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Organising Street Vendors: “Gente de Confiar” Radio Programme, Lima, Peru

An authentically democratic community requires open channels of communication between citizens. Street markets offer a natural setting for the daily give-and-take between sellers and buyers that is necessary for transactions to take place, but workers in street markets often lack reliable channels of communication with one another, with the general public, and with the broader political community. In Lima, Peru’s capital city, street traders have an urgent need to engage in public policy debates regarding their livelihoods, and have found traditional channels insufficient for them to express their proposals and ideas.

In response to this need, a local NGO in North Lima has developed a radio programme designed to promote the entrepreneurial development of small-scale traders and producers, the activities of their organisations, and their public expression on matters of local economic development.

The programme, called *Gente de Confiar* (“People of Trust”), is aired on a local radio station once a week and broadcast live over a system



The *Gente de Confiar* radio programme in Lima, Peru involves street vendors as trained correspondents.

of interconnected loudspeakers at participating street markets. By involving street traders as trained correspondents, the programme has

created a new, participatory mode of mass communication for workers who have traditionally struggled to make their voices heard.

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Background and Structure of *Gente de Confiar*

Lima's northern districts are home to thousands of the city's street traders, small-scale producers and craftsmen. Many of these workers can be found in large, centrally located groups of markets called "conglomerates," where they offer a full range of products and services to the public. Though traders within these markets have some opportunity to communicate and share ideas through their base organisations, communication between markets has posed a major challenge to traders wishing to have their sector better represented in discussions of local economic development.

With funding from Intermón-Oxfam, the Peruvian NGO Alternativa launched *Gente de Confiar* as a response to that challenge. Its founders saw the critical need among small traders, producers, and craftsmen to open a space of reflection in a mass media format to disseminate information about their products and services, as well as their achievements and proposals for local economic development.

The programme's central themes include practical orientation in business management; local economic development processes; strengthening organisations and leadership capacity; promotion of the goods and services offered by traders, producers, and carpenters' associations; relevant legal norms; preventive health care; and musical entertainment. Pre-production of the radio programme began in December



The programme is connected to street markets via live telephone links and aired over the markets' loudspeakers.

2005, and *Gente de Confiar* aired for the first time on February 14, 2006.

The programme's founders set out to construct a horizontal and participatory linkage with the sector by recruiting traders into teams of "Popular Communicators." The target participants, men and women age 35 and over, attended training sessions in May 2006 to acquire skills as correspondents for the programme. These sessions prepared the Popular Communicators to connect the programme to its audience via live telephone links at participating markets as the programme airs. Thus, correspondents conduct interviews and disseminate information from markets while

traders and their customers listen to the programme over the market's loudspeaker system.

The content of the programme also provides a space for information sharing across markets, with the aim of strengthening the workers' organisations and integrating them into public discussions regarding local economic development.

One method of giving presence to the organisations is to inform listeners about their projects, activities, and efforts to contribute to local development. Additionally, the programme disseminates information on various local economic development initiatives, and presents information on local economic development topics that can be placed on the agendas of the workers' organisations. Through these methods, information flows from the workers' organisations to the local community and vice versa.

Objectives of *Gente de Confiar*

One of the motivating factors for the radio programme was to convert traders from being passive communicators to active communicators through a *popular* and *alternative* communication medium. 'Popular communication' envisions a form of communication that mobilizes small groups to create channels of expression that reflect their own characteristics, culture, history, and traditions. 'Alternative communication' calls for a mode of communication that

more effectively reaches local communities and addresses their immediate concerns through a horizontal linkage where emitters and listeners actively interact, rather than the type of vertical linkage where emitters merely transmit information to passive listeners.

Building on these background goals, the programme's core objectives are designed to counter the mainstream media's portrayal of street traders and other small-scale entrepreneurs as marginal. Those objectives are to promote individual traders and producers, to strengthen their organisations, and to reinforce their presence in public discourse. *Gente de Confiar* aims to promote individual workers

by diffusing information on the products and services they offer, and by addressing themes that contribute to their entrepreneurial development, such as business management techniques. It seeks to strengthen workers' organisations by enabling them to disseminate their own experiences and proposals. And it encourages the public expression of these workers by offering the training and linkage to a mass media outlet that are necessary to make their voices heard.

The training sessions for Popular Communicators have helped street vendors exercise their right to communication and expression.



Primary Activities and Achievements of *Gente de Confiar*

Individual Capacity-Building

One primary achievement of *Gente de Confiar* rests in the individual development of the participants. According to many workers who went through training sessions to become Popular Communicators, the principal benefits of the programme have been to constitute themselves as central actors in the development process, exercise their right to communication and expression, and facilitate their access to the mass media system. Moreover, many traders, particularly women, have stated that their experience with the radio programme has helped them develop their own capacity for expression, and they feel that they have found a new opportunity for personal and societal fulfillment.

The capacity-building accomplishments of the programme have reached not only the Popular Communicators, but also the workers who listen to the programme. The programme's emphasis on themes related to entrepreneurship has brought practical orientation to traders and producers regarding sales strategies, group savings schemes, marketing techniques, and similar topics. In doing so, it has helped raise the level of entrepreneurial skills in the participating markets.

Organisational Strength

The development of individual workers into Popular Communicators has



translated into stronger organisation within the sector as well. These Popular Communicators form part of a broader network called the Communicators' Network for Popular Commerce and Production (*Red de Comunicadores*), which was created to strengthen all forms of communication among street traders and producers across Metropolitan Lima. After the radio programme's first year, an additional series of training workshops was conducted to integrate more correspondents and to diversify their activities into other forms of oral and written communication. These activities include preparing a print bulletin, collecting and disseminating information through organisational websites, and bolstering the links between the radio programme and the loudspeaker systems at markets, in addition to conducting *Gente de Confiar*.

Through these efforts, the workers' organisations and their members have shown a growing appreciation for the importance of communication.

Over time the programme has incorporated seven commercial conglomerates, representing more than 20 organisations of street and market vendors.

Above and beyond their training as Popular Communicators, these workers have organized initiatives to create electronic bulletins, establish information centers at the markets, and give more importance to the press secretaries of their organisations. With increased emphasis on communication, these organisations are better positioned to keep their members involved and informed.

The initial success of the *Gente de Confiar* model generated a growing demand among street traders for similar radio programmes anchored in other parts of the city. In response to this demand, Alternativa worked with groups in the southern and eastern districts of Lima to launch similar shows – *Contacto Sur* in South Lima, and *Prensa Popular* in East



Lima – in August 2007 and February 2008, respectively. Once all three shows were launched, the teams of leaders formed in the three regions of the city then began to hold periodic meetings at the metropolitan level to share experiences and coordinate themes and campaigns to develop through their radio programmes.

Local Economic Development and Community Action

With four years of experience, *Gente de Confiar* has successfully positioned itself as a well-known programme oriented toward the popular trade and production sector, and the name “Popular Communicators” is widely recognized among listeners and the general public. Over time

the programme has incorporated seven conglomerates and two additional points of sale, representing more than 20 associations of street and market traders, four organisations of small producers and six groups of craftsmen. These accomplishments have established the Popular Communicators as actors in the Council for Local Economic Development of North Lima (CODECON), and have placed their concerns for a more inclusive model of development planning in the public domain.

The street markets linked to *Gente de Confiar* have also mobilized their communications infrastructure to engage in social action. In August 2007, for example, a magnitude 8.0 earthquake struck the central

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coast of Peru, devastating several cities and towns south of Lima. Using loudspeakers, bulletins, and other forms of communication, several markets organized collection points for donated items and contracted trucks to deliver them to affected areas. The demonstration of solidarity and the ability to deliver benefits to the community reflected the will of popular traders and producers to take initiative and become protagonists in their country’s development.

The Future of *Gente de Confiar*

As an innovative programme in its first few years of operation, *Gente de Confiar* has encountered some difficulties that its conductors hope to overcome in the near term.

One of the biggest problems is irregular participation among the target population. This irregularity of participation is related to the instability of informal economy organisations in some of the target districts, and a lack of articulation among those organisations. Participation is also uneven across

sectors; traders are quite involved in the programme, while producers and craftsmen are underrepresented. Finally, there has been some disarticulation among the leadership of the organisations that initially were involved with launching *Gente de Confiar*. Thus, an effort to increase and sustain participation among organisation members, and an effort to develop a common platform among the organisations and to improve the link between them and the radio programme, are necessary.

The sustainability of the programme also depends on an alternative method of financing, once the initial funding expires. The Popular Communicators and organisation leaders involved may consider the

possibility of running the radio programme as an enterprise, which will require a management structure and a strategic plan aimed at achieving sustainability. It will also call for a significant effort to encourage a commitment to the programme on the part of participants and the listening public. Boosting the size of the listening audience may call for further experimentation with radio stations that have stronger signals, so that all districts of North Lima can be reached reliably. Achieving sustainability will require greater coordination and dedication among the Popular Communicators and their organisations, but those involved express a strong desire to carry the project forward.

Photos courtesy of Guillermo Nolasco.

WIEGO Organizing Briefs contain information on organizing strategies and practices in the informal economy. This series aims to support organizing efforts and disseminate better practices.

ABOUT WIEGO: Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing is a global research-policy-action network that seeks to improve the status of the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. WIEGO draws its membership from membership-based organisations of informal workers, researchers and statisticians working on the informal economy. For more information see www.wiego.org.

ABOUT INCLUSIVE CITIES: Launched in 2008, the Inclusive Cities project aims to strengthen membership-based organisations (MBOs) of the working poor in the areas of organising, policy analysis and advocacy, in order to ensure that urban informal workers have the tools necessary to make themselves heard within urban planning processes. Inclusive Cities is a collaboration between MBOs of the working poor, international alliances of MBOs and those supporting the work of MBOs. For more information see www.inclusive.cities.org.

