



Mechanisation addresses sugarcane labour shortages in Vanua Levu

Charan Jeath Singh

MDF supported Charan Jeath Singh to procure a suitable mechanical harvester in Labasa, Vanua Levu, to address the labour shortage of sugarcane harvesters.



The Company

Charan Jeath Singh (CJS) Group was founded over 20 years ago with the establishment of Gurbachan's Foodtown Ltd supermarket in Labasa. Including a number of companies in its portfolio, the group has recently expanded into providing mechanical harvesting services to sugarcane farmers.



The Context

Historically, manual labour has been used to harvest sugarcane in Fiji. Labourers operate in 'cane gangs' who seek seasonal employment with farmers during the harvesting season. The number of labourers depends on each farmer's expected tonnage.

Sugarcane farming households are generally made up of a male farmer who is heavily involved in the cultivating and harvesting activities, whilst his wife is actively involved in meal preparations for the labourers and the household.



The Challenge

As more young people migrate to urban areas in Viti Levu for better employment and education opportunities, labour is scarce.

Over the years, increasing costs for labour and farm maintenance have made sugarcane farming challenging and less profitable. This has resulted in sugarcane that is left unharvested, in turn contributing to the industry not meeting its harvesting quota for the season.

Whilst mechanical harvesters had been previously introduced in Labasa in the mid 2000s, the venture was unsuccessful. The harvester model was unsuitable for farms in Vanua Levu as sugar is also planted on slopes and the lack of after-sale-services meant that machines were unable to be repaired, making them unusable.

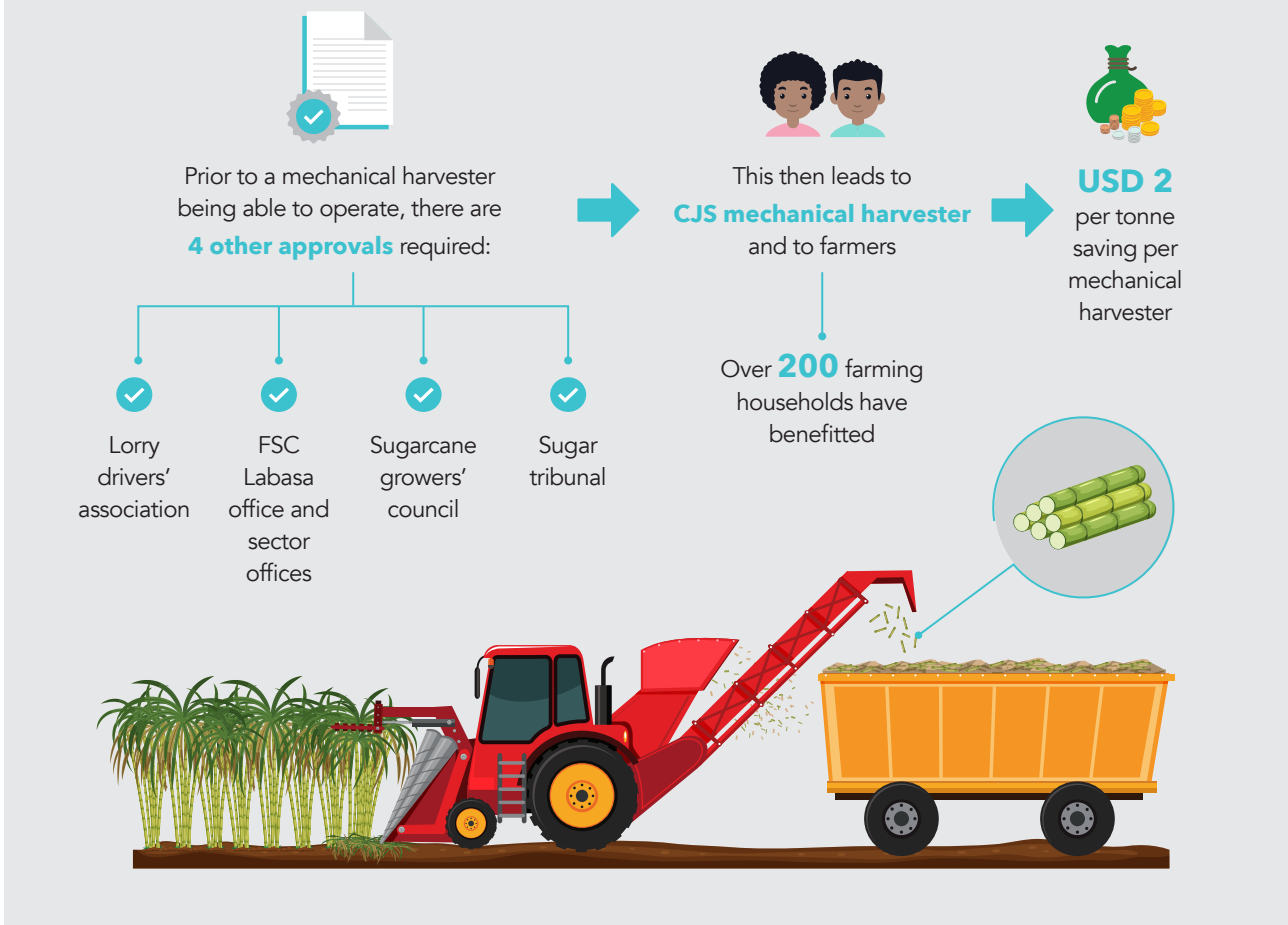
In order for CJS to successfully run the new mechanical harvester venture, an appropriate sugarcane harvester model with after-sale-service and maintenance was required.



The Solution

MDF supported CJS to procure a suitable mechanical harvester with wheels – capable of harvesting sugarcane on slopes - for farms in Vanua Levu.

The Results



As a result of harvesting services provided by CJS, over 90 sugarcane households are now able to harvest their cane on time, making sugarcane farming more profitable.

The introduction of the harvester and the harvesting service by CJS has also triggered 12 cooperatives and businesses bringing harvesters of the same or similar model to Labasa. Sugarcane farmers have also mentioned their willingness to increase the land under cultivation due to the availability of mechanical harvesters. Farmers now have more time available for cultivation and maintenance of their crop due to shorter harvests from 6 months to 2-3 days.

Time and cost savings have been recorded by all the farmers, regardless of whether they use the CJS service or the service of influenced providers. Over 200 farming households have benefitted from using the service, saving over USD 160,000 in extra costs.

The impact on female heads of households has been significant. Previously, they spent up to 15 hours a day catering for labourers during the cane cutting season, often waking up as early as 4am to finish all their obligations.

With the introduction of mechanisation in sugarcane harvesting, women now have more time to devote to their children, other economic activities, and themselves.