

**O potencial da cooperação na indústria do café entre China e Timor-Leste e sua estratégia de desenvolvimento sob a perspectiva da iniciativa do cinturão e rota**

*The potential of china-timor-leste coffee industry cooperation and the development strategy from the perspective of the belt and road initiative*

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# O POTENCIAL DA COOPERAÇÃO NA INDÚSTRIA DO CAFÉ ENTRE CHINA E TIMOR-LESTE E SUA ESTRATÉGIA DE DESENVOLVIMENTO SOB A PERSPECTIVA DA INICIATIVA DO CINTURÃO E ROTA

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## **RESUMO**

O café é a principal cultura comercial em Timor-Leste e, desde a independência, as exportações de café representam 85-90% das exportações anuais de produtos não petrolíferos do país. Nos últimos anos, o sabor único do café de Timor-Leste tem ganhado popularidade entre os consumidores chineses. Em 2023, China tornou-se o terceiro maior importador de café de Timor-Leste, consolidando-se como um parceiro estratégico cada vez mais relevante no comércio exterior de Timor-Leste. O fortalecimento da cooperação na indústria do café entre China e Timor-Leste desempenha um papel fundamental na promoção das relações bilaterais. Este artigo tem como objeto de investigação a indústria do café de Timor-Leste, iniciando com uma análise de seu desenvolvimento e desafios, seguida por uma avaliação da cooperação existente entre os dois países nesse setor. Por fim, são apresentadas recomendações políticas relevantes no contexto da Iniciativa do Cinturão e Rota e do plano de desenvolvimento de longo prazo para o café em Timor-Leste.

Palavras-chave: Café de Timor-Leste; Iniciativa do Cinturão e Rota; China; Timor-leste.

## **ABSTRACT**

Coffee is the main commercial crop in Timor-Leste, and since independence, coffee exports have accounted for 85-90% of the country's annual non-oil commodity exports. In recent years, the unique flavor of Timor-Leste coffee has gained popularity among Chinese consumers. In 2023, China had become the third largest importer of coffee from Timor-Leste, solidifying the Chinese market as an increasingly important strategic partner in Timor-Leste's foreign trade. Deepening cooperation in the coffee industry between China and Timor-Leste holds significant importance for promoting the upgrading of bilateral relations. This article takes the coffee industry of Timor-Leste as the research object, beginning with an analysis of its development and challenges, and reviews the existing cooperation between China and Timor-Leste in the coffee sector. Finally, relevant policy recommendations are proposed in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative and Timor-Leste's long-term coffee development plan.

Keywords: Timor-Leste Coffee; Belt and Road Initiative; China; Timor-Leste.

# **THE POTENTIAL OF CHINA-TIMOR-LESTE COFFEE INDUSTRY COOPERATION AND THE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE**

## **1 INTRODUÇÃO**

Timor-Leste, located in Southeast Asia and is the only Asian country in the southern hemisphere. Historically, it has served as a key transportation hub between Asia and Oceania, playing an important role as a stop along ancient China's Maritime Silk Road and a significant site in the European spice trade. China was the first country to establish diplomatic relations with Timor-Leste following its independence.

In May 2002, China and Timor-Leste formally established diplomatic relations, since then, the two countries have made rapid progress in political, economic, and cultural exchanges. Since the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, Timor-Leste's political and business communities have responded enthusiastically. In 2014, China and Timor-Leste formally established a “comprehensive partnership of good-neighborly friendship, mutual trust, and mutual benefit”, which has become a strong foundation for Timor-Leste's development.

In May 2017, China and Timor-Leste signed a Memorandum of Understanding for cooperation on the Belt and Road Initiative, providing new opportunities for bilateral relations. In September 2023, the partnership was elevated to a “comprehensive strategic partnership”. According to the full text of the Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste on Establishing Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, China has pledged to support the revitalization of Timor-Leste's coffee industry by providing technical assistance and fostering trade cooperation. In this context, understanding the development of Timor-Leste's coffee industry, analyzing the constraints on its development, and exploring the potential for cooperation between China and Timor-Leste in this sector will contribute to advancing the comprehensive strategic partnership and achieving plentiful achievements.

## **2 OVERVIEW OF TIMOR-LESTE COFFEE INDUSTRY**

Timor-Leste has a long history of coffee planting, dating back to the Portuguese colonial period. In the mid-19th century, as sandalwood exports declined, colonists promoted

large-scale coffee cultivation to address economic pressures. Due to the weak control of the colonial government over Portuguese Timor, direct cultivation measures were not implemented. Instead, Governor Afonso de Castro collaborated with the Liurai, known as local rulers, to enforce compulsory cultivation among the people under their jurisdiction. In exchange, the colonial government exempted the Liurai from the *finta* (an agricultural tax imposed by Portuguese Timor on local dependent kingdoms) if they met the requirements of “every household planting” and “maintaining 600 coffee trees”. This proposal was accepted by some Liurai (Shepherd & McWilliam, 2013).

Between 1858 and 1860, coffee accounted for approximately 7% of the colony’s total export value, by 1863-1865, it made up at least 50% of total exports (Buletin La’o Hamutuk, 2002). Encouraged by the substantial profits, more Liurai adopted coffee cultivation, leading to an expansion of coffee-growing areas and the consolidation of the colonial government's mandatory coffee cultivation program.

The rise of the coffee industry revitalized the colony’s economy. In 1897, Governor José Celestino da Silva forcibly seized parts of the Ermera region through military action, and a large plantation Sociedade Agricola Patria e Trabalho (SAPT) was established. Subsequently, the colonial government deployed troops to oversee the planting process and forced local small farmers to cultivate hundreds of thousands of coffee seedlings (Clarence-Smith, 1992, p.5). During the tenure of Governor Filomeno da Câmara de Melo Cabral, the policy of compulsory cultivation was aggressively enforced. As punishment for the failed uprising, the colonial government ordered the “mob” to plant 600 coffee trees each. Nearly 8 million coffee trees were recorded as planted in 1916 alone (Clarence-Smith, 1992, p.6). In 1926, the Estado Novo, a right-wing dictatorship, came to power and intensified pressure on the peasants. Between 1927 and 1929, the colonial government distributed 26 million coffee saplings (Clarence-Smith, 1992, p.7).

As the industry expanded, coffee rapidly became Portuguese Timor's primary export. However, decades of political turmoil in the 20th century severely impacted coffee cultivation and production. After independence, the coffee industry was rebuilt, and Timor-Leste became the world’s largest single-origin source of organic coffee. The coffee industry now plays a crucial role in the country's economic development, with more than 28% of the population relying on it for their livelihood (Tatoli, 2023a).

## 2.1 THE CURRENT SITUATION OF COFFEE CULTIVATION IN TIMOR-LESTE

Coffee is grown in the high mountains of Timor-Leste's interior region, where fertile soil and tropical monsoon climate create ideal conditions for coffee cultivation. At the beginning of the coffee industry, Arabica coffee trees were mainly cultivated. However, due to a large-scale outbreak of coffee leaf rust disease in the late 19th century led to a significant decline in production, prompting the Portuguese to introduce Robusta saplings. In the early 20th century, a hybrid variety known as Híbrido de Timor (HDT) was discovered (Henriques & Carvalho, 2013). This variety combines the excellent traits of Arabica and Robusta coffee, including high-quality flavor, remarkable temperature tolerance, and exceptional resistance to diseases and pests. HDT has played a vital role in the global coffee industry, with most commercially produced Arabica coffee today being descendants of this resilient hybrid. The majority of Timor-Leste's coffee farms are small family-run operations, mainly concentrated in the regions of Aileu, Ainaro, Bobonaro, Ermera, Liquiçá, and Manufahi, accounting for approximately 97% of the country's total (Asian Development Bank, 2019a).

Many coffee farms employ shade planting, which provides a good growing environment for coffee trees. Shade trees stabilize the soil, protect coffee trees from intense sunlight, enhance rainwater infiltration into aquifers, and provide habitats for other plants and animals, thereby enriching soil fertility (Asian Development Bank, 2019b). Due to the high cost associated with chemical inputs, most farmers rely on natural compost and organic pest control methods--a sustainable farming approach that has positioned Timor-Leste's coffee as a standout in the global specialty coffee market.

Table 1 - Timor-Leste's main coffee varieties growing conditions

	Arabica	Robusta	HDT
Optimum temperature	15~24°C	22~30°C	16°C~26°C
Optimum Annual rainfall	1200~1800mm	1500~2500mm	1500~2500mm
Optimum altitude	1000~1500m	400~800m	800~1500m

Source: Prepared by the author.

## 2.2 THE CHALLENGES OF COFFEE FARMING

Agricultural production in Timor-Leste is highly vulnerable to natural disasters. In 2015-2016, Timor-Leste faced one of the worst droughts in recent years due to the influence of El Niño (Foo, 2017). This extreme weather severely impacted Timor-Leste's coffee industry, leading to three consecutive years of poor yields from 2015 and 2017. The prolonged drought caused significant water shortages, depriving coffee plants of essential nutrients during critical growth stages. Then, in late 2017, the climate shifted to La Niña,

bringing heavy rains to the region. The sudden and excessive rainfall, following an extended drought, further complicated coffee cultivation. Heavy rains not only damaged coffee plants but also caused soil erosion and landslides, washing away nutrient-rich topsoil and further diminishing productivity.

Table 2 - Coffee Production in Timor-Leste

Year	Area Harvested (ha)	Yield(ton)	Production Quantity (kg/ha)
2012	14732	3660	248.4
2013	17048	4800	281.6
2014	23872	6660	279
2015	32196	3540	110
2016	23569	4920	208.7
2017	14808	3900	263.4
2018	27651	8340	301.6
2019	17130	6180	360.8
2020	21959	9040.6	411.7
2021	22627	13313.98	588.4
2022	22814	11674.19	511.7

Source: Prepared by the author (United Nations, 2024).

Most of the coffee trees in Timor-Leste today are left over from the last century, with more than half beyond their productive lifespan. Old coffee plants yield fewer berries of lower quality. While the global average coffee yield is 2000 kg/ha, Timor-Leste produces only 195 kg of coffee berries per hectare (Market Development Facility, 2021). Aging coffee plants are more vulnerable to fungi and pests, although the unique HDT variety in Timor-Leste helps mitigate the impact of pests and diseases, it is not evenly planted across the country. At the same time, the mountainous terrain and limited infrastructure make large-scale preventive measures difficult to implement. In this context, investing in new coffee seedlings and expanding HDT planting are the most viable solutions. However, as Timor-Leste is at the initial stages of national development, government support is constrained by economic limitations. During economic downturns, reduced government revenues further hinder investment in agriculture. Moreover, many farmers lack the skills and facilities necessary to properly grow coffee trees. For example, pruning coffee trees can extend the productive life of coffee plants. However, due to financial constraints, many farmers minimize labor input as much as possible. As a result, they often forgo essential practices like pruning branches and removing weeds, which are crucial for maintaining the quality of coffee production (Asian Development Bank, 2019b).

Apart from natural conditions, the Timor-Leste coffee trade faces several challenges. First, the logistics infrastructure is underdeveloped. Second, coffee processing equipment is limited. Third, global market competition is intense. Timor-Leste's coffee farms are located in

remote mountainous areas, and poor road transportation significantly increases the time needed to transport coffee beans, often leading to spoilage. Shipping is the primary mode of export for Timor-Leste, but limited transport options drive up the cost of the coffee trade. As a commodity, coffee's market price is highly volatile, affected by global economic fluctuations, and changes in demand and production levels. Many coffee farmers face economic crises during the periods of falling coffee prices, which limits their ability to invest in coffee processing. In such cases, most farmers rely on public equipment in their communities. However, inadequate facilities may result in delayed processing, and the inconsistent quality of the coffee further reduces its competitiveness in the market. Competing with major coffee-producing countries, such as Brazil, Vietnam, and Ethiopia, which dominate the commercial and specialty coffee markets, Timor-Leste's coffee suffers from a lack of strong international branding and recognition. Additionally, differences in processing methods and limited infrastructure contribute to inconsistent coffee quality, making it difficult to meet the stringent standards of international buyers and reducing its ability to compete in high-value markets.

### 2.3 GOVERNMENT RESPONSE MEASURES AND THE EFFORTS OF SOCIAL GROUPS

In response to these difficulties, the Government of Timor-Leste has implemented several initiatives to improve coffee quality, enhance market access, and support the livelihoods of smallholder farmers. The government has developed a long-term strategy, the National Coffee Sector Development Plan 2019-2030 (2019), and has consistently included coffee industry development in its national policy framework. In addition, the government provides small loans and subsidies to coffee farmers, promotes the cultivation of the HDT, and works to create a more stable production environment. With the support of international partners, it has secured funding and training programs for the domestic coffee industry. The Government of Timor-Leste has also actively participated in various international expositions to raise the profile of coffee and has simplified export regulations to facilitate easier access to global markets for producers. Through these measures, the government aims to improve the nation's coffee trade situation, strengthen the position of Timor-Leste's coffee in the global market, and build a more resilient industry for the country.

In addition to government support, an increasing number of young generations are contributing to the growth of Timor-Leste's coffee industry. Many young people have started taking over family farms, introducing modern coffee-growing techniques to boost production.



Meanwhile, some entrepreneurs are actively participating in international trade fairs and coffee competitions, leveraging social media to promote their coffee to the world. They are also exploring new coffee products, such as drip coffee, to diversify income streams and expand market opportunities.

Due to the small scale of individual farms, many smallholders struggle to become stable suppliers. In response, industry organizations have been established to consolidate resources and help farmers to increase their incomes. For example, Asosiasaun Café Timor (ACT), founded in 2016, has set up a national cupping laboratory. And attracts international buyers through events such as the Festival Kafé Timor (Forum de Macau, 2024). Additionally, the Cooperativa Café Timor (CCT) represents more than 20000 smallholder farmers and operates under a fair trade model. By maintaining strong connections with international buyers, CCT helps farmers obtain organic certification for their coffee. A portion of its profits is reinvested in initiatives such as healthcare services, coffee plantation renovation, and vocational training, further benefiting the farmers and their communities.

### **3 ANALYSIS OF COFFEE INDUSTRY COOPERATION BETWEEN CHINA AND TIMOR-LESTE**

#### **3.1 OPPORTUNITY**

On September 23, 2023, bilateral relations were further elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. In the Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste on Establishing Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, China pledged continued support for Timor-Leste's coffee exports to China and aiding the revitalization of its coffee industry. In July 2024, the bilateral strengthening of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, coupled with the joint signing of a cooperation plan to advance the Belt and Road Initiative construction, expanded the avenues of economic and trade collaboration, particularly in the coffee industry between China and Timor-Leste (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, 2024).

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the global economy has suffered significant setbacks, accompanied by a rise in anti-globalization and unilateralism. In response to an increasingly complex external environment, the Outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) for National Economic and Social Development and Vision 2035 of the People's Republic of China (Asian Development Bank, 2020) emphasized the importance of fostering positive interplay between domestic and international economic flows. It advocated making full use of both domestic and international markets and resources, actively promoting

the coordinated development of domestic and foreign demand, imports and exports, foreign capital inflows, and outward investment, while maintaining the basic balance of international payments.

Similarly, the Program of the Eighth Constitutional Government of Timor-Leste (Timor-Leste, 2018) continued to pursue an economic diversification strategy, aiming to spread products with an economic added value around the world, transforming natural wealth from the soil or sea into tools for food security and productivity. In this context, China and Timor-Leste are continuing to strengthen exchanges and cooperation in the coffee industry. By transferring production capacities in exchange for much-needed resources and technologies, the two countries are leveraging their complementary advantages and optimizing their respective industries. This collaboration represents an opportunity for both nations to pursue development and achieve win-win results aimed at the global economic downturn.

### 3.2 SOLID COOPERATION GROUNDS

The BRI plays a vital role in strengthening coffee trade between China and Timor-Leste, supporting Timor-Leste's economic recovery while introducing its specialty coffee to Chinese consumers. In terms of technical assistance, the Chinese government and various non-governmental organizations provide modern agricultural equipment and training programs to help Timor-Leste coffee growers improve productivity and enhance processing efficiency.

Table 3 - Coffee Industry Cooperation between China and Timor-Leste

Year	Event
2017	The Ministry of Commerce of China held "Training Course on Coffee Improvement and Post-Harvest Processing Technology for Timor-Leste" in Ermera.
2020	A center for promoting Timor-Leste coffee opened in Shanghai, China. The center advertises courses at Instituto de Tecnologia de Díli in coffee culture and tourism, in serving in coffee shops and in coffee management.
2021	The Embassy of China in Timor-Leste donated US \$20000 to ACT, a coffee plantation base was established in the village of Kirilelo in Aleu.
2022	Yunnan Association of Friendship with Foreign Countries and the Chinese Embassy donated US\$700000 to ACT to purchase coffee seedlings.
2023	ACT visited Yunnan to learn coffee cultivation techniques.

Source: Prepared by the author.

Beyond technical training, the two nations have also collaborated in market promotion, coffee trade, and other aspects. China has actively promoted Timor-Leste's specialty coffee to its domestic market through trade fairs. Since the opening of the China International Import Expo (CIIE) in 2018, Timor-Leste coffee merchants have participated actively. In October 2023, the trade expo 1.<sup>a</sup> Exposição Económica e Comercial China–Países de Língua

Portuguesa (Macau) held a Portuguese-speaking Countries Coffee Bean Selection Competition. Arabica and Typica coffee beans from Ermera secured the top two positions with scores of 88.29 and 84.5 points respectively (CPLPEX, 2023). In November of the same year, Macau companies attended the CIIE and signed a strategic cooperation agreement with Timor Global to jointly develop co-branded coffee products and special souvenirs (Sina News, 2024). Additionally, ChishaTIL of Timor-Leste has launched its own brand “Maodian Coffee” in China and established a bonded area base and a complete processing and production industry chain in China (Qi & Shu, 2024).

In the early years, Timor-Leste coffee entered the Chinese market only in small batches of commodities. Through various expositions, Timor-Leste coffee has expanded its presence in the Chinese market. Today, Timor-Leste coffee has evolved from a simple commodity trade item to a top product in the trade sector, serving as a bridge connecting the agricultural technology industry chain and supply chain between Timor-Leste and China.

#### **4 CHALLENGES OF COFFEE INDUSTRY COOPERATION BETWEEN CHINA AND TIMOR-LESTE**

At present, coffee industry cooperation between China and Timor-Leste remains relatively superficial and can be categorized into three main forms: (1) Sending experts or technical personnel for technical exchanges; (2) Providing assistance through donations of funds or equipment; (3) Organizing expos to provide a platform for Timor-Leste’s coffee merchants and attract investments from Chinese business. However, some cooperation memorandums offer only general guidance without substantive content, and there is limited in-depth collaboration in specific areas or addressing significant needs.

First, the cultivation technology is insufficient, and the number of trained personnel in coffee cultivation is limited. In Timor-Leste, coffee farming techniques remain largely primitive, with most coffee growers relying on traditional methods. Many smallholders lack access to modern agricultural tools, machinery, or technologies that could improve productivity and enhance coffee quality. This lack of management results in tall coffee trees, causing many farmers to spend more time on harvesting rather than sorting the coffee berries, further contributing to subpar coffee quality. At the same time, the number of people trained in modern coffee-growing techniques remains limited. Although China has provided training programs, they have not been sufficient to cover the majority of farmers. Due to insufficient

training such as coffee tree disease prevention, soil protection, sustainable agriculture, etc., coffee production remains low and quality unstable, making it challenging for Timor-Leste's coffee to compete in the global coffee market where quality is a key factor.

Second, as the coffee industry becomes increasingly reliant on the Chinese market, attention must be paid to the sustainability of the industry. Since 2021, China's annual coffee imports from Timor-Leste have increased by 140% (Tatoli, 2023b). By 2023, China had become the third-largest importer of Timor-Leste coffee (Global Times, 2023). Meanwhile, Chinese traders reported that Timor-Leste no longer produces enough coffee to meet demand in mainland China (Macau Business, 2022). In this context, Timor-Leste's coffee industry is becoming increasingly dependent on China as its main export market. Although current market demand presents opportunities for the development of Timor-Leste's coffee industry, over-reliance on the Chinese market could pose significant risks. Expanding cultivation to meet export needs may lead to soil erosion, deforestation, and resource depletion. Placing excessive focus on increasing production without considering long-term environmental impact could undermine the sustainability of Timor-Leste's coffee industry.

Third, the distribution of resources among small farmers is unequal. While Chinese investment in Timor-Leste's coffee industry has contributed to modernizing the sector, the benefits have not been evenly distributed. Small farmers, who account for the majority of coffee production, are often excluded from the commercial value chain. They can only provide primary coffee products, functioning as the downstream supply chain of larger coffee producers (Asian Development Bank, 2019a). This disparity could result in large farms gaining more resources and advantages from bilateral cooperation, while smaller farmers are left behind. In addition, coffee produced by smallholder farmers may struggle to meet the quality standards required for export markets, limiting their ability to benefit from the growing demand for East Timorese coffee in China and other markets.

## **5 SUGGESTIONS TO PROMOTE COOPERATION BETWEEN CHINA AND TIMOR-LESTE**

Strengthen cooperation on coffee planting technology and promote grassroots exchanges. Currently, the exchange of planting technology between China and Timor-Leste remains insufficient. China can enhance its support by increasing training programs for Timor-Leste coffee farmers. In addition to expanding the implementation of these training

programs, both sides can establish exchange initiatives that involve direct interaction with grassroots farmers in Timor-Leste. Many small farmers lack direct access to the resources provided by China-supported projects. Facilitating face-to-face interactions between grassroots farmers and experts on plantations could significantly improve coffee quality. Strengthening technical exchanges is essential for achieving greater breakthroughs in the development of the coffee industry. This approach would improve production levels and lay a good foundation for deeper cooperation in the coffee sector between China and Timor-Leste.

Strengthen cooperation in environmental and resource assessment and restoration. Collaboration in environmental assessment and restoration of coffee farms is vital for maintaining a balance between agricultural productivity and ecological health. Such efforts ensure the sustainability of coffee cultivation while protecting rural livelihoods. Timor-Leste is currently facing a series of problems such as land degradation, climate change, water shortages, and the depletion of agricultural resources. China and Timor-Leste could consider conducting joint research on technologies related to agricultural resource distribution, coffee farm yield analysis, and ecological environment detection and restoration.

Strengthen logistics facilities and storage space. Due to the growing conditions, many coffee farms in Timor-Leste are located in mountainous areas with poor road infrastructure. As a result, transportation losses between the farms and processing facilities remain high. To solve these difficulties, China can increase investment in rural road construction and storage facilities in Timor-Leste. These measures would help reduce logistics costs and transportation losses while ensuring that Timor-Leste coffee reaches international markets in the best condition.

At present, most of the coffee-related commodities produced by enterprises in China and Timor-Leste are sold to the Chinese market. In recent years, with the increasing export volume of Timor-Leste coffee and the growing consumer demand for higher product quality, both countries can work together to strengthen standards and specifications for coffee production and processing to ensure that Timor-Leste coffee meets the expectations of the Chinese market. Additionally, the two countries can collaborate to create a regulated coffee trading platform and establish a fair pricing model. Such a platform would provide a direct trading channel for merchants in China and Timor-Leste, eliminating middlemen and preventing market manipulation. Furthermore, it would ensure traceability of goods, enabling buyers to verify the origin and quality of the coffee beans.

## 6 CONCLUSION

The cooperation between China and Timor-Leste in the coffee industry holds great significance for promoting economic growth, sustainable development, and mutual benefit, resulting in a win-win outcome. This article reviews the current status of coffee production in Timor-Leste, identifies challenges in the cooperation between the two countries, and provides suggestions for improvement. The study highlights that the inherent advantages and development potential of Timor-Leste's coffee sector, combined with the substantial demand in the Chinese market, are the most important factors driving deeper collaboration in the coffee industry between China and Timor-Leste.

Through technical assistance, facility investment, and market promotion, China supports Timor-Leste in modernizing its coffee industry and improving productivity. This partnership not only strengthens Timor-Leste's coffee value chain but also deepens bilateral relations. As this collaboration progresses, it has the potential to become a model for mutually beneficial partnerships in sustainable agriculture.

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