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Eureka Journal of Agricultural Science & Bio-Innovation (EJASB)

ISSN 2760-4969 (Online) Volume 01, Issue 01, November 2025

https://eurekaoa.com/index.php/7

SOIL MICROBIOME DIVERSITY AND ITS IMPACT ON SUSTAINABLE CROP PRODUCTIVITY IN ORGANIC FARMING SYSTEMS

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Abstract

Soil microbiomes play a central role in nutrient cycling, plant growth regulation, and long-term soil fertility, especially within organic farming systems where chemical inputs are minimal. This study investigates the relationship between soil microbial diversity and sustainable crop productivity across organic farms in three agro-ecological regions of India. Soil samples were analyzed for microbial biomass carbon (MBC), microbial functional groups, enzymatic activity, and biodiversity indices (Shannon and Simpson). Crop productivity (yield/ha) of wheat, tomato, and maize was evaluated. The results show a strong positive correlation between microbial diversity and crop yield ($r = 0.82$). Farms with higher bacterial and fungal diversity reported enhanced nutrient availability, improved soil organic carbon, and stronger plant resistance to pathogens. Enzymes such as dehydrogenase and phosphatase were significantly higher in organically managed soils. This study concludes that soil microbiome diversity is a key driver of sustainable crop productivity and should be integrated into organic farming guidelines for long-term agricultural resilience.

Keywords: Soil microbiome, microbial diversity, organic farming, sustainable agriculture, crop productivity, soil health, enzymatic activity, biodiversity indices, soil fertility.

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1. Introduction

Sustainable agriculture has become a global priority as modern farming systems face increasing pressure from climate change, soil degradation, and overuse of chemical inputs. Organic farming offers a viable alternative by avoiding synthetic fertilizers and pesticides and relying on ecological processes for soil fertility. A key component of these ecological processes is the soil microbiome—the complex community of bacteria, fungi, actinomycetes, protozoa, and archaea that regulate nutrient cycling, soil structure, and plant growth.

Multiple researchers have demonstrated that soil microbial communities act as bioengineers of ecosystems by breaking down organic matter, fixing nitrogen, solubilizing phosphorus, and producing growth-promoting hormones. However, the specific impact of microbiome diversity on crop productivity in organic systems remains under-researched in many regions.

This study addresses the knowledge gap by investigating how microbial diversity affects soil fertility and crop productivity in organic farms across diverse agro-climatic zones. It aims to provide scientific evidence supporting microbiome-based management strategies in organic agriculture.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Soil Microbiome and Soil Fertility

Soil microorganisms enhance nutrient cycling through mineralization, nitrogen fixation, and organic matter decomposition. Studies have shown that soils rich in microbial biomass and diversity exhibit higher levels of available nitrogen, phosphorus, and micronutrients.

2.2 Microbial Diversity and Plant Growth

Beneficial microbes such as *Rhizobium*, *Azotobacter*, *Arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi (AMF)*, and *Trichoderma* promote plant growth by improving nutrient

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uptake and suppressing soil-borne diseases. Higher microbial diversity often corresponds to greater plant resilience.

2.3 Organic Farming and Soil Biological Health

Organic systems rely on natural inputs such as compost, green manure, and crop residues, which enhance microbial habitats and increase soil organic carbon. Evidence suggests that organic soils contain 20–30% higher microbial biomass compared to chemical-input soils.

2.4 Gaps in Existing Research

While many studies confirm the benefits of microbiomes, few have:

1. Evaluated multiple crops under a multi-region organic farming context.
2. Measured a combination of microbial diversity indices and enzyme activities.
3. Established a quantitative link between microbial diversity and yield.

This study addresses these gaps.

3. Methodology

3.1 Study Area

The study was conducted in:

- **Maharashtra (semi-arid)**
- **Punjab (sub-tropical)**
- **Uttarakhand (temperate mountain)**

3.2 Sampling and Data Collection

- 45 organic farms were selected (15 per region).
- Soil samples collected at 0–15 cm depth.
- Crops studied: wheat, tomato, maize.

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3.3 Laboratory Analysis

The following parameters were measured:

Microbial Diversity

- Total bacterial count
- Total fungal count
- Shannon diversity index (H')
- Simpson index (D)

Soil Enzymatic Activities

- Dehydrogenase
- Urease
- Phosphatase

Chemical Properties

- Soil organic carbon
- pH
- NPK availability

3.4 Statistical Analysis

- Pearson correlation
- Regression modeling
- ANOVA for region-wise comparisons

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Microbial Diversity Analysis

Table 1: Microbial Diversity Across Regions

Region	Bacterial CFU ($\times 10^6$)	Fungal CFU ($\times 10^4$)	Shannon Index (H')	Simpson Index (D)
Maharashtra	18.4	5.6	3.12	0.89
Punjab	22.9	6.8	3.54	0.93
Uttarakhand	26.3	7.9	3.78	0.95

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Interpretation:
Uttarakhand soils showed highest microbial diversity, attributed to high organic matter and cooler climate.

4.2 Soil Enzymatic Activity

Table 2: Enzyme Levels in Organic Farms

Enzyme	Maharashtra	Punjab	Uttarakhand
Dehydrogenase (µg TPF/g soil)	19.2	22.8	26.4
Urease (mg urea/g soil/hr)	14.5	16.1	18.9
Phosphatase (µg PNP/g soil/hr)	38.1	41.7	47.5

Higher enzyme activity = higher microbial metabolism.

4.3 Crop Productivity Comparison

Table 3: Yield (tons/ha)

Crop	Low Diversity	Medium Diversity	High Diversity
Wheat	2.9	3.4	4.1
Tomato	22.1	25.4	29.3
Maize	4.5	5.2	6.0

Key Finding:
Yield increased by 18–30% in farms with high microbial diversity.

4.4 Statistical Model

Regression Output (Simplified)
Crop Yield = 0.52 + 0.84 (Microbial Diversity Index)
$R^2 = 0.78$ $p < 0.001$
■ **78% of yield variability explained by microbial diversity.**

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5. Discussion

The study confirms that soil microbiome diversity strongly enhances crop productivity in organic systems. Higher microbial diversity results in:

- Better nutrient mineralization
- Higher soil organic carbon
- Greater resilience to pathogens
- Improved root growth and nutrient absorption

Regions with more organic matter inputs (e.g., Uttarakhand) showed superior microbial profiles. The results support the theory that microbial-rich soils function as natural biofertilizers, reducing dependency on external inputs.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that soil microbiome diversity is a key determinant of sustainable crop productivity in organic farming. High microbial diversity improves soil structure, nutrient availability, and crop yield. Policymakers and farmers should integrate microbiome-focused management practices—such as composting, crop rotation, mulching, and reduced tillage—into organic farming guidelines.

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