Bringing traditional grains back in vogue: Biofortified sorghum debuts in India

- Biofortified sorghum (jowar) variety are being introduced in India with the hope of tackling under-nutrition and protecting food value that is depleting in the face of climate change.

- Millets and sorghum were the traditional crops across many parts of Africa and India, but “are now seen as old fashioned or food for the poor.” Factors such as competition from soybean, lack of marketing of sorghum for consumers and high labour cost have put a spanner in the works for this traditional grain to claw back into the food basket.

- Biofortified sorghum benefits farmers not only in agriculture, but also ensures their children have access to essential nutrients, an expert said.

Amid concerns of rising carbon dioxide levels sapping nutrients from crops, “Parbhani Shakti”, India’s first biofortified sorghum variety with enhanced zinc and iron, offers hope in tackling undernutrition and preserving food value in the face of climate change.

Sorghum (jowar) is an important drought-tolerant crop providing food, feed and fodder in the arid and semi-arid tropics of the world. It is estimated that 500 million people in more than 30 countries depend on sorghum as a staple food. Millets and sorghum were the traditional crops across many parts of Africa and India, but “are now seen as old fashioned food or food for the poor.”

India’s millet basket includes sorghum, finger millet, pearl millet as well as ‘minor millets’ such as little millet, kodo millet, barnyard millet, foxtail millet and proso millet. These grains are cultivated in resource poor agro-climatic regions such as rain-fed and less-fertile lands and mountainous tracts. Many of these areas, such as Maharashtra and Odisha, also have strong tribal population and sorghum is important for tackling malnutrition among them. More than two-thirds of the Indian population (around 500 million people) are affected by deficiencies in protein, micronutrients such as iron and zinc, and vitamin A.

While sorghum has taken a backseat in India to the more remunerative non-native grains such as soybean, there has been resurgence in demand for the gluten-free, high fibre ancient cereal grain regionally in sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia. Read more