EQUATOR INITIATIVE

UNDP

COOPERATIVA DE MUJERES ARTESANAS DEL GRAN CHACO

Argentine Republic

EQUATOR PRIZE WINNER

Equator Initiative Case Studies

Local sustainable development solutions for people, nature, and resilient communities

UNDP EQUATOR INITIATIVE CASE STUDY SERIES

Indigenous Peoples and local communities across the world are advancing innovative sustainable development solutions that work for people and the Planet. Few publications or case studies tell the full story of how such initiatives evolve, the breadth of their impact, or how they change over time. Fewer still have undertaken to tell these stories with community practitioners themselves guiding the narrative. The Equator Initiative aims to fill that gap. This is precisely the reason why this case study has been crafted through a collaborative process with the representatives of the winning initiatives. The goal is to thoroughly integrate their voices and experiences, showcasing their efforts in driving local action within their respective environments.

The **UNDP Equator Initiative**, supported by generous funding from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), awarded the Equator Prize in 2025 to 10 outstanding Indigenous Peoples and local community-led initiatives from nine countries. The winning organizations showcase innovative, nature-based solutions for tackling biodiversity loss and climate change. Selected from a pool of over 700 nominations from 103 countries, this year's winners align with the Equator Prize 2025 theme 'Nature for Climate Action,' showcasing groundbreaking solutions across three categories: Nature for Climate Mitigation, Nature for Climate Adaptation and Resilience, and Nature for a Just Transition. All 10 winners were celebrated at a high-profile event, held virtually, on December 11th. The event was part of the **Nature for Life Hub**, a three-day series of virtual events designed to raise ambition for nature-based solutions in global biodiversity and climate policy. The Equator Prize 2025 winners are restoring ecosystems, revitalizing traditional knowledge, and building inclusive, nature-positive economies that advance climate resilience, protect biodiversity, and drive a just transition.

The following case study is one in a growing series that describes vetted and peer-reviewed best practices intended to inspire the policy dialogue needed to scale nature-based solutions essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

PROJECT SUMMARY

The *Cooperativa de Mujeres Artesanas del Gran Chaco* (COMAR) is a women-led artisanal cooperative working across Indigenous and rural communities in the Argentine Gran Chaco, one of the most biodiverse and threatened dry forest regions in the world. Founded to strengthen livelihoods while conserving native forests, COMAR brings together women artisans who produce high-quality textiles and handicrafts using traditional techniques and sustainably harvested forest fibres, including *chaguar*. Operating in a context of rapid deforestation, climate vulnerability, and long-standing social marginalisation, the cooperative provides a collective platform for production, training, and market access that prioritises environmental stewardship, cultural continuity, and women's economic inclusion.

Since its establishment, COMAR has strengthened the incomes and decision-making power of hundreds of Indigenous and rural women, while promoting forest-friendly production models rooted in Traditional Ecological Knowledge. With long-term support from partners such as the Gran Chaco Foundation, the cooperative has built organizational and management capacity, expanded national and international market access, and contributed to the replication of its associative model in Paraguay and Bolivia. Through its integration with initiatives such as *El Futuro Está en el Monte* (The Future is in the Forest), COMAR also supports sustainable forest management and climate-resilient livelihoods. Together, these efforts demonstrate how community-based enterprises can link biodiversity conservation with social equity, offering a scalable model for inclusive, climate-smart development in the Gran Chaco.

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KEY FACTS

Equator Prize winner

2025

Founded

2012

Location

Ingeniero Juárez, Formosa, Argentine Republic

Beneficiaries

2,600 direct beneficiaries; 20,000 indirect beneficiaries

Thematic areas

Governance and capacity-building; Women's empowerment; Sustainable livelihoods

Fields of work

Other (Sustainable artisan production); Women's groups; Ecosystem conservation

Sustainable Development Goals addressed

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

EQUATOR PRIZE 2025 WINNER FILM

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Since the formation of COMAR, my life has changed. Before, I was always at home. I would go out to the forest in the morning to gather firewood, and when I returned, I would make my crafts. I was a poor woman, without work, and with seven children to support. From the moment we started forming the organization, we had to stand up to the men who told us we should stay home. The male leaders didn't like that we had an organization. One day, I confronted them, made myself heard, and they stopped bothering us.

Some women didn't even have a house to meet in. Now everyone has a place to meet, and we have internet, computers, sewing machines, and fiber machines. Now we also have machines to grind seeds, roots, and bark—everything we use to make dyes. What I hope is that this women artisans' cooperative will grow, that more artisans and more buyers will join, so that in the future we can achieve many more things. And that's why we have to take good care of our cooperative, so that it keeps growing. Women need to work.

Norma Rodriguez, President, Cooperativa de Mujeres Artesanas del Gran Chaco

Stretching across northern Argentina, Bolivia, and Paraguay, the Gran Chaco is one of the planet's last great forest frontiers. Covering approximately 114 million hectares, it is the largest dry forest in the world and the second largest forest mass in South America, after the Amazon. The biome encompasses more than 50 distinct ecosystems, shaped by shared vegetation and climatic patterns, including dry forests, savannas, wetlands, and extensive river systems. This ecological diversity supports exceptional species and makes the region critical for the continent's environmental and bioclimatic stability. However, despite its importance, the Gran Chaco is one of the most threatened forest ecosystems. Driven primarily by agricultural expansion and cattle ranching, rapid deforestation has put unprecedented pressure on its landscapes. These pressures are compounded by climate change, with rising temperatures, prolonged droughts, and increasingly severe floods that undermine water availability, soil stability, and local production systems.

In Argentina, two-thirds of the Gran Chaco biome is found. Its forests are home to 3,400 plant and 500 bird species, as well as hundreds of mammals, reptiles, and amphibians. These include globally significant and threatened fauna listed on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species, such as the near-threatened jaguar (*Panthera onca*), vulnerable giant armadillo (*Priodontes maximus*), endangered Chaco peccary (*Catagonus wagneri*), and near-threatened maned wolf (*Chrysocyon brachyurus*). Native tree species, including hardwoods, are under increasing stress due to deforestation and habitat loss, as well as native plants such as chaguar (*Bromelia hieronymi*) and carandillo (*Trithrinax schizophylla*), which provide essential raw materials for traditional artisanal production.

Nearly four million people live in the Argentine Gran Chaco, including approximately 362,000 Indigenous Peoples from diverse ethnic and cultural groups. Around 30 per cent of the population lives in rural areas, where population density is extremely low, averaging one inhabitant per 100 hectares. Many Indigenous Peoples live on communal lands and rely on a combination of traditional livelihoods, including hunting, fishing, gathering wild fruits such as *carob*, *chañar*, and *mistol*, small-scale farming, beekeeping, livestock rearing, forestry, and artisanal production. Livelihoods are shaped by strong gender-based complementarity, with women playing a central role in textile crafts, plant gathering, small livestock management, and household care, while men more commonly engage in fishing, hunting, beekeeping, and wage labour.

Despite the cultural and environmental richness across the Argentine Gran Chaco, communities have experienced long-standing marginalisation. Limited access to infrastructure, markets, land security, and basic services has contributed to persistently high poverty and food insecurity compared to other regions. As environmental degradation and deforestation intensify, Indigenous Peoples, in particular, have seen their traditional subsistence practices and access to natural resources increasingly constrained. Women, who depend heavily on forest resources for household economies and artisanal production, are disproportionately affected by these overlapping social, economic, and environmental pressures.

Origin and structure

The *Cooperativa de Mujeres Artesanas del Gran Chaco* (Cooperative of Women Artisans of the Gran Chaco or COMAR by its acronym in Spanish) emerged in the Argentine Gran Chaco in response to the rapid loss of native forests, the erosion of Indigenous livelihoods, and the persistent exclusion of women from economic and political opportunity and decision-making. The origins of COMAR date back to 2000, when Indigenous women artisans began to organize collectively to strengthen textile production and overcome long-standing social and economic barriers. Over the following decade, additional groups joined their informal network, gradually building trust across communities that had not historically collaborated.

Working within Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCAs), the organization empowers Indigenous women artisans in traditional textile crafts through access to high-value markets. Via the consolidation of its native art brand, Matriarca, in 2012, COMAR has sought to professionalise artisanal value chains, generate dignified and high-value incomes, and reinforce the interdependence between cultural continuity, women's empowerment, and the sustainable management of native forests in the Gran Chaco.

COMAR products employ locally available and culturally connected resources such as *chaguar* fibre, palm fibre, and sheep wool, as well as natural dyes and other raw materials. Its approach contributes to reducing CO_2 emissions by promoting sustainable supply chains, regenerative production practices, and effective management of natural resources in the Argentine Gran Chaco. The cooperative links women-led entrepreneurship with biodiversity conservation, including through the sustainable management of native forest areas dedicated to the production of raw materials.

Today, COMAR is composed of 37 Indigenous women representatives from 32 women's associations, collectively representing approximately 2,600 women artisans from the Wichi, Qom, Qomleec, and Pilagá Indigenous Peoples. Governance is rooted in participatory and representative decision-making. Associations elect representatives annually through a General Assembly, supported by quarterly district meetings that ensure accountability and ongoing consultation with community members. COMAR operates through two complementary structures: a representative political body led by experienced community leaders, and a productive structure focused on artisanal commercial activities. A common governance protocol, updated and approved by the General Assembly in 2024, defines roles and responsibilities across the organization, from the Board of Directors to artisans at the community level. Through this model, COMAR has become a pioneering platform for collective leadership, economic empowerment, and intercultural collaboration among Indigenous women in the Gran Chaco.

LOCAL CHALLENGES

Persistent constraints to Indigenous Peoples' livelihoods

Indigenous Peoples in the Argentine Gran Chaco face persistent constraints in accessing stable and dignified livelihood opportunities. Many families depend on small-scale, household-based production systems that combine subsistence agriculture, gathering of forest products, artisanal crafts, and intermittent wage labour. However, limitations on access to and control over Ancestral Lands restrict communities' ability to sustain these practices or develop new productive activities. In many areas, land tenure remains insecure or fragmented, reducing long-term planning and investment in traditional livelihoods.

Poverty, social marginalisation, and lack of recognition and respect for Indigenous rights further compound these challenges. According to Argentina's National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (INDEC), Indigenous households experience significantly higher rates of unmet basic needs than the national average, reflecting gaps in housing quality, education, and access to basic services. These conditions constrain opportunities for income generation and increase dependence on external assistance, including social protection programmes and emergency food aid.

Employment options in rural areas of the Gran Chaco are scarce, particularly for women. Formal labour markets are limited, and available work is often seasonal, informal, and poorly paid. As a result, many households rely on multiple income sources to survive, combining agricultural activities with off-farm labour, government transfers, and craft production. This economic precarity increases vulnerability to external shocks, including market fluctuations and climate extremes.

Environmental degradation and climate variability further undermine livelihood security. Droughts, floods, and rising temperatures affect crop yields, livestock health, and the availability of forest resources, directly impacting household economies that depend on natural systems. These pressures contribute to food insecurity, declining health outcomes, and the gradual erosion of cultural practices tied to traditional resource use.

Deep-rooted patterns of inequality

Despite being the second-largest biome in South America, spanning Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil and Paraguay, the Gran Chaco region is characterised by some of the most severe socio-economic inequalities on the continent. In Argentina, the Province of Chaco records the highest poverty rates in the country. The impact is evident in its capital, Resistencia, where data show that nearly 80 percent of the population live below the poverty line and more than one-third live in conditions of extreme poverty. Similar conditions can be observed in neighbouring provinces such as Salta and Formosa, which rank among the most socio-economically vulnerable provinces in the country.

Access to basic services remains uneven, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas. Safe drinking water is a major concern across large parts of the Chaco, where communities rely on rainwater harvesting, shallow wells, or intermittent supply systems. Transportation and connectivity also present major barriers. Many rural roads remain unpaved, limiting access to health care, education, legal services, and markets, and making travel difficult during periods of heavy rain. Public transport options are scarce, forcing families to rely on costly private transport for essential needs. These costs place additional strain on already fragile household economies and reinforce cycles of exclusion.

Underlying these inequalities is a development model that has prioritised large-scale agricultural production over local needs. The expansion of industrial agriculture has generated economic growth in some sectors while contributing to environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, and contamination of water sources in others. The lack of participatory mechanisms and the limited participation of Indigenous Peoples in decision-making processes related to land, drinking water, and resource management exacerbate unequal outcomes and have reduced the effectiveness of public policies in addressing local realities.

Accelerated biodiversity loss in the Gran Chaco

The Gran Chaco is one of the most deforested biomes on the planet. Since 1985, nearly 25 percent of its forest cover has been cleared, primarily for cattle ranching and industrial agriculture, leading to widespread habitat loss and fragmentation. Native forests and grasslands have been converted into monoculture systems, reducing ecological connectivity and degrading soil and water systems. Overgrazing has further accelerated land degradation by diminishing vegetation cover and reducing the capacity of ecosystems to sequester carbon, contributing to increased greenhouse gas emissions.

Climate change is intensifying these pressures. The Gran Chaco experiences frequent and severe droughts and forest fires, interspersed with intense flooding, disrupting natural regeneration processes and placing additional stress on already degraded ecosystems. Forest loss and ecosystem degradation, in turn, exacerbate climate impacts by releasing stored carbon and reducing landscape resilience.

While traditional harvesting practices have historically maintained ecological balance, rising demand from regional and global markets has increased extraction, logging, and farming rates, placing additional strain on forest ecosystems and the cultural practices that depend on them. The advance of agriculture and logging has also contributed to the loss of Ancestral Lands and a steady decline in hunting, gathering, and other subsistence activities, further eroding cultural practices and community resilience.

Moreover, logging threatens native trees, including *quebracho colorado* and *blanco* (*Schinopsis quebracho-colorado*), floss silk tree (*Ceiba speciosa*), urunday (*Myracrodruon urundeuva*), black lapacho (*Handroanthus impetiginosus*), *guayacán* (*Handroanthus guayacan*), mistol (*Sarcomphalus mistol*), *chañar* (*Geoffroea decorticans*), and espinillo (*Vachellia caven*). A 2018 study by the Humboldt Institute on the Gran Chaco's forests estimated that more than half of all birds and 30 percent of all mammals will be extinct in 10 to 25 years if conservation actions are not implemented. The jaguar (*Panthera onca*) is globally classified as Near Threatened and nationally endangered in Argentina, but is considered Critically Endangered within the Gran Chaco. The endemic Chacoan peccary (*Catagonus wagneri*), already listed as endangered, faces significant risks to its long-term survival as its habitat continues to shrink.

LOCAL RESPONSES

"The Equator Prize represents significant recognition for the work that COMAR women leaders have been doing for more than 20 years, demonstrating persistence, perseverance, and continuity in the face of challenging situations within their own communities. It is an acknowledgment of the personal journey of each of them, who have made COMAR the largest cooperative in Argentina that brings together women producers, overcoming critical moments, police confrontations, financial deficits, and climate crises, managing to maintain their organization and setting an example that it is possible to promote and raise the visibility of the work of Indigenous women in the Argentine Chaco."

Fabiana Menna, President of Fundación Gran Chaco

Building a sustainable, ethical artisan textile brand

COMAR supports women artisans in the production of textiles and handicrafts rooted in Indigenous Peoples' creative representation, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, and respect for native ecosystems. COMAR artisans produce textiles using renewable natural fibres and natural dyes sourced from the Gran Chaco forest, ensuring that production remains environmentally responsible and culturally grounded. Through the creation of the pioneering Matriarca brand, the women of COMAR are repositioning Indigenous handicrafts as high-value products, overcoming social and economic challenges. The brand is an empowerment initiative for Indigenous women in the Gran Chaco, upholding artisan textiles as sustainable, high-value goods and standing as a powerful emblem for the strength, art, and resilience of Indigenous women. By strengthening textile value chains, COMAR enables women to earn stable, dignified incomes within their communities, while promoting cultural teachings and fostering local connections to the forest.

Production is based on the knowledge systems and locally available resources of the Indigenous Peoples throughout the region. For example, Wichi Indigenous women work with *chaguar* fibre harvested from native forest plants, while Qom and Pilagá artisans use palm fibres, and Qomleec women primarily work with sheep's wool.

Competency-based training programmes are co-designed with women artisans and cover fibre preparation, dye quality, weaving techniques, design innovation, and quality control. These programmes also include digital literacy and financial skills, such as mobile banking, basic accounting, and the use of digital platforms for communication and coordination. Training is delivered through decentralised workshops that allow women to participate without leaving their communities, supporting sustained engagement and skill retention. Over time, improved product quality, consistent demand,

and innovative design have enabled artisans to raise prices and stabilise income, shifting artisan work from a supplementary activity to a primary source of income for many households.

Certification, traceability, and marketing have also helped the model succeed. All products purchased from artisans carry the Matriarca brand seal, which guarantees origin, quality, and responsible sourcing. This system reinforces transparency across the value chain and protects Traditional Ecological Knowledge and artisan designs by clearly linking products to their communities of origin. Traceability has increased buyer confidence and enabled COMAR to position its products in high-value, ethical, and sustainable markets. Likewise, by supporting marketing and pricing, women artisans receive a significantly higher share of the final sales value. Since its inception, 800 Indigenous women artisans have increased their income by at least 20 percent through participation in the COMAR value chain. Annual sales have increased by an average of 15 percent, and 400 new artisans have been incorporated into COMAR's production system, expanding economic opportunities across communities. The Matriarca brand has established boutiques in the provinces of Salta, Córdoba, and San Isidro, as well as international distributors in Japan and Paris.

KEY IMPACTS

Building a sustainable, ethical artisan textile brand

- COMAR sales have increased 15 per cent annually.
- The incomes of 800 Indigenous women artisans increased by at least 20 per cent.
- COMAR incorporated 400 new artisans into its production process.
- The Matriarca brand established three stores nationally and an international distribution network.

Empowering Indigenous women

Empowerment of Indigenous women is a defining feature of COMAR's work. Through the creation and consolidation of the Matriarca brand, women artisans have gained collective visibility, economic agency, and leadership within both their communities and wider markets. Matriarca represents a deliberate shift away from extractive and intermediary-driven models toward women-led governance of production, pricing, and commercial strategy. This approach challenges entrenched gender norms and redefines the role of Indigenous women as economic actors and cultural leaders.

COMAR actively invests in visibility and recognition at local, national, and international levels. Women artisans have participated in exhibitions, cultural events, and commercial showcases that elevate Indigenous craftsmanship and strengthen pride in cultural identity. In 2024, in connection with the Paris Olympic Games, COMAR women travelled to Paris to exhibit their work through the Matriarca brand, showcasing the Indigenous art, culture, and ecology of the Argentine Gran Chaco. Matriarca products are now sold in select markets in Buenos Aires, Paris, Tokyo, and New York, where they are recognised for their quality, design, and ethical production. These engagements have expanded market access while reinforcing narratives that link conservation, culture, and economic resilience.

Strategic partnerships have further played a key role in scaling visibility and opportunity. COMAR has participated in initiatives such as *El Futuro Está en el Monte* (The Future is in the Forest), ICCAs, and various regional women's economic platforms. Support from international partners has enabled the development of new product lines, pop-up stores, and permanent retail spaces, thereby strengthening long-term commercial viability. These partnerships also provide access to mentorship, finance, and global networks that would otherwise remain inaccessible to rural Indigenous women.

Capacity-building extends beyond production to encompass leadership, rights awareness, and organizational governance. Women receive training in negotiation, collective decision-making, and representation in public and private forums. This has increased participation in regional and national networks, including the Rural Women's Network of Argentina and Women20, amplifying Indigenous women's voices in policy and development discussions. The impacts of this work include 1,000 Indigenous women artisans adopting digital tools to support production, administration, and marketing; 500 women gaining access to credit or working capital financing for the first time; and the participation of COMAR women in at least five national or international visibility events each year.

KEY IMPACTS

Empowering Indigenous women

- COMAR supported 1,000 Indigenous women artisans in incorporating technological tools to support production and marketing.
- COMAR supported 500 women artisans in gaining access to credit or working capital financing for the first time.
- COMAR women participate in at least five national or international visibility events annually.

Restoring ecosystems through sustainable resource management

Ecosystem restoration is integral to COMAR's livelihood strategy, recognising that economic resilience depends on healthy forest systems. In response to the decline in the availability of raw materials, women artisans began experimenting with the cultivation and domestication of native species otherwise traditionally harvested from the wild. This marked a shift from extractive use toward sustainable management and regenerative supply chains, ensuring long-term availability of fibres and dye plants essential to artisanal production.

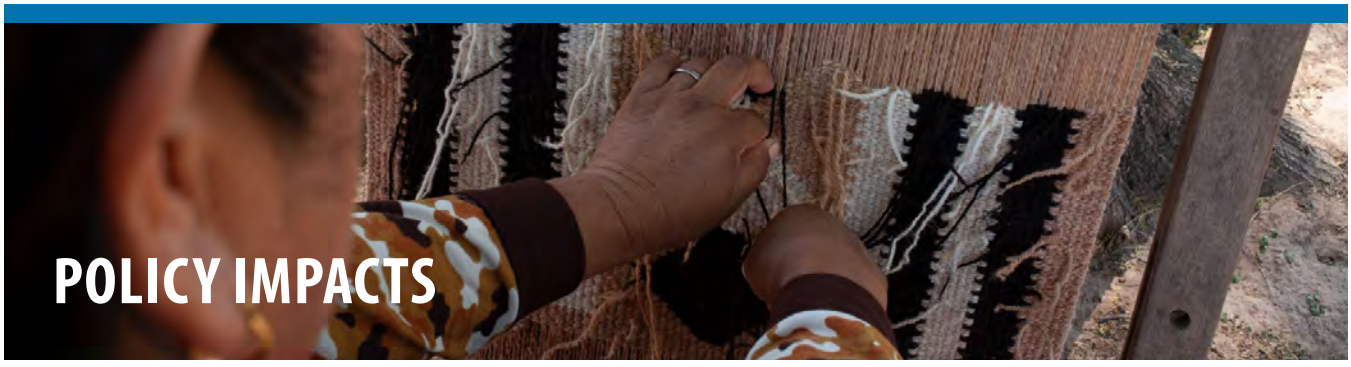
In this pursuit, COMAR established 50 hectares of *chaguar* cultivation, 100 hectares of sustainably managed forest for handicraft raw material production, and four production areas with nurseries dedicated to native dye plants. These sites serve as living laboratories where women test cultivation techniques, document regeneration cycles, and exchange knowledge across communities. Demonstration plots support replication and reduce pressure on wild populations, while strengthening local stewardship of biodiversity. Partnerships with technical institutions have strengthened scientific and practical knowledge. In collaboration with the National Institute of Industrial Technology, inventories of 32 dye-producing plants were completed, and natural dye recipes were tested under national quality standards. Additional species with dye potential have been documented, expanding opportunities for diversification and innovation while reinforcing the value of native biodiversity.

Territorial mapping has also been a critical component of this work. Women mapped approximately 300,000 hectares across their communities to identify important resource areas, conservation priority areas, and zones under pressure. This process increased understanding of land-use dynamics and made visible the ecological foundations of local economies. Mapping outcomes informed community conservation strategies developed in collaboration with local stakeholders. Agroforestry systems, home gardens, and protective fencing have also been introduced to support the regeneration of forest species and staple foods. Reforestation of carob trees contributes to food security through the production of flour and other derived products, while also enhancing carbon storage. Climate resilience is supported through early warning systems that help communities anticipate floods and droughts, reducing losses and damage. Together, COMAR's work has supported 800 family production units in learning climate resilience and sustainable production models.

KEY IMPACTS

Restoring ecosystems through sustainable resource management

- COMAR sustainably manages 100 hectares of native forest for raw materials for handicrafts, with improved and effective management that contributes to reducing CO_2 emissions.
- COMAR supported 800 family production units in learning climate resilience and sustainable production models.
- Four plantations and nurseries serve as demonstration sites for regenerative techniques and knowledge exchange.
- In collaboration with the National Institute of Industrial Technology, inventories of 32 dye-producing plants were completed, and natural dye recipes were tested under national quality standards.
- Women mapped approximately 300,000 hectares across their communities to identify important resource areas, conservation priority areas, and zones under pressure.



POLICY IMPACTS

"When given the opportunity with support, training, and sustained investment, Indigenous women have demonstrated their ability to overcome local conflicts, sometimes very critical ones, and to build networks and solutions that endure over time. Therefore, they represent a key stakeholder with whom to design public policies and lead long-term implementation processes that will change our world."

Fabiana Menna, President of Fundación Gran Chaco

National policy impacts

COMAR's work is influencing policy at local, provincial, and national levels by positioning Indigenous women as acknowledged actors in territorial governance, production systems, and social policy implementation. At the local level, COMAR's women leaders participate in community governance bodies, municipal delegations, and provincial forums, where they contribute to internal policy design and oversight. Several members have held, or currently hold, positions in provincial public office, thus strengthening the visibility of Indigenous women's leadership in formal decision-making spaces. Through this engagement, COMAR has supported the local implementation of gender-related policies on violence prevention, sexual and reproductive health, and access to justice, as well as public health initiatives related to dengue prevention, nutrition, and pandemic response, where the cooperative is routinely consulted as a key stakeholder.

At the provincial level, COMAR coordinates actions aligned with public programmes that converge livelihoods, food security, and biodiversity conservation. These include production chains supported through the NUTRIR Programme for carob flour processing, the FONTEX Programme for sewing and textile production, and the PAIPPA Programme for small-scale livestock farming. By embedding women-led artisanal and agroforestry practices within these policy frameworks, COMAR has contributed to the localisation of provincial development strategies that integrate income generation with sustainable resource management. The cooperative also plays an active role in the Pilcomayo Early Warning System, contributing community-level data and analysis on climate variability, floods, and droughts affecting territories along the Pilcomayo River, contributing to sub-national climate risk management and adaptation planning.

At the national level, COMAR collaborates with institutions such as the National Institute of Industrial Technology (*Instituto Nacional de Tecnología Industrial* or INTI by its acronym in Spanish) and the Market of Traditional and Innovative Argentine Crafts (MATRIA), contributing technical knowledge and innovation to strengthen the artisanal sector. Through joint work with INTI, COMAR's research on natural dyes derived

from native Chaco species has been incorporated into the national classification system for dyes, including the formal recognition of colours that were previously undocumented. These innovations have since been replicated in other provinces and adopted by additional stakeholders. The cooperative has also contributed to national public policy through its collaboration with UN Women and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), including research on gender gaps and community care systems and participation in the development of the Violence Prevention Alert System under the Spotlight Initiative, which was subsequently adopted as a public policy model. In parallel, COMAR's engagement in the ICCA network has supported national dialogue on biodiversity restoration and community-based conservation approaches.

Contributions to the global agenda

At the global level, COMAR supports the implementation of several critical multilateral agreements, including the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Through women-led sustainable handicraft production grounded in the use and regeneration of native species, COMAR advances integrated approaches that link biodiversity conservation, poverty reduction, and cultural revitalisation.

By organizing production systems based on renewable natural resources and Traditional Knowledge, the cooperative contributes to Climate Action (SDG 13) and Life on Land (SDG 15), while simultaneously strengthening Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8) and Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10) among Indigenous women in the Gran Chaco region. COMAR's work directly contributes to SDG 1: No Poverty by generating stable and increasing incomes for Indigenous women artisans and their families, transforming artisanal production from a marginal activity into a primary livelihood for thousands of households. Its explicit focus on women's leadership, economic autonomy, and participation in decision-making advances SDG 5: Gender Equality, particularly in contexts where Indigenous women face intersecting forms of discrimination. Through the Matriarca brand and international market engagement, COMAR demonstrates how sustainable value chains can integrate Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure (SDG 9) while safeguarding cultural heritage and traditional practices embedded in artisanal production.

In relation to the UNFCCC, COMAR contributes to climate change adaptation and mitigation by promoting diversified livelihoods, ecosystem restoration, and climate-resilient production systems in a highly vulnerable dry forest biome. Reforestation, cultivation of native species, agroforestry models, and participation in early warning systems reduce climate risks and enhance adaptive capacity at the community level. These actions also support nature-based solutions (NBS) that align climate objectives with biodiversity conservation under the CBD, illustrating how Indigenous women's enterprises can deliver co-benefits across global environmental agendas. Collectively, COMAR's integrated model offers a scalable example of how locally grounded initiatives can contribute to achieving multiple global targets through socially inclusive, culturally rooted, and ecologically sustainable development pathways.

REPLICATION, SCALABILITY, AND SUSTAINABILITY

Replication

COMAR's experience has been shared and adapted through regional and international knowledge exchanges focused on Indigenous women's artisanal production in dry forest landscapes. The cooperative is an active member of Redes Chaco, a trinational, multi-stakeholder platform operating across the Gran Chaco ecoregion. Through this platform, COMAR collaborates closely with Fundación Nativa in Bolivia and Grupo Sunu de Acción Intercultural in Paraguay, both organizations that work with artisan communities living in the same biome and belonging to many of the same Indigenous Peoples. These exchanges focus on organizational governance, sustainable management of native fibres and dyes, and women-led value chain development. COMAR also maintains learning exchanges with artisan groups from Chiapas, Mexico, where women are exploring how elements of the Matriarca model, such as collective branding, quality control, and market access, could be adapted to their own cultural and ecological contexts. These peer-to-peer processes emphasise shared learning rather than direct replication, allowing each group to adapt practices to local social, cultural, and environmental conditions.

Scalability

COMAR's model shows strong potential for scaling up, driven by sustained market demand and growing interest from new communities and commercial partners. In the territories where COMAR operates, an estimated 5,000 women are currently seeking to join the cooperative system, indicating that the main constraint to expansion is not demand but the pace of training and organizational strengthening required to maintain quality, traceability, and collective governance. In parallel, interest from entrepreneurs in opening additional Matriarca stores has led COMAR to develop a franchise model designed to expand market reach while safeguarding social and environmental standards. Planned investments in technology, digital tools, and professional development aim to improve coordination across production, logistics, and sales, enabling the cooperative to serve new national and international markets without compromising its women-led structure.

Sustainability

COMAR's long-term sustainability is underpinned by strong community ownership, diversified income streams, and growing financial stability. Over the past three fiscal years, the cooperative has recorded annual sales exceeding USD $8,670, with an average annual increase in operating sales of approximately 12 percent. These revenues are generated primarily through the commercialisation of handicrafts under the Matriarca brand, complemented by strategic partnerships and targeted project funding. Financial projections indicate that ongoing improvements in production efficiency, management systems, and market expansion will allow COMAR to fully cover its operating costs and reinvest in training, ecosystem restoration, and governance. The cooperative's legitimacy among member communities, combined with its alignment with provincial and national programmes, further strengthens its ability to sustain operations in the long term while adapting to environmental and economic change.

FUTURE PLANS

COMAR's future strategy focuses on consolidating its cooperative model while fostering innovation in new product lines and reinforcing partnerships with specialised finishing workshops in urban centres, allowing artisans to combine traditional techniques with contemporary design standards while maintaining quality and traceability. COMAR is also developing targeted communication and marketing strategies to strengthen the Matriarca brand, expand national sales channels, and increase its presence in international markets, with particular emphasis on the United States. These efforts aim to diversify revenue streams and reduce reliance on a limited number of buyers, while ensuring stable demand for artisan producers.

Social innovation underpins these ambitions. COMAR plans to strengthen evidence-building around its impacts on women's socioeconomic inclusion and inequality reduction through studies, surveys, and participatory monitoring. Parallel investments in training and workshops will focus on production quality, environmental sustainability, and climate-smart practices, supporting business models that enhance resilience while safeguarding the Gran Chaco's ecosystems.

PARTNERS

- ***Avina Foundation:*** Supports regional collaboration and replication of the cooperative model through Redes Chaco in Argentina, Bolivia, and Paraguay.
- ***Engineers Without Borders:*** Provides technical support related to infrastructure, production processes, and appropriate technologies for rural contexts.
- ***Google:*** Supports digital capacity-building and access to technological tools for communication, management, and visibility.
- ***Gran Chaco Foundation:*** Strengthens cooperative management, provides long-term technical assistance, and supports organizational, production, and marketing systems for women artisans.
- ***Inter-American Development Bank Lab (IDB Lab):*** Supports innovation, scaling strategies, and market development for inclusive and sustainable business models.
- ***El Futuro está en el Monte (The Future is in the Forest):*** Programme for the conservation, management, enrichment, and valuation of native forests and the main ally in the development of environmentally sustainable production models among Indigenous Peoples and Creole communities in the Argentine Gran Chaco.
- ***Microsoft:*** Contributes digital tools and technical support to improve internal management systems and data organization.
- ***NATIVA Bolivia:*** Collaborates on replication of the COMAR model with artisan associations in the Bolivian Gran Chaco.
- ***Redes Chaco:*** Facilitates trinational coordination, knowledge exchange, and replication of the model across the Gran Chaco ecoregion.
- ***Sumatoria:*** Provides strategic and financial advisory support to strengthen sustainability and growth.
- ***Sunu Group for Intercultural Action:*** Works with COMAR to adapt and replicate the cooperative artisan model among Indigenous communities in Paraguay.
- ***UN Women:*** Supports research, policy engagement, and initiatives addressing gender gaps, care systems, and women's empowerment.
- ***United Nations Development Programme (UNDP):*** Supports policy innovation, gender-based violence prevention systems, and links to national and global development agendas.
- ***WINGU:*** Strengthens digital infrastructure and technological capacities for cooperative management and communication.

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