



COVID-19 Recovery Story

Pandemic prevention leads to healthier lifestyles

Misak Topi, a coffee farmer from Kofikah in Eastern Highlands Province (EHP) was scared when he first heard about COVID-19 and how fatal it was.



News spread in my village that the disease was killing so many people in other countries. These countries have good health care systems and people still died! That made me very scared, because we don't even have a health worker in my village.

Misak Topi

Misak with his wife Mary own two and a half hectares of coffee cultivation. Misak spends most of his days in the coffee 'garden,' as it is referred to in PNG, and does odd jobs to provide for his family, while Mary manages all the household purchases. Mary weaves bilums – local bags – and travels to Goroka town frequently to sell the bilums and fresh vegetables to support her husband and their four children.

When COVID-19 was first detected in PNG in early March 2020, most people in rural PNG were able to sustain themselves in terms of food supply. However, following several COVID-19 outbreaks, most farmers lost their income stream because travel and gathering restrictions made it impossible for them to sell their produce in the town markets. Lockdowns happened twice in EHP, first from March to April 2020 and again from October to November 2021, as PNG battled with a deadly wave of the virus.

"The towns and markets were shut down and we were told to stay in our villages. We had enough to eat because we had gardens but we could not sell our vegetables and coffee in town, and we were not able to buy basic goods from the stores," Mary said.

Most smallholder farming families in PNG earmark their savings for children's school fees. For Misak and Mary, their main concern was not food but that they would not make enough money during the lockdown period to send their children to school when the time came.

As part of a coffee certification program supported by MDF, in partnership with PNG Coffee Export and CARE International, a training session on COVID-19 prevention was incorporated into the certification training schedule for farmers. By providing factual information on the virus, the meeting aimed to stem the spread of misinformation and help rural farmers safely produce their crops and transport them to markets. Farmers learned ways to

protect themselves and their families from falling ill and how to farm and trade responsibly in the face of the pandemic. The certification training continued to focus on sustainable coffee farming practices that would help farmers meet international market requirements. In combination, the training was vital to ensure uninterrupted farming and sale of quality coffee.



Lifestyle changes

Lifestyle and cultures in PNG may vary from one province to the next but they also share many commonalities. Families and communities are close and rely on each other. Sharing food and responsibilities is the normal way of life. Misak was worried that the highly transmissible COVID-19 would spread fast and affect everyone because of the way people interact with each other.



The way we live in the villages in PNG is very different from some countries. We help each other every day. In the gardens, we share tools. Food is shared. The old people are cared for by the family. Personal and household hygiene are a big concern in our communities. So, I thought everyone was going to get sick.

Misak.

Adding to the high risk of spreading COVID-19 was the lack of adequate water and sanitation facilities in most rural villages. Locals walk from their homes to

the nearest water source for drinking, cooking and washing. Misak, Mary and their children walk for about half a kilometre to retrieve clean water. As part of the COVID-19 awareness training, farmers were taught to use the resources around them to protect themselves from the virus. One such solution is the 'tippy tap,' a simple device constructed with local materials and used to wash hands with running water. The tippy taps were set up next to toilets to improve hygiene and sanitation. Farmers were also encouraged to build small tool sheds to keep their tools clean in a safe and secure location.

Misak and other farmers in Kofikah were part of 12 villages in EHP that completed the coffee certification training. Today, he and his family are well and conduct their normal life in a safe way. Misak says he has observed a big difference in his coffee garden and in his home.

"I did not give much attention to my coffee trees before and only checked my garden during coffee season. Now, after the training, I spend more time pruning and working in my garden. I harvest more and I get more money. My home also looks clean, our village is clean, and I'm able to farm and sell safely to protect myself and my family from this disease," Misak said.

The coffee certification program aims to help smallholder farmers become speciality coffee suppliers so they can earn a premium price for their produce. The COVID-19 prevention and precautionary component of the coffee certification training has helped farmers better understand the virus and has led to healthier lifestyle practices. Misak, his family and other farmers in Kofikah continue to put into practice what they learned in these sessions.



We would not bother to regularly clean our garden tools, even after someone borrowed it. We did not understand that disease can also spread from dirty tools. My husband recently built a small tool shed where we now keep our tools clean and safe.

Mary.