

Transforming Lives and Landscapes: The Innovative Journey of Fokus Frauen Switzerland and Casa de Maria in Northeast Brazil

Maria Elisa Huber Pessina, State University of Bahia, UNEB (maria.pessina@animaeducacao.com.br); Priscila Cembranel, Educational Society of Santa Catarina, UNISOCIESC (priscila_cembranel@yahoo.com.br); Renata Silva de Jesus, National Network for Teaching Environmental Sciences, PROFCIAMB UEFS (mrsrenatasilva@gmail.com); Raquel Moraes Moser, Federal University of Pernambuco, UFPE (raquel.moser@gmail.com); Felipe Teixeira Dias, Faculdades Integradas Padrão – FIPGuanambi – Afya Educacional (felipeteixeiradias@gmail.com); José Baltazar Salgueirinho Osório de Andrade Guerra, University of Southern Santa Catarina, UNISUL (jose.baltazarguerra@animaeducacao.com.br)

Abstract

This study highlights the case of Associação Casa de Maria, a non-governmental organization located in the semi-arid region of Bahia (Brazil), in partnership with Fokus Frauen, a non-governmental foundation for international development cooperation based in Switzerland. This case presented an innovative approach towards Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 1 (poverty), 2 (hunger), 13 (climate), 16 (institutions) and 17 (partnerships). The experiences enabled learning and strengthening in facing common social problems in the region, respecting the diversity of each group of women and joining their forces to form a network that inspires and supports each other. The case highlighted here contributes to the achievement of SDGs 1 (poverty), 2 (hunger), 13 (climate) and 17 (partnerships), focusing its efforts on strengthening the autonomy of women extractivists in the Northeast of Brazil and promoting cooperative actions and the bioeconomy.

This study highlights the case of Casa de Maria Association, a non-governmental organization located in the semi-arid region of Bahia (Brazil), in partnership with Fokus Frauen, a non-governmental international cooperation foundation for development based in Switzerland. This case presented an innovative approach regarding the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 1 (poverty), 2 (hunger), 13 (climate), 16 (institutions), and 17 (partnerships).

Casa de Maria is an association supporting women in the Territory of Chapada Diamantina (Bahia/Brazil), an impoverished region of Brazil where women's income alternatives usually involve precarious work in the tourism sector.

With the support of Fokus Frauen, a project was created with objectives including: strengthening cooperative actions in the Chapada Diamantina region through a network of women; enhancing the bioeconomy in Northeast Brazil; and increasing the consumption of products from the socio-biodiversity of the Chapada Diamantina region.

The target group for the support of the Swiss Foundation comprises women and young women who are unable to exercise their rights and potential due to discrimination, oppression, and/or poverty. The organizations and projects supported by Fokus Frauen aim to directly and sustainably improve the situation of the women involved in a project and their community.

The foundation's goal in Northeast Brazil, one of the country's poorest regions, is to strengthen the autonomy of women extractivists through their association and organization into cooperatives. This is how the foundation helped to replicate the project experience with the Babaçu coconut breakers in Maranhão/Brazil for the collectors of *Syagrus coranata*, Licuri in Chapada Diamantina (Bahia/Brazil). This exchange of experiences enabled learning and strengthening in facing common social problems in the region, respecting the diversity of each group of women and uniting their strengths to form a network that inspires and supports each other.

The case highlighted here contributes to achieving SDGs 1 (poverty), 2 (hunger), 13 (climate), and 17 (partnerships), focusing its efforts on strengthening the autonomy of women extractivists in Northeast Brazil, and promoting cooperative actions and bioeconomy.

Theoretical Framework

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) encompass a diverse range of themes including eradication of poverty, food security and agriculture, health, education, gender equality, water and sanitation, energy, sustainable economic growth, infrastructure, reduction of inequalities, sustainable cities, sustainable consumption and production patterns, climate change, protection and sustainable use of oceans and terrestrial ecosystems, peaceful, fair, and inclusive societies, and partnerships/means of implementation.

The SDGs strongly advocate for global solidarity that includes all actors (GIL, 2018). Thus, the 2030 Agenda has been implemented through formal and informal mechanisms: traditional donors - such as OECD member countries -, developing countries, official bilateral and multilateral organizations, and non-governmental organizations (GIL, 2018).

In 2015, as part of the 2030 Agenda, the Paris Agreement on reducing greenhouse gas emissions was also adopted, placing the climate change mitigation and adaptation agenda at the center of International Development Cooperation (IDC). The Paris Agreement is a very important piece in the current IDC agenda, as it established a periodic review system on the efforts of all countries to limit temperature rise, as well as financial mechanisms to assist less developed countries in transitioning to cleaner economies.

Recognizing that the impact of environmental degradation and climate change is felt most acutely in developing countries, and among the poorest and most vulnerable people, the OECD argues that this issue should be further strengthened in international development cooperation (OECD, 2020). In this context, the new international cooperation agenda has increasingly focused on themes such as climate change; promoting the energy transition; supporting sustainable value chains; promoting fair trade and social and ecological sustainability in global supply chains; protection, conservation, and sustainable use of forests; Sustainable Infrastructure; biodiversity (Pessina & Kraychete, 2020).

In Brazil, especially in the Northeast region, specific materials from the Brazilian flora can create opportunities for the design and development of products (Cerveira et al., 2022), establishing a new paradigm of production and consumption capable of empowering and generating income for local women (Abd Kadir, Hashim & Halid-Khalid, 2022).

This is crucial because there is no standard for social policies, and variations are significant in the forms of state intervention in social structures (Pereira, 2010). These policies offer certain benefits (services, taxes, laws) and provide a measure of social security regarding health, physical and intellectual integrity, education, housing, and employment. However, the complexity arises due to the diversity of contexts and regional specificities. In the case of Brazil, the development of partnerships is essential to deal with problems resulting from resource scarcity, promoting solidarity, and acting with the support of foundations

and third-sector organizations (Rocha & Tavares, 2014).

Brazil has a culture rooted in stereotypes that can function as a space for reproducing inequalities and prejudices. In this context, domestic burdens related to women continue to perpetuate gender inequalities and hinder their full financial development. Tavares and Delgado (2011) observe that, even if policy formulators, implementers, and/or managers incorporate the gender concept, this does not necessarily translate into ensuring gender mainstreaming to promote women's empowerment. For this reason, both national and international partnerships are important, especially for income generation targeting this audience (Ayatakshi-Endow & Steele, 2021).

In the Brazilian context, Fokus Frauen - a foundation that operates in non-governmental international development cooperation - contributes to strengthening the autonomy of women extractivists by establishing a network in Chapada Diamantina (Bahia/Brazil), in addition to strengthening the bioeconomy and sustainable value chains (Lima & Nolasco, 2015). This network has assisted in addressing the socio-economic challenges of the region, marked by strong gender inequality, violence, and the expansion of monocultures.

The network encompasses various representative communities of extractivist women, including peasant, indigenous, and quilombola communities, and has proven effective in combating poverty (SDG 1) through the economic inclusion of women; fighting hunger (SDG 2) through the revival of traditional eating habits; combating climate change (SDG 13) through the strengthening of agro-extractivist practices as an alternative in a region that has been suffering from the expansion of traditional agribusiness and mining; and finally, in mobilizing additional financial resources for developing countries from multiple sources (SDG 17).

Methodology

This case study highlights the history of international partnerships through the promotion of associations and cooperatives, drawing inspiration from successful experiences with Babaçu coconut breakers and Licuri collectors (fruit of a palm species). The approach includes the exchange of experiences, strategic reflection, counseling, and external evaluation. The project's monitoring involves quarterly reports and regular meetings for information exchange and visits by the project coordinator to Casa de Maria, a partner of Fokus Frauen.

Results

The outcomes achieved by Fokus Frauen include the strengthening of the autonomy of women extractivists, environmental preservation, notably income generation, and the creation of a women's network in Chapada Diamantina, as well as the stimulation of the bioeconomy.

Regarding SDG 1 and SDG 2, the project fosters income generation through the acquisition of licuri coconut, promoting its commercialization and valorization in the development of the productive chain, with the women's network engaging in cooperative action for the commercialization of the coconut and its by-products. Additionally, SDG 13 serves as a goal for resilience in communities, maintaining the palm trees untouched, consequently leading to environmental preservation actions and the conservation of the caatinga biome.

Particularly about SDG 17, the project was facilitated through the creation of multisectoral partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology, and financial resources to support the achievement of sustainable development goals.

This project went beyond project financing or resource transfer. The partnership, built horizontally between the Swiss and Brazilian institutions, contributed to transforming the local reality through intercultural learning between the Global South and Switzerland, contributing to the search for new perspectives for post-colonialism.

Due to Fokus Frauen's networked approach, encouraging and empowering its partner organization in the implementation of its projects and strategic institutional development, in this relationship, the foundation contributes to Casa de Maria through strategic reflection, experience exchange, counseling, and external evaluation. It is a participative cooperation without hierarchical bases, where project monitoring is based on close cooperation with Casa de Maria, quarterly reports, regular meetings for information exchange, counseling, and reflections.

Discussion

The international cooperation between Swiss and Brazilian institutions stands out for valuing historical awareness and connecting them through an understanding of these connections with global issues, addressing post-colonial issues and social inequalities. Intercultural exchange and the stimulation of active participation in local development issues occur through the sharing of experiences between both institutions.

This relationship is distinguished by promoting greater cooperation and institutional development by global standards.

Intercultural dialogue becomes a tool for managing diversity between countries. This exchange of information and participation in local development issues through the sharing of experiences between both institutions in the project allows for alignment in practices, strengthening of bonds, and an increased learning experience for those involved in the partnership (Bossu, 2021).

Thus, in the long term, the creation of a network in Northeast Brazil of various women's collectives is envisioned. This initiative is understood as an innovative measure for the socioeconomic development of the region, characterized by patriarchy, recurrent violence, and the expansion of monocultures and agribusiness. Therefore, innovation emerges through the exchange of experiences of diverse collectives and the integration of regions in Northeast Brazil. It is not just a network of Babaçu or Licuri extractivists but a network of women extractivist institutions.

Thus, these women, for instance, work towards improving the nutritional quality of their foods (Sales et al., 2018) and engage in the production of panels and crafts using Babaçu waste (Machado et al., 2017). In the case of Licuri, activities include extraction for the cosmetic industry (Santos et al., 2023) and the production of cereal bars (Brito et al., 2018). In this way, by being involved in the creation and implementation of these initiatives, they enhance their livelihoods and contribute to the development of an even more significant impact in the context (Olaniran & Perumal, 2021).

This support network strengthens and empowers women by supporting and valuing the work of these women, whose culture is tied to their territory and nature, and is a sustainable measure for economic development and the protection of the caatinga in Northeast Brazil.

Conclusions

The case of Fokus Frauen highlights the importance of practical actions in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Strengthening the autonomy of women extractivists, creating networks, and promoting the bioeconomy in Northeast Brazil demonstrate the applicability of the principles of SDGs 01, 02, 13, and 17. The partnership between Fokus Frauen and Casa de Maria contributes innovatively to

the socio-productive inclusion of women, aligning with the ideals of global sustainable development.

The initiative illustrates how the practical implementation of projects can positively impact multiple Sustainable Development Goals. Empowering women involved in extractive activities goes beyond providing economic independence; it also contributes to reducing inequality (SDG 01) by empowering a group often marginalized.

The creation of networks represents a significant step towards building sustainable and resilient communities, addressing hunger (SDG 02) by promoting sustainable agricultural practices and reviving traditional eating habits. Additionally, by promoting the bioeconomy in the region, Fokus Frauen is contributing to mitigating climate change (SDG 13), offering alternatives to environmentally harmful economic practices.

The strategic partnership between Fokus Frauen and Casa de Maria underscores the importance of collaboration between local and international organizations to achieve common Sustainable Development Goals. By aligning practical actions with the ideals of the SDGs, this innovative partnership not only addresses urgent local issues such as gender inequality and the expansion of monocultures but also contributes to global Sustainable Development Goal 17, promoting international cooperation and mobilizing diversified resources to drive sustainable progress.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the FAPESC, FAPEMIG, CNPQ. This article has been produced by Group from the Federal University of Santa Catarina, GREENS - Research Group on Energy Efficiency and Sustainability from the University of the South of Santa Catarina, Faculdades Integradas Padrão - FIPGuanambi Afya and Programa de Pós-Graduação em Desenvolvimento Social - UNIMONTES. Universidade do Estado da Bahia - UNEB. Centro Universitário SOCIESC - UNISOCIES. Federal University of Pernambuco (UFPE). Universidade Salvador - UNIFACS.

References

- Abd Kadir, N., Hashim, H., & A. Halid-Khalid, F. (2022) Identifying Challenges Faced by Women Entrepreneurs in The Rural Areas in Malaysia using A Nominal Group Technique. *Asian Journal of Entrepreneurship*. <https://doi.org/10.55057/aje.2022.3.4.1>.
- Atyatakshi-Endow, S. and Steele, J. (2021), "Striving for balance: women entrepreneurs in Brazil, their multiple gendered roles and Covid-19", *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship*, Vol. 13 No. 2, pp. 121-141. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJGE-09-2020-0142>
- Bossu, A. (2021). Interculturality and Agility in MOOC Design: The MOOC Step by Step Project. MOOCs and the Participatory Challenge. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-67314-7_5.
- Brito, F. A. et al. (2018). Produção agroindustrial de barra de cereal de Licuri. *Cadernos Macambira*, 3(2), 43-45.
- Cerveira, R., Prado, N., Pettan, K., & Cunha, C. (2022). TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND RURAL EXTENSION (TARE): EVALUATION OF PUBLIC SERVICE PROVIDERS IN BRAZIL. *Agricultura Familiar: Pesquisa, Formação e Desenvolvimento*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.18542/raf.v15i2.10542>.
- Gil, Carlos Gómez. (2018). Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible (ODS): una revisión crítica. *Papeles de relaciones ecosociales y cambio global*, (140), p. 107-118.
- Kurowska-Pysz, J., Wienchor, D., & Woźnikowski, J. (2021). Identification of Values Shaping Inter-Organizational Relations on the Example of the Project The Metropolitan Theatres Night. *Cultural Management: Science and Education*. <https://doi.org/10.30819/cmse.5-2.09>.
- Lima, C.C.U., Nolasco, M.C. (2015). Chapada Diamantina: A Remarkable Landscape Dominated by Mountains and Plateaus. In: Vieira, B., Salgado, A., Santos, L. (eds) *Landscapes and Landforms of Brazil*. World Geomorphological Landscapes. Springer, Dordrecht. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-8023-0_19
- Machado et al. (2017). Painéis aglomerados fabricados com resíduos do coco babaçu. *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Agrárias*, 12(2), 202-209.
- OECD (2020). Six decades of ODA: insights and outlook in the COVID-19 crisis", OECD Development Co-operation Profiles 2020, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/2dcf1367-en>.
- Olaniran, S., & Perumal, J. (2021). Enacting Community Development Principles in Women Empowerment Projects: a Case Study in Ondo State, Nigeria. *Global Social Welfare*, 8, 151 - 158. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40609-021-00210-x>.
- Olusegun, O. O., Oyelade, O. S. (2021). Access to justice for Nigerian women: A veritable tool to achieving sustainable development. *International Journal of Discrimination and the Law*. Volume 22, Issue 1, March 2022, Pages 4-29 <https://doi.org/10.1177/13582291211043418>

- Pereira, P. A. P. (2010). Mudanças Estruturais, política social e papel da família: crítica ao pluralismo de bem-estar. In: SALES, Mione A.; DE MATOS, Maurício Castro; LEAL, Maria Cristina (Orgs.). Política Social, Família e Juventude. 6 ed. São Paulo: Cortez, Cap. 1.
- Rocha, F., & Tavares, M. (2014). PROJETO MULHERES DA PAZ: uma mirada de gênero. Revista de Políticas Públicas, 18, 293-305. <https://doi.org/10.18764/2178-2865.V18N1P293-305>.
- Sales, et al. (2018). Evaluation of the quality of babassu coconut almond from Anapurus - MA. Revista Brasileira de Gestão Ambiental, v. 12, n.3, p.01 - 05. Retrieved from: <https://www.gvaa.com.br/revista/index.php/RBGA/article/download/6311/6031/32637>
- Santos, S. D. J. et al. (2023). Potencial do uso do licuri para o processamento de produtos cosméticos. Anais do XII SIMPROD. Retrieved from: <https://ri.ufs.br/handle/riufs/18416>
- Steven D. (2018) History and prospects: the pathfinders for peaceful, just and inclusive societies. Retrieved from : https://cic.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/pathfinders_history_and_prospects_23apr18.pdf
- Van Houten, K., & Edgar, A. D. (2023). Peaceful, Just, Inclusive? Unpacking the SDG 16 Agenda. Sustainable Development Goal 16 and the Global Governance of Violence: Critical Reflections on the Uncertain Future of Peace. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003291121>