



RESEARCH
PAPER

SUSTAINABLE DIETS FOR ALL

The voices of women cooks in food markets in La Paz

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SUMMARY

Bolivian people's diets have changed significantly in recent years as a result of urbanisation, increased purchasing power, and changes in consumer preferences.

Despite this, the food system in cities like La Paz is still based on the traditional wholesale and retail markets. Dining areas – where cooked food is sold inside these markets – occupy an important place within this system as they enable people to access nutritious, affordable food, as well as keeping the country's culinary traditions alive. Nevertheless, the viability of these market dining areas is threatened by competition and by changes in consumption patterns.

This paper presents the results of research carried out together with the women vendors in the dining areas of the Achumani and Obrajes markets in the city of La Paz. The research was largely guided by the interests and concerns of the vendors themselves.

Following a process to build mutual trust with the cooks in these markets, we organised talks and workshops with them to gain a better understanding of how the dining areas operate and find out about the women's concerns and needs.

With the vendors' agreement and cooperation, we conducted surveys with their customers to find out their preferences and canvass their opinions about the market dining areas. Finally, we discussed the results with the women vendors to ensure that they will be useful to the vendors and their businesses.

We found that the market dining areas operate in a context of fierce competition from businesses in the surrounding area. The women vendors – many of whom have been in the business for years – are worried about falling sales and the increasing number of places selling food outside the market. Their main concern is how to improve their businesses to

prevent further losses of customers and income. This is why it is important to understand who their customers are and what they want, as well as asking them for suggestions about how the service they receive in the market dining areas can be improved. According to the survey, customers are mainly construction industry workers. Most of them have positive opinions of the food, the service and prices. Compared with the food on offer in businesses nearby, the lunches available in the market dining areas provide a range of nutritious food at low prices.

In the customers' opinion, the main priorities are to make the market dining areas more comfortable and improve cleanliness.

The key lessons that emerged from this research focusing on the voices of the women vendors are as follows:

1. It is essential to build trust and understand that research belongs to an unfamiliar world that may make people suspicious.
2. Patience is essential to develop this trust, and it also requires flexibility and investment in terms of time and resources.
3. When citizens are involved in research, researchers need to be open to the possibility that the objectives may differ from those they envisaged at the outset.
4. Moving from evidence to action is not an automatic process; it requires time, and the capacity and the will to act.
5. Research that focuses on citizens opens up new opportunities to engage in constructive dialogue with decision makers.

1. INTRODUCTION

MARKET DINING AREAS, INFORMAL BUSINESSES AND CITIZEN VOICES

In Bolivia, both society and the economy have changed particularly fast in the last few decades. Between 1950 and 2012, about two thirds of the population moved from rural areas to the cities.¹ Urbanisation has gone hand in hand with a considerable reduction in rates of poverty, which fell from 60% in 2007 to 36% in 2017, while income per capita doubled over that same ten-year period.

The rise in income and consumer aspirations of an increasingly urban population have led to significant changes in people's diets. People who live in urban areas spend almost a quarter of their income on food, even surpassing what they spend on housing and basic services (20%).²

There has also been a shift in the demand and supply of food. People living in cities have benefited from the greater availability of certain food groups, although the availability of others has diminished. Most of the calories in people's diets now come from dairy products, cereals and meat, while the contribution from vegetables, fruit and root crops has fallen.³

Although there is a tendency for diets to become more modern, traditional dishes continue to be very important. Traditional retail markets that sell fresh produce and cooked food are part of a tradition that continues to be relevant today.

These markets are a fundamental component of the food system in Bolivian cities. They form part of a distribution network that supplies consumers on every level of income, as well as establishments such as restaurants and other food outlets.⁴

In addition to their role as places where people can access food, these markets are also an essential link between the rural and the urban economy.⁵ They are an important source of employment, income and opportunities, particularly for women,⁶ and they keep many of Bolivia's culinary traditions alive.⁷

In the metropolitan area of La Paz there are about 85 wholesale and retail markets. The wholesale markets engage in bulk sales of produce from Bolivia's different ecoregions and from other countries. These markets differ in terms of their size and how well equipped they are. Some provide vendors with suitable infrastructure for selling food, while in others the vendors set out their stalls on pavements, streets and in nearby public spaces.⁸ The retail markets are characterised by selling produce in smaller quantities to the general public. Many of them have their own buildings and there are more of them around the city.⁹ In most cases, vendors who operate in retail markets buy produce in the wholesale markets for subsequent resale in small quantities.¹⁰

As well as selling fresh food, all the retail markets have dining areas where cooked food is served. In this document we will refer to these as "market dining areas" or, simply, "eateries", although they are not a single business but rather like a food court in which the seating area is shared by several individual businesses. These dining areas are visited mainly by consumers with relatively low incomes, such as construction workers, especially at lunchtime. The eateries are also a repository of the country's gastronomic heritage, as many of the dishes they offer reflect the culinary traditions of each department, region or city. Some typical Bolivian dishes were born in these markets, and new ones continue to appear here. For example, in 2010 the women vendors in the Camacho market in La Paz created the "Macho Camacho" breakfast, a dish that combines onion, beef, sausages and chili peppers, served with a crunchy bread roll called a *marraqueta* and coffee. This dish was created to celebrate the refurbishment of the market building,¹¹ and it is now one of the favourite choices of breakfast in the market's dining area, as it swiftly became popular among the inhabitants of La Paz.

Together with the wholesale and retail markets, these form part of a traditional food system that is largely informal. This means that businesses operate outside or below the radar of government regulation to a certain extent, they depend on the unpaid labour of family members, they are based on relationships of trust rather than contracts, and many are not officially registered.

In fact, most of the traditional market businesses combine formal and informal aspects. For example, vendors in the food markets that supply the region of La Paz must be registered and make regular payments in order to be allowed to sell their wares.¹² However, the government's ability to verify and oversee compliance with these and other regulations is very limited.

Despite their essential contribution to food security and job creation, in some ways the informal markets are invisible in the public policy debate. For example, the Economic and Social Development Plan 2016-2020 only mentions the informal sector once, in the context of the forestry sector.¹³

Historically, informal markets – which are heavily dominated by people of indigenous origin – have been perceived by the traditional elites as disorderly, lacking in hygiene, and contrary to the ideals of modernisation.¹⁴

In recent years, these informal businesses have achieved significant responses to their demands, and today their importance as political, economic and social actors is much more widely acknowledged.¹⁵ The unions that represent food market vendors wield considerable political clout, and have managed to secure significant government investment in market infrastructure.

Nevertheless, government policy regarding informal businesses continues to be heavily focused on getting them to register formally – a policy that has met with limited success and a largely negative response among those involved in the informal sector.¹⁶

For this research, we forged alliances with the women cooks in the market eateries in La Paz, with the aim of developing a research agenda that would respond to their needs, interests and concerns. The women cooks in the market dining areas played the leading role in this research: the project respected the way they run their businesses, giving priority to their views of the real situation in the food system in their local settings.

One of our assumptions was that, by generating and using their own evidence, the women could develop an active public policy advocacy agenda, rather than simply being passive research subjects. However, the results we present here show that the women cooks' main concern is not to influence policy but to improve their businesses.

Objectives

This report has two main objectives. The first is to draw attention to the role of market dining areas in the food system in the city of La Paz, showing that they are important eating spaces, particularly for workers and people with low incomes. We therefore present original and detailed information about how businesses operate in the eateries in the Achumani and Obrajes "16 de Julio" markets.

The second objective is to share our experience of carrying out a research project in which the women cooks had a high level of control over the research agenda, processes and activities, and where they themselves analysed and reflected on the information produced. Research projects are usually extractive, meaning that the research subjects play a passive role and are not involved in planning and implementation. In this research, the starting point is citizen agency and the value of citizens' voices. By basing research on citizens' voices, it is possible to avoid making mistaken assumptions about participants and prevent the mismatch between public policy and local realities.¹⁷ This approach is particularly important in the context of the informal food economy, where the needs and contributions of the actors involved are often ignored.¹⁸

2. METHODOLOGY

Our research approach was guided by the interests and concerns of the women vendors, as well as the time they could spare. We used a mix of participant observation, interviews, workshops and surveys. The aim was to establish communication with the women cooks and gain their trust through informal approaches, and then proceed to more structured work in the form of workshops and surveys. The work was carried out in the Achumani and Obrajes markets from July 2018 to September 2019.

The first step was to use participant observation to gather basic information such as the number of stalls in each market, contact numbers for the leaders of the dining area and the time they had available for us to visit them. We also walked around the streets surrounding the markets and recorded information about the businesses selling food at lunchtime, in order to gain a better understanding of the competition and the types of food available in the vicinity of the markets.

In the second stage of the research we started to make contact directly with the women vendors in the markets. All these approaches were facilitated by the leaders of the dining areas, who are known as *maestras mayores* (elders), with whom we discussed the research project and the possibility of working together.

We attempted to make contact with cooks in other market dining areas in the centre and south of La Paz, but we did not find much interest, so we therefore concentrated on the two markets mentioned above. Once we had obtained consent to work together, we conducted open-ended interviews, in-depth interviews and focus groups with the women vendors to gather information about their experiences and identify possible topics of interest for the research.

Building trust and securing the vendors' interest was a lengthy and difficult process. To start with, they were very reluctant to talk to us and showed little interest in our proposed research. After the initial approaches, we organised various group meetings to explain the aims and objectives of the project, always with the authorisation and facilitation of the *maestra mayor* or leader of the dining area.

One initiative that was decisive in gaining the interest and participation of the women cooks was to hold cooking workshops. These workshops were run by young La Paz chefs who gave generously of their time to discuss different topics that the women cooks were interested in. These included the use of vegetable stocks to prepare dishes, how to make vegetarian meat substitutes, and the use of local ingredients such as tarwi, amaranth and cañahua. The workshops were useful for opening up discussions with the women cooks, and had a positive impact on their level of interest and willingness to participate in the research work. The workshops also served to guide the research objectives and strategy together with the women cooks. Rather than starting with a pre-determined research topic, the topic emerged from the conversations with the women vendors, and therefore reflected their interests and concerns.



Typical lunch menus (Mauricio Panozo/Hivos)

After several rounds of dialogue, it became clear that the issue of greatest concern to the women vendors is how to increase their sales in view of the decline in their clientele and the competition from the fast food outlets nearby. We decided together that the next stage of the research should focus on gaining a better understanding of their customers' views and preferences.

Once the direction of the research was established, we decided to use surveys to get to know the customers and find out their views about the service provided in the

market dining area. The design of the surveys was based on the information gathered during the workshops and conversations, and were validated by the participant vendors themselves, with whom we agreed the logistics of how to distribute the surveys and systematise the data.

The women vendors were in charge of handing out the survey form to be filled in by different customers at lunchtime. Between August and October 2019, we collected a total of 107 completed surveys from the Obrajes and Achumani markets.

3. THE MARKET DINING

AREAS IN CONTEXT

There are 42 retail markets in the city of La Paz. The Markets and Street Trading Directorate is the Autonomous Municipal Government's office responsible for supervising and regulating the trade conducted in markets, and interaction with the local government takes place via a committee that represents the vendors of different categories of products sold in the market. The members of the market's management committee will be representatives of the meat, groceries, vegetables, fruit and cooked food vendors, for example. The vendors of each product category appoint one of their number to represent them on the committee; it is compulsory for all the vendors to have a representative. The representatives of each category are called *maestros* or *maestras*, and the committee elects an overall leader who becomes the *maestra* or *maestro mayor*.

There are eight stalls in the dining area of the Obrajes market. Two of these sell tea, coffee, sandwiches and juice, while the remaining six sell cooked food.

The dining area of the Achumani market has 16 stalls, six selling tea and coffee, and ten selling cooked food. They mainly concentrate on serving two-course lunches, consisting of a soup and a main course. In some dining areas it is still possible to find special dishes in the mornings, such as lamb or beef soup, which used to be a popular choice of breakfast for market traders and transport workers, but the availability of these dishes is in decline. The lunch menus change every day. The lunch menus most popular with customers are those that include traditional dishes such as *aji de fideo* (pasta with beef and vegetable sauce), *aji de papalisa* (a variety of Andean potato with a spicy meat and vegetable sauce), *apanado* (meat or chicken in

breadcrumbs), *asado* (grilled beef), *falso conejo* (beef in breadcrumbs with a vegetable sauce), *panza rebosada* (belly of beef in batter), *sajta* (chicken and vegetable stew), *silpancho* (beef schnitzel topped with fried egg, onion and tomato), *thimpu de res* (beef and vegetable stew), *pique macho* (beef and sausage fried with potatoes, peppers and tomato), *revuelto de carne* (mince and potatoes) and *chicharrón* (chunks of fried chicken or pork). In the case of the vendors of tea, coffee and sandwiches, the most popular items are the home-made soft drinks they serve at lunchtime and the coffee with a bread roll that they serve at breakfast time or as an afternoon snack.

In the streets surrounding both markets there is quite a wide range of food on offer. As many of the women vendors report, this food tends to be quite different from the traditional dishes they serve in the market dining areas.



Eating lunch at Lanza food market (Mauricio Panozo/Hivos)

Most of the outside establishments sell set lunches, whether in restaurants or from street stalls. There are also places selling roast or fried chicken and *salteñas* (meat or chicken pasties), and finally places selling fast food or foreign food (see Table 1). The main difference between the food on offer inside and outside the market is that the price of a lunch in the outside establishments, which the women vendors see as competition, tends to be higher.

The price of a lunch in the eating places and restaurants near the Achumani market ranges from Bs. 12 (US\$ 1.73 at the February 2020 exchange rate) to Bs. 29 (US\$ 3.80), which is double the price charged in the market eateries.

In the streets surrounding the Obrajes market, the average cost of a lunch is Bs. 18 (USD 2.58), which is exactly double what a lunch costs in the market dining area. However, the more expensive options may include desserts or may be fast food or foreign food. Although lunches can be found at prices similar to those charged in the market eateries, they tend to be mostly from street stalls which do not have the same facilities. Many of them are exposed to the inclement weather and have few benches or tables to sit down at compared to the facilities found in a market dining area. Eating lunch inside the market is the most affordable comfortable option.

Table 1. Types of food available in the area near the Achumani and Obrajes markets

	Achumani Market dining area	Obrajes Market dining area
Most common types of food and number of establishments	Full lunch eaten in restaurant (20); full lunch eaten on the street (15); chicken (12); <i>salteñas</i> (4); others (18)	Full lunch eaten in restaurant (21); full lunch eaten on the street (8); chicken (13); <i>salteñas</i> (8); others (20)
Price range in Bs. (US\$)	5-53 (0.72-7.66)	5-55 (0.83-7.95)
Usual price in market dining areas in Bs. (US\$)	10-12 (1.44-1.73)	10 (1.44)

Note. Prepared by the authors based on survey data.

4. THE WOMEN VENDORS AND THEIR VIEWS

With the exception of one food stall, all the stalls in the Achumani and Obrajes markets are run by women. Many of the women vendors live in neighbourhoods near the markets, although others come from neighbourhoods further away or adjoining municipalities such as Achocalla, Ovejuyo and Mecapaca. Most of the women vendors are married, a few are single and a very small number are widows. The highest level of schooling attained by many of them is secondary, although several only went to primary school or have no schooling at all.

Most women have long experience running their business: on average, they have been working for 16 years in the market. The oldest vendor in the Achumani market has been working there for 40 years, while a few others only started work less than a year ago.

Many of the women vendors say that thanks to their businesses they have managed to bring up their children and support their families. They have children who have gone through primary and secondary school and university, and some are now independent professionals. By cooking and selling food the women are able to earn an income without neglecting tasks such as housework and preparing food for the family. The leftover food that they do not manage to sell is often eaten by the vendors' families or their assistants.

In most of the stalls, the vendors' children or other family members, including husbands, help with the business and regularly work as their assistants. The larger stalls may have as many as four helpers, although the majority – including the smallest stalls – have at least one assistant. The vendors of tea, coffee and sandwiches are the exception to this as they do not have assistants, although their children sometimes help them to serve customers.

Because the end of the school day coincides with the start of lunchtime, at peak times for the sale of lunches it is very common to see children in school uniform helping to serve

customers. At the end of the afternoon, or early in the morning, children can be seen doing their school homework on the tables and benches in the dining areas.

Very few of the women vendors have experience of working in any other occupation than the sale of food. According to some testimonies, many of them grew up helping their mothers, starting as young as seven years old. In the case of those who did have another job prior to selling food, these occupations included working in other businesses such as hair salons, bakeries, glass shops and internet cafés.

When they were asked about their future plans, many said they would like to improve their businesses, include new dishes and menus, and achieve financial self-sufficiency. The ideas they have for improving their businesses range from improving practices, learning new recipes or how to cook more dishes, changing menus or even decorating the market dining areas. They also stress the importance of improving the service they provide to their customers and treating them well, by being patient and kind, and offering them a wide range of menus.

The ingredients used to cook the lunches, such as groceries, root vegetables and green vegetables, are mainly bought from the Rodríguez Market, a wholesale market in the centre of La Paz which is well known for selling produce at lower prices. Meat is obtained from suppliers, or sometimes from



Woman selling juices at Camacho market (Mauricio Panozo/Hivos)

nearby butcher's shops. Other ingredients such as herbs and spices, or vegetables that might be needed the same day while the lunch is being cooked or sold, are bought from the markets themselves. The women prefer to buy from wholesale markets because the prices are lower. Non-perishable ingredients are bought once a week, while meat is bought by the day. Non-perishable ingredients are stored in the stall itself or in the dining area. Because of the limited space available in the dining areas, each stall has no more than two two-ring cookers, a sink for washing dishes, and kitchen cupboards. Few stalls have fridges, so perishable items are kept in the vendors' own homes.

The majority of the women vendors work from Monday to Saturday. The working day starts between 6 and 8am. Lunch is served between 11:30am and 3pm, and breakfasts are available from 9am. At the times of the day when there are most customers, the vendors of juices and home-made soft drinks usually come to the tables where customers are eating lunch to offer them a drink, which they serve in jugs or individual glasses. Although bottled fizzy drinks are also available, the soft drinks they make from boiling seasonal fruit or dried peaches with water are the most popular, especially in the Achumani market.

The price of a two-course lunch (soup and a main course) ranges from Bs. 10 to Bs. 12 (US\$ 1.44-1.73), while juices cost between Bs. 2 and Bs. 7 (US\$ 0.30-1.00), depending on the size. According to the women's reports regarding their income, the weekly income ranges from Bs. 1,000 to Bs. 2,000 (US\$ 144-290), while daily income is between Bs. 100 and Bs. 300 (US\$ 14-43).

These figures are very approximate because many of the women vendors are not completely sure of their income and the exact profits they make. Most of them feel that they earn enough to cover their different expenses, pay assistants and buy ingredients. A minority simply do not know whether their income is sufficient, and others report that the profit they earn is what they spend on their families and children on a day-to-day basis. Nevertheless, many vendors manage to earn an income that is sufficiently high to be able to take out loans from banks or other financial institutions.

The issue that came up most often in our interviews with the women cooks was the fall in business: the loss of customers and income, as well as increasing competition from places selling food outside the markets. All agree that the number of lunches they sell has gone down. The older women have seen a fall in sales compared to previous years, but even the vendors who started their businesses more recently feel it is difficult to keep going due to the competition. A case in point is a couple who started their business in the Achumani market at the start of 2018; by the end of that year they had closed down their stall. With regard to this, one of the women vendors reported:

"[...] Before, I used to sell a lot and – without exaggerating – all the tables would be full in the morning. I used to sell so much, I would buy a whole lamb for [US\$ 43] plus 10 kilos of beef, seven or eight chickens, we would make two kilos [or] three kilos of falso conejo [...] It all got sold, a huge saucapan of aji de fideo would all be finished. But not now, that's all changed."



Women selling traditional juices at Irapavi food market (Mauricio Panozo/Hivos)

Similarly, other vendors say that in better times they used to sell as many as 30 special or “extra” dishes and about 70 set lunches per day, whereas now they sell 50 or 60 lunches per day and they no longer make the special dishes. Others say they now sell only three quarters the amount they used to sell. Another significant change has been the disappearance of the special dishes they used to serve in the morning. The women vendors associate these changes with the increase in competition, which has become even fiercer in recent years. One of the women vendors stated:

“In the past there was nothing, but now there are small restaurants and fast food places everywhere, and many people go for the fast food as well. There’s a lot of competition now around the market, and there behind as well [pointing towards the river], and there too on the road [pointing to the main road]. People prefer all that fried food, don’t they? and they can [choose from] char-grilled meat, barbecues, roast chicken, fried chicken.”

The customers in the dining areas of the Achumani and Obrajes markets are mostly construction workers, drivers working on public transport, and people who work in businesses and shops nearby. The women vendors see these groups as their main customer base.

The number of construction workers who come and eat in the market dining areas fluctuates depending on the location of the building site and the number of buildings going up.

Usually, the same group of construction workers will come to the market eateries for a week or up to a month and then a different group will arrive. When the building work has moved on to a different stage or a new building has started going up somewhere else, many of them stop coming to the market.

Although in the past the market eateries were one of the main places where construction workers could find food, today there are new options and types of food, from street stalls and restaurants that spring up in garages or shops, to people selling lunches who take the food straight to the workers at the building site. To a certain extent, the women vendors in the market dining areas feel that this is unfair competition, because they have to comply with certain regulations and are subject to check-ups, both by the local government and by the market authorities, while the competition does not have to abide by the same requirements.

Selling food in the market eateries seems to be a great challenge for the women cooks, as they have to keep their prices relatively low, they are up against fierce competition, and the number of regular customers tends to fluctuate. For the women, understanding the motivations and views of their customers could be important for making adjustments to the service they provide.

5. CUSTOMERS' VIEWS AND OPINIONS

The preparatory work with the women cooks revealed that their main concern is the fall in the number of customers and how to improve their business. In this section we present the results of the customer opinion survey that was conducted with the participation of the women cooks.

The customers are mainly construction workers, transport workers or drivers, people who work in shops near the market, and other vendors from the same market. Bank employees and health staff also come to eat in the market. At the peak time of the day for the sale of lunches, the tables are occupied almost exclusively by men, most of whom are construction workers, but a little later it is common to see family groups with children eating lunch in the market dining area.

Of the 107 customers surveyed, half are in the 31-50 age group, a third are younger than 30, and the rest (13%) are 51 or older. Customers come from a wide range of neighbourhoods, which indicates that they see the market dining areas as a good option for eating lunch. More than half of the customers come from the south of La Paz, where the Obrajes and Achumani markets are located, but there are also customers who come from other areas of La Paz, and even from other cities.

About half of the customers surveyed eat in the market dining areas from Monday to Friday. Twenty per cent eat there twice a week, and 15 per cent visit the market dining areas every day, including weekends. According to the women vendors, Thursday and Friday are the least busy days in the Obrajes market, and Monday and Tuesday are least busy in the Achumani market.

Customers take between 15 minutes and an hour to eat, but on average they take 20-30 minutes. Although our sample of customers has gender parity, in our visits to the dining areas we observed more men than women.

The women vendors had suggested the idea that the dining areas could be made more attractive by improving hygiene and cleanliness and the service provided. We therefore

included questions in the surveys to find out customers' views of the service they receive and the cleanliness of the dining area. About half of survey respondents feel that the level of hygiene is good, and the other half say it is average. With regard to the service, about 70 per cent of the customers think it is good, and only 30 per cent say it is average.

Customers reported that their favourite lunch options are *chairo* (beef and vegetable soup), pasta soup and peanut soup for the first course; for the main course they prefer dishes such as *aji de trigo* (wheat and beef casserole), *aji de papalisa*, *pejerrey* (a river fish), *asado*, *sajta*, spaghetti with chicken, vegetable tortilla and *jaconta* (lamb, beef and vegetable stew). Their favourite choices of soft drinks are those made of pineapple, passion fruit and seasonal fruit.

The favourite lunch options reported by the customers are similar to those reported by the women vendors. As far as variety in the menu is concerned, just over half of the customers said that the choices on offer are varied, and a considerable number said that the variety is average (see Table 2).

The majority of customers feel that the combination of dishes and nutritional balance is average, while 40 per cent say that the lunches are well balanced. Finally, in the opinion of the majority of customers the price is good (meaning the lunches are not expensive), while just over a third feel that the prices are average (quite expensive). Opinions on the prices of sandwiches, tea, coffee and juices are more divided: slightly fewer than half feel that the prices are average (quite expensive), about 40 per cent say the prices are good, and 10 per cent say they are expensive.



Family having lunch in a La Paz street (Mauricio Panozo/Hivos)

Table 2. Customers' opinions of the market dining areas and the food (% of responses)

	Good	Average	Bad
Hygiene and cleanliness	46	53	1
Quality of the service	72	27	1
Menu variety	51	43	6
Nutritional balance	39	60	1
Price of lunches	57	37	6
Price of juices, tea, coffee	42	47	11

Note. Prepared by the authors based on survey data.

When they were asked about aspects they thought could be improved in the market dining areas, about half of the customers surveyed mentioned the setting, meaning the infrastructure and the space available (see Table 3). Hygiene and cleanliness were mentioned by 18 per cent of respondents, followed by the quality of the food (17%) and the service provided to customers (13%). Only 6 per cent of respondents mentioned the price as something that could be improved.

Customers also offered their suggestions to the women vendors about changes they could make to improve things. With regard to improvements in infrastructure, customers feel that the space is too small and uncomfortable at lunchtime. Several mentioned the need to refurbish the stalls and expand the seating space, so that customers do not have to eat their lunch with their backs rubbing against each other. They also suggested cleaning and painting walls, windows, floor and ceiling, as well as improving ventilation in the dining area.

With regard to the food, several customers suggested that it could be more varied, and that more meat or fish could be served alongside the rice, potato or *chuño* (freeze-dried potato). Many expressed the opinion that the lunches could be made healthier, by including more vegetables, salads made of raw or cooked vegetables and cereals, for example, or by reducing the amount of fat (especially in soups) and salt. The construction workers have fewer suggestions for how to improve the service and they are also happier with the food; what they are looking for essentially is to eat the largest possible amount of food at the lowest possible cost.

Customers feel that hygiene and cleanliness could also be improved. They mentioned that a lot of food falls on the floor, some corners of the dining area are very dirty, and the ingredients are not properly stored. They suggested some simple changes such as that the women vendors should wear face masks, caps and gloves to improve their image – although the women in Achumani market already do this. Other suggestions are to put bins near the tables for



Fast street food in La Paz (Mauricio Panozo/Hivos)

Table 3. Customers' opinions of things that could be improved

What aspects do you think could be improved?	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
Food	17	17
Dining room setting	46	63
Hygiene and cleanliness	18	81
Price	6	87
Customer service	13	100

Note. Prepared by the authors based on survey data.

customers to throw away paper napkins, and not allowing street dogs into the dining area.

With regard to the quality of customer service, some customers noted that the women vendors sometimes get the orders mixed up, forget about customers, or do not serve them in the order that they arrived. Sometimes the vendors pressure them to hurry up and vacate the seating space. Some respondents suggested that the women cooks should hire more assistants to improve the service customers receive. With regard to the price, the majority of customers are happy with it, although some suggested that all markets should set a standard regulated price.

After carrying out the surveys, we shared and discussed the results with the women vendors. In some areas the women feel that it would be relatively easy to implement the recommendations, but in others they see certain difficulties. For example, in response to the few customers who think that the lunches are expensive, the women vendors say that it would be impossible to sell them more cheaply: the lunches in the market dining areas are cheaper than the food available outside the market, and the space is more

comfortable and cleaner than the street stalls. The women cooks feel that the menus they offer are varied. Although they are willing to make small changes to the food, they do not want to make radical changes because many customers would not like changes in flavours or seasoning, and they would run the risk of losing sales and the money they have invested as a result.

Although from the customers' point of view the way the dining areas are organised may be uncomfortable, the women vendors feel that the space is laid out fairly. Each stall has the same number of tables and benches, which prevents conflicts or problems. From their point of view, solidarity and camaraderie is what should prevail in the dining areas: "We've organised the layout as well as we could, and everyone has a space to sell their food, even though it may only be small." In response to the complaints by customers that they pressure them to hurry up and finish, the women cooks do not give an inch. They insist that customers must vacate their seats as soon as possible, so that new customers have space to sit down and thus keep up their level of sales.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Food supply and demand in Bolivia has changed due to the growing population in the cities who have seen an increase in their purchasing power. Even though diets are changing, eating places such as the dining areas in traditional retail markets conserve many of Bolivia's dietary and gastronomical traditions. Nevertheless, little attention is paid to these eateries. With the increase in new food outlets and changes in Bolivian people's diets and preferences, many of them have been left invisible. Due to prejudices against markets of this type and the women vendors who work there, the important role they play in providing food outside the home, especially for the working classes, goes unrecognised.

Our aim in this research project was to place the voices, priorities and concerns of the women cooks at the centre of the conversation. We therefore went through a lengthy process that involved making approaches, establishing communication, building trust and, finally, securing their collaboration for the research. We will conclude with our thoughts on the lessons we learned by adopting an approach in which the participants guided the research rather than simply being its subjects.

1. Building trust is key

Our first challenge was to break down the barrier of distrust and establish a channel of communication with the women cooks. They are usually distrustful of the establishment, including the government, and have run their businesses and their lives largely untouched by officialdom. The women market vendors have developed a sophisticated, well organised and strict system of self-government to protect their own interests and protect themselves against adversities. The members of the research team belong to a world that is alien to their daily lives; we came up against the women vendors' understandable reluctance to expose their businesses to the eyes of outsiders and the scrutiny of people who are not part of their circle. The mediation of the market leaders known as *maestras mayores* was crucial to consolidate trust. Although our intention was to give a voice to citizens who do not normally have one, it is important to understand that having a voice is accompanied by visibility, and for many actors invisibility is a form of protection.

2. Patience, patience, patience

One of the ways we developed trust was to be patient and accept that, if we wanted the women cooks to take control of the research process, then it had to be done at a pace that fitted in with the time they could spare. The priority for the women vendors is to run their businesses; everything else is secondary. Their working day starts early and finishes late; when they are not cooking they are serving customers or cleaning up. Their spare time is very limited, and we had to adapt to their busy schedules in order to avoid interrupting their activities. The slow process of building trust and adapting to the times that were convenient for the women showed us the importance of perseverance and patience. If the aim is to do research differently, involving citizens in a significant way, it is necessary to invest time and resources flexibly. This is a major challenge, since most projects are under a great deal of pressure in terms of time and deliverables.

3. Research for whom?

Our intention was to take forward a research process which, in its design and implementation, would be useful to the women vendors and serve their own objectives and interests. Having finished the work, we have to ask ourselves whether research is a useful means to promote the interests of these women vendors. In other words, was it only important to us, or to them as well? In our view, the answer is mixed. To start with, the research was seen as something external to their lives, an extra burden to add to their already very busy daily routine, which would not bring any concrete benefits. One woman expressed this very clearly when she asked why it was necessary to do research on something they already know very well from experience. However, once the space for discussion was established, several of the women saw it as an opportunity to reflect and for everyone to learn from one another.

4. The move from evidence to action

The decision to focus the research on customers' views and opinions arose from the women vendors' concern about the viability of their businesses. This led to the most proximate objective of the work focusing on improving their business rather than influencing the debate on public policy. The



Juice kiosk in Lanza food market (Mauricio Panozo/Hivos)

women vendors' response to the survey and customer recommendations suggests that their room for manoeuvre or desire to take action is quite limited. Evidence gathering does not in itself lead automatically to action.

5. An opportunity for public policies

Several of the recommendations made by customers, about refurbishments or improvements to the market infrastructure for example, are much more difficult to implement without a great deal of coordination among the

market traders — not just those in the dining area — and a contribution from the municipal government. Although the markets are on good terms with the local government, the level of trust and communication that would enable this type of building work to be done is not yet in place. Research work like this, which produces evidence with and for market actors, could be an important step towards engaging in constructive dialogue with the state.

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