

Resilience in a pandemic The case of community pots in Lima, Peru

Due to the food crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, community pots have made a comeback in Lima's vulnerable areas, as an alternative mechanism to fight hunger. They have become a symbol of resilience and solidarity, as well as spaces where women can support each other and become empowered. In this context, community pots have captured the attention of the State, which has created policies aimed at supporting them. However, these public initiatives still present significant shortcomings.

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The COVID-19 pandemic and the measures implemented to contain it caused an economic contraction, generating an income loss for many families and therefore impairing their capacity to purchase food. In the context of this food crisis, community pots made a comeback in different areas of Metropolitan Lima, as a mechanism for the most vulnerable citizens to fight hunger.

GRADE has carried out a diagnosis of these organisations, applying a mixed methodology consisting of surveys and interviews with representatives of a sample of 40 community pots in 3 districts in the city. This document summarises the study's main findings and identifies policy recommendations in order to provide these organisations with effective support.

1) The creation of community pots was the main and fastest response to the food crisis generated by the coronavirus pandemic

According to Lima Metropolitan Municipality (MML) records, by February 2020 there

were more than 1700 community pots in the city outskirts, serving approximately 180 000 people.

These organisations have played a central role in the survival of the most vulnerable population, in a sense replacing public food programmes. While other aid mechanisms are generally found in areas that are – nowadays – more accessible, community pots are established in the city's most inaccessible, disadvantaged areas (see map). Finally, the mass multiplication of community pots ran parallel to the closure of other food assistance organisations during the most difficult moments in the pandemic.

2) Community pots are social organisations facing a serious lack of infrastructure, supplies and equipment

Community pots face issues related to their location; they arise in the city's most precarious and remote areas, with insufficient access to basic services, such as water and wastewater services. In addition, being spontaneous citizen initiatives with

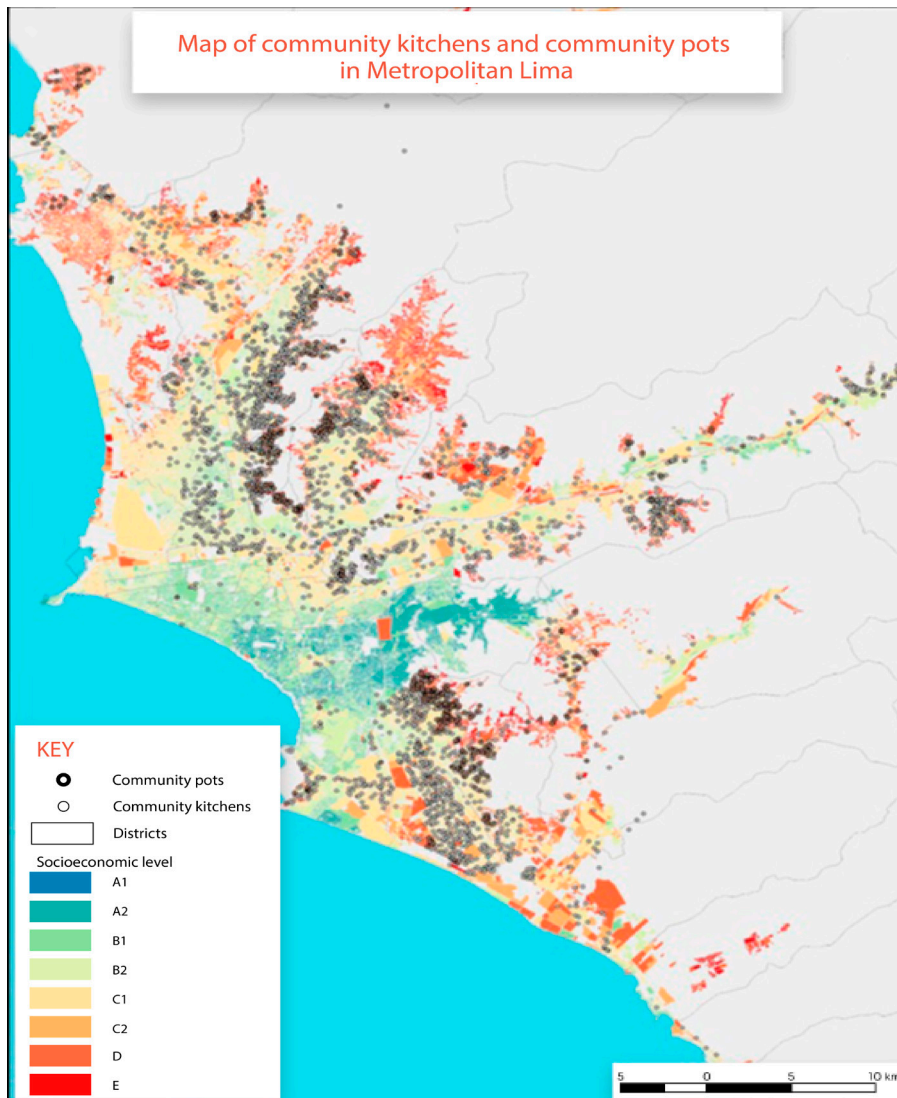
Análisis & Propuestas addresses issues related to Peruvian reality based on GRADE's research findings and offers public policy recommendations.

The content of this policy brief does not necessarily reflect the institutional view of GRADE or its donors.

This policy brief is based on the study by Lorena Alcázar and Ricardo Fort *Resiliencia en tiempos de pandemia: el caso de las ollas comunes en Lima, Perú*, published as part of the *Avances de Investigación* series.

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Sources: Record of Community Kitchens – Ministry for Development and Social Inclusion (MIDIS) and MML Record of Community Pots up to February 2020. Compiled by GRADE.

little public support, they usually operate in improvised spaces, borrowed venues and even in the street. These shortcomings make it difficult to prepare meals in sanitary conditions.

Community pots also face huge challenges in obtaining groceries to provide a diversified, balanced diet. Since they are not assigned a municipal budget, they rely mostly on their own members' contributions for funding, as well as sporadic donations. Their members' economic vulnerability, as well as

unstable donations, force them to provide meals that are very high in carbohydrates, not only because they are more accessible, but also because they constitute the bulk of the donations.

In addition, community pots face a huge shortage in tools and equipment, such as kitchen utensils, refrigerators and crockery. They do not have protection equipment against COVID-19; almost half of the community pots surveyed declared they had no sanitary kits.

We are looking for support anywhere we can find it, any help to make ends meet, each and every day, because it's an everyday issue, isn't it? And we only cook stews. When we receive rice donations, great, we make rice. Maybe that rice lasts two days, but if it doesn't, we go to the market and there we [get what we can] ... the vegetables they aren't able to sell any more.

(Verónica, Los Álamos Familias Unidas community pot, at Villa María del Triunfo)

The diagram on the next page summarises the situation for community pots.

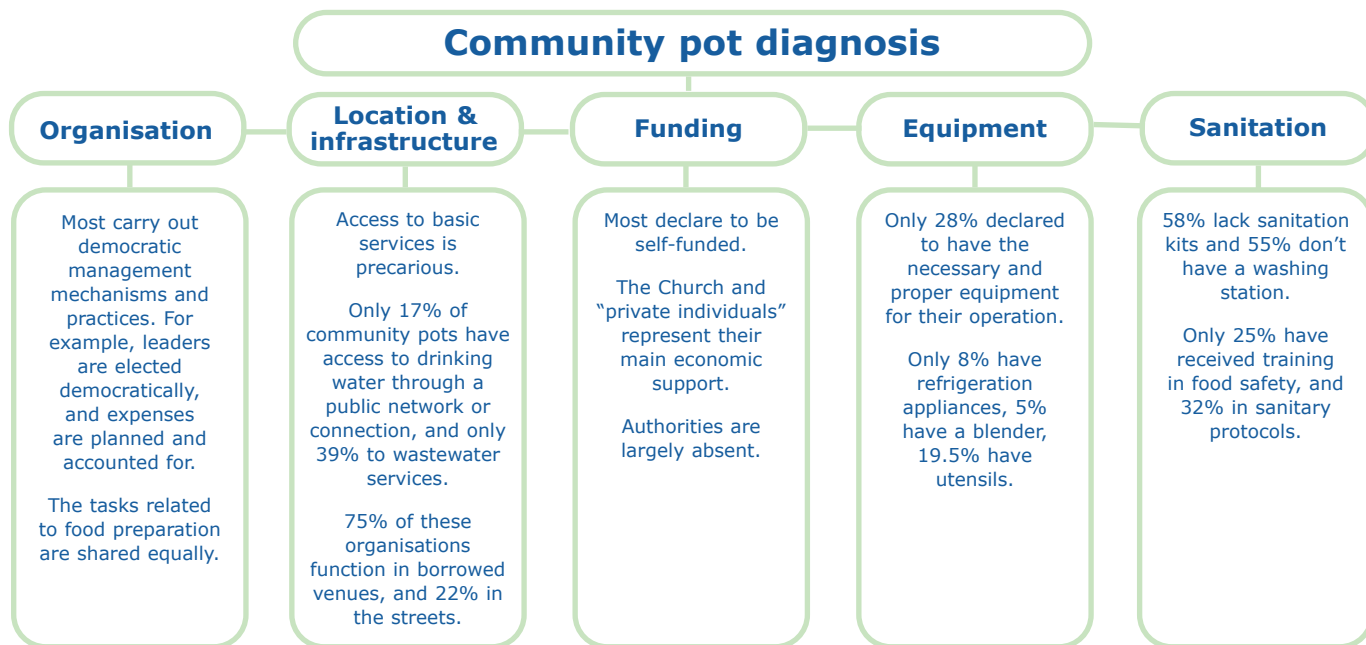
3) In spite of the precarious conditions in which they operate, community pots are a symbol of resilience and solidarity. They provide spaces where their members, especially women, feel supported and empowered.

Community pots are a symbol of resilience for the thousands of people who, facing unemployment or a relative's illness or death, have decided to join forces to meet their common need for food. Many unemployed, widowed or street-vendor women have faced the food crisis practically on their own, with no support whatsoever from Government authorities.

Community pots are also a symbol of solidarity. In spite of the scarcity they face, members make personal contributions. Some women provide an area in their home; others lend or donate utensils, such as saucepans or ladles; some give money; others, their time and effort. Most community pots rely on members' contributions – in money or goods – to prepare meals, and equal contributions are not demanded. Community pots also receive welfare cases, whose beneficiaries are not expected to make any contribution.

In addition, community pots are predominantly female spaces, fostering women's welfare and empowerment. In community pots, women are able to develop their leadership abilities and women's self-worth is promoted. The survey showed that 87.5% of women consider their work

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in community pots to be “very important”. Interviews also showed that they find emotional support and collaborative learning through their work in community pots.

I have always lived my life trying to lead. “Let’s go, neighbour! We’re having a meeting down there, let’s support this or that person” [...] That’s the way I’ve always been, calling the shots, being a leader and encouraging people, so they know we’re not alone, that together we can make it.

(Marleni Cruz, La Florida community pot, at San Juan de Lurigancho)

4) The MML was the first authority to design and carry out a programme aimed at providing integrated support for community pots. This programme has benefited hundreds of these organisations in the capital, but it has significant shortcomings.

The MML’s efforts to assist community pots should be acknowledged. Halfway through 2020 the MML launched the Manos a la

Olla programme, an initiative aimed at providing integrated support for community pots within its jurisdiction.

This programme has four components. The first has the purpose of registering community pots, showing their location and other basic information in order to be able to assist them. The second regards food management and consists of raising donations for registered community pots through private business sponsorship. The third is an educational programme providing training and counselling to community pot members in four areas: nutrition, sanitation, management, and organisation. The fourth component proposes the monitoring and evaluation of community pots’ operation and of the support they receive.

One of the programme’s main shortcomings is a lack of awareness of its existence and of clarity regarding its functions by its potential beneficiaries. Apparently, many community pots – probably the most remote, and, therefore, the most vulnerable – ignore this programme’s existence and, in consequence, have not registered themselves.

The second issue regards donations. The strategy to receive produce for the com-

munity pots has not proven effective; donations have been scarce, and often donated supplies can’t be used to prepare meals.

5) The central Government’s response to the needs of community pots has been slow and incomplete.

The Government’s response can be classified into three stages: (i) measures which did not include community pots at all (March 2020 to February 2021), (ii) measures that only partially addressed community pots’ needs (March 2021 to May 2021), (iii) the design and piloting of an integrated plan for community pots (June 2021).

In the first stage, emergency measures were taken, consisting of purchasing and distributing food baskets to the vulnerable population. Community pots were not taken into account in this period.

During the second stage, community pots had become more visible in the media, due to their fast growth. This prompted the Government to try to include them as vulnerable population eligible for the food baskets given out by municipalities. It also made regulatory and legal modifications to allow certain institutions to

provide aid to community pots. However, this was significantly hampered by the lack of an adequate identification and registration of these organisations.

The third stage involved an awareness of the importance of community pots in the response to the food crisis. The Government, through MIDIS, designed a strategy for the integrated support of community pots in the entire country. Before the end of the transition Government, in July 2021, MIDIS had communicated the strategy – through the RM 086-2021-MIDIS – to the country's 1874 local governments,

designing focal points and training its staff. A pilot for the registration of community pots was carried out in 22 districts in the country, identifying a total of 2261 organisations.

Some of these measures, such as the creation of transparency and support committees, improved food support for community pot beneficiaries. However, the new Government stopped some aspects of this initiative, and hindered its progress in other issues.

Nevertheless, the persistent work of community pot leaders – with the support

of a few congresswomen – led to the approval, in April 2022, of a law for the State's acknowledgment and support of community pots. In June, that same year, MIDIS even approved the law's regulations. In both cases, several aspects previously designed by MIDIS with GRADE's support were taken into account, although the law and its regulation also include some contradictory points and have significant room for improvement. In spite of this positive initiative, the law and proceedings still have issues hindering a proper inclusion of the most vulnerable population; therefore, GRADE is still studying mechanisms to improve these initiatives.

Policy recommendations

- It is essential to create a national record of community pots, showing their locations and those of their beneficiaries, as well as their main characteristics and needs; local governments must be responsible for keeping this record updated. Accordingly, permanent community pots must be identified and differentiated from transitory ones, in order to design public policies specific to each group's needs. Although the law promotes the creation of this registration and its constant update, it is necessary to take measures to simplify it and ensure it is accessible.
- Given that food donations are usually uncertain and unstable, the Government must assign a budget for community pots in times of crisis, ensuring a systematic resource transference. In order to ensure this transference, a strategy connecting community pots with local markets could be established, through coupons that can be redeemed in affiliated markets. This mechanism would allow community pots to have access to proper food supplies and simultaneously boost local businesses.
- Support committees must be established, with the participation of civil society, to ensure procedures are fulfilled and assigned resources are properly delivered. These committees will be responsible for the creation of transparency and control mechanisms.
- Strengthening community pot representatives' capacities and making the most of their leadership is essential. This can be done through workshops and training. Given women's predominance in these positions, all these activities must include a gender perspective, fostering women's empowerment and their employability.
- Although the new law acknowledges the existence of both permanent and temporary community pots, it creates incentives for the latter to become permanent and possibly evolve into the existing public programme of community kitchens. This entails significant risks, not only because these two types of organisations have a different rationale and operation, but also because service and operation in community kitchens present serious issues, requiring an evaluation and changes.
- The law has assigned local governments the responsibility of attending to community pots' needs, and rightly so. However, the power granted to municipalities could lead to delays and instability in the aid provided, particularly given these institutions are highly heterogeneous. It is also essential to provide oversight and transparency mechanisms, in order to avoid corruption and a political use of the aid directed towards community pots.