



MAINSTREAMING MILLETS

POLICY BRIEF NO. 6

Organic Certification of Millets

What is the Issue?

The market for organic products increased manifold in last few years. India ranks 8th in terms of the World's Organic Agricultural land and 1st in terms of the total number of producers as per 2020 data¹. Enhanced health consciousness in recent years, which has seen further upsurge post the Covid-19 pandemic, has fueled growth in sustainable, regenerative organic agriculture. Most millets can be grown on low fertility soils – acidic, saline and sandy and do not demand chemical fertilizers. This is ideal for organic farming. However difficulties in obtaining the organic certification of the millets continues to hinder furthering production and profitability for the farmers.

Key Challenges?

There are two pathways for organic certification in India- National Programme for Organic Production (NPOP) and Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) certification. Under the former, a group of organic farmers (minimum of 25 and maximum 500 farmers) possessing land in the same geographical area may apply for certification of their organic produce under the Third-Party Certification.

¹The World of Organic Agriculture, FiBL & IFOAM Yearbook 2020

Overview

The Government is promoting organic farming and the process of certification currently needs to be extended to millets as well. A simplified organic certification process for millets can upscale the diet diversity of population and ensure the farmers get their due price and access to niche market- national and international.

Bodies accredited by NPOP carry out this certification. The latter is a decentralized organic farming certification instituted by the Department of Agriculture, Cooperation and Farmers' Welfare, Ministry of Agriculture, through the National Centre of Organic Farming (NCOF). This certification system involves certification of organic produce by the farmers' groups themselves, enabling them, especially the small farmers in the country, ease of access to organic certification. The NPOP certification is mandatory for exports as it is recognized by European Union, United Kingdom, and Switzerland. While these certifications have facilitated building the "organic" brand in India, the small and marginal farmers have not reaped their due benefits. Some of the key concerns include:

- **Expensive third-party certification:** The cost of the private third-party certification is high and becomes forbidding for the millet producers, who are typically smallholder farmers from marginal groups having lower incomes. Given that the yields are low initially, the certification cost becomes an added burden. Moreover, big procurers often do not trust PGS and prefer private agencies' certification
- **Limited market for organic produce:** Given the high costs associated with organic products, certified organic food becomes a premium niche product sold in upmarket outlets out of the reach of the middle class. This limits the market for the farmers, especially the small-scale ones with no integrated platform for them to sell. Since the costs of the organic inputs are higher than those of industrially produced inputs used in the conventional farming system, the premium becomes difficult to recover without adequate marketability.
- **Long wait time:** Under the PGS, there is a waiting period of 3 years, and under NPOP (with forbidding high costs), the waiting period is one year. This becomes unsustainable for farmers since there are no immediate returns to their expenses.
- **Lack of trust:** The presence of dual certification breeds confusion among buyers and procurers. The PGS programme, which allows farmers to sell their products within a year of certification, does not find buyers.
- **Lack of dedicated insurance:** While National Agricultural Insurance Scheme (NAIS) provides insurance, no dedicated insurance for organic millet farmers is available. Organic fields are more susceptible to pests and may get contaminated with chemical inputs from neighbouring conventional farms. This enhances their risk-especially during the three-year window of certification.
- **Limited training opportunities:** Under the Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojana (PKVY), a centrally sponsored scheme, the State department selects Regional Councils (RC) that form clusters at the village level. The RCs are

supposed to organize training for cluster members and assist in the overall PGS certification, but there is no provision of training the RC. Given the limited funding support, most trainings are generic, and exposure visits are limited.

Why is this Important?

Organic farming has several benefits to the environment as well as to people's health. However, to make it attractive to farmers, fair pricing for organic produce must be ensured. A way forward to achieve this is to ensure that farmers are able to realize the higher price attributed to organic food products by being able to easily and cost effectively certify them.

How can Policies Support?

A paradigm shift from chemical-based monoculture to organic and regenerative agriculture without compromising the yeild and incomes is the need of the hour. To facilitate this, the following policy inputs would be beneficial:

- **Financial assistance for certification:** Given the rising demand for organic produce-especially millets,² it is imperative that State and Central governments create financial assistance instruments like low-cost loans and local infrastructure to cover the certification costs. Alternatively, given that the costs of the Third-Party Certification are variable³, -a blanket and sustainable cost norm can be instituted for uniformity and can potentially promote affordability.
- **Integrated market support:** The local producers, mostly smallholders, tribal and women, are often far removed from the urban markets where the demand currently rests. They often lack adequate knowledge and access to digital technology. Special efforts are therefore required to integrate them with organized markets. To enhance market access, the organically produced millets can be listed on the Government's e-Market (GeM) portal. Alongside, the farmers need to be trained in digital skills enabling them to access private online aggregators and sellers.
- **All-inclusive certification:** Certification by two pathways creates confusion among stakeholders. The Government can look at instituting a holistic framework encompassing all aspects of production, marketing, and trade of organic produce.
- **Dedicated insurance for organic millet producers:** The presence of dedicated insurance would reassure the farmers and protect them from the uncertainties of the produce-devoid of the chemical fertilizers.

² <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1716297>

³ <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/food/new-regulations-to-certify-organic-food-likely-to-favour-big-brands-61194>

- **Large scale production** – Since millets are grown in small portion of a farm land, farmers may be less attracted for its organic certification, thereby further restricting access to niche market. It is thus important to promote large scale production through adequate incentivization for crop diversification alongside the simplifying process of certification.
- **Brand building and awareness generation:** Creating awareness among farmers and FPO about Organic certification should be prioritized. Further to incentivize the farmers and enhance millets' marketability, the Government-both at the State and Centre levels should strengthen their brand creation initiatives. This can be done through dedicated branding and marketing support to prevent brand dilution of certified Indian organic products in the domestic and international markets.

Summing up

A seamless organic certification of millets can upscale the nutritive intake of India and ensure the farmers get their due price and credit and access to niche market- national and international. To make organic production the norm and not the exception, we require a resolute governmental impetus together with ground support ensuring sustainability in an increasingly climate-risked world. The good practices emerging from Uttarakhand⁴ - promoting organic farming and supporting thousands of farmers for organic certification has the potential to create a holistic perspective and promote this vision at an All-India level.

⁴ <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1716297>

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