



## MAINSTREAMING MILLETS

POLICY BRIEF NO. 3

### Increasing the Consumption of Millets: Need of the Hour

#### What is the Issue?

National and state-level initiatives have increased the production of millets across the country. However, a simultaneous increase in consumption has not been observed. Between 1962 and 2010, India's per capita consumption of millets fell drastically from 32.9 to 4.2 kgs<sup>1</sup>. Despite being nutritionally beneficial, millets hold low aspirational value and are perceived as coarse grains. A study<sup>2</sup> found that the major reasons behind low consumption of millets is because it is not included in the daily household menu, as families have lost traditional knowledge about the recipes and find it difficult, followed by dislike for the taste compared to other processed food. To enhance the consumption of millets among non-millet producing sections of society, it is important to educate people on its nutritional and health value, improving its accessibility in these areas, and develop and advertise millet-based products and recipes, which appeal to people's tastes.

<sup>1</sup>Assessing Millets and Sorghum Consumption Behavior in Urban India: A Large-Scale Survey. August 2021. Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

#### Overview

India is the largest producer and second-largest exporter of millets globally, and accounts for about 80% of the global production of millet. Despite being a staple food in semi-arid tropics and drought-prone regions in India, millets consumption is low as people perceive it as traditional, coarse and of low aspirational value. Investment through increased awareness, availability of quality products that appeal to people's taste, acceptance of millets as climate smart nutritious diet will not only enhance dietary diversity but also will put pressure on improving supply.

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Millets should be promoted through social media and campaigns to increase their consumption  
If we want to increase the consumption of millets across all strata of society”  
.....

– Official from  
Ministry of  
Women and Child  
Development  
.....

## Key Challenges?

1. **Low Aspirational Value:** Millets are also known as next-generation crops for their climate resilient nature<sup>3</sup>. In spite of being nutritionally beneficial they are considered as the poor man’s food and have low aspirational value, hence over the time they have disappeared from households’ menus.
2. **Millets as ill persons’ diet:** A study<sup>4</sup> claims that the early adopters of millets were people with health problems (28%), followed by those wanting to lose weight (15%) while those selecting millets for its taste were very less (14%).
3. **Limited knowledge on recipes and cooking:** Although millets can be easily incorporated in almost all popular rice and wheat-based recipes, one of the reasons for not consuming millets regularly is the lack of knowledge on how to cook them. Additionally, due to lack of processing environment, it is difficult and costly to use millet for cooking.
4. **Quality of Millets:** The quality of millets, whether processed or raw, is another major challenge. Issues around shelf life of millets, lack of investment in procurement and processing facilities, access to inputs such as quality seeds throttles the quality of millets, with no encouragement (through advance credit/ guaranteed buyers) from intermediaries or consumers.

## Why is this Important?

The coexistence of under nutrition, micronutrient deficiencies and of overweight/obesity is becoming a major public health concern in India. The National Family Health Survey fifth round estimates the prevalence of obesity in women and men as 24% and 23% respectively. Prevalence of diabetes in the population is 8.9%<sup>5</sup>, which makes it country with highest diabetic patients globally. Unhealthy, non-nutritious diet and physical inactivity are among the common causes of such lifestyle diseases. Hence, it is important to realize the importance of consuming nutritionally beneficial foods. Millets are non-acid forming, non-allergic, and easy to digest in addition to being rich in protein, dietary fiber, Iron, magnesium and calcium<sup>6</sup>. Hence, Millets can help in improving iron status, hemoglobin level, and in reducing iron deficiency anemia, particularly among women and girls<sup>7</sup>, along-side other ongoing efforts.

<sup>3</sup> Goron TL, Raizada MN. 2015. Genetic diversity and genomic resources available for the small millet crops to accelerate a New Green Revolution. Front Plant Sci.

<sup>4</sup> Assessing Millets and Sorghum Consumption Behavior in Urban India: A Large-Scale Survey. August 2021. Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems.

<sup>5</sup> International Diabetes Federation. 2020

<sup>6</sup> Vinoth A, Ravindhran R. 2017. Biofortification in Millets: A Sustainable Approach for Nutritional Security. Frontiers in Plant Science

<sup>7</sup> Millets Can Have a Major Impact on Improving Iron Status, Hemoglobin Level, and in Reducing Iron Deficiency Anemia–A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis, Frontiers in Nutrition. 2021

## How policy can support?

1. **Branding through social media-** Millet's consumption should be promoted using social media and public campaigns among consumers, as that is their main source of information. In addition, having a brand ambassador for promoting milled consumption through social media can increase the recognition of millets among younger age groups. By engaging celebrities, organizing local, regional, and national campaigns, creating short creative videos etc., an increase in acceptability of millets in markets can be expected.
2. **Raising Awareness about nutrition and health facts-** The high nutritional content of millets especially when compared with polished rice, maize, and refined wheat flour<sup>8</sup> needs to be highlighted. Millets are beneficial in reducing the prevalence of health problems including but not limited to diabetes, heart conditions, bone health, and general health. People should be aware about the overall health and nutritional benefits of millets. To do so, awareness campaigns, local/ regional cooking competitions, short recipe videos, messages from doctors and health experts etc. can be used.
3. **Promoting millets as Aspirational food:** Millet should be promoted as healthy alternatives to wheat/rice. In these pandemic situations, urban people have realized the importance of healthy and nutritional diet, hence it is a favorable time to push this nutritionally beneficial food in the mainstream. Encouragement of millets into the market, can also increase its production and processing, hence reducing the market price and increasing the dietary diversity.  
  
To create awareness around millet consumption and to increase the knowledge on different recipes and cooking styles, Social and Behaviour Change Communication (SBCC) activities should be used. They should focus on changing the behavior of consumers to uptake millet, to restore the staple diet into the plates of Indian population and as part of dietary diversification.
4. **Participation of other government and private sectors-** Participation of private sector entrepreneurs will aid in flexibly responding to consumer demands (such as for ragi cookies, pizza bases, noodles, jowar flour and Multigrain flour etc.) and facilitate better pricing for value-added products. Partnership with government departments like railway, tourism, sports, education, welfare department etc., can also increase the consumption of millets.
5. **Quality of Millets:** Although the nutritional benefits of millets are high as compared to rice/wheat, but to revive them into the diets of consumers, the quality of raw/ processed millets should be a priority. Further emphasis on branding, making organic certification process streamlined for millet producer, investment in training will contribute to enhanced quality and increased demand.

<sup>8</sup>Assessing Millets and Sorghum Consumption Behavior in Urban India: A Large-Scale Survey. August 2021. Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems.

6. **Decentralize value-added processing:** Millet processing provides a significant opportunity to boost off-farm livelihood opportunities, particularly for women. Placing processing units closer to production sites reduces the factory gate pricing of millet products. Off-farm opportunities ensure that cultivators also get a chance to integrate value-addition in their scope of work and reap better monetary benefits. It also makes RTE/RTC (Ready to Eat/ Ready to Cook) millet-based products affordably accessible to rural households<sup>9</sup>. There is an additional gender dimension that gets addressed through decentralized processing; typically, women engage in laborious decorticating activities<sup>10</sup>. Situating the processing units close to production sites expands their choice of employment.

### Summing up

Millets are traditionally and culturally accepted staple food that require very low input costs. Are easily grown in water stress areas and period of maturation is comparatively lower. They are highly nutritious and provide food security, making them an ideal crop of the 21st Century, especially in view of changing climate increasing population stress. Focus on consumption of millets by the Government and other stakeholder will put pressure on supply and production of quality millets. Increased consumption of millets in urban and rural markets to shift the perception of millets from 'poor man's food' to 'a healthy alternative' and as part of dietary diversification will help improved access to sustainable food and nutrition security.

To achieve this, it is recommended to use large scale awareness campaign to expand the market for millets. This includes appropriate awareness campaigns targeting different segments, especially through social and digital media channels, as these are the major sources of information on health and food among youngsters. It would also be important to promote recipes that are palatable and healthy, products that are modern and convenient, into markets that are more easily accessible.

<sup>9</sup>Supporting Millets in India: Policy Review and Suggestions for Action. DHAN Foundation. 2012

<sup>10</sup>Labour burden on women millet producers must be reduced. Down to Earth. September 2018

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#### World Food Programme

2, Poorvi Marg, Vasant Vihar  
New Delhi – 110 057, India

[wfp.org](http://wfp.org)

#### Odisha Millet Mission

Directorate of Agriculture and Food Production, Krushi  
Bhawan, Bhubaneswar-751 001 India

[milletsoodisha.com](http://milletsoodisha.com)