Ancient grain millet has potential to tackle drought, obesity and malnutrition, researcher says

It is the ancient grain that researchers hope could help farmers battling dry conditions, while also helping to tackle global obesity and malnutrition. Millets are a cereal crop that have largely been forgotten by the developed world, where in recent decades the crop has been grown more for animal feed than human consumption.

But Australian researcher Joanna Kane-Potaka, deputy director general of international crop research centre ICRISAT, hopes to change that. "It survives on minimum water, it survives in hot temperatures, and can be very important with climate change," she said. "We often say it's the last crop standing in times of drought."

Ms Kane-Potaka has gained international support for her Smart Foods program, which promotes crops that are good for people, the environment and farmers. Her focus is on millets and sorghum, both of which she wants to transform from niche crops into mainstream staples. "[Millet] was the traditional food in India, across many countries in Africa and actually was there before rice in China — millet was the food that they ate," Ms Kane-Potaka said.

"It just hasn't been industrialised, hasn't come into commercialisation in a big way, and is one of those big kept secrets [with] great potential." It is not just the crop's ability to weather dry conditions that has Ms Kane-Potaka boasting about its potential. She hopes its rich nutrients can tackle some of the world's biggest health issues.

"The finger millet has got three times the amount of calcium as milk, which is amazing, and traditionally it was the weaning porridge for babies, but those traditions are being lost," Ms Kane-Potaka said. Read more