WOMEN FARMERS HARVESTING FINGER MILLET IN A MOUNTAIN VILLAGE | PHOTO: JITENDRA RAJ BAJRACHARYA

Why is this important?

Promoting millets can be a gateway for the transformation of rural Nepal. Millets can prove to be instrumental in improving food and nutrition security in the country. Besides supplying calories, they are also a rich source of protein, fibre, minerals, and vitamins. Millets have a number of climate-resilient properties: they are hardy crops that can be grown successfully in marginal lands with less water and little or no external inputs in a sustainable manner.

Millets are also important for the economic health of the country. They have the potential to generate employment in rural as well as urban areas through product diversification and value addition, marketing of millets and millet-based products, and linking to agrotourism, among others. Similarly, millets can save billions of rupees being spent on importing cereals and thereby reduce dependency on imports and promote self-reliance. Millet farming will enhance ecological services as well as help in conserving agrobiodiversity.

What should policy address?

Awareness and sensitisation: Sensitising consumers and other stakeholders and making them aware of health and nutrition benefits is crucial. Utilising mass media and social media can be a valuable aid for this. Likewise, community-based health workers, NGO staff, teachers, and leaders can be mobilised in popularising millets at the grassroots. At the national level, celebrities, nutrition champions, and high-profile leaders could also be utilised for the purpose.

Implement price support, incentives, and market assurance: Declaring and implementing minimum support price (MSP) for millets is crucial for the market and price guarantee of millets. The Food Management and Trading Company (FMTC), cooperatives, provincial and local governments as well as the private sector can be mobilised for procurement. The government can then include the purchased millets in the public distribution system, food aid, and relief programme, among others.

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Introduce mandatory millet-based dishes: The government should make millet-based dishes for public gatherings, government-sponsored official programmes, including school midday meals and army/police ration mandatory. This will help in create forward and backward linkages by providing impetus for more production of millets and the value chain development.

Develop millet value chains and legalise millet-based alcoholic beverages: Farmers do not grow millets unless they find it profitable. The main reason behind farmers being less attracted towards millets farming is its low yield and high drudgery. Therefore, to make it more competitive, various support and subsidy programmes, including direct benefit transfers, are required at least for some time to come.

Expanding the range of food products while preserving their quality and enhancing their market appeal can be achieved through product diversification and value addition such as developing new products, incorporating innovative flavours and ingredients, and promoting traditional food recipes. Likewise, branding and promotion of local food recipes play a crucial role in highlighting the uniqueness and cultural heritage of these products. Startup support to entrepreneurs and small businesses as well as social enterprises in bringing their ideas to execution will also be crucial.

Millet-based businesses provide an impetus for production and can play a crucial role in inculcating millet-based food habits in children, youngsters, and other groups of people through providing various millet-based food recipes and processed foods. It is therefore important that millet-based private and social enterprises are supported in value addition, product diversification, branding, and marketing. Promoting traditional food recipes in home and farm stays linking with agro-tourism, as well as supporting big hotels and restaurants to include millets recipes in their menu, are also equally important.

Further, Nepal heavily relies on imported alcoholic beverages. Legalising and branding millet-based beverages such as tongba, chhyang, and raksi can reduce imports. It would also encourage investment in the local beverage sector, creating employment opportunities. Branding drives demand for millet-based beverages, encouraging consumers to choose them over foreign alternatives.

LOCAL PROCESSING PRACTICES (DEHUSKING) OF MILLETS IN A MOUNTAIN VILLAGE | PHOTO: NABIN BARAL

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Strengthen millets research and development: Low yield is one of the main causes of low competitiveness of millets. Doubling productivity would help to increase the competitiveness of millets. A comprehensive approach that includes site-specific, polymorphic varietal development and better crop management practices and their wide dissemination is needed. Also, establishing a farmer-led seed system is key for long-term productivity improvement of millets. There is a need to set up of a national centre of excellence for millet promotion. By implementing these actions, farmers can maximise yield, improve resilience to a changing climate, and sustain millet production.

A millet champion from Bajura

Nirpa Singh (42) is a permanent resident of Badimalika Municipality, Bajura in western Nepal. He is a champion of recipes using millets in Bajura. Millets have literally transformed his life and livelihood. Before he started preparing and selling millet-based cooked and baked items, he used to run a tea shop with a mediocre income. In 2015, the District Agriculture Development Office (DADO) organised a hands-on training on the preparation of millet-based food recipes. He was one of 20 participants. After the training, he started offering millet-based food recipes on demand basis. Soon after the training, DADO – Bajura started the practice of serving millet-based food items in official meetings, trainings, workshops, and other similar kinds of events. Singh started supplying such foods to DADO.

With the success of this initiative, others started to follow suit. For example, the District Administration Office (DAO) started offering millet-based snacks in their meetings. Singh now had more business opportunities. While he was mastering the preparation of some millet-based cooked foods, he turned into a trainer of millet-based food preparation. He was approached and hired by several local NGOs, municipalities, and others for training other hoteliers, restaurant owners, and the general public. He has won regional and national level awards with a cash prize in millet-based food recipe preparation competitions in 2015 and 2017.

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