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The Sewing Cooperative: Generating Resources by Increasing Production Efficiency: Argentina (GRIPE A) (Case Study)

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CASE STUDY: The Sewing Cooperative  
Generating Resources by Increasing Production Efficiency: Argentina (GRIPE A)

Author Note

This case study was written based on experiences through Northwestern University’s Global Engagement Summer Institute while Rachael was an undergraduate student at Northwestern University.

Background

The sewing cooperative functions within a *casita* (community center) in Villa Elisa, located on the outskirts of La Plata. La Plata is a university town about two hours south of Buenos Aires, where the tragic events as depicted in the movie *La noche de los lapices* (Night of the Pencils) occurred. In this tragic historical event that took place during Argentina’s Dirty War, a time of economic and political unrest in the mid 1970’s, students protested for bus passes, and were ultimately kidnapped by the government (www.fsdinternational.org/country/argentina). The cooperative is made up of three amazing women, and their coordinator. They originally began with a clothing line for dogs, and transitioned into also working on a baby clothing line made up of *pima*, a high quality fabric.

Project Goals

Although we and the cooperative had many ambitious goals to move their venture forward, through conducting strengths and needs assessments it was determined first and foremost that issues with the cooperative’s work space needed to be addressed. Also, with the addition of a new product line, baby clothing, it would be necessary for the cooperative to gain a better understand of the Argentinean market for baby clothes. Our project therefore had two parts. First, we set out to create an organized work space in which the cooperative could more efficiently produce high quality products. We did this by analyzing the differences between the cooperative’s workshop and other successfully established workshops, by evaluating the existing organizational aspects of the workshop, and by implementing strategies learned during our visits to local sewing workshops. Our second part of our project involved conducting project research for the cooperative’s new baby clothing line to better gain an understanding of the current market for baby clothes.

Our Project

Organizational Project

As soon as our team arrived in Argentina, we found out that the government was planning to close the

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casita we were set to work with for four weeks. The community center was funded by the government, so it was set to close along with all other government buildings in the area. We were unaware before we arrived that the casita had already planned to close their doors for two weeks for winter vacation. With the outbreak of GRIPE A (swine-flu) in the country, the government issued a mandatory closure of all government organizations for four weeks, extending the normal winter break by two weeks. Since the casita could not offer any programs for the children and families around Villa Elisa for those four weeks, this limited the type of project we were able work on with the community center. In addition, because many local business owners left the country on vacations during those four weeks, this set our project off to a slower start and created a few challenges for our group along the way. We ultimately decided on collaborating with the women’s sewing cooperative within the casita since the women planned to still come in to work over the four weeks. Working with this group would still be challenging though, because as it turned out, many of the women in the sewing cooperative did not come in regularly most days because they either had no orders to fulfill, they went on vacation, or they had other jobs.

We chose to begin our work with an organizational project because after talking to a staff member, we found that the women in the sewing cooperative had trouble fulfilling larger scale orders, which was a major issue for them. When they received large orders, they tended to have difficulty maintaining quality control, and had little to no systematic, efficient ways to produce their product. We realized the importance of organizing their workspace before we began to work on finding the cooperative new business opportunities or expanding the cooperative in any way. Unfortunately, this type of project required thorough involvement with a majority of the sewing cooperative members to ensure any changes to their space ultimately came from them, and also that they all understood why the changes were being implemented to help the sustainability of any changes made. The women were rarely all together, and rarely at the casita during the four week break, so the organizational process was extremely slow and not always efficient which became frustrating for many group members.

To familiarize our group with organizational best practices from other similar businesses, we began by visiting existing larger sewing cooperatives in Buenos Aires to research how more advanced sewing cooperatives were organized. We met with employees, and took pictures of the way in which they stored and organized their materials, as well as of the layout of their machines. After visiting other sewing cooperatives, we were able to gain a better understanding of what more advanced, organized sewing cooperatives looked like, as well as also learned valuable small “tools of the trade” that would be easy to implement within our cooperative.

Part of organizing the workspace involved creating a more efficient workflow. This involved rearranging the layout of the space, and placing the supplies close to the tables that they would be used at, as well as placing the tables in a more efficient way that also maximized light exposure. In addition, we removed everything from the cooperative’s room within the community center that was not associated with the cooperative, but rather belonged to the casita to give the women more ownership of their space. This helped separate them from the casita as well as give them more legitimacy as a cooperative. We also organized the various bags of scraps and other materials so they could be more easily utilized.

We sorted all of the buttons, zippers, snaps, etc. and placed the various supplies in their respective jars or bags, and labeled everything in both English and Spanish for the women in the cooperative, and for future interns. We also created separate folders to help organize the different types of important paperwork the cooperative needed (a folder for Otro Mercado, a folder for their baby clothing line, a folder for NGO partners, etc.).
We organized all of the finished products for the baby clothing line and the dog clothing line into separate, clear, large plastic storage boxes. Originally the storage tubs in the workshop stored a mix of scraps, unfinished pieces, and finished pieces. We separated the products by size, and recorded the number of each type on the outside of the box, as well as included the date. We numbered all the clear plastic boxes with permanent maker on all sides, and included an itemized list of the contents of each box, and pinned the list to a blue board that hung in the room. Things that were pinned to the blue board were historically “safe” from being moved or lost. We made sure that the permanent maker used could be erased from the boxes using rubbing alcohol if necessary in the future.

When working on the layout of room, we originally wanted to turn the two long wooden work tables in the workshop into an “L” shape to increase the amount of usable space, but after consulting with the women they explained that they needed the tables side by side to more easily work with the larger roles of fabric, so we left them as they were.

The cooperative’s fabric was not stored in a way that helped to best preserve it. The rolls of fabric were standing vertically and were not fully covered, which exposed it to humidity and dust and wrinkled the fabric. We hoped to buy a shelving unit that was long enough to hold even the longest rolls of fabric to enable the fabric to be stored on its side. The material of the shelf was important to consider because of the extreme humidity of the workspace. Ideally, we hoped to purchase metal shelves that were treated to prevent rusting, but found that was very expensive to order custom sized shelves in the treated material, over 3,000 pesos. We ultimately bought two standard sized shelves and placed them side by side to support the full length of all the bolts of fabric. Although this was not ideal since the supports on the shelves made it a little more difficult to take out the larger rolls of heavy fabric, after careful consideration it was determined to be best solution. The individual fabric bolts were wrapped but not completely sealed in a clear plastic, so we wanted additional protection from the dust and humidity, especially since many of the fabrics were expensive and easily damaged. We had a thick clear plastic cover custom sewn to drape over the two shelves and to provide extra protection. The plastic had Velcro sewn down all four corners so that the longer rolls of fabric could be pulled out from the sides of the shelves, and the smaller rolls of fabric could be pulled out from the front to make it more convenient for the women.

A second hurdle with organizing the space was protecting the space itself from the humidity and rainwater, especially since during storms the roof would leak and water would run down particular walls and flood the workspace. It addition, there was not sufficient lighting in the workshop to work comfortably, and some installed light fixtures were not even functional. An electrician came in to assess and fix the electrical problems, as well as a roofer came out and to install membrana (a roofing material) on the edges of the roof directly over the workshop.

To help productivity, we worked with the women to organize the machines in a more efficient way. We placed the machines in groups of two, each machine next to the machine that is used in the next step of the process. The two machines that were used least were placed together further back into the workshop. All three pairs of machines were arranged under light sources, with the most frequently used machine closest to the window where they could get more natural light. The rest of the machines were placed around the room near power outlets.

In the end, we ended up with extra funds remaining so we were able to purchase a few other miscellaneous supplies for the cooperative, and allocated the remainder of the funds to help to pay off the cooperative’s loans they had originally taken to cover start up costs. We also wanted to bring in something to
help combat the humidity, but after further research realized that the options were not sustainable so we decided against that purchase. We looked into anti-humidity packets that could be placed in the compartments in the tops of the clear plastic boxes, but since these packets only lasted for a few months, they would be costly to replace. Another idea was to use an electric de-humidifier, but after calculating costs we realized it would be too costly in the long run because of the electricity, as well as would require additional attention from the woman as it would need to be turned off every time the women left the workshop. Other anti-humidity powders that were available and reusable were decided against since they would take a lot of time to prepare for re-use, and would ultimately not be sustainable.

**Baby Clothing Line**

The second part of our project involved conducting marketing research for the cooperative’s baby clothing line. These products are made of white *pima*, which was donated by a previous intern who may not have been fully aware of the potential implications of his donation. We learned that this type of expensive fabric stains very easily, as well as there is little to no market in La Plata for baby clothes made out of *pima*. Because of the high cost of this type of fabric, the cooperative did not have the funds to repurchase more bolts of material when they ran out of the donation.

There had been no previous research done on any aspect of baby clothing, or the market in Villa Elisa and/or La Plata. We visited various baby stores in La Plata and Villa Elisa and talked to the owners in the various stores. When we visited stores in La Plata, for the most part the store owners were very willing to answer questions as well as allow us to take pictures of their products. We looked into the way the baby clothes were sized, and what types of pieces and sizes sold fastest. We explored which colors sold fastest, and found out that white baby clothing did not sell as well as pastel pink or pastel blue. Most of the baby clothing had cute patterns, animals, or other details. Only one store in La Plata was found to sell *pima*. We looked into what other products sold well in baby stores to see if there were other things the sewing cooperative could potentially make to add to their baby clothing line. We looked specifically for what the women would be able to make out of the scraps from the baby clothing line materials.

We realized for the women’s baby clothing line to be successful they were going to need to add some type of colored embroidery to their product. We compiled a list of various embroidery ideas that the women would be able to add to their current product line. We recorded the other types of baby accessories and toys that sold well in the baby stores that the cooperative could potentially make in the future with scraps. We also compiled a list of possible markets and vendors for the baby clothing line that the next intern could utilize to expand sales.

**Materials for Future Interns**

When we arrived in Argentina, we found that there was a lack of written information to help guide our project. Especially since we did not always have access to the staff at the community center, or the women in the cooperative, gathering information was even more challenging. Luckily, the previous intern extended his stay and his time in-country overlapped with ours. The information he provided for us was immeasurable in how much it helped get our project underway. Because of our experience, we realized how important it was to leave organized and comprehensive written materials for the next intern, especially since we would not be there when they arrived in-country. We left an extensive resource guide regarding the sewing workshop for future interns which included a comprehensive history, contact list, inventory and a list of possible project ideas.
Deliverables

Organizational Project: Building the capacity of the sewing cooperative through research and implementation of organization strategies.

- We visited existing workshops in the surrounding area to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the layout and structure of an efficient workspace.
- We removed items from the workshop that did not belong to the cooperative in order to empower women to recognize the space as their own.
- We cleaned out their assortment of scraps, separated other loaned fabrics from the fabric that belonged exclusively to the workshop, and worked with the women to create a more organized, efficient way of separating and storing their scraps.
- We improved the physical structure of the workspace in order to create a more secure and efficient environment.
- We fixed the flooding issue in the workshop by soldering *membrana* to the problem spots on the roof over the workshop.
- We addressed the lighting issues by having an electrician fix two circuits and plug in a light.
- We researched and purchased the most cost efficient shelving that would be appropriate for both the humidity and the size and weight of the fabric.
- We had a plastic covering made to cover the shelving and protect the fabric.
- We purchased materials to make longer lasting patterns and plastic sheeting to store and protect the new patterns.
- We purchased a dry erase board to be used for teaching purposes, and treated the wood frame on the board to protect against the humidity. We also purchased dry erase markers and ink refills for the markers.
- We purchased flexible measuring tape which we affixed to the side of one of the large tables with clear packaging tape to help improve efficiency.
- We affixed a flexible, water resistant material to the back of the large wooden cabinet to protect against the humidity and dust.
- We reorganized the layout of the workshop into one that produced a more efficient workflow and better utilized the available space.
- We purchased three extra light bulbs for when the three hanging lights burned out, a retractable tape measure, a new permanent marker to write on the boxes, an extension cord for the embroidery machine and fabric roller, and an adapter for the fabric cutter as well as the embroidery machine.

Baby Clothing Line Marketing Project:

- We consulted with the owners of the baby clothing stores in the La Plata area about which styles, colors, brands, fabrics, and sizes of baby clothing had the highest sales rates.
- We compiled a list of various embroidery ideas that the women would be able to add to their current product line.
- We researched relevant information about *pima* cotton, the possibility of future business with a local organic cotton cooperative, and the feasibility of shipping overseas and tapping into the international fair trade market.
**Future Intern Resource Binder:** Compilation of information and resources for future interns.

- We wrote a detailed history of the sewing cooperative.
- We included an extensive contact list, inventory, and future project ideas.

**Sustainability**

The lighting and roofing is fixed, so ideally the sewing cooperative will not have any future costs related to these two areas. The shelving is anti-oxidizing and treated with epoxy, so it will not need to be replaced anytime in the near future and should not be damaged by the humidity. The patterns because they are made on more durable paper and will be stored correctly will not need to be replaced. The cooperative currently possesses more than enough colored thread to add embroidery designs to their baby clothing product line. Two of the cooperative’s current leaders will conduct continued monitoring and evaluation.

Although we worked on the organizational process with the women the whole way through, before we left we made sure to go step by step through every inch of the workshop space to make sure they knew where everything was, and fully understood why things were the way they were.

We purchased three extra florescent light bulbs for the three hanging lamps if any of the three current light bulbs burnt out in the near future. For the dry erase board that we purchased and hung, we left a bottle of extra ink in red, blue and black for when the dry erase markers run out. We treated the wood on the frame of the dry erase board with a special paint to protect it from the humidity, so the workshop should not run into problems with the wood on the dry erase board in the future.

The next intern will be responsible for updating the packet of materials with their contributions for future interns. The women in the sewing cooperative and future interns will be responsible for updating the workshop’s financial books in the future.

**Future Intern Projects**

Future participants can support the sewing cooperative by working on pricing for the baby clothing line. It would also be beneficial for the workshop to have more systematic methods for quality control. A future intern would be able to work on a logo for the baby clothing line, as well as continuing to improve the marketability of the line through additional colors or designs to add to the products.

In addition, we recently found out that there are problems in the summer with bats in the back left corner of the workshop. A future intern can work on sealing up the hole or getting someone to come in to remove the bats.

Future interns can look into other classes that the women might be interested in going to, or for a teacher to come into the workshop. There are currently no other relevant classes offered in La Plata, but there may be in the future.

A future intern would be able to look into getting the electrical cords off of the floor and onto a tracking system on the ceiling. Other more advanced workshops do this, and it would protect the cords as well as clear space on the floor. In addition, a future intern could look into getting someone to come in and fix the broken Singer sewing machines.
One thing we learned was the importance of evaluating projects that had been done in the past to ensure that the group is truly doing a project that benefits the organization, and not a project that is being pushed because the interns are interested in the project. Even though an organizational project was not the most exciting, it was what was most needed by the cooperative to help move them forward.

Another important thing to remember is to adjust to the country and organization’s culture, and to remember that things may not be done in-country the way they are done at “home.” It is imperative to try to keep in mind the viewpoint of the individuals or groups you are working with in-country, because coming from a different culture and background, they may not see things the way you do. It is important to make sure everyone is on board and truly understands why each step of the project is being done, before any parts of the project move forward.

If you are going to a country where you do not speak the same language, it is important to acquire the vocabulary needed for your project as early on as possible, so that you do not have to worry about language barriers as much throughout your work. It helps to keep a written vocabulary list as you are going through your project.

Another thing we learned throughout this project was how much impact the size of the group can have on the project. With our project, it was particularly challenging to have so many group members when there were sometimes only one or two women in the cooperative we were working with at a time, and not always enough work to do for four people. It is important to divide up the project and make sure the scope of the project matches the size of the group. This will help ensure that group members do not feel unimportant or useless in situations.

Lastly, it is important to be aware of the stigma your group may have coming from the United States, as being wealthy and potentially just a bank for the organization. Particularly with countries like Argentina where your money goes a long way with the exchange rate, it is crucial to decide as a group exactly how you plan to discuss your available funds with the organization, so that you use your funds in the best way possible to help implement a project with the organization, and do not just use them to buy things for the sake of buying them.

**Reflection Questions after Reading This Case Study:**

- Our group had the challenge of not enough work to do, while the women in the sewing cooperative were only at the community center for extremely limited periods of time. How would you have handled the challenge of ensuring all group members feel involved and connected to the project and with the women, while not overwhelming and intimidating the few members of the sewing cooperative with such a large group?

- How would you have navigated building relationships with the women in the cooperative with such limited time available to spend with them?

- Knowing the challenging and limitations of the material the women in the cooperative had been using for their baby clothing line, do you think we did the right thing continuing to move forward working with the same fabric (pima)?

- Because of the rumored lack of oversight on other projects in La Plata, we did not want to return extra funds after we completed our project. Do you think we used our extra funds appropriately, or do you think the left over money could have been spent in better ways?

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Based on the work we were able to accomplish, do you think there were any other deliverables we could have given the cooperative or the *casita*?

How much of an impact do you think this project has? Do you feel this project is sustainable?

What would you have done differently with this project?

**Photos**

![Image of the casita](image_url)

*Figure 1. The casita.*
Figure 2. Piece from the dog clothing line.

Figure 3. Piece from the baby clothing line.

Figure 4. The back right corner of the cooperative “before.”
Figure 5. The back right corner of the sewing cooperative “after.”

Figure 6. The front wall of cooperative “before.”
Figure 7. The back left corner of the sewing cooperative “after.”

Works Cited