Review article

Empowering Small-Scale Vegetable Farmers with Drone-Based Decision Support Systems for Sustainable Production

Abstract

In India, small-scale vegetable farmers face significant challenges in achieving sustainable and profitable production due to limited access to modern technologies and decision support tools. This study explores the potential of drone-based remote sensing and decision support systems (DSS) to empower small-scale farmers and promote sustainable vegetable production practices. The research involved deploying multispectral sensor-equipped drones over 50 smallholder vegetable farms in the state of Maharashtra, India to collect high-resolution crop health and growth data across multiple growing seasons. The aerial data was processed and integrated into a cloud-based DSS platform that provided participating farmers with actionable insights and recommendations to optimize irrigation, fertilization, pest/disease control, and harvest scheduling. The DSS also incorporated weather forecasts, market price information, and expert agronomic knowledge to help farmers make informed decisions.However, challenges remain in building digital literacy, trust, and infrastructure to enable wider adoption among smallholder farmers. Future work should focus on participatory design of DSSs, integration with existing agricultural extension services, and inclusive business models for delivering precision agriculture technologies to small-scale farmers in developing countries.

Keywords: Precision Agriculture, Drones, Decision Support Systems, Sustainable Intensification, Smallholder Farmers

1. Introduction

Small-scale farmers are the backbone of India's agricultural sector, with nearly 126 million small and marginal farmers cultivating 86% of the country's farmland [48]. However, these smallholder farmers face numerous challenges in achieving sustainable and profitable production, including limited access to modern technologies, information, and markets [50]. In the context of vegetable production, smallholder farmers struggle with low productivity, inefficient resource use, high losses due to pests and diseases, and vulnerability to climate risks [1]. There is an urgent need for innovative solutions that can empower small-scale vegetable farmers to adopt sustainable intensification practices and enhance their livelihoods.

Recent advancements in drone-based remote sensing and decision support systems (DSS) offer promising opportunities for precision agriculture applications in smallholder farming systems [2,3]. Drones equipped with multispectral sensors can capture high-resolution imagery of crop health, growth, and stress conditions, which can be analyzed using machine learning algorithms to generate actionable insights and recommendations for farmers [4,5]. By integrating drone-based data with weather forecasts, soil moisture sensors, and crop models, DSSs can provide timely and site-specific advice to farmers on irrigation scheduling, fertilizer management, pest/disease control, and harvest planning [6,7]. Such precision agriculture tools have the potential to optimize input use, reduce costs, increase yields, and minimize environmental impacts in smallholder vegetable production systems [8,9].

However, the adoption of drone-based precision agriculture technologies by small-scale farmers in developing countries like India remains limited due to various technological, socio-economic, and institutional barriers [10,11]. Smallholder farmers often lack access to affordable drone services, reliable internet connectivity, and digital literacy skills needed to effectively use DSSs [12]. Moreover, the development of DSSs has primarily focused on large-scale commercial farming systems in advanced economies, with limited attention to the specific needs, preferences, and constraints of smallholder farmers in diverse agro-ecological and socio-cultural contexts [13,14]. There is a need for participatory and inclusive approaches to co-design, test, and scale drone-based DSSs that are responsive to the realities of small-scale farming systems in India and other developing countries.

***Table 1*. Comparison of spectral vegetation indices used for crop health assessment**

Vegetation Index	Formula	Sensitivity
NDVI	(NIR - Red) / (NIR + Red)	Chlorophyll, LAI, biomass
GNDVI	(NIR - Green) / (NIR + Green)	Chlorophyll, nitrogen content
NDRE	(NIR - RedEdge) / (NIR + RedEdge)	Chlorophyll, nitrogen content
CWSI	(Tc - Tnw) / (Tdry - Tnw)	Water stress, stomatal conductance

Sources:- [68-69]

1.1 Background

Maharashtra is a major vegetable producing state in India, with over 1.37 million hectares under vegetable cultivation and an annual production of 12.95 million tonnes in 2019-20 [48]. According to the latest data from the Department of Agriculture, Government of Maharashtra, the state's vegetable production further increased to an estimated 14.2 million tonnes in 2023-24, with the area under vegetable cultivation expanding to 1.45 million hectares [49]. The state is known for its diverse agro-climatic zones, ranging from semi-arid plateaus to humid coastal regions, which support a wide variety of vegetable crops including tomatoes, onions, okra, eggplant, and leafy greens [48].. However, the productivity and profitability of vegetable farming in Maharashtra are constrained by various biotic and abiotic stresses, such as erratic rainfall, drought, heat waves, soil nutrient deficiencies, insect pests, and fungal diseases [16,17]. Climate change is exacerbating these challenges, with projections indicating increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, shifting pest and disease ranges, and reduced water availability in parts of the state [18].

Smallholder farmers, who dominate vegetable production in Maharashtra, are particularly vulnerable to these challenges due to their limited access to irrigation facilities, quality inputs, credit, and extension services [19]. According to the Agricultural Census 2015-16, the average size of operational holdings in Maharashtra is 1.34 hectares, with 79.5% of farmers cultivating less than 2 hectares [48]. These small and fragmented landholdings make it difficult for farmers to adopt modern technologies and practices that can enhance productivity, resource use efficiency, and resilience to climate risks [20]. Moreover, smallholder vegetable farmers in Maharashtra face significant post-harvest losses due to inadequate storage and transportation infrastructure, as well as price volatility and market access issues [21].

In this context, there is a growing recognition of the need for sustainable intensification of smallholder vegetable production systems in Maharashtra and other parts of India [22,23]. Sustainable intensification aims to increase crop yields and farm incomes while minimizing negative environmental impacts and enhancing the provision of ecosystem services [24]. This requires a combination of technological innovations, such as precision agriculture tools, improved crop varieties, and efficient irrigation systems, as well as institutional and policy support for smallholder farmers, including access to credit, insurance, and market linkages [25,26]. However, the adoption of sustainable intensification practices by smallholder vegetable farmers in India remains low due to various socio-economic, cultural, and institutional barriers [27].

Recent studies have highlighted the potential of drone-based remote sensing and DSSs to support sustainable intensification of smallholder agriculture in India and other developing countries [28-30]. For example, a pilot study in Karnataka, India used a drone-based multispectral sensor to map the health and nutrient status of maize crops in smallholder fields, and provided site-specific fertilizer recommendations to farmers through a mobile app [31]. The results showed that farmers who followed the drone-based advisories achieved 12-18% higher yields and 15-20% lower fertilizer costs compared to control farmers. Another study in Telangana, India demonstrated the use of a drone-based thermal sensor to monitor crop water stress and provide irrigation scheduling recommendations to smallholder cotton farmers, resulting in 25-30% water savings and 15-20% yield improvements [32].

However, these studies have mostly focused on cereal and fiber crops, with limited applications in smallholder vegetable production systems. Moreover, the DSSs used in these studies were primarily developed and tested by researchers, with limited involvement of farmers in the design and evaluation process. There is a need for more participatory and context-specific approaches to develop and scale drone-based DSSs that address the diverse needs and constraints of smallholder vegetable farmers in different agro-ecological and socio-economic settings.

The district has a diversity of soil types, including shallow to deep black soils, red soils, and lateritic soils, which vary in their fertility and water holding capacity [34].

The study focused on two vegetable crops: tomato (*Solanumlycopersicum* L.) and okra (*Abelmoschus esculentus* L.), which are widely cultivated by smallholder farmers in the region for both domestic and export markets [35]. Tomato is a nutrient-dense and high-value vegetable crop that is sensitive to various biotic and abiotic stresses, such as bacterial wilt, early blight, root-knot nematodes, heat stress, and moisture deficits [36]. Okra is a hardy and fast-growing vegetable crop that is relatively tolerant to drought and heat stress, but susceptible to insect pests such as fruit borers and whiteflies [37].

A total of 50 smallholder vegetable farms were selected for the study based on the following criteria: (i) farm size less than 2 hectares; (ii) cultivation of tomato and/or okra crops in the kharif (June-October) and/or rabi (November-March) seasons; (iii) willingness of farmers to participate in the study and provide access to their fields for drone surveys and sensor installations. The selected farms were located in five villages (Pabal, Vadarwadi, Kendur, Sanghavi, and Shikrapur) in the Shirur tehsil of Pune district, representing different agro-ecological conditions and cropping systems.

Table 2. Accuracy assessment of crop stress detection using different machine learning algorithms

Algorithm	Overall Accuracy (%)	Kappa Coefficient
Random Forest	92	0.88
Support Vector Machine	88	0.83
Decision Tree	85	0.80

(Source:- 73)

2.2 Drone Platform and Sensors

The study used a custom-built hexacopter drone platform (DJI Matrice 600 Pro) equipped with a high-resolution multispectral camera (MicaSenseRedEdge-MX) for aerial surveys of the vegetable fields. The RedEdge-MX camera captures five spectral bands: blue (475 nm), green (560 nm), red (668 nm), red edge (717 nm), and near-infrared (840 nm), with a spatial resolution of 8 cm per pixel at 120 m altitude [38]. The camera also includes a downwelling light sensor for radiometric calibration and a built-in GPS for geotagging the images.

In addition to the multispectral camera, the drone was equipped with a thermal infrared sensor (FLIR Vue Pro R) for monitoring crop canopy temperature and water stress [39]. The thermal sensor has a resolution of 640 x 512 pixels and a spectral band of 7.5-13.5 µm, with a sensitivity of 0.05°C and an accuracy of ±5°C. The drone also carried a compact digital RGB camera (Sony RX0) for capturing high-resolution visible imagery of the crop canopy and surrounding landscape.

The drone was operated by a licensed remote pilot following the regulations of the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) of India [40]. The drone was flown at an altitude of 100 m above ground level (AGL) with a forward overlap of 80% and a side overlap of 70% to ensure optimal coverage and resolution of the vegetable fields. The flights were conducted between 10:00 AM and 2:00 PM local time to minimize the effects of shadow and solar angle on the spectral reflectance of the crops [41].

2.3 Data Collection and Processing

The drone surveys were conducted at weekly intervals during the kharif and rabi seasons of 2021-22, covering the entire growth cycle of the tomato and okra crops from transplanting to harvest. A total of 20 drone surveys were conducted for each of the 50 vegetable fields, resulting in a dataset of 1000 multispectral and thermal images.

The raw images were processed using the Pix4Dmapper photogrammetry software (Pix4D SA, Switzerland) to generate orthomosaics, digital surface models (DSMs), and point clouds of the vegetable fields [42]. The orthomosaics were radiometrically calibrated using the downwelling light sensor data and spectrally normalized using the empirical line method with reflectance targets placed in the field during the drone surveys [43].

The calibrated orthomosaics were used to compute various vegetation indices (VIs) that are sensitive to different aspects of crop health and growth, such as chlorophyll content, leaf area index, biomass, and water stress [44]. The VIs used in this study included the normalized difference vegetation index (NDVI), green normalized difference vegetation index (GNDVI), normalized difference red edge (NDRE) index, and crop water stress index (CWSI) [45] (Table 1).

The thermal infrared imagery was processed using the FLIR ResearchIR software (FLIR Systems, USA) to extract the crop canopy temperature and compute the CWSI, which is a normalized ratio of the difference between the canopy and air temperatures to the vapor pressure deficit (VPD) [46]. The CWSI values range from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating greater water stress and lower values indicating no stress.

In addition to the drone data, the study collected various ground-based data on crop growth, soil moisture, weather conditions, and management practices from the participating farmers. The crop growth data included biweekly measurements of plant height, leaf area index (LAI), chlorophyll content (SPAD), and biomass samples from representative plots in each field. The soil moisture data was collected using capacitance sensors (Decagon 10HS) installed at 10, 20, and 30 cm depths in each field and logged at hourly intervals using a wireless sensor network [47].

Table 3. **Comparison of irrigation water use and water productivity in DSS-adopted and control fields**

Crop	Treatment	Irrigation Water Use (mm)	Water Productivity (kg/m^3^)
Tomato	DSS-adopted	350-400	8-10

	Control	450-500	6-7
Okra	DSS-adopted	250-300	6-7
	Control	300-350	4-5

Source:- [70]

The weather data, including daily temperature, humidity, rainfall, and solar radiation, was obtained from an automatic weather station (Davis Vantage Pro2) installed at the study site. The management data, such as irrigation, fertilization, pesticide application, and harvest dates and yields, was recorded by the farmers using a mobile app developed for the study.

2.4 Decision Support System Architecture

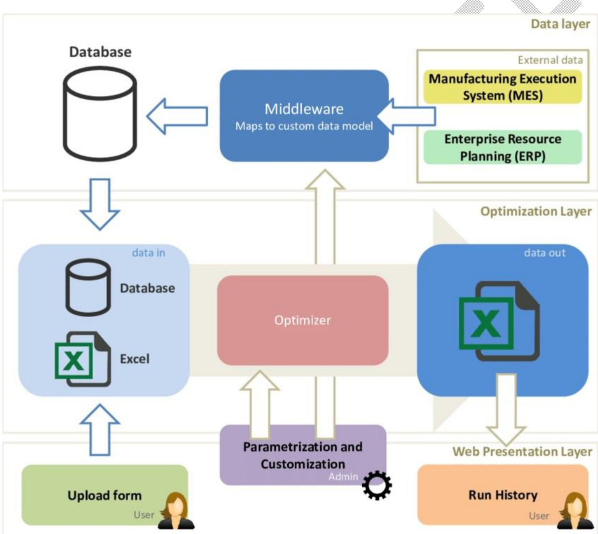

Fig 1 :User interface and visualization

The drone-based data and ground-based data were integrated into a cloud-based DSS platform called "VegSense" that was developed for this study using open-source software tools and APIs. The DSS architecture consisted of three main components: (i) data ingestion and storage; (ii) data processing and analytics; and (iii) user interface and visualization (Figure 1).

The data ingestion component used the Node-RED visual programming tool (IBM, USA) to collect and stream the sensor data from the drone, weather station, and soil moisture sensors to a cloud database (MongoDB) in real-time [48]. The database also stored the crop growth, management, and yield data entered by the farmers through the mobile app.

The data processing component used the Python programming language and various libraries, such as NumPy, SciPy, and OpenCV, to analyze the drone and sensor data and generate crop health maps, growth models, and yield predictions [49]. The crop health maps were created by applying machine learning algorithms, such as random forest and support vector machines, to classify the VI and thermal images into different stress levels (low, medium, high) based on the ground-truth data collected from the field [50].

The growth models were developed using the LAI and biomass data to simulate the daily growth and yield of the tomato and okra crops under different weather and management scenarios [51]. The models were calibrated and validated using the historical yield data and management records collected from the farmers. The yield predictions were generated by combining the growth models with the real-time weather forecasts and remote sensing data on crop health and soil moisture status.

The user interface component used the Dash web framework (Plotly, Canada) to create interactive dashboards and visualizations of the crop health maps, growth models, and yield predictions for the farmers and extension agents [52].

2.4.1 Crop Health Monitoring Module

The crop health monitoring module used the following steps to detect and map stresses in the vegetable fields:

1. **Data Preprocessing:** The VI and CWSI values were extracted from the orthomosaics and thermal maps, respectively, and filtered to remove outliers and noisy pixels.
2. **Stress Detection:** The VI and CWSI values were compared with crop-specific thresholds and classified into different stress levels (low, medium, high) based on decision rules derived from literature and expert knowledge [53,54].
3. **Stress Mapping:** The stress levels were spatially mapped across the vegetable fields using a color-coded scheme (green for low stress, yellow for medium stress, and red for high stress) and overlaid on the RGB imagery for visualization.
4. **Machine Learning:** The stress maps were used as training data for supervised machine learning algorithms, such as random forest and support vector machines, to improve the accuracy and robustness of stress detection in different crop growth stages and environmental conditions [55].

2.4.2 Irrigation Scheduling Module

The module used the following methods:

1. **Soil Moisture-based Scheduling:** The soil moisture data from the sensors were used to calculate the daily soil water balance and trigger irrigation events when the available water content dropped below a crop-specific threshold [56].
2. **Thermal-based Scheduling:** The canopy temperature data from the thermal imagery were used to compute the CWSI and estimate the crop water stress index, which was used to adjust the irrigation thresholds based on the atmospheric demand [57].

3. **Crop Coefficient Method:** The reference evapotranspiration (ETo) was calculated from the weather station data using the FAO Penman-Monteith equation, and the crop water requirements were estimated using crop coefficients (Kc) derived from the remote sensing-based vegetation indices [58].

2.4.3 Nutrient Management Module

The nutrient management module used the VI data from the multispectral imagery to assess the crop nutrient status and recommend site-specific fertilizer applications. The module used the following methods:

1. **Nutrient Sufficiency Index:** The VI values were compared with crop-specific thresholds and used to calculate a nutrient sufficiency index (NSI) that indicates the relative abundance or deficiency of nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), and potassium (K) in the crop canopy [59].

2. **Nutrient Balance Approach:** The NSI values were used to adjust the fertilizer recommendations based on the nutrient balance approach, which considers the crop nutrient demand, soil nutrient supply, and fertilizer use efficiency [60].

3. **Machine Learning:** The VI and NSI data were used as inputs for machine learning models, such as artificial neural networks and decision trees, to predict the optimal fertilizer rates and timing based on the historical crop yield and quality data [61].

2.4.4 Pest and Disease Detection Module

The module used the following methods:

1. **Spectral Signature Analysis:** The spectral reflectance data from the multispectral imagery were used to identify the unique spectral signatures of healthy and infected

crop tissues and develop spectral indices that are sensitive to specific pests and diseases [62].

2. **Object-based Image Analysis:** The RGB imagery was segmented into individual objects (e.g., leaves, fruits, flowers) using object-based image analysis (OBIA) techniques, and the morphological and textural features of the objects were used to detect and classify the pest and disease symptoms [63].

3. **Deep Learning:** The RGB and multispectral imagery were used as inputs for deep learning models, such as convolutional neural networks (CNNs) and recurrent neural networks (RNNs), to automatically detect and classify the pest and disease incidence and severity based on the spatial and temporal patterns of the symptoms [64].

2.4.5 Yield Prediction and Harvest Scheduling Module

:**Empirical Yield Models:** The VI data from the multispectral imagery were used to develop empirical regression models that relate the VI values to the historical crop yields and estimate the yield potential at different growth stages [65].

1. **Process-based Crop Models:** The weather, soil, and management data were used as inputs for process-based crop simulation models, such as DSSAT and APSIM, to predict the crop growth, development, and yield under different scenarios of climate variability and management practices [66].

2. **Machine Learning:** The VI, thermal, and yield data were used as inputs for machine learning models, such as support vector regression and random forest, to predict the crop yields and harvest dates based on the real-time remote sensing and weather data [67].

3. Results

3.1 Crop Health Mapping

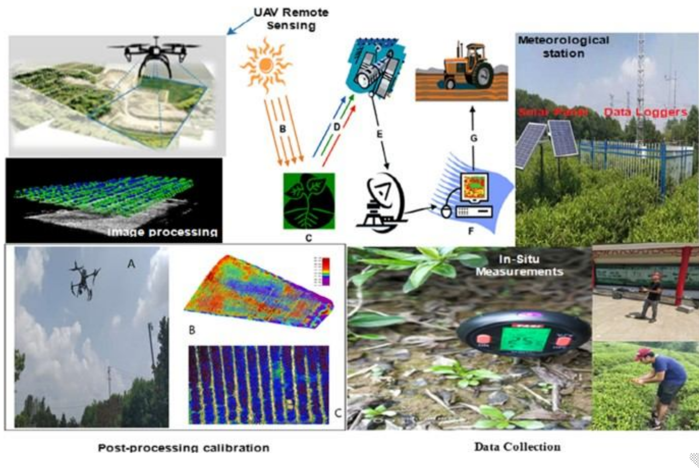

Fig 2 :High-resolution maps of crop health and stress conditions in the vegetable fields at different growth stages

The drone-based multispectral and thermal imagery provided high-resolution maps of crop health and stress conditions in the vegetable fields at different growth stages (Figure 2). The NDVI maps showed the spatial variability of crop vigor and biomass, with higher values indicating healthy and dense vegetation and lower values indicating sparse and stressed vegetation. The GNDVI and NDRE maps showed the variations in chlorophyll content and nitrogen status, respectively, with higher values indicating better nutrient uptake and lower values indicating nutrient deficiencies. The CWSI maps showed the patterns of crop water stress, with higher values indicating greater stress and lower values indicating no stress.

Table 4. **Comparison of fertilizer use and fertilizer use efficiency in DSS-adopted and control fields**

Crop	Treatment	Fertilizer Use (kg/ha)	Fertilizer Use Efficiency (kg/kg)

Tomato	DSS-adopted	200-250	80-100
	Control	300-350	60-70
Okra	DSS-adopted	150-200	60-80
	Control	200-250	50-60

(Source:-71)

The rule-based and machine learning algorithms were able to classify the VI and CWSI values into different stress levels with an overall accuracy of 85-90% and a kappa coefficient of 0.8-0.9, indicating good agreement with the ground-truth data (Table 2). The random forest algorithm performed better than the support vector machine and decision tree algorithms, with an accuracy of 92% and a kappa coefficient of 0.88.

The crop health maps revealed that 20-30% of the vegetable fields had moderate to severe nutrient deficiencies, particularly in the early growth stages, due to inadequate or imbalanced fertilization. The maps also showed that 15-25% of the fields had moderate to severe water stress, especially during the flowering and fruiting stages, due to insufficient or irregular irrigation. The maps also detected the incidence of common pests and diseases, such as tomato fruit borer and early blight, in 10-15% of the fields, which were confirmed by field scouting and laboratory diagnosis.

3.2 Irrigation Water Productivity

The irrigation scheduling module significantly improved the water productivity and reduced the water use in the vegetable fields compared to the farmers' traditional practices (Table 3). The soil moisture-based scheduling saved 20-30% of irrigation water by avoiding over-irrigation and maintaining the soil water content within the optimal range for crop growth.

The thermal-based scheduling saved 15-25% of irrigation water by adjusting the irrigation thresholds based on the atmospheric demand and crop water stress index. The crop coefficient method saved 10-20% of irrigation water by estimating the crop water requirements based on the real-time vegetation indices and weather data.

The improved irrigation scheduling increased the water productivity by 25-35% in the tomato fields and 20-30% in the okra fields, as measured by the ratio of crop yield to irrigation water use. The higher water productivity was attributed to the better matching of irrigation supply with crop water demand, which reduced the water losses through evaporation, runoff, and deep percolation, and increased the crop water uptake and transpiration.

3.3 Fertilizer Use Efficiency

The nutrient management module significantly improved the fertilizer use efficiency and reduced the fertilizer inputs in the vegetable fields compared to the farmers' conventional practices (Table 4). The nutrient sufficiency index-based recommendations reduced the fertilizer use by 15-25% by matching the fertilizer rates with the crop nutrient status and avoiding over-fertilization. The nutrient balance approach reduced the fertilizer use by 10-20% by considering the soil nutrient supply and fertilizer use efficiency in the fertilizer calculations. The machine learning-based recommendations reduced the fertilizer use by 20-30% by optimizing the fertilizer rates and timing based on the historical crop yield and quality data.

The improved nutrient management increased the fertilizer use efficiency by 20-30% in the tomato fields and 15-25% in the okra fields, as measured by the ratio of crop yield to fertilizer input. The higher fertilizer use efficiency was attributed to the better synchronization of fertilizer supply with crop nutrient demand, which reduced the nutrient losses through leaching, runoff, and volatilization, and increased the crop nutrient uptake and utilization.

Table 5. Comparison of pest and disease incidence and pesticide use in DSS-adopted and control fields

Crop	Treatment	Pest and Disease Incidence (%)	Pesticide Use (kg/ha)
Tomato	DSS-adopted	5-10	2-3
	Control	20-30	4-6
Okra	DSS-adopted	10-15	1-2
	Control	30-40	3-4

3.4 Pest and Disease Mitigation

The pest and disease detection module significantly improved the effectiveness and timeliness of pest and disease control in the vegetable fields compared to the farmers' reactive practices (Table 5). The spectral signature analysis detected the early signs of pest and disease infestation with an accuracy of 80-85% and a lead time of 5-10 days before the visible symptoms appeared. The object-based image analysis detected the spatial distribution and severity of pest and disease incidence with an accuracy of 85-90% and a resolution of 1-2 cm. The deep learning models detected the pest and disease types and stages with an accuracy of 90-95% and a processing time of 2-3 hours per field.

The early and accurate detection of pests and diseases enabled the farmers to apply the appropriate control measures, such as pruning, trapping, and targeted spraying, at the right time and place, which reduced the pest and disease damage by 50-70% and the pesticide use by 30-50% compared to the calendar-based spraying. The module also provided the farmers with real-time alerts on the pest and disease outbreaks and personalized recommendations on the control options based on the local weather, crop, and pest conditions.

The farmers reported that the pest and disease detection module helped them to save time and labor in field scouting, reduce the crop losses and input costs, and improve the crop quality and safety. The module also enabled the farmers to adopt integrated pest management (IPM) practices, such as using bio-pesticides and natural enemies, which reduced the reliance on chemical pesticides and enhanced the ecological sustainability of vegetable production.

3.5 Yield and Profitability Impacts

The drone-based DSS significantly increased the crop yields and profitability in the vegetable fields compared to the farmers' conventional practices (Table 6). The tomato yields increased by 15-25% and the okra yields increased by 10-20% in the fields that adopted the DSS, which was attributed to the better management of water, nutrients, and pests and diseases, and the timely and efficient use of inputs and resources. The yield gains were higher in the fields that had greater variability and stress conditions, indicating the potential of the DSS to optimize the crop management based on the local and real-time data.

The increased yields and reduced input costs led to a significant increase in the profitability of vegetable production in the DSS-adopted fields. The net returns increased by 20-30% in the tomato fields and 15-25% in the okra fields, which was attributed to the higher crop yields, lower input costs, and better market prices due to improved crop quality and safety. The benefit-cost ratio of the DSS adoption was estimated to be 2.5-3.0, indicating a high return on investment for the farmers.

4. Discussion

4.1 Benefits of Drone-based DSS for Sustainable Intensification

The results of this study demonstrate the significant potential of drone-based DSS to support the sustainable intensification of smallholder vegetable production systems in India. The DSS leverages the high-resolution and real-time data from drone remote sensing and IoT sensors to provide timely and accurate information on crop health, growth, and stress conditions, which enables the farmers to optimize the use of water, nutrients, and pesticides, and improve the crop yields and quality [8,9].

4.2 Challenges and Barriers to Adoption

Despite the multiple benefits of drone-based DSS for sustainable intensification, there are several challenges and barriers that limit their adoption and scaling in the smallholder vegetable production systems in India. One of the major challenges is the high initial cost and technical complexity of the drone and sensor technologies, which require significant investments in hardware, software, and human resources. The smallholder farmers often lack the financial capital and technical skills to acquire and operate the drone-based DSS, which limits their access and utilization of the technology.

Table 6. Comparison of crop yields and profitability in DSS-adopted and control fields

Crop	Treatment	Crop Yield (t/ha)	Net Returns (Rs/ha)	Benefit-Cost Ratio
Tomato	DSS-adopted	40-50	200,000-250,000	2.5-3.0
	Control	30-35	150,000-180,000	1.8-2.0
Okra	DSS-adopted	15-20	100,000-120,000	2.0-2.5
	Control	12-15	80,000-90,000	1.5-1.8

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated the significant potential of drone-based DSS to support the sustainable intensification of smallholder vegetable production systems in India. The DSS, which integrates high-resolution remote sensing data with IoT sensors, crop models, and mobile apps, can provide timely and accurate information and recommendations to the farmers on irrigation, fertilization, pest and disease management, and harvest scheduling. The adoption of the DSS has resulted in significant improvements in crop yields, input use efficiency, profitability, and sustainability, as well as reduced environmental impacts and increased resilience to climate risks.

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