



Press Release

Small and marginal farmers from India, including women, at the centre of co-research and co-innovation to bring back nutritious crops and food that have been “forgotten”

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Rather than mere recipients and beneficiaries of agricultural innovation and knowledge “transferred” by scientists, small and marginal Indian farmers, including women, must be perceived and recognized as key actors and partners in research and knowledge creation. Women especially are the backbone of marginal farmer households in India.

As we celebrate the International Year of Millets, a new pilot ‘Collective Action’ stresses the role of these small farmers in agriculture, farming, and contribution to strengthened agri-food systems. Supported by various national and international partners in India, the initiative is based on leadership, ownership and empowerment of small and marginal farmers, including women, as custodians of forgotten food, biodiversity and holders of related knowledge. It provides them with two types of benefits.

Firstly, it contributes to greater food and nutrition security, resilience and climate adaptation. Secondly, it makes them equal partners in research along with research institutes and protagonists of development and innovation. Moreover, when they share common interests and concerns, such as for their traditional foods that have fallen out of the mainstream, the recognition and respect for their values can bring transformational changes beyond their communities – to all societies.

“Innovation is a coping mechanism for small and family farmers to make their farming practices more sustainable,” Reema Nanavaty, Executive Director, Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA)

The Collective Action on Forgotten Foods and Crops is based on strong principles of collaboration, partnership and knowledge exchange that combines farmers’ custodianship, insights, perspectives and experiences with innovative research practices.

“Everything that we have done on forgotten food with farmers until now would not have been possible if people from different organizations didn’t believe in our mission. We want India to be an example of how to co-design activities that can bring different types of knowledge and actors at the same level,” Alessandro Meschinelli, Senior Innovation System Advisor, Global Forum on Agricultural Research and Innovation (GFAR)

The initiative is facilitated by the Global Forum on Agricultural Research and Innovation (GFAR), and led by the Asian Farmers Association for Sustainable Rural Development (AFA), Asia-Pacific Association of Agricultural Research Institutions (APAARI), MS Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) and the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA).

"Government, research, education, extension, private sector, civil society, NGOs and other stakeholders need to actively support farmer-led processes of innovation in harnessing forgotten foods to meet the 2030 Agenda, with special reference to SDG1 on eradicating poverty in all its forms and SDG2 on fighting hunger and malnutrition," Prof. M. S. Swaminathan, MSSRF

An innovative process of collaboration was introduced to unleash the potential of forgotten foods, which includes cultivated, semidomesticated and wild species, and traditional varieties. These crops have been produced and consumed for centuries as a valuable source of fibre, oil, and medicinal properties, as well as fodder. Yet, their roles have been undervalued and their importance neglected by markets, research and policies.

"It is a critical to foster co-creation of knowledge through the appreciation of the importance of indigenous knowledge, the integration of farmers' and scientific knowledge, and the support to farmer experimentation and problem-solving research that addresses the needs and priorities of farmers," Pierre Ferrand, Agriculture Officer (Agroecology), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific

The Partners' Meeting for a Joint Project Design: Fostering Collective Action on Forgotten Food is taking place from 3-5 May 2023 in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. It brought together representatives of farmers' organizations, national agricultural research and extension institutions (NARES), government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), regional associations, and international development agencies to initiate partnership and develop a full programme design on forgotten foods.

"The Green Revolution improved India's food self-sufficiency and exports, but at the same time, we have forgotten our local food. Diabetes and cancer are increasing also among farmer communities, largely due to the change of our eating habits," Shri Nitin Shukla, Joint Director, Department of Agriculture, Government of Gujarat

Earlier this year, local consultations with farmers took place in Gujarat, Meghalaya, Odisha and Tamil Nadu. In these farmer-led workshops, farmers themselves identified forgotten crops, solutions for seed selection, conservation and multiplication, value addition, marketing and various culinary applications. They also sought support of key government agencies and international development for this Collective Action.

"Agriculture has the responsibility to feed the world, and forgotten food that is very rich in nutrients is one of the important pieces of the puzzle in agriculture. There was a time when science was not ready to listen, but we now have a chance to correct our agricultural practices and work with farmers to sustain this food for future generations," Carlo Fadda, Research Director, Alliance Bioversity and CIAT.

The outcomes of these consultations are a basis for this international workshop, which will demonstrate evidence, raise awareness and build commitment to initiate a multi-stakeholder platform on forgotten food and crops. The event also considers existing initiatives, such as the United Nations Decade of Family Farming, Farmers' Forum, and National Committees of Family Farming, as well the International Year of Millets initiated by the Government of India.

“Research, government and farmers rarely work together, and this is a unique opportunity to show how we work together in partnership on the programme co-design, K. S. Varaprasad, Senior Technical Advisor, Asia-Pacific Association of Agricultural Research Institutions (APAARI)

The event, as well as the local consultations conducted earlier this year, were preceded by a very inclusive consultative process with farmers and other innovation actors, which led to the development of the [Manifesto on Forgotten Foods](#). The Manifesto guides the global forgotten foods agenda. It situates smallholder farmers as central actors in designing and implementing research programmes on forgotten food to ensure food and nutrition security, support transformation of agri-food systems and adaptation to climate change.

“We are here to unlock the potential of neglected and underutilized crops, because they are for the future as they are helping to reduce poverty. This Collective Action is happening for farmers and with farmers,” Ma. Estrella Penunia, Secretary General, Asian Farmers' Association for Sustainable Rural Development (AFA)

This national-level initiative in India is a significant step to demonstrate evidence on India's wealth in agrobiodiversity, culture and cuisines. It is envisioned to attract other countries and societies to embrace forgotten food that is healthy and highly nutritious, and contributes to more functional, diversified and sustainable agri-food systems, while also contributing to the pro-poor transformation of agricultural research and innovation systems.