

## Interstate Cooperative of Women Babassu Nut Breakers-CIMQCB

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Logo of CIMQCB

### Introduction

The Cooperativa Interestadual das Mulheres Quebradeiras de Coco Babaçu (CIMQCB) is a cooperative formed by women from forest communities who collect and process babassu nuts in the Brazilian states of Pará, Maranhão, Tocantins, and Piauí. CIMQCB was founded in 2009 (officially registered in 2011) and its headquarters are in São Luís, Maranhão. The cooperative brings together more than 130 women from 36 producer groups.

### Babassu: a plant with multiple uses and qualities

The babassu (*Orbignyaspiciosa*) is a type of Latin American palm tree found in Brazil, mainly in transition areas between the Amazon Forest, *Cerrado* (Brazilian savannah), and *Caatinga* (typical vegetation found in the dry areas in Northeast Brazil). Babassu has multiple uses including the manufacture of edible, medicinal, and ornamental products, cosmetics, and biofuels. Babassu oil is rich in vitamins E and A. It has antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, and cholesterol-reducing properties. Babassu nut is the second non-timber forest product most sold in the country (approximately 120,000 tons are sold per year)<sup>1</sup>.

The main products commercialized by CIMQCB are: babassu nut soap, babassu oil, babassu flour, and handicrafts. The cooperative has its own brand but still lacks the patent. Most of CIMQCB sales occur in regions where its production groups are established. The cooperative has important customers from other Brazilian regions as well, such as the federal government (through the Food Acquisition Program from Family Farms<sup>2</sup>) and [Central do Cerrado](#) in Brasília. Products are also sold to occasional customers through orders by email or phone.

### CIMQCB origins: a historical and autonomous movement

The goals of the cooperative extend far beyond the commercialization of babassu products. CIMQCB has its origin in a historical social movement in the North of Brazil: the Interstate Women's Movement of Babassu Nut Breakers (MIQCB). The main objectives of this movement are to ensure that nut breakers have access to babassu palms, to preserve the babassu plant, and to promote gender equality and sustainable extractive policies<sup>3</sup>.

For over 30 years babassu nut breakers have organized to prevent the destruction of babassu palm resulting from the expansion of land grabbing and monocultures in Maranhão, Tocantins, Pará, and Piauí. Farmers and settlers have been encouraged by public policies to occupy lands in babassu regions, leading to strong restrictions to resource access previously enjoyed by babassu nut breakers.

However, important rights to babassu nut breakers were granted thanks to the actions of MIQCB. For example, Free Babassu Laws have been approved in 17 municipalities in Maranhão, Pará, and Tocantins. Such laws ensure that nut breakers have free access to babassu palms, even on private properties. The origins of this organization are based in local conflicts dynamics,

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<sup>1</sup>Carrazza et al., ISPN, 2012.

[http://www.ispn.org.br/arquivos/Mont\\_babacu006.pdf](http://www.ispn.org.br/arquivos/Mont_babacu006.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Ministério do Desenvolvimento Agrário, "Cartilha do PAA", Asscom MDS, 2012. Web. Consulted in July 2016.

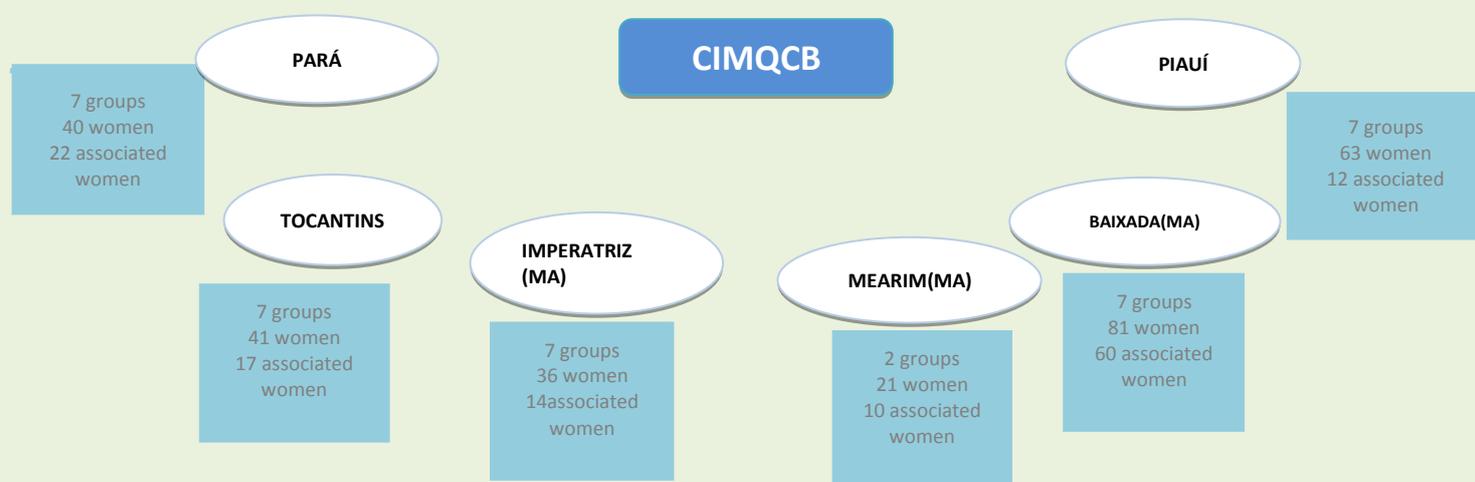
<sup>3</sup>Projeto Nova Cartografia Social da Amazônia, 2005.

which until now have been the basis for production groups that form the CIMQCB<sup>4</sup>.

CIMQCB was created in 2009 by MIQCB in order to increase the economic support for babassu nut breakers and to enhance the commercial part of the movement. MIQCB has financed the cooperative through projects with international donors, which still support some of the activities of CIMQCB (mainly technical assistance). The CIMQCB and MIQCB headquarters are the same, but the cooperative has its own direction and some independent projects. In general, the strategic and political orientation of the cooperative is guided by the MIQCB with respect to, for example, the fight for a minimal price for the babassu nut.

Sociedade, População e Natureza (ISPN) through the Program of Small Ecosocial Projects (PPP-ECOS) funded by the Global Environment Facility, the European Commission, and the Amazon Fund. The PPP-ECOS has supported more than 17 community projects with babassu nut breakers<sup>5</sup>. Most of the projects are aimed at strengthening the organization, promoting technical training, and improving production structures.

CIMQCB's sales to the government through the National Nutrition Programme for Schools and the Food Acquisition Program have also contributed to the development of a market for CIMQCB in Maranhão and Piauí. However, those contributions are still insufficient for sustaining the traditional babassu economy.



Source: CIMQCB Presentation, Interstate Movement of Babassu nut breakers, 2012.

## Network of producers

### Strong allies and partners

Multilateral organizations and government programs have played an important role in the consolidation of CIMQCB. The European Union and the German Development Bank (KfW) were some of the first donors. Currently, the cooperative receives support from the Instituto

<sup>4</sup>Some groups of nut breakers were already organized in cooperatives before the creation of CIMQCB. One example is the Cooperativa dos Pequenos Produtores Agroextrativistas de Lago do Junco (COPPALJ), founded in 1991 in Maranhão. COPPALJ has sold its products to Aveda and since 1995 has had a contract with The Body Shop to sell babassu oil.

## Challenges

### External obstacles

#### Deforestation

The major challenges for babassu nut breakers are increasing deforestation and the lack of control of free babassu laws by local authorities. Livestock, logging, and plantations of soy, sugar cane, palm, and eucalyptus are among the main causes of

Currently, COOPALJ's oil is certified organic by the Instituto Biodinâmico. Source: Cerratinga. "Coopalj-Maranhão", ISPN, n.d. Web. Consulted on 22 of July, 2016. e The Body Shop. <https://www.thebodyshop.com.br/oleo-de-babassu-organico>

<sup>5</sup> Carrazza et al., 2012.

deforestation and forest degradation in that region. The Brazilian Ministry of Agriculture considers the regions of Maranhão, Tocantins, Piauí, and Bahia as the new frontiers of agriculture expansion in Brazil. Other causes of deforestation are the increase of fish farms (which seriously affect water sources) and the use of babassu coal in pig iron and steel industries<sup>6</sup>. The development of these activities has limited access to land, preventing the work of babassu nut breakers. The fact that many landowners defy babassu laws and remain unpunished aggravates this situation.

### Competition

Competition with other babassu oil producers and substitute products poses a great challenge for CIMQCB. Palm oil and coconut oil producers are the cooperative's strongest competitors. Since the 1980s, this competition caused a sharp decrease in babassu oil production in Maranhão, where now only a quarter of the fruit produced is used. Moreover, there are companies that produce babassu oil at a very low price. Regional consumers often prefer cheaper products, although their quality is lower. In general, raw material used for those cheaper products is provided directly by landowners that are not in municipalities under free babassu laws, or by those who break this law. The fact that CIMQCB pays and advocates for a minimal price for nut breakers and invests in training and quality makes its products more expensive. This minimal price is BRL 2.87 per kilogram of babassu nuts; however, other local buyers and intermediaries pay only BRL 1.60 per kilogram. For this reason it is difficult for the cooperative to increase its market share of final products, such as the babassu oil.

### Products of the CIMQCB

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<sup>6</sup>Sources of information on deforestation: interview with Helena da Sila, director of CIMQCB and The Guardian press article (Hill, D. "Future of Brazil's babassu fruit breakers threatened by deforestation", The Guardian, 18 of August, 2015. Web. Consulted in July 2016 <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/aug/18/future-brazils-babassu-fruit-breakers-threatened-deforestation>>)



**Babassu oil and babassu nuts**



**Babassu flour**

Source: CIMQCB

### Internal challenges

#### Legal, Permitting and Licensing

Official registration and legal structuring of production units are major obstacles for CIMQCB. Most production units still do not have a business license. CIMQCB faces many difficulties in obtaining approval for their manufacturing units from the National Sanitary Surveillance Agency (ANVISA). Once ANVISA approves the units, they can easily get business licenses. There are many requirements and rules to be followed by producers in order to complete the regularization process, and CIMQCB lacks resources to comply with official standards. Because of the lack of official registration, the cooperative cannot export its products and has already lost opportunities, such as a contract with French buyers. However, the cooperative has made considerable progress in recent years, and now has a greater

understanding of legal requirements. CIMQCB has also promoted many training courses for producers that focus on the development of quality standards. Still, only a few units have business licenses, mainly in the Piauí State.

### Logistics

Logistics and internet sales are still great challenges, mainly due to difficulties in maintaining a product stock and meeting delivery deadlines. Although the cooperative webpage looks like an e-commerce tool, CIMQCB has no structure to make it work. Each buyer needs to contact CIMQCB by email or by phone in order to plan payment and delivery schedules. Orders are often shipped via transportation companies and mail. Most sales are made locally, at regional fairs.

### Future strategies

Overcoming internal challenges is part of CIMQCB's strategy for the coming years. First, the cooperative intends to invest in the legal structuring of production units. That process would contribute not only to greater access to new markets, but also to the development of existing contracts, such as the one with the Food Acquisition Program obtained by CIMQCB's subsidiary in Piauí. Promoting access to this program by other CIMQCB branches is one of the priorities of the cooperative. Despite being the largest buyer, this program imposes many requirements for producers and pays lower prices than those expected by CIMQCB. Other goals of the cooperative are to create labels with nutritional information and to obtain organic certification. Those are considered important steps to accessing international markets.

### Impacts

#### Environmental Conservation

Extraction of babassu nuts has had many positive consequences for the preservation of babassu palms and the surrounding environment, mainly due to the political influence of the nut breakers movement. Free babassu laws approved in 17

municipalities establish that the preservation of babassu palms must be guaranteed, as well as free access by nut breakers (even without landowners' permission). Thus, it encourages a sustainable extractive economy and prevents local populations from engaging in deforestation activities. In addition, CIMQCB's investment in training and quality products contributes to the enhancement of other non-timber product markets in the Amazon region.

#### Social benefits and income generation

CIMQCB has protected the main source of income for many women from traditional communities living in babassu regions. The cooperative transfers the totality of payments received from buyers to productive groups. Lack of access to data for all of the production groups makes it difficult to estimate the income generated by the cooperative. In the Piauí branch, for example, about 8000 liters of babassu oil were sold in 2015. Sales in Piauí are higher than in other regions due to access to the Food Acquisition Program. Thus, one nut breaker in Piauí can have an income between BRL 1,000 and 2,000 per month (USD 300 -600). In the babassu nut high season, revenue approaches 2,000 per month, but these amounts do not vary significantly during the year.

Not all of the production groups sell their products solely through CIMQCB. They are allowed to have commercialization projects and independent institutional support. Each production group defines its own marketing system. Generally, producers receive money from the cooperative before the payment is made by customers. Today there is financial stability and sufficient cash flow to allow such trade relations. As the babassu nut breakers do not usually have other sources of income, CIMQCB believes advanced payments are the best way of providing support to women. However, some babassu nut breakers still sell their products to other intermediaries in the local market that assure even faster payments, even if the price paid is lower than the price offered by the CIMQCB.

## Benefits for women and traditional populations

CIMQCB and the nut breakers movement have contributed to strengthening the role of women and traditional communities. Encouraging social mobilization and women's economic autonomy within the family have been central steps to the reduction of gender inequality in those communities. Nut breaker groups also promote local actions and campaigns against gender violence.

## Sources

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## Key points

1. Preferred access to school nutrition programs provides a secure market.
2. Challenging federal sanitary and business regulations reduce other market options.
3. Partnerships with foreign development programs were key for organizational development.

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