Delivering healthy diets to Peruvian families through community kitchens

The Non-Communicable Disease Prevention (NCDP) program supports the generation of new knowledge to help inform policies and programs that are low cost but can have a high impact on reducing the non-communicable disease (NCD) burden and improving overall population health in low- and middle-income countries. NCDP funds research focusing on the main risk factors for NCDs: tobacco use, unhealthy diet, alcohol misuse, and physical inactivity.

The challenge

In Peru, a country with dramatic socioeconomic and health inequalities, nearly two-thirds of the deaths in 2010 were attributed to NCDs. Unhealthy diet is one of the four major risk factors for NCDs and obesity is one of its manifestations. In Peru, as in many Latin American countries, obesity and poor nutrition are linked to poverty.

Comedores Populares - community kitchens - are an important channel for providing food to Peruvian families living in poverty. Community kitchens were established in 1978 by low-income women as a community response to the economic crisis and poverty in the country. Today, there are more than 15,500 kitchens in Peru, 5,000 of which are in Lima. Every day, more than 500,000 lunch rations are sold for less than US$ 0.75 each in the kitchens of Lima. Unfortunately, these menus (usually a soup and a dish made of rice and legumes) hardly ever include fruits and vegetables.

In this context, community kitchens provide a unique opportunity to increase the consumption of healthy foods by poor urban families in Peru.

The research

The main goal of this project is to explore options to promote healthy eating habits among poor inhabitants of urban communities who are suppliers and/or consumers of community kitchens in Lima.

This project will combine qualitative methodologies and tools common to public health research, health economics and behavioral economics to explore opportunities and barriers to increasing the availability and affordability of healthy foods in the kitchens. To do so, the team will begin by identifying and describing the main preferences of the women who plan and prepare the meals for the kitchens, and of the consumers who purchase the menus.

The evidence from this research will help design and implement two interventions for promoting healthier diets in community kitchens: one to increase the consumption of fruits and vegetables, and the other to reduce the use of high-fat and high-salt products in the prepared food.

Finally, the team will assess the effects of the interventions and weigh their ability to have large impacts while maintaining cost-effectiveness.

Expected results

The project aims to:

- Improve the nutritional value of meals served at community kitchens;
- expand the emerging field of best-worst scaling, a method for studying food consumer preferences;
- inform Peruvian policymakers on opportunities and barriers to increase the availability and affordability of healthy foods in these kitchens;
- frame new policies on healthy diets that can be applied to larger populations in the country

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