

Promoting Early Childhood Development through a Public Programme: Wawa Wasi in Peru

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YOUNG LIVES RESEARCH SUMMARY • WORKING PAPER 51

August 2009

In 1993, the Peruvian government created the Programa Nacional Wawa Wasi – a national programme of childcare centres that provide health, nutrition and early education support to promote the development of children ages 6 to 48 months in poor areas. While Wawa Wasi is the largest programme of its kind in Peru, few studies have assessed its impact on the lives of children and their families. According to recent statistics, about two-thirds of children under the age of 5 in Peru are growing up in poverty and a quarter of all under-5s are stunted. The paper describes the acknowledged success and diverse strengths of the Wawa Wasi programme and makes some suggestions to strengthen its achievements to date.

This paper presents the results of a Young Lives study into the impact and perceptions of the Wawa Wasi programme. Wawa Wasi centres address a number of different needs for poor children: safety, early childhood learning, nutrition, health, and parenting practices. Each centre caters for a maximum of eight children who can attend the centre five days per week, and are under the care of a ‘caregiver mother’, who comes from the local community. Each centre plans teaching activities and has toys and learning materials appropriate for children of different ages. At the centres, children receive three meals a day, prepared by a local community kitchen. They learn how to brush their teeth and wash their hands, and are checked for their height, weight, and vaccination status. The Wawa Wasi centres also provide training for parents and caregivers to encourage child-rearing practices that focus on children’s needs. There are three types of Wawa Wasi centres: family Wawa Wasis, where a caregiver mother looks after up to eight children from her community at her home; community Wawa Wasis, where a local authority takes care of up to 16 children; and institutional Wawa Wasis, sponsored by organisations that wish to support a centre. A fourth type of Wawa Wasi, called *Qatari Wawa*, has recently been started for children in poor communities in the Andes.

Overall the programme has higher coverage and greater numbers of enrolled children in urban coastal regions, although poverty tends to be greater in rural areas in the Andes. The programme has recently begun to experiment with several models for greater inclusion of children in rural areas.

For this research, we looked at the developmental levels of the children, specifically their cognitive, motor, and social development. This was complemented by interviews to examine the implementation and functioning of the programme as well as local perceptions of the Wawa Wasi and their achievements. The findings show that people tend to have positive attitudes towards Wawa Wasis, and they are perceived to be a place where the children are safe and have a nutritious diet, which allow their mothers to go work or study without having to worry. However, there is little difference between the motor and language skills of children who have spent six months in the programme and those who have not. In light of these findings, the authors make ten recommendations aimed at helping Wawa Wasi achieve its objectives. These recommendations relate to the training and supervision of caregiver mothers; the availability of materials; health monitoring; encouraging the social recognition of the volunteer management committee; assisting parents in improving child-rearing practices at home; expanding the programme; and evaluating the impact of new models for rural areas.

The Wawa Wasi programme is running well and is well-respected. It is an important state intervention targeting poor children, with coverage enjoyed by no other public or private initiative. Nonetheless, the programme appears to be at a crossroads and needs to re-define its role. While it has largely come to resemble a nursery service to help mothers find and keep jobs, the authors argue that it could be refocused to emphasise holistic care and promote children’s social development at an early age.

