



The Andean Blueberry in the Hands of Women

Economic Contribution in the Value Chain

UNORCAC Case Study (Imbabura)





**Biobusiness
Ecuador**
Sustainability of
native biodiversity



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The Andean blueberry in the hands of women. Economic contribution in the value chain. UNORCAC case study (Imbabura)

Biobusiness Ecuador: Sustainability of Native Biodiversity Project

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Minister of Environment and Energy

Juan Carlos Blum

CAF Representative in Ecuador

Diana Mejía

GEF-CAF Project Manager

Mauricio Velásquez

Director of the Heifer Foundation Ecuador

Rosa Rodríguez

Coordinator of the Biobusiness Ecuador Project

Karina Ron

Prepared by

Ana Poma (Biobusiness Project), Verónica Guaján (CAF)

Research

Diego Valencia

Specialist in Social Economy and Public Policy

Paulina Aulestia

Specialist in Rights and Gender Equality

Editing

Silvana González

Lorena Andrade

Photographs

Heifer Foundation Ecuador – Biobusiness Project Ecuador

Design and Layout

Nadía Hidalgo / Salem diseño

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HEIFER FOUNDATION ECUADOR

+593 2 250 1427 / 290 8985

www.heifer-ecuador.org

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1

Introduction

The Biobusinesses Ecuador: Sustainability of Native Biodiversity project is an initiative of the Ministry of Environment and Energy, implemented by the Heifer Ecuador Foundation, with CAF - Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean - as the implementing entity, and funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF). Together we work to ensure that biobusinesses that care for and utilize our native biodiversity develop fairly and profitably, with the participation of women and communities as true protagonists.

Along this path, and with the support of the Union of Indigenous peasants Organizations of Cotacachi (UNORCAC), we present this booklet on the contribution of women in the andean blueberry chain.



What will you find here?

A simple, accessible booklet filled with the real voices of women and men from rural communities. We gathered their stories, their experiences, their efforts, and their dreams to show how much women contribute -both in the work that is seen and paid, and in the work that is unseen and unrecognized- to the harvesting of the delicious andean blueberry.

What will it do for you?

- To help you clearly see how work is divided between women and men and why women's work is often overlooked.
- To understand how traditional roles limit women's recognition and opportunities.
- To discover practical ideas that help women have a stronger voice, more

decision-making power and higher incomes through biobusinesses.

Why is it important?

When we understand the reality, we can change it. This material is a tool for conversations within families, communities, organizations, and institutions. It serves to build together more equitable paths where women's work is valued, remunerated and celebrated, and where we can all find opportunities to start businesses through the use of natural resources, but at the same time, we must take care of nature and strengthen the quality of life in the rural sector.

This booklet is yours! Use it, share it, discuss it, and add your own ideas. Because change begins when we talk, reflect, and act together.

Biobusiness Ecuador:
Sustainability of
Native Biodiversity.



Funded by:

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CAF - Development
Bank of Latin America
and the Caribbean.

**Biobusiness
Ecuador**
Sustainability of
native biodiversity





What is the Andean blueberry?

The Andean blueberry (*Vaccinium floribundum*) is a wild fruit from the Andes, highly valued for its nutritional richness. Its high concentration of antioxidants, vitamins, and minerals makes it an essential food for the health and well-being of rural communities.

It grows naturally in the moorlands (páramos) of Ecuador, Colombia, and Peru and has been harvested by generations of Indigenous and farming families, who have passed down their knowledge about this fruit as part of their ancestral relationship with the land. Harvesting varies depending on altitude and weather conditions, and takes place mainly between August and December, although the peak is in October.

Beyond its nutritional value, the Andean blueberry contributes to food sovereignty, strengthens the family farming economy, and plays a key ecological role in the conservation of high-Andean ecosystems. Its presence promotes biodiversity, as it protects the soil and contributes to the water balance of the moorlands, which are a source of life for thousands of communities.



Who participated?

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The analysis of women's economic contribution to the Andean blueberry value chain is based on the commercial relationship between the company SUMAK MIKUY, UNORCAC, and the communities that harvest this wild fruit.

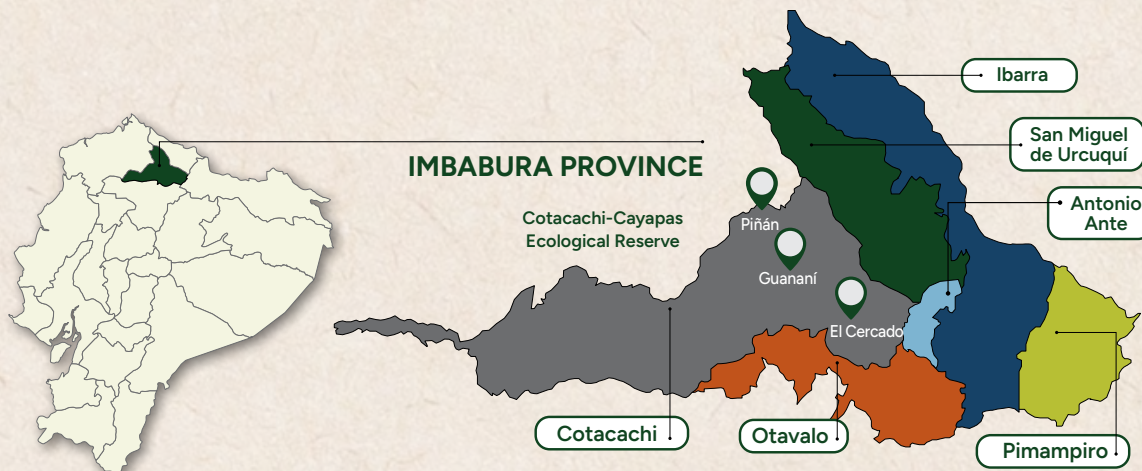
SUMAK MIKUY's participation stemmed from a vision of economic, social, and productive development with a focus on food sovereignty. This strategy sought to strengthen the role of women in biobusinesses linked to Andean blueberry, by recognizing their work, knowledge, and leadership in the country's rural areas.

The Cotacachi canton was selected as a case study, with Andean blueberry suppliers being Indigenous families from

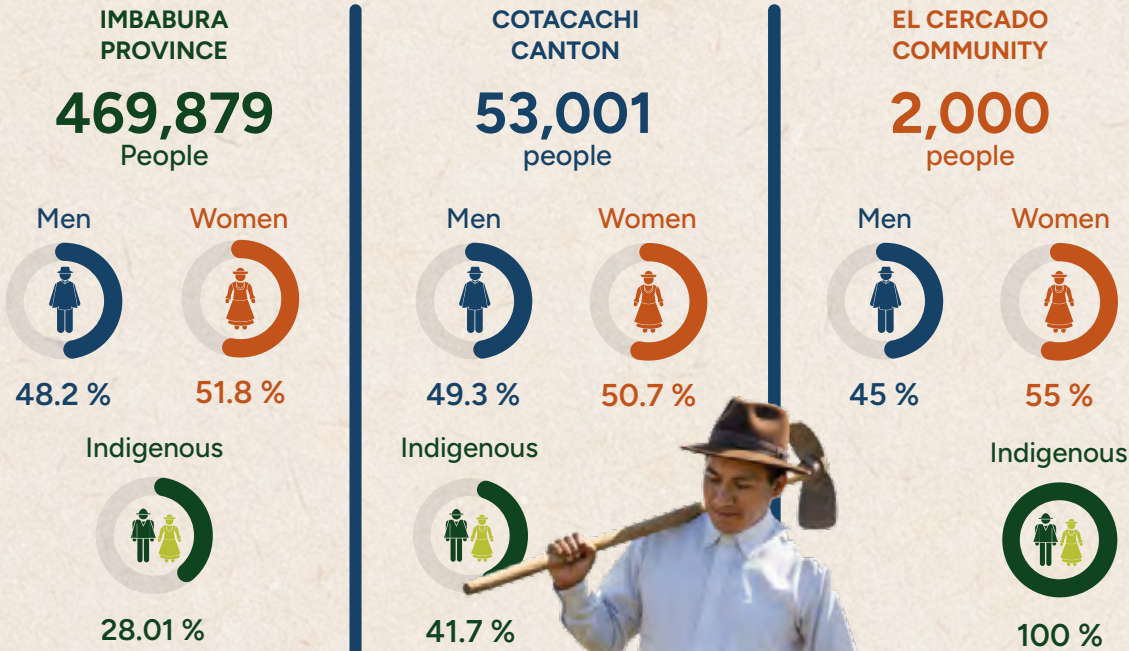
communities such as Piñán, Guananí, and El Cercado. Piñán is located within the Cotacachi-Cayapas National Park, 65 km from the cantonal capital, and has an ancestral population of 225 inhabitants. Guananí, in the Imantag parish, has around 100 inhabitants, while El Cercado, in the El Sagrario parish, is home to approximately 2,000 people from the rural area.

These communities contribute to the harvesting of Andean blueberries and also maintain ancestral cultural and ecological practices that enrich the value chain and promote a rural economic model based on identity, equity, and sustainability.

The demographic data for the study area are presented below.



Sociodemographic data of the **El Cercado community,**
in the **Cotacachi canton, Imbabura province**



ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION IN THE VALUE CHAIN

Population of boys and girls (0-11 years) and adolescents (12-17 years)

IMBABURA



COTACACHI



EL CERCADO
COMMUNITY



Young populations (18-29) and adults (30-64)

IMBABURA



COTACACHI

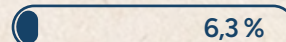


EL CERCADO
COMMUNITY

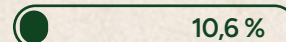


ILLITERACY RATE

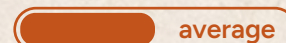
IMBABURA



COTACACHI



EL CERCADO



NET ATTENDANCE RATE IN BASIC EDUCATION

IMBABURA



COTACACHI



EL CERCADO



THE ANDEAN BLUEBERRY
IN THE HANDS OF WOMEN



Chronic Child Malnutrition < 5 years old	Chronic Child Malnutrition < 5 years old quintile 1
IMBABURA 16.2 %	IMBABURA 24.3 %
COTACACHI -	COTACACHI -
EL CERCADO high	EL CERCADO high



Extreme Poverty as per income	Poverty as per income
IMBABURA 29.4 %	IMBABURA 11.8 %
COTACACHI -	COTACACHI -
EL CERCADO -	EL CERCADO -



Women who have experienced gender-based violence in the last 12 months	Women who have experienced gender-based violence in the last 12 months in the workplace
IMBABURA 33.1 %	IMBABURA 7.2 %
COTACACHI -	COTACACHI -
EL CERCADO high	EL CERCADO -



Average Labor Income (USD)
IMBABURA \$421.9
COTACACHI -
EL CERCADO -



What concepts did we use?

One of the methodological approaches used was the theory of change, which generated mechanisms to strengthen women's empowerment. This theory seeks to enhance family well-being through a transformation in the definition of roles and responsibilities at the family and community levels, allowing for greater access to resources, benefits, opportunities, participation, and decision-making power for women (Heifer Ecuador, 2020).

For the Heifer Ecuador Foundation, women's participation on equal terms throughout the various links of the value chain is a determining factor for their economic empowerment and the strengthening of their agency. This agency is understood as the capacity to act and redefine, from their own spaces and territories, the standards that produce inequalities, through everyday, strategic, and intercultural practices.

From the perspective of feminist economics, work is conceived as a dual category that encompasses both paid (productive) and unpaid (reproductive) activity. While the former unfolds in the spheres of production and circulation of goods in exchange for a



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wage, the latter constitutes an invisible yet essential support, coexisting simultaneously to sustain life and the economic system. Work performed through activities within the sphere of production and circulation receives a wage. At the same time, paid work is accompanied by unpaid work. The latter is an activity primarily carried out by women, due to social and cultural patterns established by patriarchal society, and consists of the reproduction of the workforce and its care, an economic activity whereby no wage is received (Girón, 2016).

In this regard, productive and reproductive work, both paid and unpaid; that is, monetized or non-monetized respectively, which is indispensable to differentiate between production and reproduction, establishes a conceptual framework between the nature and role of social reproduction and the economic system (Benaría, 2006).



4

How did we conduct the work?

1

INTERVIEWS



To understand women's contribution to the andean blueberry value chain, qualitative and quantitative research methods were applied, including in-depth semi-structured interviews, participatory workshops, surveys, secondary data collection, and data analysis. This work was carried out between January and February 2024.

As part of the participatory process, interviews were conducted with key personnel from the company SUMAK MIKUY and UNORCAC. Workshops were also held with the company's partners, and surveys were administered to residents of the three communities. Finally, workshops were held to share the results with the participants. The resulting diagnostic assessment is detailed below.

2

PARTICIPATORY WORKSHOPS



3

SURVEYS



4

SECONDARY INFORMATION



5

DATA ANALYSIS



What did we find in this assessment?

5



As a result of the research process, it is evident that women actively participate in every step of the andean blueberry value chain. From preparing to ascend to the moorlands -securing water, food, and logistical support- to harvesting the fruit, which involves walking long distances, collecting, and carrying the crop.

They are also present during the sorting process, where they clean, select, and package

the andean blueberry for sale. Finally, many of them are responsible for selling the fruit, whether at fairs, local markets, or through community trade agreements.

Their participation is predominant in each of these stages. This demonstrates their commitment and effort, as well as their fundamental role in sustaining biobusinesses and strengthening the family and community economy.



THE ANDEAN BLUEBERRY IN THE HANDS OF WOMEN

COLLECTION



CLASSIFICATION



WOMEN PARTICIPATE

actively in all the
steps that make up
the value chain of
the Andean
blueberry.



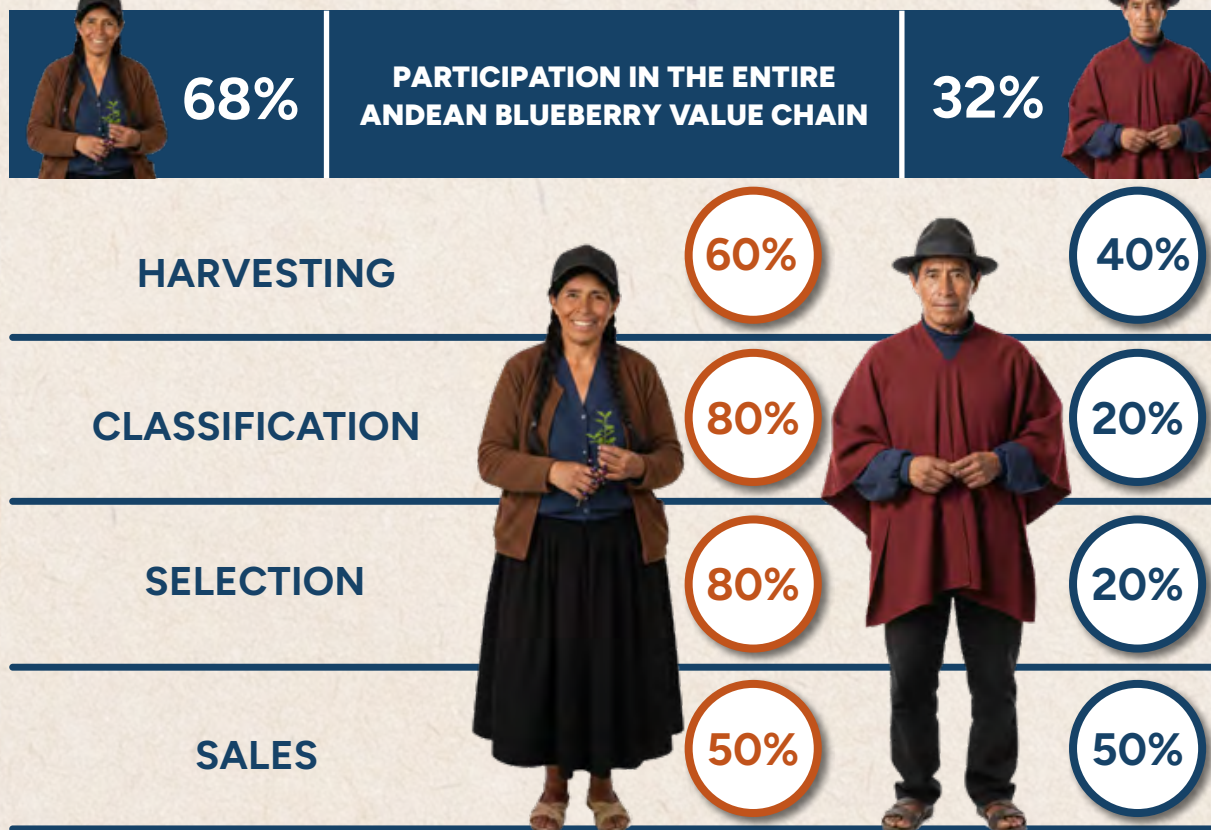
SELECTION



SALE

How do women participate in the Andean blueberry value chain?

Women play a leading role in all stages of working with andean blueberries. Their effort and commitment are reflected in clear figures:



The active participation of boys and girls also observed at every stage, accompanying and learning alongside their families.

These figures show that women **ARE THE DRIVING FORCE BEHIND THE ANDEAN BLUEBERRY BIOBUSINESS**, from the moorlands to the market.

THE ANDEAN BLUEBERRY IN THE HANDS OF WOMEN



To understand how women participate in the andean blueberry value chain from a gender perspective, it is important to discuss roles, which are social constructs that define what is expected of men and women in each culture and historical moment. In other words, the tasks, behaviors, and responsibilities they assume are not natural, but rather learned and assigned by society (FAO, 2007).

In the case of andean blueberry, women perform tasks that reflect these roles. Their participation increases during the harvest season, especially when their husbands migrate temporarily to the cities in search of work. Although many of these activities

require physical effort –such as carrying buckets weighing up to 20 kilos– they undertake them as part of their family and community responsibilities.

Working as a family also allows for the sharing of ancestral knowledge about the care of the moorlands (high-altitude Andean grassland), the appropriate time to harvest the fruit, and respect for nature. This transmission of knowledge strengthens the connection to the land and to the cycles of life.

During sorting, the women select the ripe berries and discard the green or damaged ones. This task requires precision and attention to detail, skills traditionally associated with the female role due to gender stereotypes.

In trading, they transport the buckets to the sales points, offer the product, negotiate prices, and manage sales. Their role combines physical strength with social skills, demonstrating initiative and organizational ability.

Furthermore, harvesting andean blueberry berries for commercial purposes allows them to supplement their family income. Although many also make women bracelets, participating in the harvest helps them diversify their economic sources and strengthen their household's livelihood.

Time Use in the Participation of Activities

Analyzing how women and men organize their time allows us to understand how income – both monetary and non-monetary – is generated, and how power is distributed within households and communities.

IN THIS CONTEXT

Women work an average of **14 hours a day** in productive activities (paid and unpaid) and care. **Men, 12 hours.**



WOMEN SPEND MORE THAN TWICE AS MUCH TIME AS MEN on care tasks, such as housework, preparing food and caring for the family.

47% of women bear the sole responsibility for care work. When tasks are shared, and support is received, it comes primarily from their daughters (42%). 53% of women share care work with their partners, sons and daughters.

Men dedicate 40% more time than women to self-care activities, such as personal rest or recreation.



These data show that women's time is more heavily burdened with invisible responsibilities that sustain daily life but are not always recognized as work. Making this reality visible is key to moving towards more equitable relationships and valuing the comprehensive contribution of women in their homes and communities.





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What is the economic contribution of women in the Andean blueberry value chain?

To understand the true contribution of women in the Andean blueberry production chain, a three-month harvesting cycle, from September to November, was analyzed. All of their activities were taken into account, from productive work – both paid and unpaid – to caregiving and community participation.

The time they dedicate was also considered, comparing it to a standard 160-hour work month, and reference values were applied to calculate the economic contribution of agricultural, domestic, and community activities. This allowed for the calculation of the total value of their work, including unpaid labor that sustains the lives and well-being of families.

Economic Contribution by Gender in the Andean Blueberry Value Chain

Gender	PAID				UNPAID			Total Economic Contribution (h)=(d+e+f+g)
	 Productive			 Total Paid Productive (d)=(a+b+c)	 Unpaid Productive	 Reproductive	 Community	
	Labor	Andean blueberry	Bracelets		Chakra	Care		
	(a)	(b)	(c)		(e)	(f)	(g)	
 Women	-	72,00	160,00	232,00	115,41	428,06	23,75	799,22
 Men	311,20	48,00	97,96	457,16	317,36	201,25	11,87	987,64

Preparation: Biobusiness Ecuador Project, based on the consultancy of Diego Valencia (2024).
Source: Participatory workshop of the Andean blueberry value chain (EPAEM, 2024) and Ministerial Agreement No. MDT-2023-180, published in the Official Registry No. 465, of December 27, 2023.



ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION IN THE VALUE CHAIN

- In paid work, women receive USD 799.22, while men receive USD 987.64.
- However, in unpaid work –such as caregiving, community work, and productive work– their contribution is greater: USD 567.22 compared to USD 530.48.
- In care work, women’s economic contribution is more than double that of men: USD 428.06 compared to USD 201.25.
- When all activities are added together, it is observed that the monthly well-being¹ of families depends 54% on reproductive tasks. To reach that level, women work 2.3 times more than men, representing 56% of total work, compared to 21% for men.
- If the value of reproductive, community, and care work is translated into monetary terms, women’s economic contribution is 1.7 times greater than men’s.

These data show that women’s work sustains the family economy and community life. Recognizing this contribution is fundamental to moving towards fairer models, where invisible work is no longer ignored and begins to be valued as an essential part of rural development.

Results of the Andean Blueberry Value Chain

Women contribute 2.3 times more to the andean blueberry value chain than men.

The monthly well-being of families depends 54% on reproductive activities.

If the value of reproductive and care work is translated into monetary terms, women’s economic contribution would be USD 428.06, 1.7 times greater than that of men.



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¹ Economic contribution of paid production work, and unpaid reproduction and care work.



7

What are the conclusions?

In the Andean blueberry value chain, **54% of monthly family well-being depends on reproductive activities** – those that sustain daily life, such as caregiving, household management, and community work – in terms of social contribution. Economically, women contribute 2.3 times more than men, equivalent to USD 428.06 in economic value.

Transforming gender stereotypes is vital to achieving a more equitable distribution of work, access to opportunities, participation in decision-making spaces, and social recognition. This also implies promoting positive masculinities that value caregiving, shared responsibility, and commitment to the economic, social, and political development of rural families, who hold deeply rooted ancestral views of masculinity.

Recognizing and making visible the work of women not only empowers those who perform it but also drives the transformation of local communities, strengthens the community fabric, and paves the way for a more just, inclusive, and sustainable rural life.





“This document technically reveals the economic contribution of women in representative biobusiness value chains in the country. The findings are intended to spark dialogue and collective reflection to promote changes that will lead to a fairer balance in recognizing the value of women’s work compared to men’s and a more equitable sharing of the benefits derived from biodiversity. The study is part of a larger exercise by the Biobusiness Ecuador project, which aims to gather lessons learned and experiences regarding the role of women in biodiversity-based businesses.”





8

A Call to Action

“ Equality that builds a future begins with recognizing the women who, day after day, sustain the andean blueberry chain without their contribution being fully valued. It is essential to promote policies that give them a voice and spaces for effective participation, so that their strength and wisdom can drive the sustainable development of their families and communities. ”

The time to act is now!

“ Including women at the heart of **biobusiness** value chains is a clear commitment to sustainability, equity, and local development. Recognizing their contributions strengthens communities and paves the way for fairer paths for everyone. ”

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Biobusiness Ecuador

Sustainability of
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