

Cisterns, Sanitation and Progress in Pesqueira

By Amy Kirschenbaum

All photos by Sean Sprague



Farmer Josefa Maria de Oliveira Paes and the community cistern in Laje do Carrapicho.

Centro Diocesano de Apoio ao Pequeno Produtor (CEDAPP), a nongovernmental organization with roots in the Catholic Church, has labored for 19 years to mitigate drought, improve sanitation and diversify income in one of the poorest areas of the Brazilian Northeast.

Today, it can point to progress. How CEDAPP's team changed behavior in the 10 communities participating in the IAF-funded project near the small city of Pesqueira, in the state of Pernambuco, could move even the most skeptical observer. After several failed attempts at capturing residents' attention, CEDAPP developed an interactive, multimedia curriculum to transmit its critical message of resource management and civic participation. From materials tailored to CEDAPP's workshops, *nordestinos* learned to distinguish clean and polluted water as "water of life" and "water of death," and they can now judge when water is suitable only for crops or bathing and when it can be used for cooking and drinking. They also know how long substances take to biodegrade: five years for a cigarette, 100 years for plastics, 400 years for metal and indefinitely for rubber. To minimize contamination, said project coordinator Maria Elisabete Pires, "We teach them only to throw in the water what fish can eat."

Rainfall from the brief wet season in Pesqueira used to last residents only a month, jeopardizing their agriculture and well-being, especially infant health. To introduce cisterns, communities were willing to invest resources totaling 30 percent of the cost and residents were willing to contribute their labor. The cisterns collect enough precious rain water to last the more than eight months between wet seasons. Water storage, said technical advisor Lourdes Viana Vinokur, has taught people about economics, health measures and the value of working together. For women, who traditionally had to carry the water for the household, the cistern has represented a drastic lifestyle change. "One told me, 'The cistern was my liberation,'" said Vinokur.

Toilets are even more valued. "I wanted to hug it when I got it, but I settled for caressing it every day," said Arlindo Eduardo da Silva, one proud owner of a new toilet. Before CEDAPP intervened, most of the 33 communities it serves did not have a single home with indoor plumbing. Now small children are reluctant



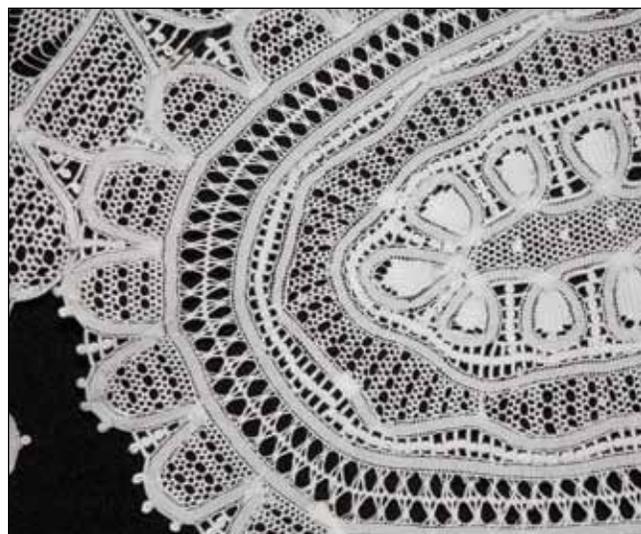
Arlindo da Silva's daughter in the family's new bathroom.



to invite friends to a home without at least a community bathroom facility nearby. In addition to dignity, cleanliness and convenience, bathrooms at or close to home offer assurance of personal safety, according to da Silva who no longer worries about his young daughters as he did when the family had to resort to open fields. CEDAPP began by installing “basic toilets,” but in some places lack of running water was an enormous obstacle to using a traditional fixture. When CEDAPP representatives met to discuss fair trade with colleagues from another IAF grantee, Centro de Estudos e Promoção da Agricultura de Grupo (CEPAGRO), somehow the subject turned to toilets, specifically “dry toilets,” which require less water to operate than the “basic toilets” and also compost waste.

CEDAPP has since installed 85 “dry toilets” in several communities, although residents initially had reservations. “People were afraid that they would smell bad and they didn’t understand how they could work without water,” Suely Rodrigues, vice-president of a local producers’ association, told the Recife daily *Jornal do Comercio de Comunicação*. “Now I would like one of my own.” Dry toilets are outfitted with an exhaust pipe similar to the one on a septic tank, which takes care of inconvenient odor. Ashes, sawdust or lime is used to dry up waste that can then be safely composted. CEDAPP expects a surefire multiplier effect as groups throughout the Northeast, including the Brazilian government’s ProRural, an agency that provides support to farmers, want to know more about the innovation.

Along with year-round access to clean water and sanitation, CEDAPP engages residents in a variety of activities to boost income. Taking advantage of the particular proclivities, vocations and traditions present in each community, and of geography, CEDAPP helps residents work together as cooperatives that produce what is most suited to their abilities and resources. Members receive training in organization and business administration and learn to optimize market appeal by effectively presenting, packaging and pricing goods ranging from lace and leather to honey, dairy products and fruit pulp for making juices. Thanks to CEDAPP’s agricultural assistance, more food is available from local farms and it costs less than produce that used to be brought from far away. The resulting increase in disposable income has



With CEDAPP’s help, the lace-makers’ cooperative in Nossa Senhora das Graças now markets members’ crafts in its own store located in a shopping center. Hand-embroidered garments and hand-made lace from Pesqueira are prized throughout Brazil and exported. A single doily, table runner, or placemat that takes an entire day to craft earns the artisan \$15 or \$20 and can retail in urban shops for five times as much.



The community center built by CEDAPP in Sítio Tigre de Sertânia, where residents learn to craft leather items from goat hides tanned locally.

Members of nine honey cooperatives use the plant built and equipment installed by CEDAPP in Novo Cajueiro.



In the municipality of Alagoinha, members of the Socorro Agricultural Association process graviola, or soursop, and other tropical fruits.



been credited with slowing migration to cities. People prefer to remain close to their families and neighbors. They are willing to work on the land if they can make a living from it.

Residents take pride in these communities and they now actively participate in their municipal councils. Even young children demonstrate a sense of commitment and responsibility—their school attendance is better than ever. Although they still face

many challenges, by working with CEDAPP these *nordestinos* have resolved some of their most pressing problems. Father Bartholomeo Bergese, the Italian priest who helped found CEDAPP and serves as its director, may have put it best. “What they are doing is working miracles.” For more, visit cedapp.org.

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Goat milk and cheese sell for double the price of products from cow's milk. CEDAPP's training in animal husbandry and feed production helped farmers enter this lucrative market. Now they compete at a popular annual event where a prize is awarded to the most productive goat. For two consecutive years the top honor went to goats raised by Terezinha de Jesus de Melo, pictured here with her favorite kid, Buizinha, from among the 17 produced by one of her winners.

