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REVISTA BRASILEIRA DE GESTÃO E DESENVOLVIMENTO REGIONAL
V.21, N°2, Mai-Ago/2025 | Taubaté/SP - Brasil | ISSN 1809-239x

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Received: 09/06/2024
Accepted: 05/13/2025

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ABSTRACT

The açaí production chain offers an inclusive economic opportunity for rural Amazonian communities, and it has a growing market, especially internationally. However, the intense commercialization dynamics surrounding the fruit have generated pressures that threaten the biodiversity of the Amazonian forests where it is harvested. Addressing the sustainability challenges in açaí production permeates structural and public governance issues, while also engaging with locally developed strategies. This study explores the experience of the communities of the Bailique archipelago, in Amapá, which were organized through the Community Protocol, and sought international cooperation for development (ICD) with a strategy to unprecedentedly certify the management of açaí by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). This study aimed to investigate, from the perspective of local actors, whether the ICD implementation in the certification process respected the principle of protagonism of local actors and supported the sustainability of açaí production in communities. The methodological approach of the research was qualitative, guided by action research. The results indicate that the organization of communities in the community protocol was a key element for local interests to guide and allow balanced relationships in the cooperation process.

Keywords: Açaí. Sustainability. International Development Cooperation. Community Protocol, FSC Certification.

RESUMO

A cadeia produtiva do açaí oferece uma oportunidade econômica inclusiva para as comunidades rurais amazônicas, com um mercado em crescimento, especialmente o internacional. No entanto, a intensa dinâmica de comercialização do fruto tem acarretado pressões que colocam em risco a biodiversidade das florestas amazônicas onde o fruto é coletado. O enfrentamento dos desafios da sustentabilidade na produção de açaí perpassa questões estruturais e de governança pública, mas também envolve as estratégias desenvolvidas localmente. Este artigo explora a experiência das comunidades do arquipélago de Bailique, no Amapá, que organizadas por meio do Protocolo Comunitário, buscaram a cooperação internacional para o desenvolvimento (CID) com estratégia para ineditamente certificar pelo Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) o manejo do açaí. O objetivo foi investigar, na perspectiva dos atores locais, se a execução da CID no processo de obtenção da certificação respeitou o princípio do protagonismo dos autores locais e apoiou a sustentabilidade da produção de açaí das comunidades. A abordagem metodológica da pesquisa foi qualitativa, orientada pela pesquisação. Os resultados alcançados indicam que a organização das comunidades no protocolo comunitário foi elemento-chave para que os interesses locais fossem orientadores e permitissem relações equilibradas no processo de cooperação.

Palavras-chave: Açaí. Sustentabilidade. Cooperação Internacional para o Desenvolvimento. Protocolo Comunitário, Certificação FSC.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2015, açaí has been the highest-value non-timber plant-based extractive food product in Brazil. (IBGE, 2022). The Amazonian states, especially Pará, are the largest producers. The açaí production chain represents an inclusive economic opportunity for rural Amazonian communities, which are the main açaí producers (Superti, Pinto, Cialdella, 2021). The regional market is the major consumer, followed by the national and international markets. However, the latter registered the most significant growth (CONAB, 2021).

The expansion of the international market has deepened the global links of the production chain and required constant improvement of products and specialization of the agricultural sector in the Amazon. The representative increase in national and international demand has stimulated monoculture (açaization), loss of biodiversity, and generated structural changes in the region's floodplain forests (Freitas et al., 2021). The increase in the dynamics of financialization of the production chain tends to aggravate these processes (Neves Fonseca, Lima, 2024). Moreover, it is important not to overlook the climate emergency, which has been exacerbated by the sharp

rise in deforestation rates in the region and, on an international level, by Brazil's environmental commitments under the Paris Agreement (2015) and the Glasgow Climate Pact (COP-26, 2021).

The challenges posed by the intensification of açaí production present a duality that requires careful consideration: while açaí cultivation has promoted economic inclusion and improved living conditions for local communities (Cialdella et al., 2022; Superti, Pegler, Araújo, 2018; Pepper & Alves, 2016), it also poses a real threat to estuarine forests. In native environments, the açaí palm relies on the forest and its pollinators to maintain productivity. (Campbell et al., 2018). Therefore, intensifying production without considering the ecological aspects can lead to a cycle of environmental degradation that tends to compromise the sustainability of the value chain.

Thus, although the high demand for açaí and its integration into global value chains represent promising opportunities, establishing sustainable production and fostering economic development in the region depend on additional organizational, structural, and productive variables. The presence or absence of public governance through inductive, infrastructure, and regulatory policies assumes a decisive aspect, especially concerning the family producer, who once again runs the risk of being trapped by the historical logic of exclusionary and unsustainable exploitation of Amazonian products, as signaled by Brondizio (2008).

Furthermore, community-built response initiatives stand out for their potential to generate locally rooted solutions and foster social innovation. This study discusses one such experience that the communities of the Bailique archipelago in Amapá developed. Through the establishment of collective consensus, the articulation of shared interests, and the planning of their territorial development trajectory via the community protocol, these communities actively sought international cooperation for development (ICD), within the framework of Brazil-Germany cooperation, to certify the sustainability of their açaí production and gain market recognition.

By the late 1980s, under pressure from environmental movements and international debates, ICD began to explicitly incorporate environmental concerns, including preservation and sustainability. One of the most important milestones—reinforcing the need for new paradigms for the 21st century (Sachs, 2015)—was the publication of the Brundtland Report in 1987. The document introduced the concept of sustainable development (World Commission on Environment and Development,

1987) and represented a turning point for part of the international community in recognizing the importance of integrating environmental considerations into development strategies. Furthermore, the 1992 Earth Summit—United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED)—Required heads of state to commit to environmental responsibility and reinforced the need to prioritize environmental sustainability within the IDC agenda. The conference resulted in key international frameworks, including Agenda 21, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

Although insufficient to contain the environmental crisis, the commitments and strategies adopted by national and international actors have triggered transformations in the global economy, reshaped market dynamics, and established shared responsibilities in the field of environmental management. While these ties reflect the imbalances and asymmetries of the international system, national and local actors, governments, and international and transnational corporate actors have turned to international cooperation as one possible avenue for addressing environmental issues.

This study contributes to the discussion on the role of ICD in promoting environmental sustainability, focusing specifically on the sociobiodiversity value chains of the Brazilian Amazon. The guiding research question was: From the perspective of local actors, what role has international development cooperation played in achieving FSC certification for açaí management within the context of the Bailique Community Protocol in Amapá?

The methodological approach was qualitative and guided by action research. The techniques included field notebooks, focus groups, questionnaires, and document analysis, in addition to a review of specialized literature. The case[1] study focused on the international cooperation initiative implemented within the scope of the Bailique Community Protocol, which led to the pioneering Forest Stewardship Council[2] (FSC) certification for sustainable açaí management.

1 This expanded case study is part of the doctoral dissertation of the second author, conducted within the Graduate Program in Public Policy at the State University of Ceará (UECE).

2 The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) is a non-profit, non-governmental organization that sets standards for forest management and accredits certification bodies to conduct audits. FSC certifications are globally recognized as the gold standard among environmental certifications due to their comprehensive scope, rigor, and international recognition (GONÇALO et al., 2024).

This study presents the results, organized into three sections in addition to the introduction and conclusion. The first section offers a brief reflection on international development cooperation, followed by an outline of the research methodology. In the third section, we contextualize the community protocol and present the field research results on the role of international cooperation in enabling açaí forest management certification.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

ICD emerges as a systematic practice only after World War II (Pessina, 2017). In that context, industrialized capitalist countries faced two interconnected challenges: the rise of the Soviet Union, which offered an alternative political and economic model, and the process of decolonization. Both the countries still struggling to end colonial rule and those that had already gained independence, such as Latin American nations, aspired to industrialize. Central capitalist countries needed to support the advancement of peripheral countries to prevent them from aligning with socialist ideologies or pursuing more autonomous strategies outside the Western sphere. (Santos Filho, 2005).

Thus, first the United States, followed by Western European powers (which were losing their colonies) and Japan, began allocating resources to peripheral countries through international development cooperation. To systematize these efforts, driven by national interests but also shaped by Cold War dynamics, an international development cooperation system was established, with the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as the coordinating body. It is important to emphasize that such resources never reached the scale or intensity required to drive structural transformation in peripheral societies. However, in some cases, these resources contributed significantly to the development of social, institutional, and economic sectors, as exemplified by German cooperation with Brazil. (Cervo, 1994).

ICD has undergone several phases, including revisions of its overall objectives and implementation procedures. The revisions stemmed from both domestic and international factors. Domestically, since funding primarily came from taxpayers, donor countries faced internal pressure to use resources more effectively in line with national interests, or risk having those funds withdrawn. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge the emergence of *constituencies* and professionals

genuinely committed to the development of peripheral countries (Lancaster, 2007).

From an international perspective, peripheral countries criticized IDC for its instrumental, rather than solidaristic, nature. Its objectives focused more on opening markets and creating technological dependency than on genuinely promoting development. Strong critiques argued that IDC served as a tool to impose donor countries' worldviews, since many supported projects aimed to implement solutions designed by developed countries with little participation or input from the recipient countries (Milani, 2012). Thus, cooperation was often practiced *top-down*, limiting project effectiveness by overlooking local realities and failing to foster local ownership.

An alternative to the *top-down approach* is South-South Cooperation, which emphasizes horizontality and solidarity (Ayllon, 2014) among nations facing similar challenges. Despite heavy criticism, IDC has become an important form of interaction between countries, governed by a set of agreed-upon rules that coordinate its activities, typically through the OECD.

Another important development in IDC was the integration of environmental issues. Since the mid-1960s, the environmental movement, which first strengthened in developed countries, has begun to challenge the unintended consequences of development in general and industrialization processes in particular. This movement led to the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972, followed by other significant conferences and conventions, such as the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Earth Summit), as well as key documents like the Brundtland Report (1987), the Millennium Development Goals (2000–2015), and the Sustainable Development Goals (2015–2030), among others. These negotiations reflect the incorporation of sustainability into the UN development agenda and brought the need to integrate environmental considerations into international cooperation agreements (Alves, 2015; Koehler, 2015).

IDC is not inherently positive and requires concrete analysis. The term "sustainable" development also carries widely debated controversies (Martine & Alves, 2015) Therefore, without dismissing the inherent contradictions of international cooperation, one can argue that, from the perspective of international norms guiding IDC in the 21st century (Pessina, 2017), two key elements must be included: environmental sustainability and the active participation of local actors.

Therefore, the critical analysis of IDC becomes the broader object of study and justifies the present case study. In other words, one cannot assume that all IDC efforts genuinely aim for the sustainable development of countries in the Global South or that they prioritize and enable local actors' leadership, although such an approach is undoubtedly desirable. What our study seeks to clarify, from the perspective of local actors, is whether IDC, in the process of obtaining FSC certification (an outcome of the strategies articulated in the Community Protocol), respected the principle of local leadership and supported the sustainability of açaí production in the Bailique communities.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH AND RESEARCH STRATEGIES

The results and reflections presented in this study stem from a broader project[3] that encompasses research, knowledge co-creation, technology transfer, and capacity building. The methodology was based on participatory action research, which involves direct engagement with the studied reality through reciprocal collaboration between researchers and participants, marked by non-hierarchical interaction. This methodological approach guided the selection of strategies and techniques used in the research, which form the basis of each part of this article.

The discussion on ICD started from non-systematic research in the specialized literature. The most substantial phase of data and information collection took place during fieldwork, which relied primarily on two research techniques: focus groups and questionnaires, complemented by field notes and document analysis.

Fieldwork took place in three stages: in May 2023, a focus group was conducted with the board of the Bailique Agroextractivist Producers' Cooperative – AMAZONBAI, in Macapá; in December 2023, a second focus group was held with local leaders in the Arraiol community during a field visit to the Bailique archipelago in Amapá; and between June and July 2024, questionnaires were administered to cooperative agroextractivist members. Although the certification process under analysis was locally led by the Association of Traditional Communities of Bailique (ACTB), we chose to conduct the focus group with the cooperative's board because both community leaders

3 This is the "Inov'Açaí" project – Co-construction of knowledge, innovations, and public policies for the sustainability of community-based production in the Amazon Bioeconomy. The project is funded by Public Call no. 38/2022, Amazônia +10.

and current ACTB representatives identified AMAZONBAI as the main holder of institutional memory and continuity of the process..

The questionnaire, with a broader scope, included four questions relevant to the discussion in this study. The first aimed to identify, in an open-ended and non-leading manner, which cooperative members had participated in the cooperation agreement. Only those who answered "yes" proceeded to the next three questions. The following two, also open-ended, asked for the name of the cooperation project and the entity responsible for it. The final question addressed the type of relationship established between the community and the cooperation agents. It was a multiple-choice question and assessed the direction of participation flows (*bottom-up/top-down*). The instrument was administered to 43 randomly selected açaí producers who met two criteria: being cooperative members and not serving on AMAZONBAI's board. Considering the population size of 143 members, the sample was set at 30%, reaching the confidence level and the maximum margin of error of approximately 5%.

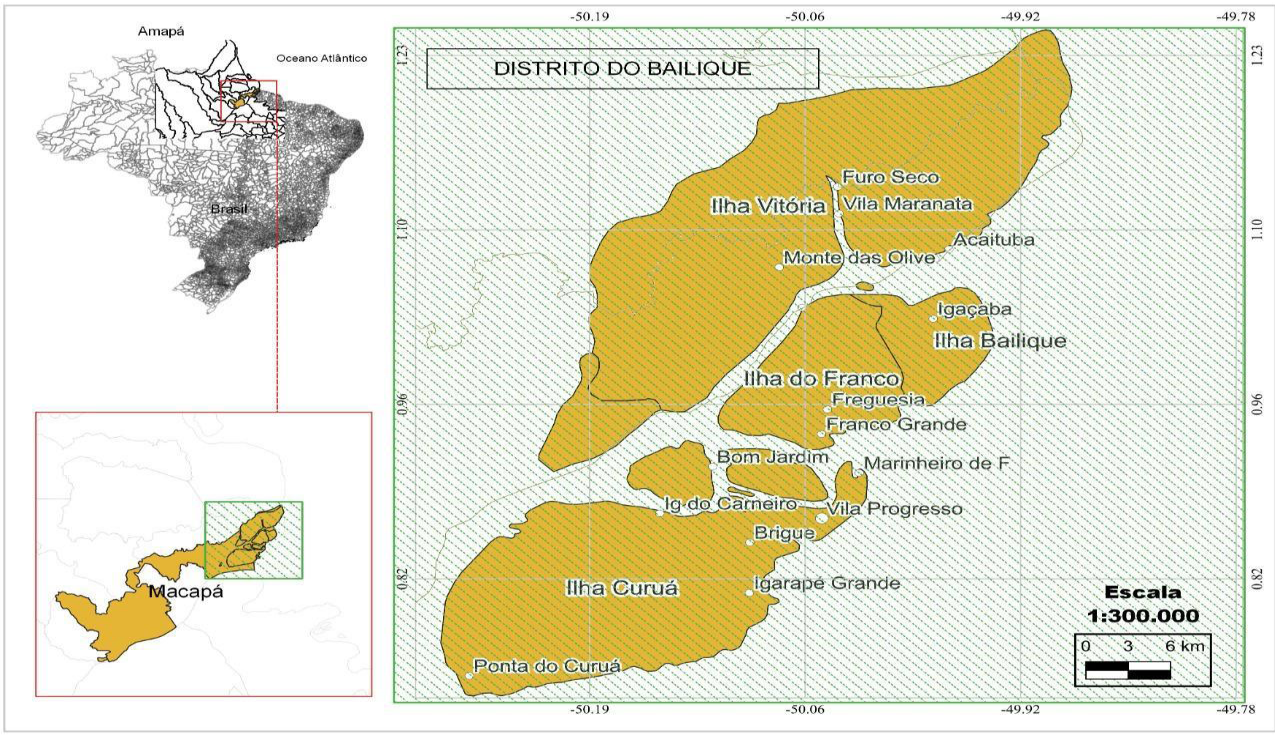
The focus group technique was conducted in separate meetings with the cooperative's board and community leaders, with no overlapping participants. This method enables the collection of information by generating discussion through prompts and targeted questions, while allowing researchers to observe group interactions, facilitating an understanding of the perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes that emerge during conversations on specific topics (Trad, 2009). The meeting with the board included the cooperative's president, four directors, and two secretaries. During the visit to Bailique, the focus group included 16 community leaders, both cooperative and non-cooperative extractivists. The field notebook was produced during the December visit to Bailique, and the documents analyzed were reports from the cooperative.

By adhering to the ethical standards of research, including informed consent, anonymity of participants, and approval by the Research Ethics Committee, the chosen methods and techniques enabled the triangulation of information, data, and diverse perspectives. The results of this process are presented in the following sections.

LOCAL PROTAGONISM IN INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN BAILIQUE.

The Bailique Archipelago consists of eight estuarine islands and a stretch of mainland. It is a district of Macapá, the capital of the state of Amapá, located 200 kilometers away at the mouth of the Amazon River. Access to the region is by river, requiring a 12-hour journey from Macapá. Figure 1 below shows the location of the archipelago.

Figure 1 | Location of the Bailique Archipelago area, Macapá/AP



Source: Adapted from IBGE (2016). Credit Elaboration: Josiel R. Guedes (2022).

The Bailique Archipelago is home to approximately 10,000 people living across 51 communities, according to the Bailique Community Council (CCB). The population's livelihood primarily depends on the agroextractivism of açaí and other non-timber forest products (NTFPs), as well as fishing, animal husbandry, and subsistence farming. These are riverside communities that maintain traditional ways of life. Each community has its internal organization (community associations), and they also organize collectively through bodies such as the CCB and the Z-5 Fishers' Colony (Field Notes, 2023).

Local culture is deeply rooted in traditional knowledge. A significant number of midwives, healers, and spiritual practitioners are part of the community (Bailique Community Protocol, 2014). Traditional knowledge also shapes the organization of the local economy, especially in artisanal fishing and the harvesting of non-timber forest products such as açaí. The management and harvesting of açaí occur communally and are passed down through generations. This activity not only ensures food security but, according to community leaders, currently represents the primary source of income for families (Focus Group, Community Leaders, 2023).

Despite its natural and cultural wealth, the archipelago faces significant challenges. Basic infrastructure is limited, with restricted access to health, education, and sanitation services. Poor transportation hinders the flow of goods and residents' mobility. Communities also struggle with irregular electricity supply and limited telecommunications coverage (Field Notes, 2023). Moreover, climate change and human activities threaten the fragile ecological balance of the archipelago. These include the phenomenon of "landfalls"—an accelerated erosion process affecting riverbanks and islands that causes large portions of land to collapse, driven by both natural and human factors, along with overfishing and illegal logging. These environmental pressures directly impact the local populations' subsistence, as they rely heavily on natural resources for their livelihoods (Souza et al., 2020), even though the Macapá municipal master plan recognizes the Bailique district as part of a Sustainable Development Zone.

In 2013, the communities of Bailique decided to implement the community protocol in response to their many challenges, which were stimulated by the Grupo de Trabalho Amazônico (GTA) The GTA, a key player in the process, was created in 1991 and operates in the Brazilian Amazon through eighteen regional offices in the nine states of the Legal Amazon. The network was established when the Pilot Program for the Protection of Tropical Forests in Brazil was implemented. It is composed of other organizations that defend the rights and interests of traditional populations and indigenous communities in the Amazon.

According to Monteiro (2018), the logic of the community protocol is based on the Nagoya Protocol, which addresses access to genetic resources and the fair and equitable distribution of benefits arising from their use. The Nagoya Protocol was established during the tenth Conference of the Parties (COP-10), held in Japan in 2010, as a complement to the agreements of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). A total of 130 countries, including Brazil, are signatories to the Nagoya Protocol.

According to Article 12.3 of the Nagoya Protocol, signatory states must support the development of community protocols that regulate access to traditional knowledge related to genetic resources and ensure the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from such use, in a way that respects the way of life of Indigenous and traditional communities. This provision aims to fulfill the CBD's objective of protecting the rights of communities as holders of traditional knowledge in benefit-sharing arrangements. The treaty specifically proposed the protocols to mediate relations between the private sector and communities regarding access to traditional knowledge for commercial purposes (Monteiro, 2018).

The Bailique Community Protocol stands out for its unique features. It goes beyond access and benefit-sharing to include territorial management, improved sustainable harvesting techniques, optimized production strategies, strengthened community values, transmission of traditional knowledge to younger generations, and sustainable development of local economic potential.

Described as a social innovation initiative in the Case Report on the *Big Push* for Sustainability in Brazil by the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the Bailique Community Protocol aimed to address structural inequalities in the archipelago by empowering local leaders, fostering a sense of belonging, encouraging stewardship of the territory, and strengthening traditional knowledge. In this context, the Protocol is presented as a transformative tool that challenges conventional paradigms and promotes new, community-driven models of income generation (Agostini & Ramos, 2020). It also served as a mechanism to protect community rights by safeguarding biodiversity resources, associated traditional knowledge, and territorial integrity.

The project that led to the creation of the Bailique Community Protocol was developed by the national and regional branches of GTA, with the participation of Oficina Escola de Lutheria da Amazônia (OLEA[4]), the Bailique Community Council, and the Bailique Fishermen's Colony Z-5. Public entities such as the Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation (EMBRAPA) in the state and the Amapá Institute for Rural Development contributed occasionally in supporting roles. The work began in October 2013 and engaged 34 communities across the archipelago (Bailique Community Protocol, 2020). To coordinate community representation in managing and implementing the protocol, the Association of Traditional Communities of Bailique was established in 2015.

4 The Oficina Escola de Lutheria da Amazônia (OLEA) is a non-profit civil society organization based in Manaus that develops participatory, educational, musical, and socio-environmental projects.

The development of the Protocol marked a period of intense engagement, recognition of differences, frequent conflicts, and collective construction among the communities. They gathered to discuss their aspirations, needs, differences, and opportunities for territorial development. According to community leaders who participated in the focus group, the decision to strengthen collective organization discouraged some residents who disagreed with the communal strategies. Sustaining participation and engagement throughout the protocol's implementation emerged as one of the main challenges (Focus Group, Community Leaders, 2023). Over the three years of its construction, the protocol addressed three key thematic areas: community organization, strategies for engagement with external actors and public policies, and the development of productive chains and certifications (Alves & Ramos, 2019).

Within the third thematic area, the feasibility study on productive chains conducted during the Protocol identified açaí as one of the local biodiversity products with strong economic potential for the communities. To strengthen this value chain and ensure its sustainability, two key strategies emerged: The pursuit of mechanisms that recognize and value the collective production efforts and the organization of producers into a cooperative (Focus Group, Community Leaders, 2023).

The communities chose certification as a strategy to add value to local production. However, as Costa and Beitum (2020) note, they sought a model aligned with the principles and goals established in the Community Protocol. Given its proximity to institutions supporting the protocol's implementation, the Institute for Forest and Agricultural Management and Certification (IMAFLORA) was invited to present information about certification schemes, their processes, and possibilities. Among the available options, the FSC model stood out for features that aligned closely with the protocol.

According to Auld et al. (2008), social movements, environmental organizations, and NGOs created the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) in response to growing concern over forest degradation and the failure to establish a legally binding global agreement on forests, particularly during the ECO 92. Founded in 1993 in Toronto, Canada, the FSC emerged through the efforts of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), environmental NGOs, timber traders, Indigenous groups, and forest worker organizations. Today, its headquarters are located in Bonn, Germany. The FSC certification is widely regarded as the most rigorous and respected standard for sustainable forest management. Its credibility stems from a comprehensive set of criteria that address not only environmental conservation but also the protection of local communities'

rights and workers' welfare.

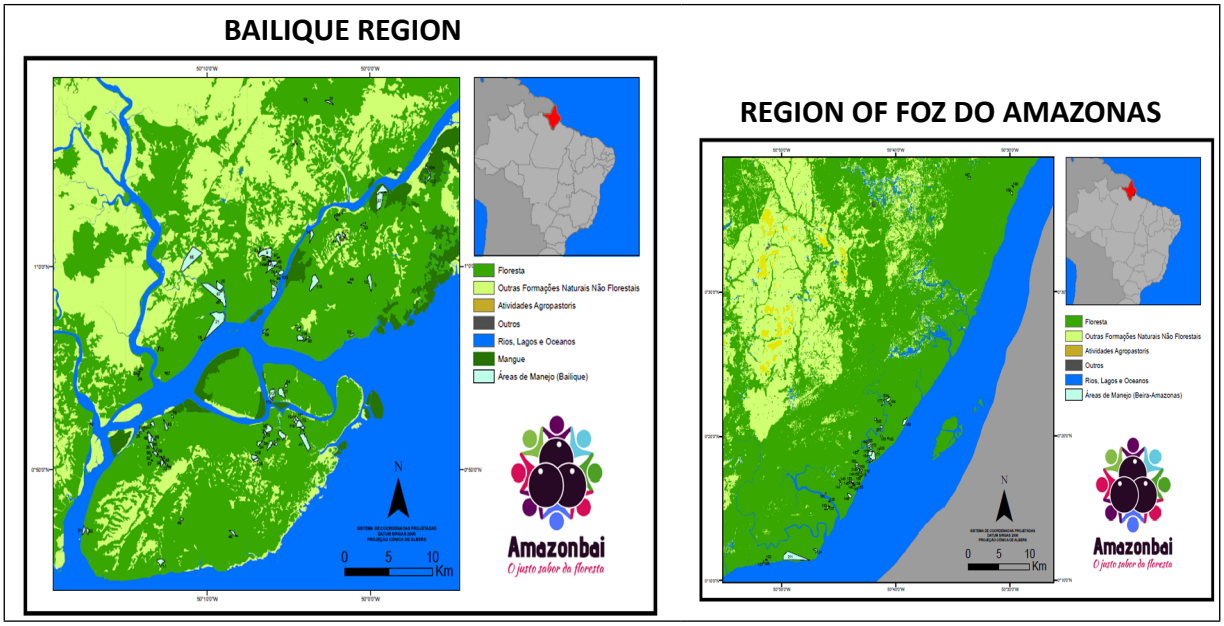
The FSC certification aligned with the principles of the Protocol primarily through its social commitments. By recognizing community rights and traditional knowledge, the FSC encouraged active participation in forest resource management and aimed to strengthen community cohesion. It also respected traditional practices by integrating local knowledge into forest management strategies for environmental conservation. Moreover, the FSC's global acceptance in environmentally conscious market niches further reinforced its relevance (Auld et al., 2008; Gonçalves, 2024).

At that time, the FSC primarily certified timber products and had only begun expanding its scope to include non-timber forest products. The Bailique initiative marked the first certification of sustainable açaí forest management, granted to the Association of Traditional Communities of Bailique in 2016 (Focus Group, AMAZONBAI Board, 2023).

In 2017, the Bailique Agroextractivist Producers' Cooperative – AMAZONBAI – was established. Emerging from the Protocolo Comunitário and inheriting the FSC certification, the cooperative adopted the same territorial development approach, according to its board. Building on prior experience, AMAZONBAI pursued additional FSC certifications—specifically, chain of custody for açaí and certification for carbon stock maintenance and biodiversity protection. These aimed to enhance the environmental and social value of the açaí produced in the archipelago and to access markets willing to pay a premium for sustainable, community-based products. Today, AMAZONBAI supplies both national and international markets (Focus Group, AMAZONBAI Board, 2023).

Currently, the cooperative includes 143 members across 23 communities. Since 2021, it has expanded into agro-industrial processing and broadened its operational territory and the number of communities involved in forest management, incorporating the Foz do Amazonas (Beira-Amazonas) region. This area also drew on the Bailique experience to develop its own community protocol. According to AMAZONBAI reports (2022), in the Bailique region, 89 FSC-certified producers manage a total of 2,080.19 hectares. In the Foz do Amazonas (Beira-Amazonas), 42 certified producers, along with the area managed by the Macacoari Agroextractivist Family School (EFAM), cover an additional 1,384.39 hectares.

Figure 2 | AMAZONBAI Forest Management Areas



Source: Cooperativa AMAZONBAI (2022).

RESULTS

The process to obtain FSC certification for açaí management received support from the Brazil-Germany Cooperation for Sustainable Development through a partnership between the Brazilian Ministry of the Environment (MMA) and the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)*. The Macapá City Hall contributed to handling bureaucratic procedures. The implementation took place under the Private Sector Action for Biodiversity Project, part of the International Climate Initiative, which provided both financial support and technical assistance. IMAFLORA conducted the certification audit, covering the costs through its social fund.

The Association of Traditional Communities of Bailique led the initial certification process locally. After the creation of the AMAZONBAI Cooperative, the responsibility for certification shifted to it. In total, 98 agroextractivists had their management plans audited under the FSC's *Small and Low Intensity Managed Forests (SLIMF)* standard, designed for small-scale producers.

According to the cooperative's board (Focus Group, AMAZONBAI Board, 2023), international cooperation played a crucial role in enabling the certification process. The board highlighted three key aspects, the most direct being financial support. The FSC certification required investments in technical assistance, training, and producer education, and international cooperation provided the necessary

funding. Financial support proved essential for the economic viability of certification projects in small-producer communities, helping them overcome otherwise insurmountable financial barriers.

In addition to financial support, international cooperation indirectly helped the cooperative to meet the necessary conditions to access the European and North American markets, allowing members to enter niches that pay more for certified products. However, participants emphasized that "certifications help us compete in international markets, but they do not guarantee financial returns" (Focus Group, AMAZONBAI Board). Bailique's açaí production has grown stronger in both national and international markets (Costa & Beitum, 2020). With the cooperative and certification in place, producers eliminated intermediaries, made their first export in 2017, and expanded their national market presence (Focus Group, AMAZONBAI Board, 2023).

This research finding contrasts with the conclusions of Overdevest and Rickenbach (2006), who reported North American producers' disappointment with FSC certification as a tool for creating opportunities and accessing certified markets. The difference likely stems from the dynamics of the açaí economy. As noted by Cialdella and Alves (2014), demand for the fruit continues to exceed supply, a trend supported by the strong growth in imports (CONAB, 2021). This market context likely created favorable conditions for Bailique's certified açaí to enter higher-value niches. FSC certification alone would have been unlikely to yield similar results outside this environment. Additionally, other factors, such as the role of internal and external actors and government incentives, lie beyond the scope of this article and require further investigation.

According to the cooperative's board, the partnership also provided specialized technical support to train local producers on FSC criteria. This support included improving forest governance and implementing participatory monitoring mechanisms, both essential for meeting the certification's rigorous standards and protecting community rights. The board further emphasized the importance of the FSC Ecosystem Services Procedure, introduced in late 2018. This procedure gave forest-based agroextractivists and investors tools to measure, verify, and communicate the positive impacts of their practices. Increasing transparency and trust among all stakeholders helped attract new investments and strengthen sustainable practices.

The cooperative's board viewed the cooperation for certification as a successful experience. However, they emphasized that the main advantage lay in the fact that, after developing the Community Protocol and establishing the cooperative, the producers had a clear vision of their goals, "they weren't led to adopt this or that strategy, they knew what they wanted from the partnership" (Grupo Focal, Diretoria AMAZONBAI, 2023). In other words, the empowerment and prior planning fostered by the Community Protocol were crucial in ensuring that relationships with external actors and strategic decisions aligned with local interests.

During the focus group with community leaders, participants emphasized the importance of aligning cooperation with local interests. They identified this as a key factor that ensured the relationship between producers and cooperation or certification agents was grounded in "respect and dialogue between the different types of knowledge each party contributed" (Focus Group, Community Leadership, 2023). Among the 43 producers who responded to the survey, 8 (or 19%) reported participating in the international cooperation initiative. However, none could name the project. Of those who participated, 6 credited AMAZONBAI as the responsible entity. When asked in a multiple-choice question about the nature of the relationship between the community and the cooperation organization, 6 selected "equal partnership," 1 chose "unequal but convenient," and 1 responded "don't know." No respondents selected "unequal and uncomfortable" or "the community led the process."

Most producers who participated in the international cooperation initiative shared a view consistent with that of community leaders: although the community may not have fully led the process, the relationship did not follow a *top-down model. Instead,* it reflected more horizontal dynamics. According to the cooperative's board, international cooperation contributed to the FSC certification in Bailique by providing essential financial resources, technical assistance, and, indirectly, facilitating access to markets for certified products. Both the focus group participants and survey respondents described the relationship between local and external actors as one grounded in mutual respect for each party's knowledge. The AMAZONBAI experience, rooted in the Bailique Protocol, illustrates how international cooperation for development can promote sustainability in the Amazon when guided by local interests and needs.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study found that international actors and developed countries possess established and institutionalized political and economic mechanisms that allow ICD to function as a foreign policy tool with tangible impacts on the domestic policies of developing nations. Moreover, institutions such as GIZ, the FSC certification body, the OECD, and the UN are central to decision-making processes in global environmental sustainability policies. Their influence shapes the content of international cooperation agreements and guides the market dynamics for forest-based products from certified supply chains, as seen in the case of açaí certified and marketed by the AMAZONBAI Cooperative.

This discussion points to the understanding that environmental sustainability, as defined by ICD frameworks, supports the socio-environmental certification of productive chains such as açaí. However, it also imposes standards and regulations on production, resource use, and commercialization that reflect global market logics. Therefore, the adoption of instruments such as the Bailique Community Protocol plays a fundamental role in shaping a new model for the certification and international commercialization of biodiversity products through ICD. This approach aims not only to meet international standards but, more importantly, to prioritize local interests and needs in territories pursuing innovative socio-environmental development pathways, as exemplified by the Bailique experience in Amapá.

These findings underscore the need for further research on the impact of ICD on the autonomy of local territories, particularly regarding the adaptation of international standards to specific socio-environmental contexts. Future studies should investigate how the active participation of local communities in certification and commercialization processes can influence environmental sustainability policies and promote more equitable forms of international cooperation aligned with the preservation and development goals of traditional communities.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Professor Thiago Lima da Silva from the Department of International Relations at UFPB for his valuable feedback and contributions to this article. We also acknowledge the financial support provided by the Research Support Foundation of the State of Paraíba (FAPESQ) through

the project “Inov’Açaí – Co-construction of knowledge, innovations, and public policies for the sustainability of community-based production in the Amazon Bioeconomy,” funded under Call No. 38/2022, Amazônia +10 Public Call, grant number 3008/2022.

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