



We should not be naive. A few hours' flight from here, there is a horrific war... Ukraine can continue to count on the Netherlands for financial, military and political support



## Five steps to turnaround India's horticulture sector

India, while being the second largest producer of fruits and vegetables globally, accounts for a mere 2% of global horticulture trade. To fulfil its horticulture potential, India must adopt a strategic, multi-pronged approach that strengthens its foundations and embraces new opportunities. Given its agricultural potential and ideal climatic zones, the country must boost horticultural production and improve access to nutritious food for fellow Indians, harnessing the advantage that horticulture lends itself to our smallholder farming structure.

To do so, first, embrace the full strength of Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs). FPOs can enable economies of scale, enhance operational efficiencies, promote best practices, connect farmers with (international) buyers, secure fair prices, minimise the impact of intermediaries, and build farmers' capacity to manage modern agriculture's complexities. I have been fortunate to witness this transformation first-hand, over the last few years. Purandar Highlands, an FPO started by progressive smallholder farmers in Purandar, near Pune, is harnessing locally grown figs and has done well in both the domestic as well as international markets. Similarly, the FPO Sahyadri Farms has developed a comprehensive infrastructure — including an advisory team, pack-house, cold storage, and technology — to reduce costs and optimise resources. They mentor farmers in producing quality goods that meet global standards, and in establishing crop-specific value chains. FPOs can also drive consistency in produce such as variety, size and level of maturity which is a prerequisite for successful processing and trade.

Second, enhancing product quality and consistency to meet international standards. We must improve the quality of our produce to meet international standards. For this, we must bridge the gap in extension services and ensure that farmers are equipped with the latest agronomic knowledge and sustainable farming techniques. Precision farming methods, integrated pest management, and responsible use of crop protection products can boost yields and maintain quality while minimising environmental impact. Strengthening post-harvest infrastructure — including storage facilities and processing units — is essential for reducing wastage and enhancing the value and marketability of horticulture produce. It will also be beneficial to have trade agreements that reduce tariff- and non-tariff barriers that have impeded Indian exports.

Third, robust regulatory frameworks and

technology for safety and quality. Compliance with international safety and quality standards is crucial for establishing a strong presence in foreign markets. India must also embrace technologies that can propel the horticulture sector forward. Supporting and investing in agri-tech through grants or tax incentives will enable the adoption of precision agriculture technologies, IoT-based monitoring systems, water management and drones for crop management. This will improve productivity, efficiency, and resilience against climate and market variations.

Fourth, an integrated logistics and supply chain framework. Effective cold chains are vital for maintaining the safety and nutritional value of in-transit food products, especially when catering to global markets that conduct stringent checks for quality, freshness, and chemical residues.

This can be achieved through a robust cold chain that includes pre-cooling facilities, refrigerated transport, and efficient packaging technologies. Enhanced cold storage capacity enables farmers to adjust the supply based on demand fluctuations — a crucial advantage while exporting. Government-led programmes such as the Gati Shakti mission, and the Dedicated Freight Corridor of Indian Railways

should combine cold storage and transportation elements with real-time market data along with a provision to give farmers visibility into market demand, prices, and available logistics services.

Fifth, a bigger role for public-private partnerships (PPPs). Lack of adequate insurance coverage can leave farmers vulnerable, impact their financial stability, and discourage them from cultivating high-value crops. Affordable and customised insurance products can mitigate the risks associated with horticulture and encourage farmers to invest in quality improvement and compliance with export standards. The Cluster Development Programme (CDP) for horticulture is a good example of a PPP, wherein the government plays a facilitative role, and private enterprises leverage their operational excellence to create specialised clusters focused on horticultural crops with export potential.

India truly has the potential to become a horticulture powerhouse. It can get there with robust, coordinated efforts and innovative strategies that enable equitable, sustainable growth for the sector and prioritise the prosperity of farmers.



Simon Wiebusch