



Organisation

Grande Sertão Cooperative

Country

Brazil

Product

Fruit pulp

Best practice

Promoting social and economic benefits  
by conserving nature

# SUMMARY

## THE STORY OF GRANDE SERTÃO COOPERATIVE

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Grande Sertão Cooperative is an organisation of family farmers in Brazil. The cooperative uses agro-ecological methods to produce fruit from cultivated trees and native forests managed by the farmers. About 1500 farming families in the region are members of the cooperative, which makes a significant contribution to improving the living conditions of the local population and, at the same time, to conserving natural resources.

### **The reality of Grande Sertão**

Grande Sertão is in the north of the south-eastern state of Minas Gerais. The north of this state, which is on the border of the caatinga (scrubland) and cerrado (savannah) regions of the country, has a varied pattern of ecosystems. Rural communities that have been present here for around three centuries have developed agricultural systems adapted to local ecosystems and used resources in a sustainable way. However, “economic development” of the region, beginning in the 1970s, was characterised by the introduction of large monocultural plantations of eucalyptus. This process excluded local communities, which suffered the social and environmental impact of “development” in different ways.

### **How it all started**

The work that led to the creation of the Grande Sertão Cooperative can be traced back to the mid-1980s, when the North Minas Centre for Alternative Agriculture (CAA-NM) was founded. CAA-NM helped the region’s farmers to organise themselves, strengthened their political participation, recognised the value of their culture and encouraged agro-ecological practices.

The first phase of the work involved building contacts with the farmers, introducing the technology and beginning the marketing of produce. This phase began in 1995, with the construction of the fruit pulp factory near the town of Montes Claros. From the beginning, the co-operative concentrated on harvesting fruit from traditional agro-ecosystems.

The second phase focused on improving the technology, organisation and marketing aspects of the work. The main steps in this phase were the creation of a micro-company and the production of goods for the formal market. The third phase was one of consolidation and included the creation of the Grande Sertão Cooperative.

### **On the way**

Grande Sertão received support from various organisations, the government and international development agencies. These partnerships were crucial in helping it to achieve the results we now see.

The Grande Sertão Cooperative's work currently involves 1500 families from approximately 150 communities in more than 20 of the region's municipalities. These numbers are increasing every year.

Eight of the sixteen species used to produce frozen fruit pulp are native to the caatinga and cerrado ecosystems. The cooperative also produces other traditional foods from the region, such as honey, sugarcane products and seeds from local oil-producing plants.

### **What was achieved**

The Grande Sertão Cooperative's success in organising, producing, marketing and generating income has helped to conserve the natural resources of North Minas.

Grande Sertão has processed around 1000 tonnes of fruit to produce approximately 500 tonnes of frozen pulp. It has generated an average income of R\$ 50 (approximately US\$ 25,00) per family per year. However, some farmers have managed to obtain almost R\$ 3,000 (approximately US\$ 1,500) from a single harvest. This is a high income for rural North Minas.

As the fruit trees have increased in value, the communities that benefit from them have taken steps to protect them, either by planting new trees in order to recover degraded areas or by managing the remaining ecosystems in a sustainable way. They have also taken political action to protect and recover their own land and areas from which they extract forest resources.

Grande Sertão's work has had a positive impact on the local communities, for example, Abóboras, Água Boa, Vereda Funda and the Americana and Tapera settlements.

### **Useful lessons**

It has proved important to organise the local communities and develop production and marketing. Success in these aspects has promoted environmental conservation, mainly because of the way that the farmers use native species for the sustainable harvesting of fruit.

Another essential factor has been the willingness of communities to fight for their rights, mainly for their right to the land they have traditionally occupied. As the traditional communities of

North Minas have become politically and economically stronger, they have contributed to building a more equitable and sustainable development model.

Grande Sertão has demonstrated, in practice, that it is possible to combine social and economic development with the conservation of natural resources. The income generated by farmers and the recognition given to the value of traditional culture has increased the self-esteem of the communities. The region's population has increasingly become an active protagonist in the struggle for a fairer and more environmentally friendly social, political and economic model.