Millet Network of India [MINI] has emerged as a continuation of DDS's relentless efforts in promoting millets over the last 25 years in the Zaheerabad region of Andhra Pradesh. Having reached significant milestones in community action for revival of millet based farming and food systems placing control over food, seeds, markets and natural resources in to the hands of the poor - especially the women who are from multiple marginalization, DDS believed that it was time to build a network of people who are already working with millets or thinking about them across India, undeterred by their historical neglect. Consequently, Millet Network of India [MINI] was initiated by DDS in October 2007. MINI and her partners believe that the main reasons behind the agrarian distress are the designed destruction of the rural communities and the undermining of their rights.

Today, MINI is an alliance of over 120 members representing over 50 farmer organizations, scientists, nutritionists, civil society groups, media persons and women. They represent over 15 rain fed states of India. The MINI sees millets not just as crops but as a concept and above all its ability to help the millet farmers make their agricultural autonomous.

MILLET NETWORK OF INDIA – AN OVERVIEW

While looking at MINI, it is important to look at the context within which MINI functions. India, today, is in the grip of multiple crises.

The Hunger and Nutrition Crisis:

The Global Hunger Index 2012 ranks India 66th out of 81 nations; even behind African countries like Mali, Botswana, Nigeria and Zimbabwe. Now, these countries do not boast of an economy that is growing at 8% per annum, nor do they have four out of the top ten billionaires in the Forbes' List. Yet, these countries have been successful in ensuring that their population is able to eat nutritious food. India is home to the largest number of malnourished children and according to the National Family Health Survey-III, more than 40% of the children int the country suffer from malnutrition. According to the State Hunger Index 2008, prepared by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), out of the

17 states that were ranked, 14 states fell into the 'Alarming' category, and one fell under the 'very alarming' category. The NSSO 61st Round (2005) indicates that there has been a decline in the per-capita calorie and protein consumption in India. This is closely linked to the trends in agriculture, where the area under and the production of millets took a significant hit (as we shall be seeing in subsequent paragraphs). Considering that more than 60% of the people in India access more than 60% of their proteins from cereals, taking into account the fact that rice and wheat that have come to dominate the cereal segment in the country today and the fact that rice and wheat that are commonly available today have been shown to be deficient in proteins (NSSO 61st Round), this decline in protein intake hardly comes as a surprise. This is also aided to a great extent by the fact that millets, which have been shown to be storehouses of proteins along with a host of other nutrients, have seen a steep fall since the 1960s.

The Agricultural Crisis:

The agricultural sector of India is in the grip of a serious crisis. Years of pursuing McKinsey style agriculture that focuses on commercialization and orienting agriculture to meet the demands of the domestic and export markets, has resulted in poisoned and encrusted soils, raising costs of agriculture, a plateauing of the productivity and a shattered rural economy. The 59th Round of the National Sample Survey Organisation indicates that the average Monthly Per Capita Consumption Expenditure for farming households across the country stands at a paltry Rs.503. All these factors have resulted in more than 200,000 farmers committing suicide between 2000 and 2009 (according to the National Crime Records Bureau). One of the fallouts of the agricultural policies pursued in India is the undermining of the traditional biodiversity-based agricultural systems; of which millets are an integral part. In the last 50 years, the total area under millets declined by about 50%; the decline in the area under Jowar was to the tune of 59%, Bajra witnessed a 25% decline in the area, Ragi a decline of 39% and small millets declined by about 80% in the period under consideration. During the same period, then production of millets declined by more than 3 million tons. Considering that millets grow in the arid and semi-arid regions of the country, which comprise of more than 65% of its landmass, and are grown by Dalits and Aadivaasis, who constitute some of the most deprived and marginalized sections of the Indian population, this decline in the area under and the production of millets represents a serious comprise of the food security of India. The policy environment that prevailed in the country did not encourage millet cultivation in any way. When the State finally extended support to millet cultivation through INSIMP, the principles of mono-cropping and chemical-inputs that informed this program were completely antithetical to millet cultivation.

The Water Crisis:

One of the major challenges confronting human kind today is that of climate change. It is estimated that with rising global temperatures, there will be drastic and far-reaching effects of climatic and weather patterns across the globe, and that some of the poorest and most vulnerable sections of the population across the globe will be effected by this. One of the forecasted characteristics of climate change is erratic rainfall patterns and a reduction in the number if rainy days. This is sure to have an impact on the availability of water, especially in the arid and semi-arid belts, which in India comprise of more than 65% of the total area under cultivation. Under these circumstances, over-exploitation of groundwater becomes a looming prospect, and if the crops grown are water-intensive like paddy, sugarcane and soy bean, then there is a real threat that the precious groundwater resources will be exhausted within this generation, and that none of this invaluable resource will be left for the benefit of the future generations. The table given herewith indicates the criticality of groundwater levels in some of the states where MINI is working, and across the country.

State	Safe	Semi-Critical	Critical	Over-Exploited
Andhra Pradesh	78	93	26	84
Gujarat	156	20	6	27
Karnataka	154	34	11	71
Madhya Pradesh	224	61	2	24
Tamil Nadu	136	67	33	139
India	**4277**	**523**	**169**	**802**

Source: Central Groundwater Board, Groundwater Year Book 2011-12

As can be seen in the table given above, out of the more 4277 blocks assessed by Central Ground Water Board, 523 blocks/talukas/mandals, 169 fell under the critical category and 802 came under the over-exploited category. As the table indicates, a number of crisis-ridden blocks are located in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu; these are states where MINI has substantial interventions going on. It has been proven that millets need very little water in order to grow; on the other hand crops like rice and sugarcane require obscene amounts of water. It is estimated that 400,000 liters of water is needed to grow one quintal of paddy and 25,000 liters of water is needed to grow a quintal of sugarcane. Such profligate consumption of water in times of climate change is criminal. On the other hand, millets need hardly any water, and can grow under conditions of both high and low

rainfall, making them ideal in the face of climate change when rainfall patterns are likely to get more and more erratic.

The Crisis of Food Distribution:

Along with the crisis in food production, there is also a grave crisis in food distribution. The Public Distribution System, which is the pre-eminent food distribution program of the government has, for long, depended on rice and wheat, and has excluded the range of millets, pulses and oilseeds which have been bulwark of food security in semi-arid regions of India. Furthermore, this system is reeking with corruption and pilferage; it is estimated that every year, more than 100,000 tons of food grains are lost to pests and pilferage. Furthermore, the current model of centralized procurement means that the grain in India travels about 2000 kilometers before being distributed. It is also estimated that it costs about Rs.1200-Rs.1300 to transport a quintal of rice or wheat. All these factors have lead to a paradox where more than 25% of the total food grain produced is procured for PDS, and there has been a significant increase in the quantum of food grains procured and distributed under PDS, and yet India is home to the largest number of malnourished children in the world.

The Crisis of Democracy:

India is seeing one of the gravest challenges being mounted against the lofty ideals enshrined in the Constitution. In agriculture, this is manifesting itself in the shape of Genetically Engineered Crops. In the face of growing evidence that GE Crops are a highly dubious technology; despite the fact that a number of leading research agencies like the Swiss National Science Foundation and The Washington State University; the Technical Committee consisting of mainstream scientists, set up by the Supreme Court of India and the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Genetic Engineering, comprising politicians of all hues, including the ruling coalition, puncturing holes into the claims being made by the pro-GE lobby, the biotechnology companies have been hell-bent on introducing GE crops at all costs. Sometimes, they have attempted to subvert democratic institutions and spread misinformation among the general public about the purported benefits of GE crops; the media has also been playing an active role in manipulating public opinion and thus 'manufacturing consent'. In all this, the suffering of the millions of farmers who have opted for GE Crops, the plight of pastoralists who are discovering that their livestock are no longer able to get nutritious fodder, thanks to the fact that vast areas of land have been turned over to GE Cotton cultivation and the mounting international experience that shows GE Crops in extremely poor light is being kept in the dark. This is indeed a grave threat to

democratic values, which are based on the fundamental right to make a choice, which in turn cannot do without the foundation of free and fair information.

The work that is being done by MINI must be seen within the context presented above. It is in this milieu that MINI is trying to revive and strengthen millet-based agricultural systems. The very foundation of this initiative is based on the experience of DDS, stemming from over 25 years of engaging with marginalized communities, especially with women among them. MINI is an extension of this vision carried forward at a national scale through likeminded and committed voluntary organizations and civil society groups. It is envisaged as a platform where such organisations can evolve strategies to ensure food security, especially of the rural populations.

The various initiatives of MINI are firmly anchored at the grassroots level, with the communities actively involved in their conceptualization, planning and execution, thereby ensuring their farmer-centric character. This has further been ensured by a combination of grassroots action research, revival of food culture, research and documentation of people's knowledge and consumer education. MINI aims to broad-base the case for bio-diversity and sustainability driven agricultural practices to present different dimensions—technical, social, political, economic—of millet-based farming in a rigorous manner, for the comprehension of the wider public and the policymakers alike. Millet Network of India (MINI) has been working to give fillip to millet based agriculture that is independent of external inputs and rooted in the concepts of biodiversity and sustainability. In doing so, we aim to restore ecological leadership, food sovereignty and dignity to the agricultural communities in general and the small and the marginalized ones among them in particular. Among the marginalized communities mentioned above are Dalits and Aadivasis, especially women among them, who comprise some of the most vulnerable groups in the country at present.

MINI PARTNERS AT A GLANCE

MINI comprises of more than 120 members—farmers' groups, NGOs, activists, professionals-- spread across 15 states of India. Out of them, we are working with eight organisations and activists in undertaking various field-level interventions aimed at reviving millet-based biodiverse farming. These partners and the states where they function are given below.

Name of the Organisation	State	District
SABALA	Andhra Pradesh	Vizianagaram
Sarada Valley Development Society (SVDS)	Andhra Pradesh	Visakhapatnam
Deccan Development Society (DDS)	Andhra Pradesh	Medak
Karnataka Rajya Raita Sangha	Karnataka	Bidar
Bayalu Seeme Rural Development Society (BSRDS)	Karnataka	Gulbarga
Pargjyothi Rural Devleopment Society (PRDS)	Karnataka	Gulbarga (Chincholi taluka)
RAPID	Karnataka	Dharwad
SCOPE	Karnataka	Dharwad
North-East Network	Nagaland	Phek (Chizami)
Paryavaran Vikas Kendra	Gujarat	Rajkot and Bhavnagar
Paryavaran Mitra	Gujarat	Ahmedabad
Nirman	Odisha	Kandhamal
Ahinsa Club	Odisha	Bargarh
Lok Shakthi Sanghathan	Odisha	Bolangir
RCDC (Starting January 2013)	Odisha	Bhubaneswar and Other locations
Lok Vigyan Kendra	Himachal Pradesh	Karasog
Foundation for Ecological Security (began in Nov-Dec	Madhya Pradesh	Mandla

2012)		
Women's Collective	Tamil Nadu	15 districts across the state

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