

## Cooperative Development Program in Paraguay

### Helping Women Become Agricultural Leaders



Claudelina Portillo was the only woman in an elected leadership position in the Guayaibi Poty cooperative in Paraguay. Many of her female friends told her they could not join because the \$3 monthly fee was too high.

Portillo raised the issue with the other cooperative leaders, but they weren't willing to find a solution.

Faced with this resistance, she decided to quit the cooperative and strike out on her own.

### Women-led Cooperative Mocked

When Portillo founded the female-only Paraiso Poty Committee, which produces and exports bananas and pineapple to Argentina, the other cooperative leaders mocked her.

They said that the co-op would fail because it would be made up of women who would just argue with each other.

### Female Cooperative Members Prove Detractors Wrong

Portillo surprised her detractors when she secured a space in the central market in Asuncion and soon after received an award from the Ministry of Agriculture for being the only women's cooperative featured at the central market. The award prize was eminently useful—a piece of banana-processing equipment.

Significantly, the cooperative is achieving large volumes: last year the Paraiso Poty co-op produced 497 tons.

Portillo's success bucks attitudes that women can't be agricultural leaders.

### USAID Program Works to Empower Women to be Community Leaders

With USAID support, ACDI/VOCA's Cooperative Development Program (CDP) works with Paraiso Poty and 15 other cooperatives in Paraguay to build their capacity in order to increase members' incomes and fight rural poverty.

Early on the program established gender trainings and awareness-raising about the importance of women's roles in cooperatives for the board of directors and other elected leadership positions.

Women in leadership positions in co-ops often have a ripple effect—as Portillo is—helping other women increase their financial security and become organizational decision-makers along the way.



# Success Story

## **CDP Provides Key Technical Training to Paraiso Poty**

The Cooperative Development Program began working with Portillo and Paraiso Poty in 2010, aiding in the adoption of Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) and the development of plans to manage and pack the banana production.

As of May 2012, Paraiso Poty had 61 members, a 20 percent increase since 2011. The committee is still small and not yet registered as a formal cooperative, but through CDP's assistance, it expects to be registered with 100 members by 2014.

## **Women in Power, Benefits for All**

Originally all the Paraiso Poty members were women, but nine of the women's husbands have since also joined the cooperative.

This is a significant trend that differs from many cooperative practices where only one member of the household—typically the male—is a registered member and therefore the primary recipient of cooperative benefits. Dual membership of both husbands and wives exemplifies Portillo's vision for Paraiso Poty to become a family-oriented cooperative.

"We realized we need the men to help us, so we are establishing a construction committee for them to lead," Portillo said.

## **Cooperative Looks to Develop Future Farmers with Youth Programs**

Portillo also recognized that young people in the community are less interested in farming than their parents.

To address the need for future farmers, the cooperative established a youth subcommittee and offers free membership to youth members between the ages of 15 and 25.

Through local government support, short-term courses have been offered to the 25 youth members focused on vocational training in hair-dressing, dressmaking and mechanics.



## **USAID Program Builds Local Capacity in Paraguay**

CDP in Paraguay works with small to medium-sized cooperatives that have promising business models but that lack the technical, operational or organizational knowledge to best serve their members.

Approximately 100 men and women from seven of the 16 co-ops have been trained in gender awareness in cooperative development through the CDP program.

*For more information, please visit [www.acdivoca.org](http://www.acdivoca.org).*