



# MILLET NETWORK OF INDIA

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**Smt. Sonia Gandhi**  
**Chairperson**  
**National Advisory Council**  
**New Delhi**

**Subject: UPA position on draft National Food Security Act and  
Request for appointment to discuss India's biodiverse millet  
based agriculture systems**

Respected Madame Gandhi,

It is with keen interest that we read the Hindustan Times newspaper dated 7<sup>th</sup> April 2010 which reported on a three page note to the Empowered Group of Ministers (EGoM) with regards to the draft Food Security Bill. We deeply appreciate and congratulate you on the fantastic role you have played in making this Bill possible. Far more important for us is the emphasis you have laid that the National Food Security Act must ensure food for all, addressing the concerns of availability, access and absorption. Further it is extremely encouraging to note that the UPA under your leadership believes that the Public Distribution System (PDS) needs to be reformed through inclusion of grains that are locally bought and should also accommodate grains such as jowar, bajra and other millets.

We also like to wholeheartedly congratulate you for having articulated the need not just for food but for nutrition in the PDS. This is critically important especially in the background of the argument that nutritionists are making that India is facing a Nutritional Emergency and Health Poverty, both the result of a poor food system that people are subjected to. While arguing for mitigation of this problem Indian National Science Academy in its Position Paper on *Nutrition Security for India - Issues and the Way Forward* has asked for Strengthening of public distribution system and broadening the basket with inclusion of millets, pulse and oils. This again is in tune with your thinking.

In fact the UPA vision of a Food Security Act has raised the nation's expectations sky high. However, many of us who are part of the Millet Network of India (MINI) remained concerned with the thrust of the draft Bill which seems to be concentrated only on the quantum of grains to be made available under PDS.

However much important this might be, we cannot stay away from the long term needs of a sustainable PDS which needs to include the principles of local production, consumption and distribution. Moreover, PDS along with several public food programmes such as mid-day meals, ICDS etc need to include *millet*s within their procurement and implementation plans.

We would like to bring to your kind attention that *MINI*, a network of over 145 institutions and individuals spread over 17 states, composed of farmers, scientists, nutritionists, grassroots activists and environmentalists fondly hopes that this proposed reform in the Food Security Act will expand the canvas wider and address both the food and farming issues simultaneously, since both of them are inextricably linked with each other. We would like to argue as to how millets can offer a very important solution to both these issues.

In some of the harshest agricultural environments in India, the poorest and most vulnerable populations have sustained their food, health and nutritional security through cultivation and consumption of millets. Through an unique farming system they have ensured landscape level biodiversity and ecological security.

Jowar, bajra, mandua (ragi) and many other types of minor millets have been core to India's life cultures for generations. In fact our folk literature, songs and theatre have many references to these. Different parts of India grow different kinds of millets. Rajasthan along with a large part of 'Rainfed India' cultivates Pearl Millet [Bajra]. Deccan plateau [Marathwada in Maharashtra, Telangana in Andhra Pradesh and North Karnataka in Karnataka] is well known for the production of sorghum. Southern Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Southern Karnataka, Orissa and Himalayas are the home of Finger millet [Ragi]. Uttarakhand and other hill and tribal areas in Central India cultivate a range of small millets such as Foxtail, Proso, Kodo and Barnyard.

It is also true that during the decades following India's independence due to our policy thrust and also schematic focus, many farmers have given up farming millets which began to be regarded as minor and coarse grains. In fact in between 1966-2006, India lost almost 44% of the farm land under millets both due to changing cropping patterns as well as industrialisation.

In this light we would like to bring to your attention that a very recent interview of the Agriculture Minister of Punjab, Shri Sucha Singh Langah on NDTV India highlighted that even the states which focussed heavily on Green Revolution agriculture are now seriously thinking of moving forward to millets. The Hon'ble Agriculture minister stated in that interview that in the light of the rotting grains in Punjab, the state is much better off growing, "coarse grains" rather than rice/wheat. From a state which is considered to be a forerunner of India's modern agriculture, this desired focus on millet based agriculture is not just welcome but begs serious attention.

*It might be of great interest to you that Dorli Village in Vidarbha which had, in*

*sheer desperation, put itself up for sale, which Mr Rahul Gandhi had visited two years ago in his numerous healing missions across India, last year moved away from cotton and started growing jowar through the initiative of MINI. The year had a treacherous monsoon and the jowar crop failed. But since no farmer had borrowed heavy money for doing this farming no one had to go through the ignominy of moneylender's harassment and consequently no one in Dorli committed suicide. The farmers were able to save the fodder from their failed crop and sustain their livestock. This year they have decided to continue with their millet cropping.*

It may also be appropriate for us to mention here the harsh remarks made by the Honourable Supreme Court about the PDS situation in India. We believe that addition of millets and decentralising the PDS system all over the country will be the best positive reply to this criticism.

In this light we seek your attention on two specific areas (other than the National Food Security Act) with respect to millets:

1. *Public Distribution System (PDS) and Millets*: The strengthening of the Public Distribution System (PDS) will be the backbone of any effort to get out of the food crisis facing the country. We, at the *Millet Network of India* strongly believe that the inclusion of millets within this system should get the top priority. We believe so, because millets bring with them six critical securities: food, fodder, health, nutrition, water and ecological. In order to offer a detailed explanation on this, we are herewith enclosing a booklet and a film that provide the basis of our contention.

In order to incentivise this unique farming system, a new policy should emerge by putting millets in the PDS and other public food programmes such as ICDS, Food for Work and School Meals. Millets in the PDS can begin with an introduction of a modest five kgs of millets out of the present quota of 25 kgs of rice/wheat in the year 2010 [and 10 kgs of millets if the quota is increased to 35 kgs] and gradually be increased to at least 50% in millet growing states by the year 2020. Efforts must also be made to introduce millet meals twice a week in the ICDS, school mid-day meals programme, in the welfare hostel diet and such other schemes of the government.

The new millet based PDS must also ensure local community level procurement, storage and distribution, which in turn will enable us to save on the huge food miles [a term used to describe the length that food travels from the area of production to the area of consumption]

2. *Honouring Millet Farmers*: As the 'Climate Crisis' intensifies, it is likely that rice and wheat will become unviable as food security crops. With the projected increase of 2 degree Celsius in temperature in the near future, wheat, which is an extremely thermal sensitive crop, will disappear from

the farming scene. Rice varieties which need standing water for their cultivation are the most important emitters of methane, a green-house gas. As such, farming rice on the present scale will be impossible in the near future! In such a scenario, millets will be the saviour of our food and farming systems.

Therefore, it is time that we recognise the ecological role played by the dryland millet based mixed farming systems and announce monetary incentives to the millet farmers for their role in biodiversity conservation, water conservation and sustaining solutions against climate change. A new and urgent focus on watersheds needs to evolve. Such a new focus should compel a move from the current watershed+ approach to a “Green Water” based watershed programme which restrains drawing of groundwater for agriculture at the end of a watershed cycle and emphasises soil moisture enhancement and non-irrigated farming systems. In particular, we strongly recommend a new targeted fillip to millet-based biodiverse cropping systems.

By saving on the current subsidies on chemical fertilizers [which reportedly stood at Rs.1,19,000 crores in 2008] and power [for lifting groundwater for agriculture], the finances needed for millet bonuses can be realized. Further, such incentives can also rescue farmers from their current desperate reliance on high external input agriculture and move them to low input organic and biodiverse farming, thereby finding a lasting solution for the agrarian crisis that has been haunting India for the last decade, leading to thousands of farmer suicides every year.

We would also like to bring to your attention that a large number of Members of Parliament, Members of Legislative Assembly/Council, Panchayat Presidents, Doctors/ Nutritionists, Scientists/ Academicians and thousands of farmers, farmer groups, civil society members and consumer groups have already endorsed the cause of millets which espouses their inclusion in the PDS and biodiversity bonus that we have listed in this letter to you. With your leadership, we can take the concerns around millets to the next step of policy space.

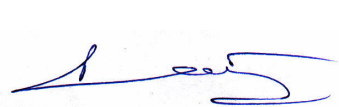
It would be our honour and pleasure to meet you in person along with millet farmers to discuss this further. We would be willing to do this in New Delhi or during any of your visits in Andhra Pradesh, where the MINI secretariat is currently located. In this light we seek an appointment from you to discuss this in person, where we can share our work and discuss the possibilities that rest with the future of millets in India.

We have also written to the Shri Pranab Mukherjee, Finance Minister of India highlighting the need to include millets into the annual budgets presented before the Parliament. We include a copy of that letter for your kind consideration.

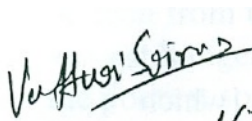
We look forward to your intervention at this critical time when climate change issues require local and grounded responses. Millets crops bring with them a significant solution as they are very own indigenous C4 crops [crops which are climate change compliant] which have within their cultivation carbon fixing properties. Further, in the light of growing water shortage, millet crops with their use of minimal or no water bring with them a revolutionary solution to addressing and mitigating the impacts of climate crisis on India's agricultural systems.

On our part we will also write to the Planning Commission of India which, as per the newspaper report is preparing a note to reform the scope of the draft National Food Security Act.

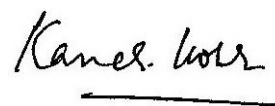
Sincerely,



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**Millet Network of India**

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