

## Pro-Poor Growth Story

# The power of processing

## Coffee milling saves farmers' time and effort

*The transition from manual to wet mills has increased coffee quality and production in Timor-Leste.*

Coffee is a critical industry for Timor-Leste. The sector generates USD25 million (AUD35 million) annually, making it the largest non-oil export. Additionally, around 37 per cent of Timor-Leste's population depend on this sector for at least part of their earnings. For many households, coffee farming is the only opportunity to bring in a cash income. In 2020, due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, MDF secured inbound flights for several key specialty coffee buying personnel who were able to successfully procure the 2020 harvest. This connection immediately boosted coffee cherry prices and established a sales channel for coffee farmers. MDF replicated the activity in 2021, as travel restrictions continued in Timor-Leste due to the pandemic. This venture offered an opportunity for suppliers and farmers to build a direct connection.

Timorese farmers continue to manually process coffee beans. This poses a challenge to meet international demand. Many coffee producers use manual pulpers, a method which requires spending hours removing the skin of the coffee cherry and spinning the pulpers by hand. The task is time consuming, labour-intensive and leads to low productivity and insufficient quality and quantity.

Keeping this challenge in mind, MDF worked with Karst Organics to organise a new wet mill to upgrade local coffee cherry processing. MDF also supported Karst Organics to conduct training sessions for farmers on selective harvesting and picking techniques. Both initiatives will cut down time and labour costs for farmers. Karst Organics is a specialty green bean supplier, sourcing Arabica green beans from smallholder farmers in Timor-Leste. Over the last three years, the business has worked with farmers in Letefoho and Ermera.

Francisco de Deus is a coffee farmer who owns a six hectare coffee farm in the village of Rotuto. Francisco has been processing his coffee manually for many years but wanted to increase his production volumes. He saw the opportunity to expand his knowledge and chose to attend the Karst Organics training on selective picking, fermentation and drying.



*Previously, after pulping and washing, we needed at least seven hours to remove the remaining cherry skin. But now we spend less than an hour to do the work.*

**Francisco de Deus,**  
Coffee farmer.



Francisco now leads the Rotuto Group, comprising of 10 farmers, and is responsible for wet mill operation and coffee cherries quality inspection before the farmers sell their haul to Karst Organics. Francisco and his group members sold coffee cherries at a price 15 per cent higher than the previous year thanks to the improved crop quality.

Francisco and his fellow farmers in the group use the saved time for fermentation and to pick more cherries to sell. The price premium for quality coffee also motivated the farmers to do more selective picking. Consequently, these farmers were able to sell four tonnes of coffee cherries in 2021, a significant increase from three tonnes the previous year.

Meet another coffee farmer, Filomena dos Santos, who benefitted from using a wet mill for pulping coffee. With the wet mill, farmers don't need to spend seven hours removing the coffee cherry skin after washing because the entire skin is washed away with water.



*In the past few years, I pulped coffee manually. In a day, I could only pulp around three to four sacks [70 kg sacks], which caused me chest pain. But in 2021, with the wet mill, pulping coffee is so easy! I could pulp five to six sacks of coffee and there is no more chest pain.*

**Filomena dos Santos,**  
Coffee farmer.

As the farmers' production quantities increased, so has their coffee cherry quality. The Karst Organics training covered a wide range of topics, including best practice harvesting and processing techniques. Farmers also learned how to better identify coffee beans. All participants who adopted these practices told MDF that they noticed changes in the quality of their coffee and were able to sell their crops at higher prices. As a result, 80 farmers benefitted from the intervention,

which generated an additional income of USD12,825 (AUD17,980) for the growers, including five persons with disabilities.

With better processing facilities in place and more farmers adopting efficient practices, coffee quality is on the rise in Timor-Leste. For farmers like Francisco and Filomena, these improvements have enhanced their quality of life.