

A woman with a joyful expression is carrying a large, dark, woven basket filled with fresh green leafy vegetables and small yellow flowers on her head. She is wearing a bright pink, long-sleeved shirt with a subtle floral pattern and a brown patterned sarong. Her hands are raised, holding the sides of the basket. The background is blurred, showing other people in a market setting.

Women entrepreneurs lead better agricultural productivity in Timor Leste

Inclusion story

Agriculture is the backbone of Timor-Leste's economy, and yet farmers **face significant barriers** that limit their productivity.

Only six per cent of agricultural households in Timor-Leste use fertiliser or plant protection methods, and just 20 per cent use improved seed varieties. As a result, farmers generate consistently low yields. A lack of access to agricultural inputs—such as seeds, fertiliser and herbicides—remains a major hurdle for farmers. MDF Timor-Leste is collaborating with local agricultural input retailers to address some of these challenges and bridge the gap between farmers—particularly women—and essential resources, leading to growth and opportunity.

In Timor-Leste, women working in agriculture have limited access to land and credit and grapple with low productivity due to inadequate farming tools and services. As women also shoulder a heavy load of unpaid work, they have limited involvement in cash crop farming. Moreover, social and cultural norms restrict their role in household and farming decision-making and the degree to which they can participate in markets.

MDF is working with its partners to increase access to agricultural inputs outside the capital, Dili. Part of this work is supporting women entrepreneurs to establish input shops in rural areas. One such partner is Hyutmeran, an input retailer that started working with MDF in 2023. The business provides farmers with easy access to agricultural inputs, including climate-resilient seeds, and purchases horticultural produce from farmers for distribution to supermarkets in Dili. In 2024, with MDF's support, Hyutmeran expanded operations to municipalities outside Dili, further improving input availability for rural farmers.

Lucia da Silva: Making inputs accessible

Before Lucia da Silva opened her shop, farmers in Selo Kraik had to wake up before dawn and travel for hours to buy basic seeds. Now, they simply walk to her store.

Lucia, a 30-year-old entrepreneur from Selo Kraik in Aileu Municipality, understands the struggles of rural farmers. For years, her neighbors had to travel to Dili just to buy basic farming supplies. Partnering with Vicente de Jesus, owner of Hyutmeran, Lucia decided to open an agricultural input shop in her village.

"I was motivated to sell inputs because Hyutmeran ensures a

consistent supply, so I never have to worry about stock. At the same time, it's rewarding to know I'm helping farmers access resources without the time and cost of traveling to Dili or Aileu," she explains.

Lucia's shop has become a much needed resource for her community, providing high-quality seeds, fertiliser and herbicides at affordable prices. Farmers regularly visit her shop, especially during the dry season when input demand spikes.



Her business generates a monthly income of USD500-600 (AUD783-940), which she uses to support her family and reinvest in her business.



Graciana Amaral Colo: Addressing local demand

Just a few kilometers away in Aileu town, 26-year-old Graciana Amaral Colo runs another thriving input shop. A farmer herself, Graciana understands the importance of timely access to farming supplies.

Her shop is particularly busy during the dry season, when farmers need extra support to maintain their crops. Her ability to meet this demand has earned her trust among the local farming community. Beyond selling products, Graciana sees herself as a partner in her customers' success, often sharing farming tips and insights.



With a steady monthly revenue of USD500-600 (AUD783 – 940), she has built financial independence while contributing to agricultural growth in her community.



*Every day, farmers ask for inputs at my shop. **Since opening, it's been clear how much time and effort this saves them**—they no longer have to travel to Dili or Aileu for supplies*

"Farmers come to me because they know I have what they need and can also give them advice," she says.

Sabina dos Santos: Meeting specific agricultural input needs

In Manatuto Municipality, 31-year-old Sabina dos Santos caters to a different set of agricultural needs: her shop specialises in herbicides, which are in high demand among

local farmers managing weed-infested fields during the dry season.

"Farmers frequently ask for herbicides to manage weeds in their fields," Sabina explains. Her shop not only meets these needs but also saves farmers from traveling long distances. Although her shop is smaller than Lucia's and Graciana's, Sabina takes pride in her work and the trust she has built with her customers.



She earns a steady income of USD100-150 (AUD156-235) per month, which she uses to support her household and sustain her business.



Women entrepreneurs proudly display their agricultural inputs at their store.

Expanding access to agricultural inputs through MDF partnerships

For farmers, having input retailers closer to home brings tangible benefits. With easier access to information and high-quality inputs, they can increase crop yields, improve productivity and reduce costs. An MDF assessment found that 50 per cent of farmers have reduced their expenses by eliminating long-distance travel. Moreover, these resources allow farmers to switch to higher-value crops and adopt better agricultural practices, strengthening food security and resilience.

Women, who already play a vital role in agriculture, are now gaining even stronger influence through these local shops. Entrepreneurs like Lucia, Graciana, and Sabina are not only earning steady incomes, but also making decisions relating to buying and using agricultural inputs. Farmers with disabilities have also benefited from having input shops that are easily accessible without the need for extensive travel.

Women entrepreneurs like Lucia, Graciana, and Sabina are not just

improving access to agricultural inputs, they are reshaping social and economic dynamics. Their leadership is fostering a subtle yet significant shift in social norms, positioning them as decision-makers, contributors to community growth, and role models for future generations. By supporting women entrepreneurs, MDF and its partners are not only improving access to agricultural inputs but also paving the way for more inclusive, resilient and self-sufficient rural communities across Timor-Leste.



This isn't just about selling products. It's about making life easier for our farmers and creating a better future for our families.

Lucia da Silva