

## Brazilian Women Get New Lease in Life Planting Flowers

Contributed by Geovana Pagel  
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The life of 21 impoverished women from the interior of the northeastern Brazilian state of Paraíba started being transformed six years ago. Dissatisfied with their misery and the hunger that affected their families, they discovered a powerful weapon against the lack of opportunities: planting flowers.

With great determination and work, the women from the city of Pilões, 130 kilometers away from state capital João Pessoa, managed to establish the first Floriculturist Cooperative of the State of Paraíba (Cofep).

According to the president of the Cofep, Maria Helena Lourenço dos Santos, it took three years to get the essential loan so as to establish the greenhouses for the planting of chrysanthemums. "We took our project to be analyzed by many banks. But we had nothing to present as guarantees, nobody would give us credit," she recalls.

While waiting for somebody to support the initiative, they participated in courses about cooperativism at the Brazilian Micro and Small Business Support Service (Sebrae) and in training courses about flower cultivation. The loan was only granted in 2002, thanks to the Cooperar project, a partnership between the World Bank and the government of the state of Paraíba.

The counterpart was the work of the cooperative members. "We spent ten months working on the construction of the flowerbeds and of the greenhouses without earning a cent. The money, around US\$ 32,000, was all invested in infrastructure and in the saplings," recalled Maria Helena.

So as to complete the difficulties, the women had to face the dissatisfaction of their husbands and children, who complained about their absence and about the lack of financial return.

"Nobody believed that the group made up just of simple women like us could be successful. What saved us was the union and the determination for the accomplishment of this dream," she evaluated.

Today, flower production generates, for each producer, between one and two minimum salaries a month (about US\$ 100 to US\$ 200). In all, production totals around 600 packets of flowers a week, in 9 wooden greenhouses and 9 metal greenhouses, whose construction was completed with funds from the National Program for Agricultural Farming (Pronaf Mulher), started by the Bank of Brazil at the end of last year.

Apart from the market of Paraíba, they also sell to the state of Pernambuco. "There is only poverty when there is lack of courage. Only rain falls from the sky," stated Maria Helena.

### Awards

The success story of the floriculturists from Paraíba has already generated awards. The Sebrae Woman Entrepreneur Award for the Northeast was given to Karla Paiva Rocha, the cooperative's treasurer, on March 8th, in Brazilian capital Brasília. Karla travelled to Switzerland to learn about the novelties of floriculture and about Swiss entrepreneurs.

On the 23rd of June, the cooperative won the first place in the 3rd Innovative Social Experiences Award, in the Female Voice - Northeastern Meeting of Innovative Social Experiences, in Recife.

The award is given by the World Bank, with the support of Global Development Learning Network (GDLN), which is a Norwegian/Dutch fund that supports inclusion of activities of the kind in the operations of the World Bank.

Other partners in the award are the Fund for the Support of Small Projects, the Bank of the Northeast, the United Nations Development Fund and the United Nations Environment Program.

Around 100 projects were registered for the award and they underwent a triage to select 27 (three from each state of the Northeast). Of these, four were selected as the best in the whole region. "It is a matter of great satisfaction to know that our history serves as an example and is awarded for this," stated Maria Helena.

The US\$ 3,000 award will be used in the construction of a head office for the cooperative. The space will include one classroom to be used for the development of a digital inclusion project within the Solidary Sebrae Program.

The children of the women who are members of the cooperative will have computer lessons. The room will also be used for cooking lessons, and talks about sexual education and hygiene.

## Logo

With the support of the Sebrae, which offers assistance in the area of logos and package design, they developed the Flores de Pilões logo, which has already been advertised in two fairs that the floriculturists participated in: Fiaflora ExpoGarden, in Brasília, in May, and the Hortitec fair, in Holambra (a large flower production hub in the southeastern Brazilian state of São Paulo), in the month of June.

Still this year, through the Bank of Brazil foundation, the Cofep should receive a car, with air conditioning, appropriate for flower delivery in the region.

"Our target is to increase production and to start planting roses and green plants outside the greenhouses," guarantees Maria Helena.

## Contact

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