

Odisha Millets Mission - a step towards combating climate vulnerability and promoting sustainable food systems | Geeta Sinha

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[Home](#) > [2022](#) > **Odisha Millets Mission - a step towards combating climate vulnerability and (...)**

Mainstream, VOL LX No 4, New Delhi, January 15, 2022

Friday, 14 January 2022 (2022-01-14T10:54:56Z), by [Geeta Sinha](#)



The Department of Science and Technology (DST), Government of India and Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation conducted a pan-India assessment of climate change vulnerability based on fourteen parameters encompassing socio-economic aspects, livelihood, institution and infrastructure and biophysical features. “Out of 100 most vulnerable districts in the country, 70% of them are in five states of Eastern India— Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand, Arunachal Pradesh and Odisha,” said Dr Akhilesh Gupta, Senior Advisor and Head, Policy Coordination & Programme Management (PCPM) Division, and a climate change expert at the DST. In this context, the intention is to elucidate one of the existing policy interventions of Odisha that has the potential to address multiple concerns of sustainability pertaining to climate vulnerability. The launch of Odisha Millets Mission is one such flagship programme of Department of Agriculture and Farmers’ Empowerment, Government of Odisha that has the propensity to contribute substantially to some of the interlinked core goals of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – climate action, good health and well-being and responsible production and consumption.

Climate change directly impacts the availability of basic necessities like freshwater, food security and energy and the efforts to address this through mitigation and adaptation will notably inform and shape the global development agenda and in this case, it is precisely Odisha’s development agenda. Moreover, the transition from commercial crops to growing traditional crops like millets is envisaged to reduce climate vulnerability that invariably feeds into the loop of achieving food security, improving nutritional status and responsible production and consumption goals of the SDGs. Ending food insecurity has always been one of the development priorities of the state, as high economic growth has mostly failed to translate to reducing farmer’s issues and existing food crisis. Additionally, the pandemic (COVID 19) since its arrival has further aggravated the situation of food crisis, hunger and heightened burden on farmlands due to reverse migration issues.

Given the situation, Millet mission with central objective to promote millets and revival of millet in farms and on plates is envisaged to promote traditional farming that promulgates sustainable and climate-resilient food systems. Likewise, it also has the

ability to address intertwined issues like food crisis, livelihood issues, malnutrition and lowering implications of climate change on people and natural resources. Under Millet mission, Odisha has shifted its focus towards millets that continued to remain undervalued. Some of the factors contributing to the failures of millet production and consumption has been both state and market failure, industrialisation, globalisation and neoliberal policies. The transition from traditional to commercial agriculture was driven by factors including market forces, profit maximisation and promoted by government programmes to address constraints that limited productivity of 'rice-based cropping' as in the case of Odisha. Although commercial agriculture increased production and income of the farmers, but, in the long run it demonstrated to pose threat to the environment, land, soil and water resources and thus, contributing to the factors of climate vulnerability. Unlike commercial agriculture, traditional agriculture including millet farming upholds agroecological practices, maintains indigenous local agrobiodiversity and promulgates harmonious ecosystem co-existing with its dependent communities.

Kudos to Odisha government that has envisioned the revival of millets not only in fields but on plates too. In the early 2000s when shift from millets to oilseeds crop was promoted with a famous slogan of "Kodo kutki hatao soyabean lagao" has taken a U turn and government has realised the significance of producing millets on a mission mode to address issues of food security, nutrition and sustainability. Moreover, 2018 was also observed as the "National Year of Millets". In this context, the challenges and uncertainties for farmers to adopt agroecological practices to produce millets are manifold. A comprehensive plan and an enabling environment for the promotion of millets in the state would be required to achieve its stated goals. The state of Odisha under Millets mission is committed to bring about changes in promoting production and consumption of millets and in tandem, have designed and developed interventions to bridge the existing gaps and problems. The response from the state would require a robust design for farmers involved in Millet mission to provide them with consistent technical and management expertise dealing with issues of production, bio-inputs, crop insurances, post-harvest infrastructure, value addition, certification and remunerative marketing systems. This would require adequate time and sustained efforts to streamline the whole process.

Within existing circumstances during pandemic, to address the issues of existing nutritional deficiencies coupled with increasing food crisis, the produce from millet growing farmers must ensure greater linkage with food distributional systems and schemes of the state like PDS, ICDS, Antoday Anna Yojna. Such initiative will ensure development of millets value chain and enhance the nutritional intake of the marginalised sections through different schemes. This would significantly trigger both the production and consumption of millets- from farms to plate. In a nutshell, Millet mission can be considered as one such initiative that has the potential to revive traditional and sustainable agricultural practices that are climate resilient, upholds nutritional value and promotes sustainable food systems to address food security concerns pertaining to SDGs.

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