

## Pro-Poor Growth Story

# Improving Productivity

## The silver lining for Sri Lanka's organic farming industry



Piyarathne is a lead organic farmer in his town of Dambulla, located in the North of Matale District in Sri Lanka's Central Province. He grows organic moringa, lemongrass, passion fruit and marigold. Piyarathne is one of a small group of farmers in Sri Lanka who have transitioned to certified organic crops. As chemical fertiliser imports were restricted, this choice helped him maintain a stable income in a period of turbulent policy direction that shifted to fully organic agriculture.



*I have been growing moringa for over 12 years and selling to a company (MDF partner English Tea Shop - ETS). I switched to organic five years ago.*

### Piyarathne

Organic agriculture is a fundamental pillar of biodynamic farming. If executed correctly, this practice can improve soil properties and if catered precisely to the target market, organic certifications can fetch higher prices for farmers. Sri Lanka's organic farming industry is nascent, largely targeting export spices and some tea. The industry accounted for less than 2.5 per cent of total agricultural land in 2021. Knowledge of organic farming techniques and best practice is not widespread, leading to high post-harvest losses. As a result, Sri Lanka's organic farming yields tend to be substandard compared to other countries. However, farmers like Piyarathne are changing the game. Piyarathne owns

seven acres of land, of which four acres are dedicated to organic cultivation. He also employs between two to four farm labourers at any given time, providing income opportunities for his community.

Organic agriculture was thrown into the spotlight in 2021, but MDF recognised the need for improved organic farming techniques as early as 2019, as a way of improving the farmgate productivity of MDF partner, English Tea Shop (ETS). ETS's organic certified farmer cluster, which included Piyarathne, were experiencing low productivity levels. This led MDF and ETS to develop a Training of Trainer (ToT) manual for farmers growing ginger, moringa, turmeric, cardamom, vanilla and lemongrass in the regions of Deniyaya, Beliatta and Matale, based on a gap analysis conducted in 2020 at all training locations. Building on the gap analysis, MDF and ETS proceeded to train farmer groups associated with all three ETS primary processors, along with extension officers, in 2021. The coaching sessions provided information on organic farming practices to reduce soil erosion, improve soil nutrition and biodiversity, pest management techniques, and advice on compost and liquid fertiliser production.

Not long after the training workshops, the government announced the decision to restrict the import of agrochemicals in April 2021. This sudden announcement resulted in fertiliser shortages and steep price increases for both synthetic and organic agri-inputs. Farmers,

whose organic certification status depended on the procurement of quality fertiliser, suffered heavily. After much lobbying and protests, the import of agri-inputs was reinstated in late 2021. However, shortages persist.

Piyarathne received the MDF training from one of ETS' main processors, Maarji. He used the information from the workshop to start producing his own compost, liquid fertiliser and organic pesticide.



*I have seen the process of making organic fertiliser before on television. Then, I attended the workshop, which taught me how to do it. I make 15kg [of fertiliser] from four different plant varieties. I ferment it and spray the fertiliser on the crops within three to four days of making it. It has really been successful.*

#### **Piyarathne.**

Piyarathne admits, casually demonstrating his fertiliser making process to the MDF team. Piyarathne is now producing sufficient fertiliser and pesticide for his almost four acres of crop land at little to no cost.

Natural pest repellents are a key part of organic farming. Based on the recommendations of the workshops and Maarji on pest management techniques, Piyarathne grows marigold on his land as well. In addition to repelling harmful pest infestations, the plant is an additional source of income as MDF's partner purchases the flowers weekly.

With rising labour and organic input costs, farmers who engage in organic farming like Piyarathne seek low maintenance crops to diversify incomes. Strong organic

crops, such as marigold, moringa and lemongrass, have proven to be highly profitable additions, improving the resilience of farmer livelihoods.

For Piyarathne, he was able to successfully increase his knowledge of organic farming and holistic management practices, such as liquid fertiliser and pesticides, thanks to the information he learned during workshops. Paired with his existing knowledge and experience, this has led to increased yields and access to a new market via new crop additions.

Despite the trainings to improve farmgate productivity, MDF notes that not all farmers have been as proactive as Piyarathne. This was mainly due to COVID-19 restrictions disrupting the workshops. MDF expects to increase future uptake through more frequent follow-up trainings, local farmers taking a leadership role in the organic model roll-out and regular visits from extension officers, incentivised by ETS's primary processors. This will improve the productivity of existing organic farmlands, leading to higher incomes and making it a profitable farming model that could be replicated.

The transition to organic is difficult, not only for Sri Lankan farmers but globally. Nevertheless, positive results experienced by certified organic farmers, such as Piyarathne, shows that there is potential to generate stable organic farming livelihoods if proper training is delivered on optimal farming techniques. With MDF's intervention in its first year of monitoring, the team will continue to work with ETS and interested businesses to scale up the knowledge transfer from the workshops and increase organic farming productivity to benefit agribusinesses and Sri Lankan farming households.



*I get LKR200/kg for marigold, while I only get LKR70/kg for moringa and lemongrass. I can sell 10-15kg of marigold a week to the company [Maarji]. I didn't have many marigold plants last year. I planted about 10,000-15,000 marigold trees this year.*

**Piyarathne,**  
Lead organic farmer