



BUILDING FPO CAPACITY TO ENTER THE BUSINESS OF AGROBIODIVERSITY



India is home to an extraordinary wealth of healthy and unique food ingredients, supported by centuries of traditional knowledge. As consumer demand for nutritious and natural foods continues to grow, this presents a significant market opportunity to India's farmers and entrepreneurs. However, small and marginal farmers—the custodians of many of these ingredients—often lack market access, resources and the support needed to benefit from this growing demand and enhance their livelihoods. Farmer Producer Organizations can be of use here.

On May 21, 2026, the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) organized an online discussion on how Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) can include indigenous varieties in their portfolio.

The inclusion of indigenous varieties by FPOs will not only strengthen food systems but also enhance farmers' livelihood options. Consumers too would benefit from safe and nutritious foods along with ensuring that agrobiodiversity is protected.

The discussion was guided by the CSE report [*The Business of Agrobiodiversity: Tapping Farmer-Producer Organisations*](#). This report has case studies, expert opinions and recommendations on how the business of agrobiodiversity can be supported in the country.

The discussion revealed that despite multiple success stories, it remains difficult for FPOs to begin working with biodiversity. There are many challenges: shifting from Green Revolution technologies to agroecological farming—the government heavily subsidises fertilizers, banking and finance for chemical farming. Second, markets in India are oriented towards large-scale production and are not built for diverse small crops and small farmers. Third, the institutional framework needs policy support.

The transition is difficult because an enabling environment is absent. This enabling environment cannot be created by FPOs alone and requires action from the government, financial institutions and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). Most FPOs can barely manage their core business, let alone lobby for change.

Keeping the ground reality in context, this document focuses on what FPOs can do to begin with. If the government, financial institutions and CSOs are serious about supporting good food, they need to jump in and support where possible .

We have used the discussion to create a basic roadmap that FPOs can use to begin work with biodiversity. We have also identified areas where other players can step in.

The following experts have contributed to this roadmap:

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- Satyasovan Das, State Head, Foundation for Ecological Security, Madhya Pradesh
- Rajnikant Prasad, CEO, UPProKisan Producer Company Limited, Uttar Pradesh
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- Sachin Oza, Executive Director, DSC Foundation, Gujarat
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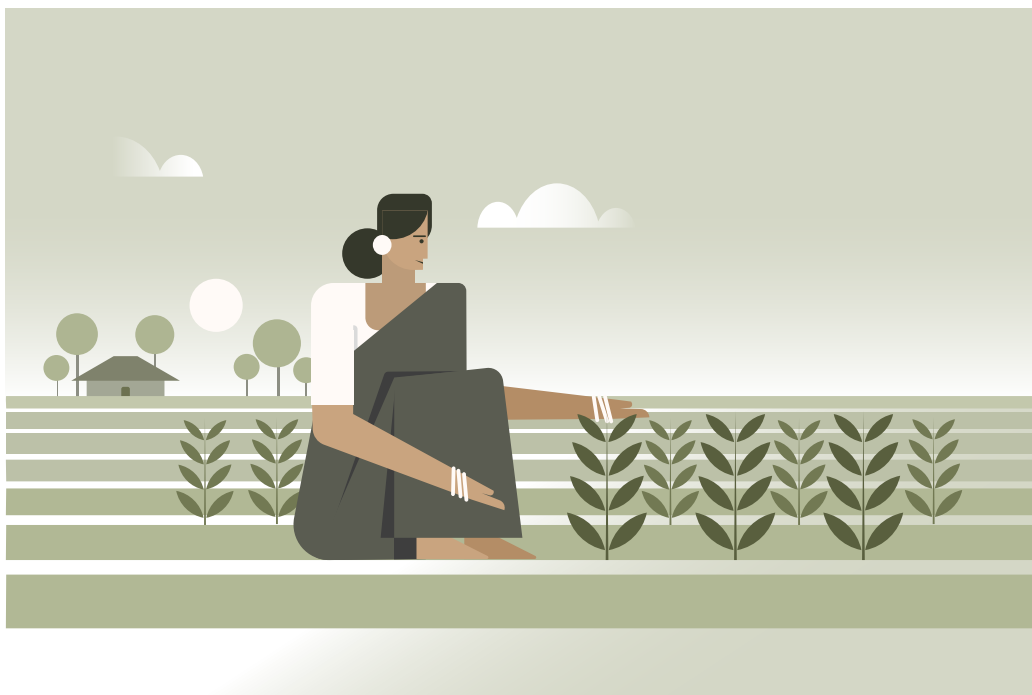
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STEP 1: Identify winners

The first and most critical decision is choosing which traditional variety or ingredient to promote. This is not just a farming decision—it is a business decision.

- A winning variety must satisfy three conditions: farmers want to grow it because it is remunerative, the local ecosystem supports it, and there is a consumer willing to pay for it.
- To identify the winner, start with what already exists. You can invite the oldest farmers in the village—those aged 60–70 or older—and ask them what they grew before the Green Revolution. This seed mapping exercise, which takes just two to three days, can help identify 10–30 traditional varieties that have been quietly surviving in the region.
- Collect what is available. Even 100–200 grams of a rare seed is enough to begin the multiplication process.
- The variety must fit into existing food habits and be valued within the community. Campaigns like ‘Know your food, respect your food’ are needed to revive local food pride and reconnect communities with their traditional ingredients. Only those seeds that are part of the food system survive. These are the seeds that need to be chosen.
- Launch a diversity block. Grow all collected varieties together in half to one acre of land, with five to six rows of each variety. This allows you to compare the varieties side by side and understand which ones perform best in your soil and climate.
- Run participatory variety trials. Let experienced farmers walk through the diversity block and select the varieties they prefer—based on taste, yield, aroma and cooking quality. Invite scientists from the local Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs) to assess grain quality, pest resistance and seed viability. Together, these processes identify the strongest candidates.



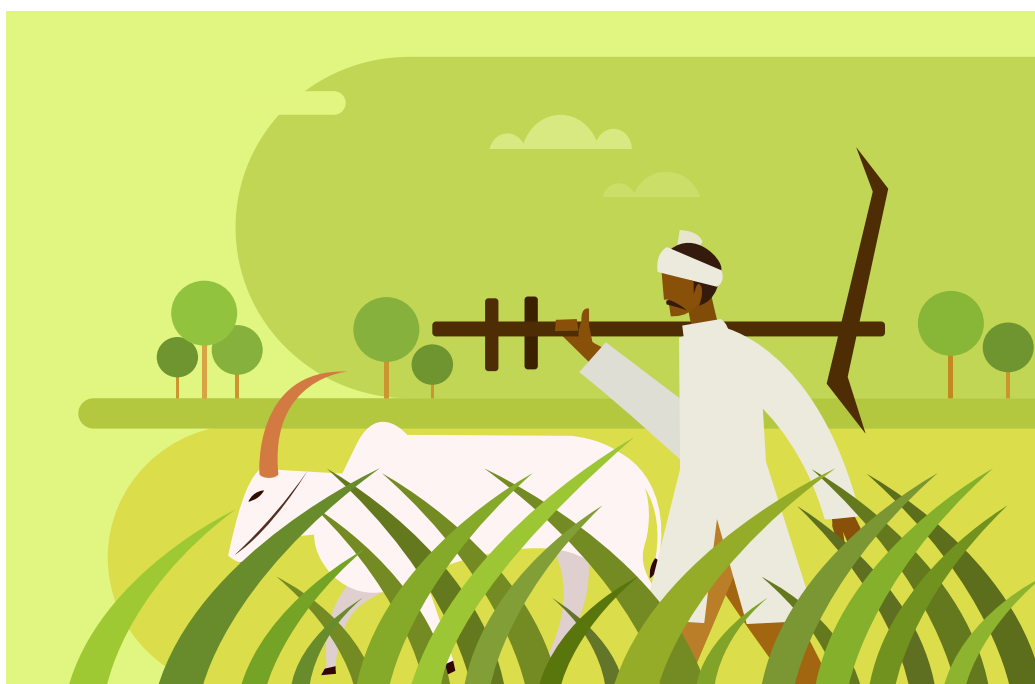
- Look for varieties that offer something unique. Traditional varieties of rice, millets, oilseeds and pulses often have higher protein content, a lower glycaemic index, and better aroma and taste than commercial varieties. These qualities are what health-conscious urban consumers increasingly look for.
- Start with no more than five varieties. Select those that show the strongest combination of farmer interest, local food culture fit, local processing and market potential. Trying to promote too many varieties at once spreads effort too thin.
- Document the traditional knowledge on varieties you collect. This will help identify suitable candidates to promote both now and in the future.

STEP 2: Support farmers

Once the variety is chosen, the FPO must become the backbone of the entire farming process. This includes ensuring high-quality seeds, improving soil, providing bio-inputs, supporting processing and supporting certifications. Without this support, individual farmers cannot sustain the shift from chemical to natural farming. The FPO should essentially be constituted by farmers in the vicinity for better prospects across all fronts—agroecology, scale, processes, markets, etc.

Seeds

- Traditional seeds are not available from government seed centres or Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVKs), which supply only high-yielding hybrid varieties. Help build a seed supply system—setting up community seed banks works.
- Identify and support dedicated seed producers. To do so, it is important to distinguish between a seed saver and a seed producer. A seed saver holds small quantities for personal or community use. A seed producer grows seeds at scale—4–6 acres—in accordance with quality protocols.
- Strive to obtain formal recognition for traditional seeds



across the country so that they are legally accepted for purchase or sale in the formal market.

- Include seed marketing in the overall business model. If the FPO does not generate revenue from seeds, it will not survive.

Bio-inputs and farming support

- Create awareness of the benefits of natural farming and how to manage the initial productivity loss; supply of inputs such as seeds, bio-inputs like Jeevamrut, and tools; processing; storage; and certification for those selling beyond local markets.
- Take responsibility for environmental management around the farm—water flows, soil quality, air quality, land use—to support farmers practising natural farming.
- Train farmers in the process of preparing bio-inputs. Provide support in terms of money, knowledge and skills.
- Inform farmers about the government-led Bio-input Resource Centres in the area and connect members to the centres.
- Anchor and operate Bio-input Resource Centres to support their network of member farmers.
- Provide the farming equipment needed to grow diverse crops.

Storage and processing

- Train farmers in post-harvest technology, storage and distribution—these responsibilities cannot be managed by individual farmers alone. Training should promote nature-friendly storage, including the use of solar power and natural pesticides.
- Invest in basic processing equipment appropriate to their crop—dal mills, flour mills, de-husking machines. Where in-house processing is not immediately possible, tie-ups with third-party processors can be a starting point, but the goal should be to bring processing in-house to avoid dependency. Keep local consumers in mind, too, not only urban buyers.

- Proper storage infrastructure is essential to reduce post-harvest losses, which reduce income and undermine quality. The FPO must have clean, pest-free storage facilities.
- All processing involves labour—often women’s. Compensate labour fairly and structure processing activities to reduce drudgery.

Certification, GI tagging and branding

- Help farmers sell beyond local markets by supporting them in obtaining organic certification. This will help them claim premium pricing and increase farmers’ income.
- Apply for Geographical Indication (GI) tags to transform the traditional variety into a recognized brand.
- Register with APEDA (Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority) if exporting to international markets is the goal. APEDA certification also opens doors to institutional buyers and export channels.
- Facilitate branding that reflects the product’s story—its origin, traditional roots, health benefits, and the farmers behind it. Consumers are increasingly drawn to products with authentic stories.
- Brand extension and visibility should be increased through social media rather than through traditional channels.
- Facilitate participation in an exhibition or community-based event for direct interaction with customers.

STEP 3: Creating markets

Market creation is perhaps the most difficult part of this journey. Most FPOs fail here. The key insight from successful FPOs is this: think backwards from the consumer, not forward from the farm. Understand what the consumer wants, and then align your product to meet that need.

Understanding consumers

- Carry out a simple survey to understand what people are already buying or searching for. What health concerns are driving their choices? Regularly assessing consumer trends, preferences and willingness to pay for such products can help farmers and FPOs choose the right crops and products to cultivate.
- Urban and semi-urban consumers are increasingly concerned about health and attributes such as high glycemic index, low protein, excessive carbohydrates and the presence of chemical residues of food. FPOs need to inform consumers that traditional varieties naturally address these concerns. Traditional rice varieties



with a lower glycemic index, high-protein millets, and indigenous oilseeds with better fatty acid profiles are real market opportunities.

- Consumers respond to stories. Document the stories of the variety's origin, the farming community behind it, and the ecological value it represents. All of this builds brand loyalty.

Building the market

- Build dedicated markets by first identifying local and institutional buyers. Temples, schools, anganwadis, hospitals and hostels are natural first buyers of clean, nutritious food. Build these relationships where possible before pursuing retail or e-commerce.
- Aggregate produce from all farmer members, grade it for consistent quality, and sell to a single reliable buyer rather than scattering supply across multiple small transactions. This builds credibility and trust.
- Enforce quality standards from the farm all the way to delivery. Quality and consistency are non-negotiable. One failure—a bad batch, a missed delivery or a quality deviation—can permanently end a buyer relationship. Interact regularly with farmers. Provide incentives to motivate.
- Partner with market-facing organizations. There are successful models in which the FPO handles production and the market partner handles distribution. Profits are shared equally. This kind of collaboration can resolve the marketing gap without the FPO having to build those capabilities from scratch.
- Align production with market demand to ensure products meet consumer expectations, prevent oversupply and secure fair prices for farmers.

STEP 4: Navigating policy

The policy environment in India has not kept pace with the needs of FPOs working on agro-biodiversity. The government has a clear role in supporting FPOs, but they usually have to manage with little or no support. Instead, they are forced to rely on consumer networks, NGO partnerships and their own earnings.

Leverage what exists

- Access funds from the National Mission on Natural Farming (NMNF), which promotes natural farming and the formation of farmer clusters. Connect with the NMNF implementing agency and the clusters formed under this scheme.
- APEDA provides registration, market linkage support and access to international buyers for organic and indigenous products to FPOs with export ambitions. Get these.

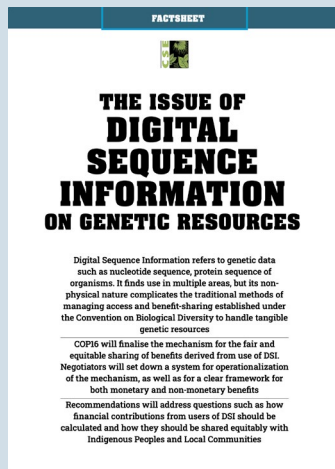
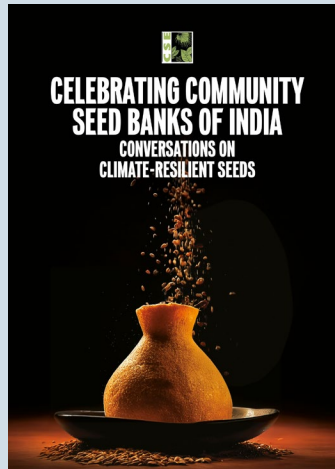
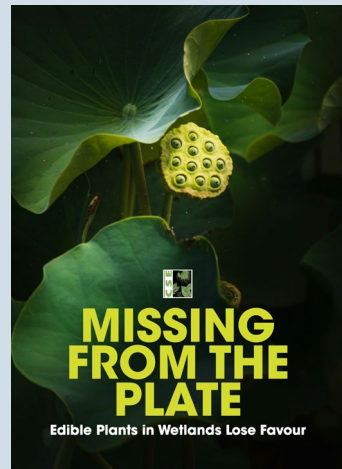
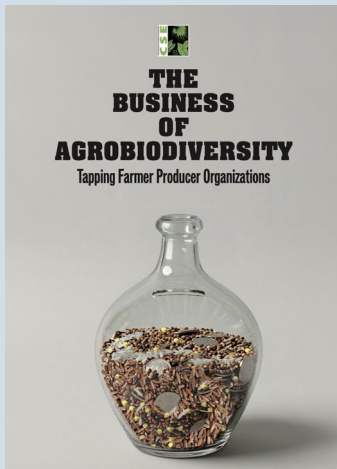
Demand changes in policy

- Demand setting of Minimum Support Price, especially for products that can go into local distribution systems for anganwadis, midday meal schemes, hospital food and government hostels. The government must procure the produce when market prices fall below the MSP.
- Demand change in policies to help FPOs receive Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) funds or grants from NGOs or individuals. This is essential for non-revenue-generating activities such as research, extension and capacity-building components of the work of FPOs.
- Demand that FPOs can use marketing infrastructure such as National Cooperative Exports Limited and the National Cooperative of Organics Limited.
- Separate mandis are essential for selling indigenous produce as they fail to get any additional benefit in normal mandis. Insist that these are established.
- Ask for extension of tax holidays as returns are visible only after three to six years.
- Policies that allow for and incentivize diversity are essential.



- Ask for a solution: The One District, One Product policy works against diversity. It concentrates effort on a single product per district, creating market distortions.
- Call for ease of loans. The government is best placed to hold workshops to sensitize banks about the work that FPOs do.
- Demand that the government provide patient, long-term capital and not just a one-time scheme disbursement.
- Urge the government to create its own certification process and fix local standards for quality testing and certification. Certificates should be free of cost for all farmers who have been practising organic farming for three years.
- Petition the government to help create markets and create branding for agrobiodiversity. Government policy should adequately incentivize a shift to native food crops and a shift to natural farming from conventional farming.

Biodiversity and Food



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