

Brazil Uses Bamboo Handicraft to Generate New Jobs

Contributed by Cláudia Abreu
Thursday, 26 October 2006

A sustainable development program in the bamboo productive chain is contributing to the improvement of the quality of life of various poor families all around Brazil.

Since it was created, in 2001, the Project for Development of the Bamboo Cycle in Brazil, coordinated by Bambuzeria Cruzeiro do Sul (Bamcrus), has benefited over 2,000 people.

Around 30 cooperatives of producers are currently working with the raw material, each participant receiving over one minimum wage per month. The cooperative members produce from coat hangers to Japanese style fences.

The work with bamboo began in 1981, when Lúcio Ventania, the company director, started researching the natural fibres in the country and their application in handicraft. It did not take long for him to find bamboo.

The plant, considered sacred by the Chinese and used in the production of furniture in Asia since 684 b.C., grows very well in the country. "Various species that grow well in different Brazilian states provide applications in various areas," explained Ventania.

According to him, the most common kinds of bamboo are green bamboo, imperial bamboo, common bamboo, bucket bamboo and Chinese bamboo. All these species are of Asian origin and were brought to the country by Portuguese immigrants.

"Brazil also has other native varieties, locally named carnaúba, cana-brava, taboca, taquara, taquari and taquaraçu, which are still little explored for handicraft. Each species has its own characteristics. There are different sizes, thickness, forms, colors and resistances," explained Ventania.

After the initial research and the insertion into the world of handicraft, in 1999 Ventania established Bamcrus. Two years later the company became a civil society organization of public interest (OSCIP), a non-profit making organization with national scope, and started coordinating the Project for Development of the Bamboo Cycle in Brazil.

In this period, important partnerships were established, among them agreements with the Brazilian Micro and Small Business Support Service (Sebrae) in various states, technical service and rural extension institutes, city halls, organizations connected to the catholic church, private sector and also with Avina Foundation, a Swiss organization established in 1944 to help in the development of sustainable projects in various countries.

Bamcrus then started identifying impoverished communities interested in developing activities with bamboo, training laborers and organizing cooperatives. One of them is Bamji, which produces and sells eco-products made out of bamboo. The cooperative was established last year, in the city of Contagem, in the southeastern state of Minas Gerais. There, a group of 30 people from Vila Dom Bosco is producing bamboo fences inspired on Japanese design.

According to Cássio Vinicius Alves, a Bamji technician, the cooperative has already developed 13 models of modular fences. The modules are 2 meters long and the height may vary from 80 centimeters to 2.10 meters. Production is in the Japanese style. Nails, screws and glue are not used. "The structures are tied with high resistance polypropylene thread. For finishing, three coats of varnish are applied," he finished off.

The fences are generally sold for the landscaping and decoration projects in the states of Minas Gerais and São Paulo, in southeastern Brazil, and in the south of the country. "We are not yet exporting, but I believe that the product may be well accepted abroad. Up to now, everything we produced has been sold, we are working practically without stock. This is a sign that there is market for the product," stated Alves.

Bamboo generates income in the Southeast and Northeast of Brazil
Bamboo, quilombola
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Bamboo

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Amazonas

Another group that is working with bamboo is Bambuzeria Amazônia, in the northern Brazilian state of Amapá. Set up by the residents of quilombola communities (originally settlements of escaped slaves), the company was established in September last year and specialized itself in the production of coat hangers.

According to Carolina Rolim, the sustainable development project consultant, 12 people work on production in the factory. "The whole of the produce is sold," she said. The group produces around 1,000 coat hangers a month.

The products, designed by Bamcrus, are the Bambuzeria Amazônia cash cow and may be found in decoration product shops in the North of the country. But the intention, according to Carolina, is to enter new markets in Brazil and, in the future, to export.

The European Union is included in the list of potential customers. "For this, we need to increase the number of artisans. Our plans include offering more courses for the training of bamboo production masters," she explained.

The coat hangers made by Bambuzeria Amazônia, like the products made by Bamji, are also produced without the use of nails, screws and glue. Varnish, however, was left out, being replaced with carnaúba wax.

"The products are made by hand with bamboo that has had its fibres tempered with fire, avoiding the attack of pests and

guaranteeing the durability of the products," stated Carolina.

In honor of the region, the coat hangers are given the names of Amazon rivers. The models are: Araguari, Amazonas, Matapi and Oiapoque.

In the state of Amazonas, apart from the Bamcrus partners, other companies support the program, like Apel, specialized in the area of project management, and the Council of Afro-Descended Communities in the State of Amapá (CCADA).

According to Carolina, bamboo growing was not very common in the region. Introduction of the culture was the responsibility of Bamcrus. The acceptance, however, was good.

"There is a significant volumes of raw material and lack of activities for the people in the region, so the project is important," she concluded.

For the time being, the company is producing with species originally from Asia that have been grown in Amapá, but research on local varieties, like taboca, found abundantly in the region, is at an advanced stage.

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