



MILLET NETWORK OF INDIA

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June 6, 2010

Smt. Sonia Gandhi
Chairperson
National Advisory Council
New Delhi

Subject: Request to bring climate compliant millet farming system on the NAC's pro poor and food security agenda

Respected Madame Gandhi,

We are delighted to hear about the reconstitution of the National Advisory Council (NAC) under your leadership. We have written to you in the past as chairperson of the UPA requesting you to take a visionary position on the future of food and farming in India. With the experience of pushing into place exemplary legislations on NREGA and RTI in the last tenure of the NAC, we believe that the NAC's revival can lead the way to some critical changes in the food and farming sector.

At the outset, we introduce ourselves as the Millet Network of India (MINI). As the name would suggest, it is a network of organisations and individuals who have been working on the concerns around millet based food and farming practices and a vast millet culture that surrounds this. The *MINI* is a network of over 145 institutions and individuals, composed of farmers, scientists, nutritionists, grassroots activists and environmentalists. While the members of the network in their individual and organisational capacities have been encouraging and reviving millet cultivation, distribution and consumption for the last several decades in various parts of India, especially in the less ecologically privileged areas, they have come together for a collective cause for the last three years.

We have heard from media reports that the NAC has proposed its first meeting on 10th June 2010. We place before you and the members of the NAC a few points for your kind consideration with respect to millets which include jowar, bajra, ragi and many other minor millets. Our strong request for a new national attention on millets is due to the fact that they can be cultivated in the harshest agricultural environments in India. Moreover, the poorest and most vulnerable populations have sustained their food, health and nutritional security through cultivation and consumption of millets. Through a unique farming system they have ensured

landscape level biodiversity and ecological security. [We have annexed some material that highlights the importance of millets in our life systems].

However, during the decades following India's independence, due to our policy thrust and schematic focus, many farmers have been compelled to give 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.

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 his/her millet 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.

In the light of our points above, we seek your attention on three specific areas (other than the National Food Security Act) with respect to millets:

1. Millets in the National Food Security Act: 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) remain 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 needs to include millets within their procurement and implementation plan. We have attached with this letter, some portions of the draft Bill where millets can be included in the draft Food Security Bill.
2. Public Distribution System (PDS) and Millets: As you are rightly aware, 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 MINI 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]

3. *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.

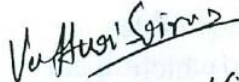
It would be our honour and pleasure to meet you and the members of the NAC to discuss this further. We would be willing to do this in New Delhi or during any of your visits in Andhra Pradesh, where the MINI secretariat is currently located. In this light we seek an appointment from you to discuss this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

We 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.

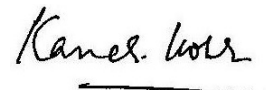
Sincerely,



PV Satheesh
Convener



Vatturi Srinivas
National Coordinator



Kanchi Kohli
Campaign Advisor

Millet Network of India

CC: Members NAC