of the poor and disadvantaged women who were historically kept voiceless due to gender, socio-economic status, and ethnicity. The mammoth movement of *Comedores* has generated an increasing attention by government and other agencies to the issues and problems of this sector, and has resulted in more support for this population. Currently, *Comedores Populares* in Peru is one of the most significant civic movement by popular women.

The factors contributing to such significant developments of *Comedores Populares* in Peru are the combination of the existence of traditional mutual help, as well as extensive roles played by a variety of external actors. The following illustrates different external actors that have assisted the *Comedores* directly and indirectly.

Figure 1: External Actors of Comedores Populares



In this paper, I will examine how the *Comedores Populares* have become such a prominent social

phenomenon of women, in the Lima Metropolitan Area. First, I will introduce what are *Comedores* and how they work in general, with special attention to two major different types of existing *Comedores*. Then I will touch on their development in Lima through each distinct phase of evolution. To follow, I will examine the conditions which have enabled the formation and rapid large-scaled expansion of *Comedores*, with a particular emphasis on the characteristics and traditions that their members possess and the roles that the external actors have played. I will conclude the paper by explaining the nature of synergetic relations between *Comedores Populares* and external actors.

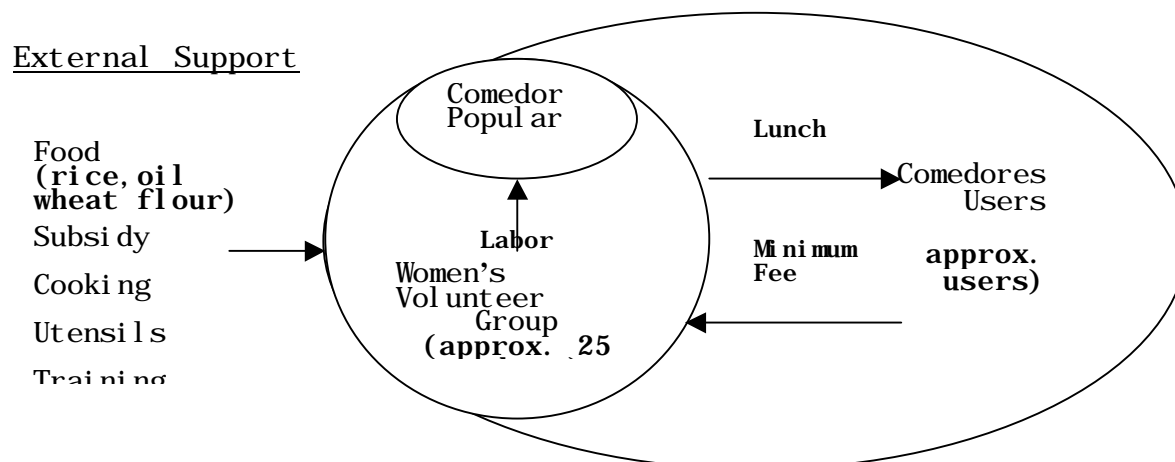
My paper is based on a literature review on *Comedores Populares* and interviews conducted at *Comedores* in Ventanilla District, Lima, in March 1999:

## II. Types and Typical Mechanism of *Comedores Populares*

Of 4,858 *Comedores Populares* in the Lima Metropolitan Area, about half (2,273 *Comedores*) are the *self-managed* type originally started by parish churches and later by local NGOs, while the rest (2,573) are a government-supported type created by central and local governments as well as by political parties. The former consist of the *Comedores* created under the time of the Fernando Belaúnde (1980-85) regime which later became independent (Blondet and Montero). Both types of *Comedores* often coexist within the same communities.

The following figure shows the typical operational mechanism of *Comedores Populares*. The organizational structures of both of the above types of *Comedores* are similar, while the kind of assistance provided to *Comedores* varies depending on the supporting agents (to be explained later in detail).

Figure 2: Typical Operational Mechanism of *Comedores Populares*



*Comedores Populares* are organized by women's volunteer groups composed of about 25 women, generally housewives in very poor neighborhoods. In order to receive support from NGOs or the government agency, groups have to officially register. Each *Comedores* has the Board of Directors which is composed of 6 to 9 delegates, headed by President and supported by Vice President, General Coordinator, Treasurer, Secretary, etc. A general assembly is held periodically with delegates, volunteer members, and users of *Comedores*.

From external sources, *Comedores* receive basic food, such as rice/wheat/beans and oil. They purchase the rest including meat, fish, fresh vegetables. Sometimes they receive financial or technical support in the forms of subsidies and training -- generally in areas such as nutrition, infant health, reproductive health, handicraft, management, and women's leadership. The *Comedores'* members take turns preparing meals on a voluntary basis. Usually three or four women prepare lunch (about 20% of *Comedores* serve breakfast ) for approximately 100 people in the neighborhood including family members of women associated with *Comedores*. The users of *Comedores* pay the women's group a minimum fee required to support the operation. Usually one-tenth of the meals are provided free to the extremely poor, the sick or the old in the neighborhood. *Comedores* set up a kitchen and warehouse for food at one of the members homes. Although sometimes they have a proper cooking facility.

The principal objective of women who form *Comedores Populares* is to reduce the household expenses for food. *Comedores*, due to the food and/or financial aid from external public or private agencies and the economy of scale, supply meals with a lower cost compared with ones prepared individually. In addition, the communal preparation of meals enables women to use their time for income-generating activities if necessary. Also the training offered at *Comedores* motivates women along with a sense of reward for helping their own community.

### III. Evolution of Comedores Populares

*Comedores Populares*, though currently found throughout the country, are most prominent in the Lima Metropolitan area in terms of the numbers and intensity of activities. The table below shows the increase of the *Comedores* in Lima Metropolitan area from late 1970s to 1994. (The numbers in the table include both *self-managed* and government-supported types of *Comedores*).

Table 1: Increase of *Comedores Populares* in the Lima Metropolitan Area

year	number	year	number	year	number	year	number
before 1980	119	1983	303	1987	1,383	1991	5,112
1980	172	1984	523	1988	1,861	1992	-
1981	199	1985	884	1989	2,958	1993	-
1982	236	1986	1,117	1990	3,259	1994	4,848

Sources: Blondet and Montero, 1995

What are the main factors that contributed to such a rapid expansion of *Comedores Populares* in the Lima Metropolitan area? What have been the major driving forces that have sustained these women’s volunteer groups for a number of years under the difficult economic condition, and have created a powerful social movement?

In order to discuss these, I will review the evolution of *Comedores Populares* since its initial stage.

**1. Late 1970s to Early 80s: Initial State**

*Formation of Comedores Populares in one of the districts of Lima by women’s initiative with a help from a church => Through churches, charity groups and NGOs, Comedores Populares replicated in other districts of Lima.*

Figure 3: Initial Stage (late 1970s to early 80s)



Blondet and Montero indicate that the very first *Comedores Populares* originated in Comas, one of the impoverished and densely populated districts within Lima. In 1978, a group of women began to cook breakfast together for their family members because by doing so, they believed that they would be able to make use of food in a more effective manner rather than receiving raw food individually (there was a food supply program organized by a church group). Also, they thought that the collective action would prevent them from being cheated in the food provision that was their concern at that time.

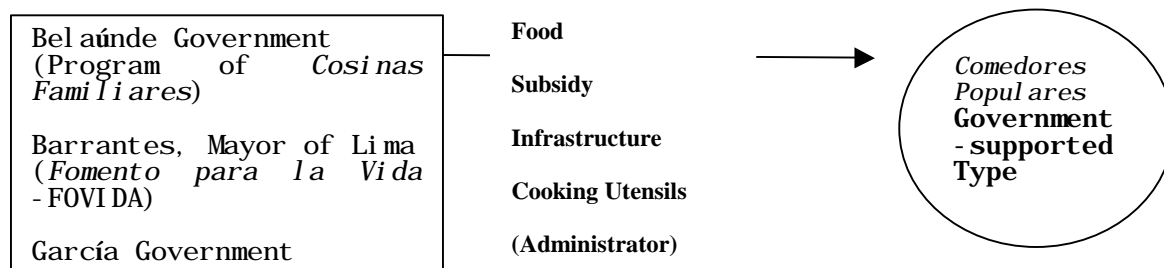
Eventually, the parish churches and NGOs in other districts in Lima heard about the *Comedores*

*Populares* in Comas, and replicated a similar type of the communal kitchen in their own districts. By 1982 (four years after the birth of the first *Comedores* in Comas), the number of *Comedores* had already increased to 200. CARITAS (a Catholic organization) modified their food aid program, in order to support to collective cooking. The materials supplied to *Comedores* were kept very minimal in order that *Comedores* be self-managed and self-sustained, instead of being too dependent on the external support.

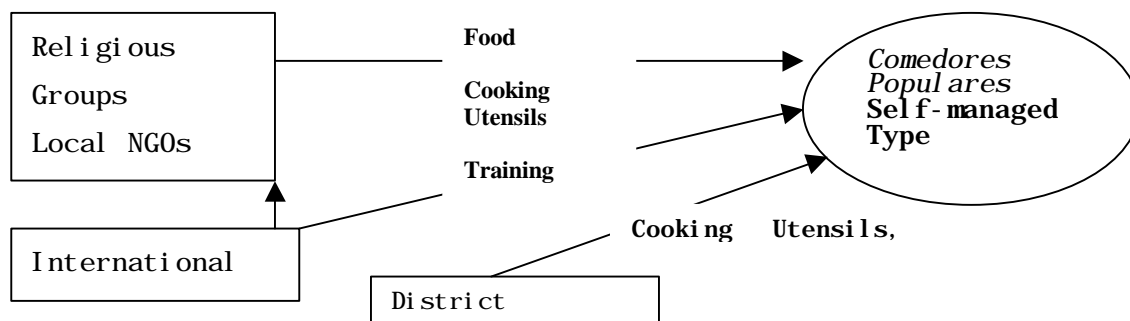
## 2. Early 80s to Late 80s: Beginning of Public Support to *Comedores Populares*

*First public support to Comedores Populares under the Belaúnde regime=>More public support by Mayor of Lima and the Alan Garcia regime. On the other hand, the sel-managed type of Comedores persisted with increased training by NGOs.*

Figure 4: Early 1980s to late 80s  
Government-Supported Type of *Comedores Populares*



Self-managed Type of *Comedores Populares*



The first public support to *Comedores Populares* started under the Belaúnde regime in 1982. Finding out about the success and expansion of *Comedores* in Lima, the First Lady, Violeta Correa de Belaúnde, launched a program called *Cosinas Familiares*. The concept and mechanism were similar to *Comedores* though the state provided a women's group with a subsidy, infrastructure (a whole package that includes cooking utensils, refrigerator, etc.), and an administrator as well. Due to this new program, the number of *Comedores* more than doubled. In addition, the Leftist Mayor of Lima, Barrantes, initiated the Program called FOVICA (*Fomento para la Vida*), and this program provided support to 300 *Comedores* between 1984 and 1986. The

APRA (American Revolutionary Popular Alliance) Party during the presidential campaign for Alan García in 1984, started to support *Comedores* too. When García assumed presidency in 1985, he created the Direct Assistance Program (*Programa de Asistencia Directa, PAD*) through which the old programs initiated by the APRA Party were given light again, including the Mothers Club (*Club de Madres*). The *Club de Madres* adopted the *Comedores* as one of its major services. This resulted in the number of *Comedores* surpassing 1,000 in total.

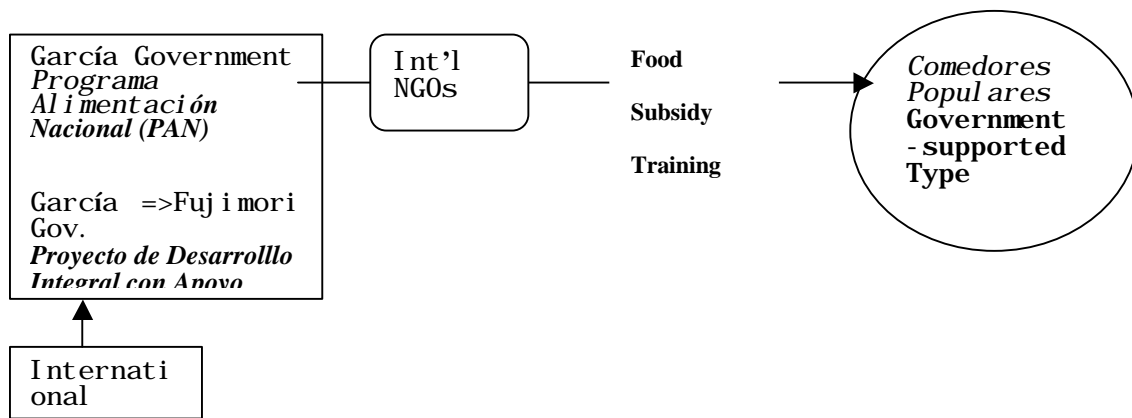
During this period, the self-managed type of *Comedores Populares* persisted with the continued support from non-governmental sources, including religious groups or NGOs. Also, the *Cosinas Familiares* established under the Belaúnde Government cut off food aid by the García Government, and converted themselves to be autonomous. These self-managed *Comedores* began to form the new grassroots movement. Both religious groups and NGOs as well as Peruvian feminist groups triggered this new-sprung action by facilitating *Comedores* to form federations by district (or combined districts), and providing training to members of these *Comedores* in nutrition, health, handicraft as well as group organization, self-esteem, women's rights, and participation/leadership. The idea of forming federations originally occurred for the purpose of distributing the food effectively by centralizing it; however, the federation started to provide the important function of information exchange and mutual support among *Comedores*.

In the 80s, self-managed *Comedores Populares* experienced a significant expansion beyond Lima, and over 100 *Comedores* were established in other cities of Peru (Mujica, 1994). By this time, the self-managed *Comedores* felt the exclusion from the State programs and started to protest government policy, demanding the support from the government. In 1986, the Episcopal Commission of Social Action (*Comisión Episcopal de Acción Social*) convoked and helped self-managed *Comedores* to hold the first meeting, gathering 300 *Comedores* members from Lima and other cities. As a result, the representatives of self-managed *Comedores* of about ten provinces in the country and formed a National Commission of *Comedores* (*Comisión Nacional de Comedores Populares Autogestionarios, CNC*). The meeting, though started due to the demand for the government's support to *Comedores*, decided to maintain autonomy of organizations. CNC began to promote further organization of women and federate *Comedores* in different parts of the country. CNC also started to propose national food policies and social programs. In 1988, CNC achieved a new legal status for *Comedores* as a social base group with the support from local NGOs and sympathetic government officials.

3. Late 1980s and early 90s: Significant Increase of Public Support to *Comedores Populares* but Crisis of Self-managed *Comedores*

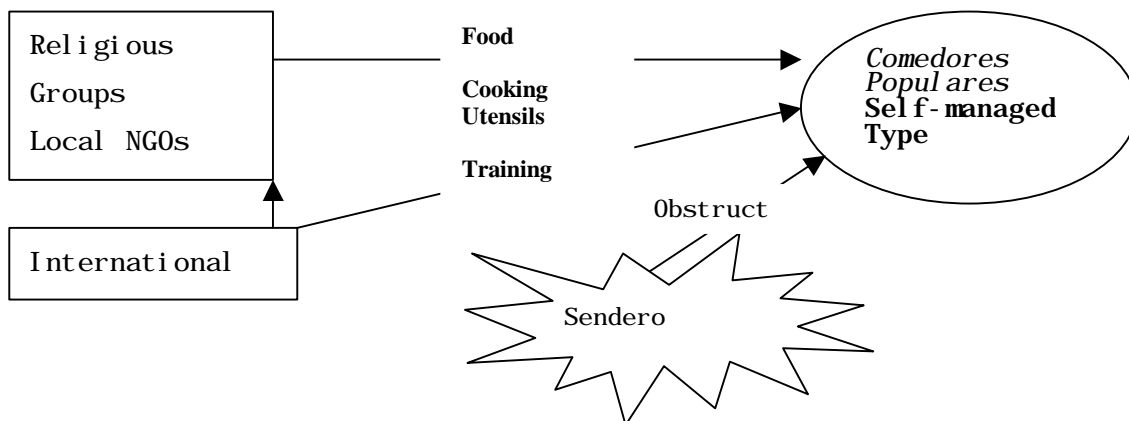
*Serious economic problems => Increased demand for food aid => Fierce support to Comedores Populares by both García and Fujimori governments. On the other hand, crisis of the self-managed type of Comedores due to the food shortage and the threat from terrorists.*

Figure 5: Late 1980s to Early 1990s  
Government-supported type of Comedores Populares



*\*Note:* Under the Fujimori Government, PRODIA became part of the PRONAA (*Programa Nacional de Asistencia Alimentaria*) when PRONAA was created in 1992.

Self-managed Type of Comedores Populares



Late 80s and early 90s saw the polarization of *Comedores Populares*. The state-supported *Comedores* multiplied enormously on one hand, and the self-managed *Comedores* became weakened on the other. The adjustment program put forth by the García Government in its last two years, as well as the extremely tight structural adjustment initiated by the Fujimori Government in 1990, hit the poor population hard, creating a huge number of people barely



meeting the subsistence level. This increased an immense demand from these people for food aid. In 1988, PAN (*Programa de Alimentación Nacional*) started to provide food aid through CARITAS to the extreme poor. The number of *Comedores* in Lima increased about 1,000 in one year, from 1,988 in 1988 to 2,958 in 1989. Also, with the support from USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development), the Government started the PRODIA (*Proyecto de Desarrollo Integral con Apoyo Alimentario*), which supported *Comedores* in various cities in Peru including Lima. The project was coordinated with the central and regional governments, and the food was channeled through CARE.

The Fujimori regime, due to the critical consequences of its structural adjustment program, started the PES (*Programa de Emergencia Social*) to provide food, health services and temporary jobs for people at risk. As a result, the number of *Comedores Populares* grew drastically again, counting over 5,000 in total in Lima by 1992. In every poor section of Lima, women formed a group to receive food aid from the State and serve meals collectively. During these days, *Comedores* were the essential measures for poor women to keep their families from hunger.

In 1992, the Fujimori Government established PRONAA (*Programa Nacional de Asistencia Alimentaria*), merging two of the existing government agencies dealing with the food provision to the poor, including PRODIA. PRONAA started to support one-third of *Comedores Populares* in the Lima Metropolitan area.

Meanwhile, the self-managed type of *Comedores Populares* began to face serious problems due to the deepened economic crises and obstructions from terrorists. Having been kept outside of the State food aid programs, it became extraordinary difficult to secure sufficient food to sustain communal food services. This resulted in a fairly large percentage of self-managed *Comedores* quitting the communal food services. On the other hand, some *Comedores* devised a way to survive by initiating income-generation activities such as operating a restaurant, etc.

Also, it was at this time that the self-managed *Comedores* began to take a collective social demand toward the government. The representative of the self-managed *Comedores*, with assistance from NGOs, proposed that the García Government provide subsidies from public funds. (This was never considered by the Government). In 1990, another attempt was made by them to create a law that sets forth the subsidy to any type of *Comedores Populares*. The Law 25307 was approved by the Parliament in December 1990 under the Fujimori Government, but it was never budgeted. Later in 1993, the Law 26404 was created to prioritize food aid to every type of *Comedores* including the self-managed ones. This resulted in the support to over 13,000 *Comedores* throughout the country.

In the early 90s, the terrorist group *Sendero Luminoso* started to attack *Comedores Populares* in Lima, demanding the women's groups follow their own strategies and programs. Receiving resistance from the women's groups, *Sendero* killed some women leaders of *Comedores*. As a result, a fairly large number of women left *Comedores*, which deteriorated the *Comedores*' organizational base. Even after *Sendero* became no longer a threat to *Comedores*, it took a while for self-managed *Comedores* to resume their activities.

#### **IV. Factors for Development and Expansion of *Comedores Populares***

In this section, I will examine the factors that contributed to the explosive developments of *Comedores Populares* particularly in the Lima Metropolitan Area. First, I will look at the factors attributed to women's groups themselves, including the aspects related to the constituents and the geographical elements. Then, I will review the role that various external actors have played including religious groups, NGOs, local and central governments.

##### **1. Factors Attributed to Women's Groups**

The rapid and large-scaled expansion of *Comedores Populares* in the Lima Metropolitan area can be attributed to: (i) the tradition of mutual help rooted in a Peruvian rural society, and (ii) the urban environment with its distinct socio-geographic elements.

One of the significant aspects about *Comedores Populares* in Lima is that it is the phenomenon found in the fairly new shantytowns from the 1970s called *pueblo joven* which are composed of migrants from rural areas, principally from the *Sierra* (mountain) region. In contrast, the traditional impoverished sections of Lima inhabited by generations of Lima-born habitants have barely seen the development of *Comedores Populares*. A number of NGOs and local government personnel I interviewed attributed the immense developments of *Comedores* in *pueblo joven* to the rural tradition of mutual help called "Ayllu" which is commonly found in the *Sierra* region. The villages of the *Sierra* region have developed a system of conducting agricultural labors collectively, and it is said that the rural migrants still carry out this indigenous reciprocity practice after having migrated to Lima. According to the interviewees, people from the same home provinces in the *Sierra* tend to settle down in the same sections of the peripheral Lima, share a sense of common native place and develop a cooperative mechanism to help each other in the new urban environment.

In addition, the rapid growth and increase of *Comedores Populares* in the Lima Metropolitan area

has occurred due to the special characteristics of urban setting as follows:

- Because people live closely in the shantytowns of Lima, the experiences of one section of city have been easily transmitted and replicated in other sections. Women in the poor sections of Lima or the Parish groups/community development agents followed example of *Comedores* of neighboring communities and created it in their own communities.
- Neither government or non-governmental organizations have been able to keep up with an extremely drastic population growth in Lima due to rural migration; therefore, this has increased the dependency on the voluntary labor of shantytown's residents.

## **2. Roles of External Actors (Community Development Agents, Religious Groups, NGOs, Local and Central Governments, and International Donors)**

The external actors including religious groups, NGOs, the government and international donors have played crucial roles in the development and massive spread of *Comedores Populares*. Without the external actors, the immense developments of *Comedores Populares* would never have been possible.

The roles of external actors can be categorized in the following two: (i) religious groups, local and international NGOs including feminist groups which have helped to develop autonomous *Comedores* with minimal food provision but substantial training to strengthen women's conscious-building, organizational and social action skills; and (ii) local and central governments and political parties (often with back-up from international NGOs and donors) which have helped to institutionalize *Comedores* as the public programs and to expand it at the massive manner regionally and nationally.

Based on the preceding section, "III. Evolution of *Comedores Populares*," the following table compares the roles which each of the above groups of actors has played in the course of the evolution and expansion of *Comedores*. As for "local and central governments and political parties," I have to note here that the information below is limited because the existing literature does not describe much about the types of assistance provided by them.

Table 2: Roles of External Actors for the Development of *Community Populares*

Religious Groups, and Local and International NGOs, Feminist Groups	Local and Central Government and Political Parties
<b>Provider:</b> Provided food and sometimes cooking utensils, but kept minimal for <i>Comedores</i> to become self-support.	<b>Provider:</b> Provided food, subsidy, cooking utensils, etc., and often established infrastructure (storage and/or kitchen).
<b>Mobilizer:</b> Mobilized women to form groups to receive food supplies and work together for communal food service.	<b>Mobilizer:</b> Mobilized women to form groups to have an access to the established food aid program.
<b>Advisor:</b> Advised women in relation to the management of <i>Comedores</i> and family life, gender, and community issues.	<b>Adviser:</b> Advise women how run <i>Comedores Populares</i> with the established regulations (receiving food aid, providing food services, organization of <i>Comedores</i> , budget, etc.)
<b>Promoter:</b> Promoted to raise women's social awareness related to family/community, gender and socio-economic status, and to take actions. Also promoted women to form federations at the district, regional and national level for information exchange, mutual help, advocacy, and collective social action.	<b>Promoter:</b> Promoted women's support to the current regime or the political party. Motivated women to improve the situation of families and communities.
<b>Trainer:</b> Trained women in the organizational and financial aspects of <i>Comedores</i> as well as in the areas such as self-esteem, gender role, women and law, nutrition, health, small income-generation, and leadership, etc.	<b>Trainer:</b> Trained women in the administration of <i>Comedores</i> . In recent years, began to training women for productive activities for income generation to make <i>Comedores</i> more self-sufficient.
<b>Facilitator:</b> Facilitated to disseminate information on the experiences of <i>Comedores</i> to other sections of the city, and helped <i>Comedores</i> to have an access to local and central governments.	<b>Supervisor</b> Supervised the administration of <i>Comedores</i> (storage and use of food, budget, etc.).

As seen in the above table, the roles that each group of external actors have played are sometimes similar and sometimes very distinct.

The very basic and common role that both groups of external actors have played is that they created an environment for poor women to organize and work together to receive food. A variety of literature on *Comedores* indicates the fact that the women formed a group and started to collaborate, and through this daily participatory experience created a feeling of solidarity and shared trust. In addition, women have acquired organizational and team work skills because various tasks of administrating *Comedores* (including buying food, cooking and serving meals, and collection fees) are rotated among members. The majority of women had never participated in any type of community organizations before, but especially those who assumed responsibility as delegates gained leadership experiences and skills. Also, the majority of the members of *Comedores* whom I interviewed expressed self-satisfaction and dignity arising from a feeling of helping communities.

When it comes to the provision of food and other equipment, there is some clear difference. The state and political parties provided most of the whole set of things needed for communal cooking in addition to basic food, while non-state organizations provided the minimum to avoid dependency on external agencies, which has helped women to devise methods to be self-sufficient.

The advisory role was important for both groups of external actors; however, a slight difference is observed between two. The state actors advised women on the administration of *Comedores* per the regulations of the state program, while the non-state actors advised women not only in relation to the management of *Comedores* but issues related to gender, family/community development, advocacy, etc.

As for the role as “promoter and trainer,” the state or political parties intended to enlist political support to the current regime or a particular political party. For example, PAD (*Programa de Asistencia Directa*) established by García Government in 1986, prioritized their support to women’s groups organized under their political party leadership, and expected faithfulness of *Comedores* members to the party. As the poor were getting over the critical economic condition, the state agencies began to provide training for production activities so that the *Comedores* would be self-sustained with less or no food aid from the state in the future.

On the other hand, non-state actors promoted women’s conscious-raising related gender, economic and class aspects. Both local and international NGOs conducted variety of training to these poor women to enhance their self-esteem and gain self-confidence as well in order to develop capacity in self-managing the *Comedores* and to be pro-active for improving their situations. The feminist groups began to offer to poor women sensitization and training efforts, too. This resulted in women of *Comedores* dealing with issues of political violence, women’s rights, and urban poverty.

The non-state actors also promoted connecting *Comedores* horizontally and vertically. First, parish churches helped *Comedores* to form district federations, and then the national church groups assisted local federations of *Comedores* to unite at the regional and national levels. This has created opportunities for poor women to connect themselves for the first time with those outside of their own communities and also with external agents. With a broadly based network, women of *Comedores* have gained political space, began to form a massive and powerful popular movement to transform their economic and social surroundings.

The non-state actors have played a significant role as “facilitator” as well, by helping women to

outreach external agencies including local and central governments to express, demand and seek resources. For example, NGOs facilitated *Comedores* to submit the proposals to the government for national food policy and law. As for state agencies and political parties, there is little description as “facilitator.” Instead, the role as “supervisor” appears to be more prominent. In fact, the interview which I conducted with one of the *Comedores* in Ventanilla District was monitored by a state administrator of *Comedores*.

The study by Lind and Farmelo concludes that the self-managed *Comedores*, compared with the state-supported, are far more active in reaching other community groups and participating in broader community planning processes. In general, the member of state-managed *Comedores* consider themselves as recipients of state support, which prohibits them from challenging the state and creating a mass social movement. Also they often lack motivation for meetings of *Comedores* (Boggio 1990, and Mujica 1994). On the contrary, a number of literature suggests that variety and types of assistance provided by the non-state actors has had empowerment effects over self-managed *Comedores*, and thus have helped them to self-sustain for a long period and become social change agents. Time was opportune for *Comedores* to get plentiful support from NGOs because the NGOs in Peru became active starting in the 70s, working closely with grass-roots groups in poor communities and playing very dynamic roles in strengthening these groups.

Nevertheless, I cannot help feeling that the above indication about self-managed *Comedores* is too oversimplified and idealistic. First of all, the degree of organizational skills and capacity as well as willingness to reach external agents for social demand or resources appears to depend on the capability and leadership of delegates of each *Comedores*. The *Comedores* with competent leaders manage *Comedores* better, and there are some *Comedores* extremely successful in expanding their activities through income-generating activities. During my field visit to Ventanilla, I observed a considerable gap among self-managed *Comedores* in terms of organizational capacity. Also, the interviews with local NGOs working in the neighborhood revealed that the leaders often do not promote the equal participation of the members and users of *Comedores* at the meetings nor incorporate the opinions of the entire volunteer members and users in the decision-making. According to NGO staff, there is hierarchy in poor neighborhoods as well, which often influences the politics within *Comedores*. I feel that my limited interviews and field visits are not sufficient to analyze this matter so I would like to wait for additional investigations to discuss this more deeply. -

## **V. Conclusion**

The case of the explosive developments of *Comedores Populares* portrays the synergetic relations between women's voluntary groups and external actors. The women who have been supporting *Comedores* have inherited a tradition of mutual help and collective action due to their rural origin. In Peter Evans's words, it is the case of "sociocultural endowment" in which the stock of social capital is originally embedded within the society. On the other hand, the external actors have up-scaled the grass-roots actions of indigent women to the regional and national level, and helped to strengthen their capability not only to collaborate each other but to take a collective civic action. This, in turn, has contributed to the external actors deepening their understanding of the issues, the need of *Comedores*. This in turn has helped them in attending to this disadvantaged population, and developing policies and law to support them.

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