

POLICY BRIEF

Revitalising millets in Northeast India: A healthy choice

What's the issue?

Millets have long been a staple of the regional diet in Northeast India because of their durability and high nutritional value. However, the rise in consumption of fine cereals, along with a subpar production system and inadequate compensation for millet farmers, have led to the decline of millet consumption and production. The low volume output is exacerbated by the lack of access to good-quality traditional seeds, fertilisers, and effective farming methods, coupled with changing patterns of climate.

Furthermore, poor market demand and a lack of pro-poor policies of the government make millet growing even more difficult. Farming communities have few options for generating revenue since limited efforts have been made to market and link millet-based products to markets. Thus, there is a need to support existing farming practices that generate agrobiodiverse landraces, develop climate-resilient cultivars, and facilitate platforms for the value addition of the product.

The existing primary processing of millets is labour-intensive and the lack of proper storage facilities results in poor-quality grains fetching low market prices. Thus, there is a need to develop infrastructure and build the capacity of farmers and other stakeholders along the millet value chain.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Empower smallholder farmers: Promote farmer producer organisations (FPOs) for enhancing production, aggregation, value addition, and marketing of millets
- Establish a centre of excellence to promote research and development for indigenous millet varieties and value chains
- Incentivise farmers for production through state-led procurement and distribution
- Establish backward and forward linkages through the creation of farmgate-level infrastructure for primary processing and marketing
- Create awareness and foster behavioural change through innovation extension mechanisms and popularising millet cuisine through the documentation of development of region-specific culinary practices

India's initiative in the 2023 International Year of Millets (IYM) and the G20 presidency brings focus to the country's Northeastern states to showcase its agriculture policy in terms of farmers' income and livelihood as a global model.

Why is this important?

The recommendations provided in this brief directly address the challenges faced by smallholder and marginal farmers, promote sustainable agriculture and biodiversity conservation, revitalise the local economy and cultural identities, strengthen agricultural infrastructure and value chains, and improve nutritional outcomes while promoting entrepreneurship.

By implementing these measures, policymakers can effectively address the specific concerns and priorities of the region, contributing to enhanced livelihoods, preservation of biocultural heritage, sustainable agricultural development, improved market access, and overall prosperity in Northeast India. These measures also align with the government's objectives of inclusive agricultural growth, (agro)biodiversity conservation, and improved nutrition outcomes in the region.

What should policymakers do?

Empowering smallholder farmers – Promoting FPOs for enhancing production, aggregation, value addition, and marketing: A large number of farmers in the region have small and marginal landholdings. The individual farmer often faces challenges along the entire agriculture value chain, including that of access to quality inputs and marketing the harvested produce. Through FPOs, collective action would lower the cost of inputs and increase overall profitability, thus enhancing their income.

Establishing a centre of excellence to promote research and development for indigenous millet varieties and value chains: In order to protect and promote indigenous millet varieties, there is a need to systematically document millet landraces and cultural practices at the local level that support genetic diversity. Such knowledge can facilitate a transition towards sustainable livelihoods and build the adaptive capacity and resilience of the local communities. Establishing a centre of excellence in the region will support the in-situ conservation of genetic heritage, living seedbanks, promotion, and extension.

Incentivising farmers for millet production through state-led procurement and distribution of the crop: The area under cultivation of millets has witnessed a steady decline in the region. Millets, a heritage crop, have lost their prominence and there is very low demand as compared with fine cereals such as rice and wheat. Thus, incentivising farmers to produce millet will encourage them to incorporate millet into their

cropping systems or expand millet production and revitalise the local economy and cultural identities.

Establishing backward and forward linkages through the creation of farmgate-level infrastructure for primary processing and marketing: There exists a high potential for improving the existing, mostly manual, infrastructure for the production system. The current primary processing of millets is labour-intensive and results in poor marketability of the produce. Further, the low density of physical markets and fragmentation of the value chain pose a challenge to the production and marketing of millets. Thus, the existing practices need to be addressed substantially by developing proper forward and backward linkages.

Awareness creation and the fostering of behavioural change through innovation extension mechanisms and popularising millet cuisine through the documentation of region-specific culinary practices: Despite being nutritionally rich and traditionally and culturally relevant in the region, millets have lost their prominence over time. Therefore, there is a need to create awareness about the benefits of millets and to initiate behavioural change. To facilitate these changes, it is necessary to engage with various stakeholders such as media, e-commerce, local social groups, the food and culinary sector, the tourism and hospitality sector and institutes. There is also a need to promote entrepreneurship through business incubation for stimulating the interest of local youth and investors in millet-based agri-business.

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