

Bringing back millet to cope with climate change, empower women

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Written by: AlertNet correspondent



A farmer works in his millet farm in Kanati village, near Ahmedabad, on September 16, 2009. Indian social organizations are trying to restore millet as an important crop in northeast India, to help improve both women's status and food security in the face of climate change.

REUTERS/Amit Dave

By Teresa Rehman

CHIZAMI, India (AlertNet) - Seno Tsuhah, a primary school teacher in this picturesque village near the Myanmar border, wants to help local women cope with changing climate conditions in Nagaland by promoting an old practice: the cultivation of traditional varieties of millet.

Sowing seeds is mostly the domain of women in the area, explains Tsuhah, the moving spirit of a local resource centre of the North East Network, an NGO that works on women's empowerment and human rights.

In each home, a woman "usually keeps the seeds and the different crop selection is mainly done by her. We are trying to sensitise women farmers to promote crop diversity and revive the traditional indigenous seeds which are suitable for the local soil," she says.

Millet, an upland crop, has long been cultivated in the hills of northeast India, and millet-based 'apong,' a country liquor, is a common brew. But the traditional grain is seen primarily as food for the poor and for animals, and millet cultivation is diminishing, along with the traditional 'jhum' system of integrating multiple crops in a field.

"The earlier jhum systems were very complex, but nowadays it has been extremely simplified and the focus has shifted to mono-cropping," said Subbiah Arunachalam, of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research in Meghalaya state.

Increasingly unusual weather, including more erratic rainfall and prolonged dry spells, however, are driving Tsuhah and others to try to revive the crop, which can grow in harsh conditions and needs little in the way of fertilizer or other inputs.

Her centre is in the process of setting up a seed bank of traditional millet varieties and has so far collected about 15. It is also collecting traditional millet recipes and organizing food festivals and exhibitions to pass on the information.

"We are trying to ensure that the seeds are preserved and accorded due importance. If some seeds are lost, there

is always a scope of sharing the seeds," she said.

Climate change is leading to increasingly temperatures in places like northeast India, and wheat harvests are expected to suffer as a result. Cultivation of rice, another staple, releases too much methane, a potent greenhouse gas, from paddies, environmentalists say.

MILLET SEEN AS A RESILIENT CHOICE

Millet is seen as a more resilient choice, not least because it requires much less water than rice or wheat.

Millet, cultivated in traditional mixed 'jhum' fields, is usually sown on rocky sloping ground with minimal soil. Planted in April, it is harvested in July, and a millet feast usually follows in August.

"Jhum is the indigenous way of maintaining the ecology and rejuvenating life. It is difficult to understand why millet is called a poor man's food," Tshuhah said.

Millet, while a traditional food and widely used for brewing, is today largely used as animal fodder. But it has also won a spot on the shelves of health food shops frequented by India's elite.

The Millet Network of India, in a nationwide campaign, is now promoting the grain as a climate change-compliant crop and a traditional Indian choice.

Srinivas Vatturi, of the millet network, emphasizes that multi-cropping of grains like millet are part of women-led traditional farming, while mono-cropping is largely controlled by men. Men may control money produced by selling mono-crops, he said, but women control food produced at home for the house.

Millet also improves not only food security but health, ecological, livelihood and fodder security, he said.

OUTSIDE INDIA'S DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM

One problem in expanding the cultivation of millet is that it is not included in India's national distribution system for subsidized grain, said P.V. Satheesh of the Deccan Development Society, an Indian NGO that promotes development among India's poorest.

That exclusion - which has resulted in more Indians eating distributed grains like rice and wheat - has hurt millet production in the country and curbed the diversity of Indian diets, he said. Many young people are no longer aware of traditional crop varieties.

With hunger still widespread in India and a state focus on distributing rice and wheat doing little to curb that, growing nutritionally rich millet at a household level could improve diets, he said. It could be a particularly good choice in remote hilly areas where people are now dependent on food transported all the way from the neighbouring plain areas.

"The farming landscape of the country needs to be redesigned and new food policies shaped, as crops of larger powerful states like Punjab and Haryana are designing the food policies of our country now. Most millet growers are from poorer areas and communities," Satheesh said.

Ketaki Bardalai, executive director of the Foundation for Social Transformation, a northeast Indian NGO, said promoting traditional cultivation systems, mapping millet cultivation pockets and discovering the reasons for its decline are all key, particularly in Northeast India, one of the country's most economically backward and conflict-troubled zones.

"Sadly, the growing and consuming of millet is slowly fading. The treasure trove of traditional systems disappearing is also very high," she said.

Teresa Rehman is a journalist based in Northeast India. She can be reached at www.teresarehman.net

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1. *Susan Rynjah* says:
28 Apr 2010 14:59:20 GMT

Thanks for highlighting this region which is neglected even by mainstream Indian media.

2. *Muthyavan.* says:
28 Apr 2010 18:44:15 GMT

Millet is only one of the hundred's of locally grown healthy grains which is fast disappearing in the traditional village economy of the past. These grains were boosting a healthy eating of strong old villagers lost past. It has now replaced by the present cash grains of rice, wheat and corn. Resulting in poor health for generations with diseases like blood pressure, diabetic and hart problems.

Most of the old societies are built of strong men who goes out in the morning with their herd of cattle's in search of pasture lands. Women who remains back home tendering their kids making meals for the family also do cultivations of producing many grains and vegetables. When they come back in the evenings they milk their cattle's and families settle dawn for a healthy eating's. This golden way of healthy living and many grains they cultivated like millet has been lost to the modern way of mechanised cultivating cash crops.

Many of these golden grains which were feeding the populations for thousands of years have come under a direct threat mostly by the state banks and government agencies. Which are helping only the cash crops such as rice,wheat and tobacco by fertilizer subsidies and loan guarantees. There is not even a scientific plan by governments to preserve these ancient grains from disappearing. In countries like Norway scientific societies are preserving all the grains which were in circulations for centuries.

Politically it will be another success story if action is taken to safeguard these village level old cultivations and crops. As today most of the challenges to the rule of the land come out from villages and hill tribe peoples.

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