

Project #: HN5512

Name of project: Lenca II, Creating Microenterprises with the Lencas Indigenous Families

Group Name: Rural Savings and Credit Fund Las Minas de Colosuca

Barrio El Mancino, San Sebastian (municipality), Honduras

Story by Lauren Puchowski

Photographs by Russ Powell

Themes: entrepreneurship, value chain, nutrition, sustainability, education, gender justice

Family members in household:

Wife, Rosalina “Rosita” Vasquez, 52

Husband, Jose’ Coronado Melgar (age unknown)

Rosita’s children from previous marriage:

Arnold Antonio, 30

Carmen Sarahy, 28

Sarahy’s daughter Dominique Eiza, 5

Rosita’s children with Coronado:

Jessy Melgar, 22

Fabio Melgar, 20

Technician (Heifer): German Benitez

Entrepreneurial advisor (Heifer): Helsy Gamez

\$1USD = about 25 lempiras

1 Honduran manzana = about 1.7 acres, but may vary

On a recent morning in the spacious front room of Rosalina “Rosita” Vasquez, Rosita and five other women gather around a couple of large tables to mix dough for a day of baking. In the soft light from the large front window, the women scoop ingredients into large shallow wooden bowls, hand-carved from a single piece of wood, called *bateas*. On this particular morning the women are making a kind of toasted cookie that is a traditional sweet, one their mothers and grandmothers made. They scoop corn flour into the *batea* and then add eggs, butter, and oil. They don’t bother to consult a recipe, for they know it by heart.

The women, who include two of Rosita’s daughters, work quickly, up to their elbows in flour. Under their hands, the dough comes together in a rough, shaggy ball; they roll it out with a tool that presses a design of hearts into the top, and cut out the cookies using a drinking glass as a cookie-cutter. They chat easily among themselves: local news, who has been doing what in their neighborhood, a man they know who died the day before.

For the women and everyone raised in this small farming community, it is a familiar scene. For generations, people here have lived on what they could raise themselves, and have, according to the traditions of their people, the Lenca indigenous, shared both the labor and the bounty of farming.

But there are a few significant differences here. For one thing, the women are wearing hairnets, and masks over their mouths and noses. And they are not making a few loaves to feed their families, but hundreds to sell. This is not a few housewives making lunch but a micro-business founded by Rosita and 25 others, mostly women, with Heifer's help. As the group finishes arranging cookies to be baked on metal trays, Rosita, the group's leader, helps them begin the next recipe, a traditional bread called *empanadas*. These are filled with *cuajada*, a local handmade cheese. She watches them work, her smile visible even behind her mask. Business, she says, is good.

Like the others, Rosita was raised in the family tradition of farming. It was a family tradition and a revered way of life for the Lenca, who have long farmed the steep hillsides here in Lempira, Honduras' poorest region. Farming was the only way she knew to reliably feed her family, who subsisted, as her parents and grandparents had before them, on the corn and beans they raised in traditional ways. "My grandfather grew crops on two or three manzanas of land --corn and beans, sorghum and wheat, just to feed our family. He had lots of corn, but no silos--he stored it in the traditional way, in towers made of stacked ears of corn," she says.

Though difficult, farming was always a source of independence, as resourceful families learned to make what they could, and do without the rest. "My grandfather also grew sugarcane, so we never bought sugar. And we made our own soap," she remembers. Above all, farming was a deep wellspring of pride and community, a way of marking the turning of the seasons and celebrating the bounty of the land. Rosita recalls the joyful days of the corn harvest, the lively festivities and the bonfires, her mother dancing traditional Lenca dances and singing the old songs.

But for all that farming was for Rosita and her family, it was not a way to get ahead. Their lives were defined by backbreaking work that allowed them to survive, if barely, but never moved them forward. "There were eight of us children, six girls and two boys," she says. "My father didn't have many boys, so we girls had to work in the fields. I had to learn to grow corn and beans, to bring it back home from the fields, and how to sell it." Their diet was limited to what they grew, with any surplus sold for a little extra money. "Sometimes my father would travel to El Salvador by horse, which took four or five days, and when he

returned he brought money and medicines,” bought by selling bread that the family had made.

With little storage and no savings, the family lived perilously close to ruin. “When I was young, we had one very harsh summer when the crops dried up,” she remembers. “We had to go out and try to find corn to eat. And then the hurricane destroyed the rest. It ripped trees from their roots,” she says, “and dropped them on cattle.” This was Hurricane Fifi, which killed as many as 10,000 people in Honduras, left 350,000 homeless and destroyed many, if not most, of the country’s roads. “It was a time of hardship and misery,” Rosita recalls.

The Lenca people are known for their close family ties and warm culture, and this helped sustain the family during difficult times. “We learned to love others, to treat people kindly, and to share what you have,” says Rosita. But as the family grew, they had few options to support themselves, and so “my sisters got married when they were 15 or 16, and had their own kids,” she says. As the oldest, Rosita left school at 14, “to help my mother,” she says. “It was very hard, but I had to get used to it, because I had no choice.” Rosita has a cheerful, brisk, non-nonsense manner, but her face clouds when she remembers that time. “What I always dreamed, but could never achieve, was to be a teacher,” she says, speaking softly. “There was no money to send me to school. My father could not afford it.”

In 1987 she got married and had two children, a boy, Arnold Antonio, now 30, and a girl, Sarahy, now 28, but her husband did not stay to help her raise them. “Things happen in life,” she says, shaking her head. “He left, and I had to assume responsibilities as a single mother. My parents were always close with me and helped me, and so I stayed with them.” When her children were very young, “I left them with my parents and I went to the city and worked as a maid for several years.” But the work paid almost nothing -- 100 lempiras for 30 days. “And I was mistreated,” Rosita recalls. “If I did something wrong, they would take my wages.” She missed her children terribly, and “I felt bad making my parents take care of my children,” she says. “My father was 69 at the time.” So she returned home.

It was a turning point for Rosita, who took stock of her life and began to understand that if things were to change, it would be because she changed them. “I told my children, we are going to build our own house,” she says. “We are going to be a family.”

She began planning her house on the piece of land next to her parents’ house. “My father gave me materials, but he didn’t help me build it,” she says, and there is not resentment but a hint of pride in her voice. “He did not give me a home, but he gave me knowledge,” the skills she needed to do the job. In Lenca tradition, her brother and many friends in the

community helped. Labor was cheap back then, she says, and they paid carpenters and masons for some of the work, but the family did the rest. Sarahy remembers helping. "Even though we were small, we helped my mother," Sarahy says. "We would carry the adobe and mud, and the bricks." Recalls Rosita, "I dug the foundation. We cut down pine trees and cut them into boards. We built it out of adobe, two rooms, with dirt floors. I climbed up and put on the roof. I did a man's work," she says, and now her pride is obvious.

In 1993, Rosita's father died. Her sister was also a single mother at this point, with one child. With their father's land available, farming was the one good option they had, and so they took it. "My sister and I began to learn to plant corn as our father had taught us," says Rosita. "We planted sugarcane, and learned to harvest and process them. We raised our children together."

Rosita took additional jobs where she could find them to support the family. For a time, she says, "I was an assistant to a doctor. I would help with the vaccines, I would deliver medicines." Even still, these were lean times, as she was sole caregiver and also supported the family. Being a single parent is hard, "especially when you don't know when you are going to get the next dollar," she says. "Sometimes we could not even afford secondhand clothes," she remembers. She drew strength from her tightly knit community. "My friends helped me and supported me. Nurses I worked with gave me clothes and shoes for my children." Even still, she struggled. "There were times when you just feel so lonely. But you find the strength in yourself to go on."

In 1993, she married Coronado Melgar, to whom she is still married today. They had two children together, Jessy, 22, and Fabio, 20, and Coronado became a father to her other children as well. "He has been an exemplary father," says Rosita. "He has taught my kids so much." They raised their children in the Lenca tradition as they had been taught. "What I know, they know," says Rosita. "I have passed on a lot to them. I taught them to respect their elders, to treat people kindly, and to share with others."

Farming continued to provide the families' chief income and support. At that time, a couple of different organizations offered training, financing, and seeds and other supplies to area farmers, and she and Coronado eagerly took the opportunity to improve their work, organizing with others in the community to participate. They realized that working with others made them stronger than they would be on their own. For a time, Coronado was a manager of a farming cooperative. Together with area families, they created a communal bank, which also provided financing.

Although the family's finances improved slightly with these improvements, Rosita's children from her first marriage, Antonio and Sarahy, did not finish high school because the family could not afford it. When Sarahy was 23, she had a little girl Eiza, now 5. Sarahy, too, is now a single mother. In 2014, Rosita recalls, another opportunity presented itself, and again the family pursued it. "We were invited to a meeting, 17 families from my barrio, with Heifer International. We were told there would be an opportunity to establish a program for food security, and that we would be given support with chickens, goats, cows, basic grains, and silage, and also with materials to fix our homes." This was part of a project now called Lenca I, which provided good-quality livestock like cows and poultry as well as training in sustainable production systems, like kitchen gardens, to impoverished indigenous Lenca families.

After that meeting, Sarahy, who had just had baby Eiza, was given a cow. "We were so excited!" says Rosita. The cow that Sarahy received was worth about 20,000 lempiras, or \$1000 -- an amount that would have been impossible for their family to pay at the time. "We still have that cow today," says Rosita. "It is a very good quality cow, so we were able to sell some of the milk, but we also kept some of the milk to drink," which, she says, improved their diets.

It's clear, though, that even more exciting to Rosita than the new income and milk was what happened next. Guided by Heifer, Rosita and her family, together with other women in their community, formed a group to Pass on the Gift of milk and eggs to needy children. Then, they began to use profits from selling those products to provide meals and support for families in the community who had the greatest need. "We also provided meals for children who were underweight," she says. She returns often to this thought as she tells the story of her business--the idea that the enterprise could be not only a source of income for the participants but a source of support for those in the community who needed it most. It is an idea that Heifer reinforced in its trainings with participants, to share with those who had the greatest need. For Rosita, it seemed to have special resonance, and she took it to heart as she built her enterprise.

Rosita and others in the group received additional training from Heifer as part of what Heifer calls a "field school" -- a way to help community groups improve their production and income by providing training in farming, animal raising, and making products to sell from what they grow, like bread and cheese. Heifer's field schools also help participants develop and run small businesses, and help them form groups to run those businesses. "We received training to see what we wanted to produce," says Rosita. Everyone was familiar with baked goods--"Our parents always made bread for us to eat," says Rosita, but the idea

of building a business from it was new. They started slowly. “We began making bread for our families, and selling just a few cookies door to door.”

When these early attempts showed promise, Heifer helped them expand. “Heifer helped us improve our processes,” says Rosita. The women follow sanitation regulations, including hairnets and face masks, and washing everything with a bleach solution afterward. After they learned about the importance of nutrition from Heifer, they developed a bread that used *cuajada* in the recipe, “so that it wasn’t just carbs,” says Rosita. “With Heifer’s help, we were connected to commodities in our own community that we could purchase, like corn, milk, and *cuajada*.” Other ingredients, like beans and wheat, they could grow themselves.

As the business grew, they began to see new potential. “We began to make bread, we made *tamalitos*, we made *pasteles*,” says Rosita. “We saw that we could obtain good profit from that. So then we said, we are not just going to be a field school, we are going to carry out activities to make a profit. And we would have a fund that would not be just to provide food, but to provide economic aid to families.”

They named the business Minas de Colosuca, after the region. “We each had certain responsibilities. We could save 20 lempiras here, 15 lempiras there. We agreed that we would pool these savings to help those members of the group who most needed help,” says Rosita. There are few big stores in her area, so many people buy baked goods and other supplies from small local family-run stores called *pulperias*, or from people who sell door to door. Rosita and the other women were able to do well selling to nearby families. “After a 10-month period, we saw that we had grown quite a bit. We reached a point when we had 1500 lempiras in the fund. At that point, Helys [the Heifer technician who provide business advice to the groups in the project] told us, ‘You have all this money--you could create even more activities, and create even greater profits.’ So we established another goal to save 200 or 300 lempiras at a time, to create an even larger fund. [This is a Rural Savings Bank and Credit, for which the group is in the process of securing legal status.]”

Says Rosita, “Heifer agreed to help us legally establish the fund, and also help us promote our products. We’ve worked hand in hand with Heifer on many things: training in how to obtain our sanitary registry, basic accounting, labeling, and packaging.” In addition to small-business strategies, bread recipes, and organizational skills, Rosita says they were able to rely on Heifer for support and troubleshooting as problems came up. “If we needed any type of information, we could request it from them, and we knew we could count on them to give it to us without delay,” she says.

Today the group consists of 16 women and 11 men, who bake several thousand cookies and rolls a week, preparing recipes in Rosita's front room in rotating shifts, and baking them in a wood-fired oven behind the house. Like many in the area, Rosita used to bake in a traditional wood-fired, dome-shaped oven built from adobe, brick, and concrete built by her husband in a shady spot behind her house. The oven's simple design made it difficult to clean, and it had no chimney, which meant it was messy and unpleasant, even dangerous, to operate. Once it was hot, it would hold the heat for a long time, but because it was so thick, it took a great deal of wood to bring up to temperature.

Heifer provided them with the design and some of the materials for an improved, more eco-friendly oven. Coronado built the foundation for it, and an engineer from Heifer helped them finish it. With a trap for the ashes and a chimney, the new oven was safer, easier to clean, and more responsive than the old one. They also used a thermometer to determine the temperature, a more accurate and consistent method than the traditional approach, of tossing in a green corn husk to see how fast it curled up and burned.

Rosita's husband, who is known as Don Coronado, is in charge of the oven. "It's important to support the group," he says. On this morning, he has lit a fire as he usually does, using dry wood that they have collected from around their home, and within twenty minutes it has reached 450 degrees and is ready to be filled with the pans of cookies that the women carry out to the back. The cookies fill the air with their aroma and emerge in a few minutes, toasted, crispy and delicious. The women bag them in cellophane bags for sale to their neighbors and in a nearby store. Rosita says they often fulfill larger orders for people who are traveling to visit relatives in the U.S. and want to bring a taste of home.

Members of the group are not employees as such, says Rosita; instead, they receive a percentage of the earnings. Each month, the group makes 1500 to 2000 lempiras in profits, which is put into the savings fund and loaned to group members as well as community members. "We loan at 1.5% interest within the group," says Rosita, "and up to 3% outside the group. We have a committee that decides how to loan the money, and when it is to be given to those who need it."

65% of the population in Honduras is estimated to make less than a living wage, or \$3.45/day, and unemployment is higher and family incomes lower in the more remote areas, accessible only by steep, twisting dirt roads. Jobs are particularly scarce in this immediate area. "It is difficult to find work here," says Rosita. "Work opportunities are few."

Mayra Garcia, 38, a member of the group who does its accounting, used to work in a bank, but cannot find work now. "There are no opportunities for work these days," says Mayra. "I find the work this group does very interesting, because it benefits the group economically, and also helps the families. Everyone who is in the group, they have no other income." Mayra lives with her parents and cares for her mother; her brothers support the family and also pay for her eldest son to attend college in Tegucigalpa, where he has excellent grades and is studying to be a doctor. She says that her part of the group's profits help pay her family's expenses, but that she has not been able to save much yet. "Things are very difficult," she says.

"Of 16 women in the group," says Rosita, "nine are single mothers, including my daughter," she says. Some of the group's profits are passed on as *Passing on the Gift*, she says. "It used to be a chicken or a cow, and now it is money that people can use to buy things they need, like pots and pans for their kitchens." That her business is designed to help people is no accident. "Whatever I could not have in my life, hopefully others can have it," she says. "I want to give that opportunity to people, to have a better future. We hope that this business can have a positive impact on the community. There are no job opportunities and our youth is leaving. You cannot help everyone directly," she sighs, and it is clear that she wishes she could.

Sarahy, who is now part of the group, says that she had no job before this one. "Basically, you survive on the things you can make," she says, of that time. "There is no employment. It was very difficult. Since I'm a single mother, the hardest part was trying to feed my daughter. I was only able to do it with the help of my mother. The cow helped a lot, because then I did not have to purchase milk for her."

"I want the business to continue to grow," says Sarahy. "I want to improve professionally, and also to fight for my daughter to grow up well. My mother is such an example to follow -- all that she has done is very important."

Down the hill from the family's house, Jessy helps sell some of the group's products in a store that carries school and household supplies and is also a repair shop for motorbikes, a common form of transportation. The group sells cookies as well as packages of *pinol* that they have made, a drink made from ground corn and spices, which they have named "Inovacion" because it has more nutritious ingredients than traditional *pinol*. Per Heifer's advice, the group also makes and sells large nutritional blocks for cattle, which helps improve the condition of local cows as well as earn money for the group.

Rosita says, "This is a quality block with many ingredients that pregnant cattle need. It will improve the birth rate of cattle. We saw a need for these with the cattle here. The climate is so hot that we need these mineral blocks as a complement to the food, in addition to eating grass. Before, some cattle died, and others were very skinny. So now we have fewer deaths, better births, and almost no sicknesses."

"The municipality here, which works with Heifer, gave the group 5500 lempiras as part of a Passing on the Gift, to help them make these blocks," says German Benitez, a Heifer technician who helps the group. "They spent 5000 lempiras to make the blocks, which they sell at 15 lempiras a pound. "They will make 9000 lempiras in profits," he says.

"Everything we make generates a profit," says Rosita, "but the blocks produce the greatest. You can make a ton of bread, but the profits from it are small. That is why we want to diversify--make many kinds of things."

Rosita says that the most valuable contributions from Heifer were training in sales, which helped her to overcome shyness, and the cooperative training. "For the first time, we organized ourselves," she says. "Most of all, we have the Heifer assessment [the strategic analysis and business plan that Heifer provides the group], which is the greatest tool of all." She hopes to expand her business throughout the whole region, but the biggest challenge is finding markets for their products. With Heifer's help they have participated in artisanal fairs, and they are exploring other ways to sell.

"We began very small, with very little," says Rosita. "A few times we almost gave up when we saw our competition. But we are determined. We are not going to stop." Of her accomplishments, she says, "I'm very happy, because it is something I can do myself. My daughter benefitted from Heifer. We knew we had to give something back."