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Crop Diversification for Improved Livelihoods of Organic Cotton Growers in India

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Abstract

India is the biggest producer of organic cotton, most of it produced by smallholder farmers who sell it as a cash crop for in-season income generation. For these smallholder farmers, organic cotton-based farming systems need to be economically viable. Diversification is one option that is often proposed as a means to improve the livelihoods of smallholder farmers. It holds great potential to increase and diversify their income and mitigate economic risks. Diversifying the farming system can be achieved through optimizing crop rotation, including intercrops and accompanying crops and using green manure, among others. Compared to monocultures, these practices bear agronomical and environmental benefits - such as increased productivity, additional lever in pest management, and fostering biodiversity.

We initiated a study in early 2020 to investigate the impact of crop diversification practices on the livelihood of organic cotton growers in India. A mixed-methods approach (Analysis of existing data sets, stakeholder interviews, and participatory horizontal farmer-stakeholder workshops) applied at landscape level enables us to identify existing diversification measures, economic, agronomic, and environmental strengths and weaknesses of existing and potential diversification measures to monoculture production of cotton. Particular attention is paid to market access and the local agro-climatic conditions as well as other contextual factors that influence the well-being of farmers.

The holistic appraisal of the different options to diversify cotton-based farming systems enables the recommendation of solutions suitable for the local conditions. Therefore, the study will contribute to a better understanding of the importance of diversification to improve the livelihood of organic cotton farmers.

Keywords: Cotton, crop diversification, India, livelihood, organic agriculture, smallholder farmers