

Harnessing the comparative advantages of black cardamom

22 December 2020 | Microsoft Teams

SECTION 1

Background

Black cardamom (*Amomum subulatum* Roxb.) is a high-value cash crop and one of the main sources of income for farmers in Bhutan, India, and Nepal residing in the Kangchenjunga Landscape (KL). This crop is grown almost exclusively in the eastern Himalayan region: in places such as Eastern Nepal; Sikkim and parts of Darjeeling in India; and Southern Bhutan. Thus, black cardamom, owing to its unique geographical position, stands a great chance to earn the geographical indication (GI) certificate. A GI certificate can help distinguish black cardamom from other species of cardamoms and help in establishing itself as a brand, thereby protecting its intellectual property rights. This certification can also enable the member countries of KL to make joint efforts in spreading awareness among the consumers about the attributes of this particular cardamom species; thus, a uniform regional standard could evolve whereby the product can enjoy a unique identity.

In this regard, a regional webinar, Harnessing the comparative advantages of black cardamom: Exploring possibilities to establish geographical indication and common regional standards, was organized on 22 December 2020 by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development

(ICIMOD) in collaboration with the following institutions: G.B. Pant National Institute of Himalayan Environment (NIHE), Sikkim Regional Centre; Department of Agriculture, Ministry of Agriculture and Forests, Bhutan; and the Research Centre for Applied Science and Technology, Tribhuvan University (see the programme agenda [here](#)). The webinar was a follow-up to a regional workshop organized in Nepal's Taplejung district in May 2019, which emphasized the need to explore opportunities for transboundary collaboration in promoting black cardamom as a unique product.

About the webinar

The webinar discussed the possibility of securing a GI certificate and developing a uniform regional standard for black cardamom. It also served as a forum to initiate dialogue among the relevant stakeholders by providing a knowledge-sharing and networking platform for national and regional experts and partners. This was intended to harness technical as well as investment opportunities for the promotion of black cardamom in KL. The webinar was attended by 44 participants comprising policymakers, government officials, private-sector representatives (cardamom entrepreneurs and exporters), members of cooperatives, development practitioners, research experts, ICIMOD officials, and partners of the Kangchenjunga Landscape Conservation and Development Initiative (KLCDI) from Bhutan, India, and Nepal.

Objectives

The main objectives of the webinar were to identify the action points that could help in promoting black cardamom as a unique product in the international market. The webinar primarily focused on positioning black cardamom as a Himalayan brand by securing GI certification for it. The webinar also explored ways to bridge the knowledge gaps and improve understanding on the linkages around the promotion of black cardamom in KL.

The webinar had the following specific objectives:

- Develop a common understanding on issues regarding the black cardamom value chain
- Discuss the potential opportunities for creating a uniform regional quality standard and for securing a GI certificate for black cardamom
- Identify the key action points for better positioning of black cardamom as a unique product

Welcome address and the context of the webinar

Nakul Chettri, Regional Programme Manager, Transboundary Landscapes, ICIMOD, welcomed the participants and explained the overall objective of the webinar and the rationale behind organizing the event. He stated that the webinar was a follow-up to a regional workshop held in May 2019, which emphasized upon exploring opportunities for transboundary collaboration in developing a value chain for black cardamom. He highlighted the issues and challenges in doing so, pointing to the fluctuations in market price and in the overall production patterns. He underlined the need for regional cooperation among the member countries of KL in order to address the common issues involved in the promotion of black cardamom.

SECTION 2

Opening remarks

Yogendra Kumar Karki, Secretary, Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development, Nepal, stated that the area under cultivation of black cardamom in Nepal has increased in recent years. However, he said, this crop has been increasingly suffering from diseases and unstable market prices. He said that since such issues are common across the member countries of KL, there is a need to collaborate in terms of exchanging technology and information. He reiterated his ministry's commitment towards the promotion of black cardamom in Nepal as well as in the region.

Laxman Sharma, Associate Professor, Department of Horticulture, Sikkim University, India, suggested establishing quality standards that can prove useful in earning GI certification. He also said that there is a need to introduce better varieties of black cardamom with higher oil content. He then proposed establishing a quality evaluation laboratory in the landscape.

Kinley Tshering, Director, Department of Agriculture, Ministry of Agriculture and Forests, Bhutan, underscored the importance of black cardamom in supporting the regional mountain economy. She said, "In Bhutan, black cardamom is the most important source of cash income after yartsa gunbu (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*), with over 70 per cent of the farmers engaged in its cultivation." Tshering offered her institution's full support in securing a GI certificate and establishing a uniform regional standard for black cardamom. She also suggested setting up a regional centre to promote black cardamom.

Pema Gyamtsho, Director General, ICIMOD, welcomed the positive response of the government representatives from Bhutan, India, and Nepal to the idea of fostering transboundary collaboration through the medium of black cardamom. He pointed out that since black cardamom has not been positioned well in the international market, it has not been faring well in its competition with green cardamom, white cardamom, and small cardamom. He hoped that swift progress would be made in improving the marketing mechanism of black cardamom in the landscape.

Technical presentations

Presentation 1: Status of and issues in black cardamom and possible ways to distinguish it from green, white, and other cardamom species

Surendra Raj Joshi, Senior Resilient Livelihoods Specialist, ICIMOD, gave a brief overview of the status and issues in black cardamom in the region and the potential opportunities it offers. The key messages from the presentation were:

- Black cardamom is a mountain-niche product of low volume and high value; it's a non-perishable product and is recognized as one of the important cash crops in the landscape.
- In the global trade in Medicinal and Aromatic Plants (MAPs), black cardamom's share is only 4 per cent. In terms of its production, Nepal ranks first, with 51 per cent of the production, followed by 38 per cent in India and 11 per cent in Bhutan.
- Despite its high value and contribution in terms of cash income, there are several issues facing black cardamom – the most important being its lack of unique identity in the international market; presently, there is a common code for green, white, and black cardamom.
- Black cardamom has also got to now face emerging competition from green and white cardamoms, especially from countries such as Guatemala and Indonesia.
- Production fluctuation is another challenge. While there has been an expansion in the cultivation area of black cardamom, the crop has become vulnerable to changes in weather patterns and to climate change-induced natural disasters; there is also the issue of diseases and pest attacks.
- Price variability is another problem area – this is due to weak market linkages and no value addition at the local level. The major proportion of black cardamom moves to other countries (beyond Bhutan, India, and Nepal) without any value addition and blending.
- There is a need to position black cardamom as a distinct product, separate from green and white cardamoms.
- Knowledge and technology have to be shared and transferred to improve competitiveness and reduce the costs involved in production, processing, and delivery.
- Regional collaboration is imperative in terms of preparing a common message to inform the consumers about the unique attributes of black cardamom.

Presentation 2: Opportunities and challenges in creating a uniform regional standard and in securing GI certification

Indu Bikram Joshi, Deputy Director General, Department of Environment, Ministry of Forests and Environment, Government of Nepal, highlighted the opportunities and challenges in creating a uniform regional standard for black cardamom:

- GI certification has tremendously boosted the demand of Darjeeling tea, Swiss knives, and Scottish whisky, to name a few; so, a GI certificate for black cardamom holds immense significance for the landscape and its people.
- A uniform regional standard is necessary for our landscape to ensure the safety and compatibility of the cardamom produced.
- Such a standard, however challenging it may be to establish one, will help in both intra-regional as well as in international trade.

Possible next steps in harnessing opportunities

Nakul Chettri moderated the session.

The key messages from the panel discussion were:

- The establishment of a regional task force to promote black cardamom.
- Increasing private-sector investments – this can spur more planting of black cardamom across KL.
- GI certification and the establishment of a uniform regional standard for black cardamom can help distinguish it from green and white cardamoms.

- Developing synergies between governments and relevant institutions can facilitate knowledge exchange.
- The publication of a policy brief will allow for a common voice to emerge, thereby strengthening the case for GI certification.

Presentation of a draft policy brief on black cardamom: Policy pointers/ constraints and issues therein

Surendra Raj Joshi presented a draft policy brief on black cardamom and sought inputs from the policymakers and experts present at the webinar. During his presentation, he touched upon three policy pointers and issues:

Policy pointer 1: The need for a unique identity

Key constraints and issues: Black cardamom is facing emerging competition from white and green cardamoms.

Actions suggested:

- Bhutan, India, and Nepal should join hands to secure GI certification; these countries should also prepare coordinated messages that can lead towards the establishment of a uniform regional standard.
- A proposal should be put forth to the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSTAT) for the revision of the six-digit Harmonized System (HS).
- The composition of black cardamom has to be identified; this will go a long way in creating a unique identity for this cardamom species in the international market.
- Common regional facilities ought to be set up for testing and certification to bolster the claim of black cardamom being a unique product.

Policy pointer 2: The need to diversify and strengthen value chain linkages

Key constraints and issues: The major proportion of black cardamom moves to other countries (beyond Bhutan, India, and Nepal) without any value addition and blending.

Actions suggested:

- Horizontal and vertical linkages should be strengthened among the value-chain actors in order to achieve economy of scale and fetch better prices.
- Innovations have to be made and start-up centres have to be set up so as to create entrepreneurship along the value chain; this will ensure quality at the stages of drying, collection, tail-cutting, grading, and packaging.
- Risks have to be reduced through product diversification – for example, by expanding the domestic consumption of value-added products.

Policy pointer 3: The need to lower the cost of production

Key constraints and issues: The cost of production of black cardamom in the Eastern Himalaya is rather high. Presently, the traders in black cardamom sell it (despite its different flavour and taste) at USD 5/kg.

Actions suggested:

- The three countries need to collaborate to develop climate-resilient and contextualized solutions.
- The market performance of different varieties of black cardamom must be tested. Each variety ought to be registered for trial and those that are the most promising – i.e., the most productive and resilient varieties – must be promoted for cross-country exchange.
- Mechanisms have to be put in place to develop, test, and demonstrate innovative labour-/energy-/cost-saving, and women-friendly technologies for production and processing of black cardamom.

The representatives from Bhutan, India, and Nepal agreed to the key points of the draft policy brief and stated that this has to be published so that it is more widely shared and disseminated.

SECTION 4

Way forward

ICIMOD welcomed the positive response of the government representatives from Bhutan, India, and Nepal to the idea of fostering transboundary collaboration through the medium of black cardamom. Based on the discussions and suggestions, the following broad action points were agreed upon by the participants to be taken as the next steps for harnessing the comparative advantages of black cardamom in KL:

Short-term

- Endorsement, publication of policy briefs, and advocacy (in terms of institutions, infrastructure, and legal framework).

- Initiate mechanisms for GI certification and for establishing a uniform regional standard (in terms of harmonization of methods/standards).
- Cross-learning and capacity building to promote good practices (in terms of value chain, organic farming, and agroforestry).
- Promote private-sector engagement and entrepreneurship development.
- Strengthen the stakeholders' network (in terms of country chapters and regional platforms).
- Map the production areas and the growers at the landscape level.

Medium- and long-term

- Take up research on genetic differentiation and germplasm improvement.
- Develop market surveillance.
- Initiate high-level regional policy dialogue on GI certification.

Additional event information and materials are available at: <https://www.icimod.org/event/harnessing-the-comparative-advantages-of-large-black-cardamom/>

File links:

[Agenda](#)

[List of participants](#)

Proceedings prepared by Kamal Aryal, Surendra Raj Joshi, Basant Pant, Syed Muhammad Abubakar, Nakul Chettri, and Tashi Dorji
Edited and laid out by the Production Team, Knowledge Management and Communication Unit, ICIMOD



ICIMOD gratefully acknowledges the support of its core donors: the Governments of Afghanistan, Australia, Austria, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Norway, Pakistan, Sweden, and Switzerland.

© ICIMOD 2021

International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development
GPO Box 3226, Kathmandu, Nepal
T +977 1 5275222 | **E** info@icimod.org | **www.icimod.org**