



Advancing Crop Resilience: Plant Breeding Techniques to Combat Climate Change Challenges for Small and Marginal Farmers

Supratim Sadhu* and Devayan Chatterjee

*Assistant Professor, Faculty of Agriculture, JIS University,
Agarpara, Kolkata, West Bengal-700109, India*

Corresponding Author

Supratim Sadhu

Email: supratim.sadhu@jisuniversity.ac.in



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ABSTRACT

Climate change poses significant challenges to global agriculture, particularly for smallholder farmers who are most vulnerable to its effects. Unpredictable weather patterns, including droughts, floods, and temperature extremes, threaten crop yields and food security. Plant breeding, a key agricultural science, offers solutions to these challenges by developing crop varieties with enhanced resilience to environmental stress. This review examines modern plant breeding techniques, including marker-assisted selection, genomic selection, and CRISPR-based gene editing, and their potential to combat climate change impacts on smallholder farms. The article explores how these technologies can improve traits such as drought tolerance, heat resistance, and disease resilience in crops, thereby increasing their adaptability to climate stressors. Additionally, it highlights the importance of farmer participation in breeding programs, the need for accessible seed systems, and the role of agricultural extension services in ensuring the successful adoption of these innovations. Ultimately, this review underscores the potential of plant breeding to enhance food security and sustainability for smallholder farmers in the face of climate change, emphasizing the importance of integrating scientific advancements with practical, farmer-centered approaches.

INTRODUCTION

Climate change has emerged as a critical threat to global agricultural systems, with smallholder farmers—those managing limited land holdings—bearing the brunt of its effects (Matiu *et al.*, 2017). Rainfed agriculture has traditionally been the primary livelihood for smallholder farmers, but it is now increasingly at risk due to climate change, which disturbs the once-reliable patterns of rainfall. Smallholder farmers contribute to over 80% of global food production, the impact of climate change on agriculture extends far beyond the farmers and their families (Lowder *et al.*, 2016). These farmers, who contribute significantly to food production, especially in developing regions, are encountering increasingly unpredictable climatic conditions such as drought, erratic rainfall, heat stress, and flooding. These factors lead to severe crop losses, reduced productivity, and greater food insecurity. For small landholder farmers, who often lack the financial resources to adapt to these changes, the need for effective and sustainable agricultural solutions is paramount.

One of the most promising approaches to overcoming the challenges posed by climate change is through the application of plant breeding techniques aimed at improving crop resilience. Plant breeding has long been used to develop crop varieties with desirable traits such as higher yield, disease resistance, and improved nutritional content. However, with the escalating challenges of climate change, the focus has shifted toward enhancing crop resilience to environmental stressors.

The integration of modern plant breeding techniques, including molecular markers, gene editing (such as CRISPR-Cas9), and genomic selection, offers new opportunities to accelerate the development of climate-resilient crop varieties (Abdallah, 2025). These technologies enable breeders to create crops

that are more tolerant to adverse environmental conditions, such as drought, salinity, and heat stress, which are becoming increasingly prevalent in many parts of the world.

This article aims to explore the current advancements in plant breeding techniques and their potential to address the challenges posed by climate change for smallholder farmers. It examines the role of genetic improvements in key staple crops—such as cereals, legumes, and vegetables—in enhancing resilience to climatic extremes. Additionally, the article discusses the practical implications of these innovations, including the challenges of translating laboratory results into field applications, the importance of farmer involvement in breeding programs, and the need for supportive policies and infrastructure to ensure equitable access to these technologies.

The Need for Resilient Crops

Smallholder farmers face a range of challenges that exacerbate the impacts of climate change. These farmers typically operate on less than two hectares of land, making them particularly vulnerable to climate-related shocks. The combination of limited resources, dependence on rain-fed agriculture, and lack of access to modern agricultural technologies heighten the risks associated with fluctuating weather patterns. Moreover, smallholders often grow a diverse range of crops for food security and income generation, making them sensitive to any changes in crop performance due to climate stressors.

For these farmers, the availability of crop varieties that can withstand environmental stress is crucial. Research shows that improving crop resilience through breeding can significantly mitigate the risks of climate-

related crop failures. Crops that are drought-tolerant, heat-resistant, or able to withstand flooding or salinity can help secure food production and provide a buffer against climate-induced yield variability.

Modern Plant Breeding Techniques for Climate Resilience

Traditional plant breeding, which involves selecting plants with desirable traits and crossbreeding them over several generations, has been instrumental in the development of improved crop varieties. However, these methods can be slow, requiring multiple cycles of selection to achieve desired results. With the advent of molecular tools, the pace of breeding has accelerated, allowing for more precise and targeted improvements.

1. Marker-Assisted Selection (MAS):

Marker-assisted selection uses molecular markers to identify desirable genes linked to specific traits, such as drought tolerance or disease resistance. By screening large numbers of plants for these markers, breeders can more quickly identify superior varieties. MAS has been successfully used to improve drought tolerance in crops like maize and rice, offering smallholder farmers a way to mitigate the impacts of water scarcity.

2. Genomic Selection (GS):

Genomic selection involves the use of high-density genotyping to predict the genetic potential of plants for certain traits. This approach allows breeders to select plants with desirable traits before they are grown to maturity, thereby reducing the time and resources spent on traditional breeding methods. GS has the potential to improve the efficiency of breeding programs, especially for complex traits like drought resistance.

3. Gene Editing (CRISPR-Cas9):

Gene editing technologies, particularly CRISPR-

Cas9, have revolutionized plant breeding by allowing for the precise modification of genes responsible for specific traits. With CRISPR, scientists can target and edit genes to improve crop resilience to climate stressors, such as heat, drought, or salt tolerance. This technology has shown promise in improving traits like disease resistance, nitrogen use efficiency, and water uptake in crops like wheat, rice, and tomatoes.

Field Application and Farmer Involvement

While advancements in breeding technologies are promising, the translation of laboratory successes into field applications remains a significant challenge. For smallholder farmers, the adoption of climate-resilient crop varieties depends not only on the availability of these seeds but also on factors such as cost, access to training, and infrastructure.

1. Farmer Participation in Breeding Programs:

Involving smallholder farmers in the breeding process is essential to ensure that the varieties developed are suited to local environmental conditions and meet the needs of the farming community. Participatory breeding programs, where farmers actively engage in selecting traits that are most beneficial to them, can help increase the relevance and adoption of new varieties.

2. Access and Affordability:

The success of climate-resilient crops hinges on making them accessible to smallholder farmers. Seed systems need to be strengthened, and policies must ensure that these crops are affordable and available in local markets. Public-private partnerships, government support, and investment in agricultural research can play a vital role in scaling up the distribution of improved varieties.

3. Extension Services and Education:

For smallholder farmers to benefit from new

plant breeding technologies, they must be equipped with the knowledge to adopt them. Agricultural extension services, which provide farmers with training on new technologies and best practices, are critical to facilitating the uptake of climate-resilient crops.

CONCLUSION

Plant breeding plays a crucial role in the fight against climate change by offering solutions to enhance crop resilience, particularly for smallholder farmers who are most vulnerable to its impacts. With the advent of modern breeding technologies, such as marker-assisted selection, genomic selection, and gene editing, the potential to develop crops that can withstand the challenges posed by climate change is greater than ever before. However, for these innovations to benefit smallholder farmers, there must be a concerted effort to integrate them into farming systems through participatory breeding, accessible seed systems, and strong extension services. By combining scientific advancements with

farmer-centric approaches, plant breeding can be a powerful tool in building climate-resilient agricultural systems that ensure food security for generations to come.

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