

## COPPALJ

## COOP CARD\*

**Location:** Lago do Junco, Maranhão**Year of foundation:** 1989**N° of members:** 201**Sector:** Family farming cooperative**Key themes:** Women's empowerment, community development, environmental protection

## CONTEXT

In Brazil, inequality is still a major issue, so even though the national 2018 Human Development Index (HDI) was 0.761, placing the country in the high human development group, when the value considers inequality inequality, the HDI falls to 0.574. The loss of 24.5 percent is due to inequality in the distribution of the HDI dimension indices, namely, life expectancy, education and income. Poverty still has a predominantly rural face. If we consider monetary poverty, although rural households account for only 15% of the population, 45% of them fall within the nation's poorest quartile.

The large majority of family farms are in northeastern, southern and southeast Brazil. Family farmers in Brazil produce more than 70% of the food consumed domestically. Under the "Zero Hunger Project" initiated by President Lula in 2003, differentiated policies for family farming were implemented and basic legislation was built for the national food and nutrition security policy. Here, family farming cooperatives have been acknowledged as an important actor to unlock the potential of smallholder producers and to pull rural communities out of poverty

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\*Information collected during a fieldwork carried out in August 2019.

## COOP STORY

COPPALJ (Cooperativa de pequenos produtores agroextrativistas do Lago do Junco e Lago dos Rodrigues) is a family farming cooperative located in the municipality of Lago do Junco, in the Maranhão State, one of the poorest States in Brazil. The cooperative was founded in 1991 by smallholder farmers and babaçu nut breaker women, who are rural workers devoted to collecting and breaking nuts to produce babaçu oil. Before setting up the cooperative, most of the families were involved in fighting against landowners who were jeopardizing their continuity on the land they were used to living and working on. Once they managed to maintain the control over their land, they started their fight to protect the babaçu palms. They managed to pass a municipality law that extends their control over the babaçu palms and guarantees them free access to this natural resource that landowners wanted to destroy to replace with livestock breeding. In addition, a cooperative was set up to enhance babaçu's value and its commercialization. Today, the COPPALJ has 201 members. It transforms babaçu nuts into organic oil, which is sold in local, domestic and international markets. The COPPALJ has also created a network of 8 shops at community level, where members can sell their nuts and buy several items for consumption. This is a mixed cooperative, where both women and men can be members. As women members reported, it took a lot of work and training for women to actively participate in the cooperative management and for men to accept women leadership, and yet there is still a long way to go. The coop is also part of a network of social movement organizations, such as local NGOs, like ASSEMA and AMTR, trade unions and family agricultural schools. Since the coop was set up, the quality of life of the members and their communities has substantially improved in many domains, from nutrition to education and from access to health care to decent housing. Most of all, as they reported, by acting together they have empowered themselves and found their own way to freedom and social justice.

## HOW HAS THE COOPERATIVE CHANGED MEMBERS' LIVES?

- **Wellbeing:** It has improved the wellbeing of their households and communities, by increasing food security and nutrition, access to healthcare and education;
- **Environmental conservation:** It produces ecologically and preserves the Babaçu forests;
- **Gender equality:** It has contributed to change people's mindset about women's role in society;
- **Local empowerment:** It contributes to the empowerment of the community, and more particularly of women and youth.

\*Information collected during  
a field work carried out in January 2019.

## SELECTED QUOTE

"We managed to free babaçu here in our territory. Our life is made of battles, hard work and fights. To be able to deal with everything, the cost of living, sustainability, ignorance, and misunderstanding. This struggle in defence of the babaçu palm tree, our mother, is very important"

Diocina Lopes do Reis – member of COPPALJ



## KEY LEARNING POINTS

- An endogenous process of collective action can give birth to genuine cooperatives, capable of empowering members, transforming territories, and generating innovative models of local development.
- Family farming cooperatives have a key role in improving rural communities' wellbeing and food security.
- Mixed cooperatives, if supported by training on gender equality and other organizations, can be a means for women's empowerment and more inclusive workplaces.
- To become a driver of sustainable local development, it is crucial that cooperatives are part of a network made up of other cooperatives, as well as of associations, trade unions, and other social economy bodies. They should also have a strategy of collective-action to protect the environment and to campaign for public policies.

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