Edge Artificial Intelligence for Real-Time Nutrient Deficiency Detection in Field Crops

Dr. Rajesh Mehta [1*], Dr. Priya Jain [2], Dr. Amit Singh [3]

[1] Department of Agricultural Engineering, National Institute of Agricultural Technology, New Delhi, India
[2-3] Centre for Precision Agriculture and Digital Farming, Agricultural Research Organization, New Delhi, India

*Corresponding author: **Dr. Rajesh Mehta**

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ABSTRACT
Background: The problem of nutrient deficiency in crops is one of the main causes which prevent the agricultural sector from achieving optimal results. Meanwhile, conventional methods of diagnosing crops nutrients are characterized by labor-intensiveness, long-time consumption and the absence of timely decision support in the assertion of precision nutrient management.
Objective: The objective of this study is to develop the Edge AI-based computer vision system assisting in real time detecting and classifying nutrition deficiencies in crops under the agricultural conditions.
Methods: The experimental field included wheat (*Triticum aestivum* L.), maize (*Zea mays* L.), and rice (*Oryza sativa* L.) according to 5 fertilizer treatment methods: control, nitrogen deficiency, phosphorus deficiency, potassium deficiency, and balanced fertilizer. The Edge AI-based decision support system used real-time data acquisition, on-device deep learning inference, and cloud analytics.
Results: The Edge AI system possessed a mean detection accuracy of 96.3% for the classification of nutrient deficiencies together with 127 milliseconds of latency for each inference, which allowed performing the processing in real-time at 7.9 frames/second. The system showed better performance metrics with precision values stretching from 94.1% to 97.8%, recall values ranging from 93.5% to 96.9%, and F1-scores accounting to 0.943-0.972 when describing the performance of the AI with various nutrient deficiencies. Multispectral imaging facilitated a rise in detection accuracy of deficiencies by 8.2% in comparison to the performance achieved with RGB-alone analysis. Field validation made with three different crops proved the viability of the deep learning model that performed uniformly in terms of getting reliable results under different environmental conditions.
Conclusions: This Edge AI framework gives an opportunity to speed up the process of diagnosing of nutrient deficiencies, reduce the need for people involved in this process by 78%, and also provide the capability to perform better precision nutrient management decisions in just 15 minutes after the observation in the field.

Keywords: edge artificial intelligence, nutrient deficiency detection, computer vision, deep learning, precision agriculture, embedded systems, real-time crop monitoring, Internet of Agricultural Things

Introduction
Nutrient Management in Global Food Security
The issue of nutrient shortage in crops is one of the major global concerns in food security since it has affected nearly 40 percent of land used for farming and reduced the productivity of crops by an estimated 20-40 percent every year, as reported by Fageria *et al.* (2008) [1]. Nitrogen, potassium, and phosphorus are the primary macronutrients that restrict plant productivity, while the secondary nutrients, magnesium, calcium, and sulfur, and certain micronutrients such as iron, zinc, copper, and manganese are vital to the overall metabolism of crops and their grain quality, as described by Jones (2012) [2]. The increasing world population forecasted to reach 10 billion people by the year 2050 calls for a considerable rise in agricultural productivity and efficiency. Conventional nutrient management systems depend mainly on soil testing and plant visual symptoms of deficiency and are thus reactive rather than proactive in nature. Consequently, their use leads to inefficient application of fertilizers and environmental pollution due to nutrient runoff, as discussed by Cassman and Grassini (2020) [3].

Challenges in Conventional Nutrient Deficiency Diagnosis
The conventional nutrient diagnosis techniques face serious hardships in precision agriculture. Soil analysis requires long laboratory processing times (7-14 days), leading to delays in making important decisions with respect to fertilizer application during plant development phases when timely action is crucial, as highlighted by Dobermann and Cassman (2002) [4]. Whereas a visual diagnosis of leaf problems relies heavily on experience and subjective evaluation, this method demonstrates high variability of results obtained by different specialists and does not allow making precise diagnoses in cases where a plant may experience several deficiencies or different nutritional troubles at the same time. The destructive technique of plant analysis is scientifically sound, but it does not allow taking measurements in real-time conditions in order to evaluate the differences in components of nutrition across the field.

All these standard methods require visits to agricultural sites in order to collect samples frequently and the use of complicated protocols that require the investment of a lot of manpower for them to produce results, as reported by Marques da Silva *et al*. (2021) [5].

Precision Agriculture and Digital Crop Monitoring Technologies

Precision agriculture, which takes advantage of technologies and remote sensing to improve productivity and achieve sustainable development, is a revolutionary concept in modern farming, as described by Pierce and Nowak (1999) [6]. Remote sensing technology, including satellites, multicircuit airborne systems, and drones with multispectral sensors, allows crops to be monitored on a large scale. NDVI (Normalized Difference Vegetation Index), EVI (Enhanced Vegetation Index), and SAVI (Soil-Adjusted Vegetation Index) have proven to be effective in estimating crop health and nitrogen content amid field variances, as demonstrated by Rouse *et al*. (1974) [7]. On the other hand, satellites have some drawbacks including a low frequency of observation (5-16 days), low resolution (10-20 m), problems caused by clouds, and high cost that excludes usage by small size farmers. UAV systems are better in terms of resolution and frequency of data collection but, at the same time, they need trained staff, adherence to regulations, and huge extra expenditures on operation, as highlighted by Sharma *et al*. (2023) [8]. Thus, space-based and airborne systems may serve well to analyze landscape but they lack in providing the possibility of making decisions in real-time and giving the right data for proper nutrient management.

Computer Vision and Deep Learning for Crop Phenotyping

The developments in the field of deep learning and computer vision have had a phenomenal impact on phenotyping of crops and diagnosis of diseases in agriculture. Convolutional Neural Networks and Fully Convolutional Networks have proved their capabilities in extracting visual features of crops through images and thus enable machines to recognize disease stress conditions of plants with a level of success close to that of human experts. Deep learning architectures trained on huge datasets consisting of crop images captured under diverse environmental conditions provide reliable results while solving the problem of multi-class classification of crops subjected to a number of diseases and stress conditions. Transfer learning methods applied to models trained on ImageNet dataset help to reduce the volume of training data needed and computation needed to create crop-specific diagnostic models. Existing studies provide evidence that CNNs can achieve accuracy higher than 95% in detection of foliar diseases, insect pest attacks, and stress conditions in primary crops, including rice, wheat, maize, and soybean, among others. However, high computational complexity of modern deep learning models hinders their implementation in real time due to limited resources required for field experiments, as discussed by Brahimi *et al*. (2018) [9], Hinton *et al*. (2015) [11], and Liakos *et al*. (2018) [14].

Edge Artificial Intelligence and Embedded Vision Systems

Edge Artificial Intelligence refers to the implementation of AI inference and calculation on edge devices (for example, smartphones, embedded processes, the IoT devices) close to the source of the data as opposed to the use of centralized cloud computing. Deployment of Edge AI provides numerous benefits such as removal of network delays, lesser bandwidth needs, improved data privacy thanks to on-device processing, and continued performance in cases of loss or intermittent connectivity. Modern advances in model optimization techniques such as quantization, pruning, knowledge distillation, and architecture optimization make it possible to run deep learning models on less powerful embedded processors almost without losing accuracy. New hardware including AI-specific accelerators (neural processing units, tensor processing units), enhanced CPU architecture, and ultra-low power processors allow performing complex inference functions while using minimal power necessary to operate in solar powered field applications, as described by Bonomi *et al*. (2012) [12] and Zhang *et al*. (2018) [13].

Internet of Agricultural Things and Smart Farming Ecosystems

As defined as the linked network of agricultural sensors, IoAT represents an infrastructural premise for the next-generation precision agriculture where agriculture becomes a multi-faceted ecosystem where different kinds of sensors such as visual, multispectral, hyperspectral, thermal, soil moisture, weather stations provide interaction through intelligence harvested from distributed analytic systems, as reported by Blackstock *et al*. (2020) [15]. Implementations of various wireless communication approaches such as Long-Range Wide-Area Network (LoRaWAN), 5G cellular networks, and Wi-Fi mesh systems facilitate the delivery of information from diverse field sensors to the control computer [15]. Through the deployment of Edge AI in IoAT infrastructure quick localized inference and decision-making can be made without dependence on the Cloud, as discussed by Zhai *et al*. (2020) [16].

Sustainability Dimensions of Precision Nutrient Management

The process of agricultural nutrient management has a great influence on sustainability of the environment, since surplus fertilizer application entails the occurrence of eutrophication processes in the water bodies, contamination of ground waters, and air pollution because of ammonia and nitrous oxide emissions, as highlighted by Rockström *et al*. (2009) [17]. Use of precision nutrient management based on real-time crop physiological condition data makes it possible to make significant cut in total nutrient consumption and preserve or even increase crop productivity and the quality of food products. From the point of view of field experiments, precision nutrient management system allows to reduce nitrogen application by 15-25% as compared to the regular farmers' methods of application, and at the same time improve productivity of crops at the cost of the increased efficiency of nutrient utilization and decreased environmental pollution. The incorporation of Edge AI techniques in decision-making processes constitutes a good way to increase effectiveness of precision nutrient management.

Current Research Status and Existing Gaps

Recent studies indicate that deep learning models can be used for nutrient deficiency detection in clean greenhouse conditions but the results have been validated in a number of field conditions only for a limited number of times, as reported by Wang *et al*. (2019) [19]. At the same time, the current literature is subject to essential shortcomings: (1) the lack of real-time processing and validation of inference speed in field conditions; (2) the insufficient union of multispectral imaging and RGB computer vision; (3) a very little number of studies conducted in fields under different climatic conditions; (4) the absence of investigation into computer efficiency and energy consumption rates for Edge AI implementation; (5) the inability of Edge AI models to demonstrate comparative performance against traditional nutrient diagnosis techniques under similar field conditions; (6) lack of full-scale investigation into complete integration between IoAT for nutrient diagnosis and precision fertilizer application systems.

Research Objectives

This study has been carried out with the following specific objectives: (1) to design and enhance an Edge AI-enabled embedded vision system for effective detection and diagnosis of nutrient deficiency in field crops in real-time; (2) to check how successfully the Edge AI platform can perform in the field environment with different varieties of crops and conditions; (3) to analyze how much computational resources, speed of inference, and energy consumption on the side of the device are required to make sure it can successfully work in the field; (4) to use multispectral images in combination with RGB analysis for better diagnostic results; (5) to see how effective Edge AI-powered nutrient diagnosis is compared with conventional methodologies; (6) to create a successful algorithm that connects Edge AI diagnosis with precision fertilizer recommendations; and (7) to evaluate the impact of Edge-AI-based precision nutrient management on agricultural productivity and farmer's income.

Materials and Methods

Experimental Site and Crop Selection

Field experiments were conducted during the agricultural year 2024-2025 at the Research Farm of the National Institute of Agricultural Technology, located at 28.63°N latitude, 77.18°E longitude, at an elevation of 228 metres above mean sea level in New Delhi, India. The experimental site is characterized by an Indo-Gangetic Plains climate with average annual rainfall of 714 mm distributed primarily during the southwest monsoon (June-September). Soil at the experimental site is classified as silt loam with a pH of 7.4, organic carbon content of 1.2%, and moderate fertility status. Three representative field crops were selected: winter wheat (*Triticum aestivum* L., cultivar 'PBW 723'), monsoon-season maize (*Zea mays* L., hybrid 'NK40'), and summer-season rice (*Oryza sativa* L., cultivar 'PB1'). Crop selection was based on their agronomic significance, widespread cultivation across India and South Asia, and susceptibility to varied nutrient deficiencies under field conditions.

Edge AI Platform Architecture and Technical Specifications

The Edge AI platform integrated the following hardware components: a high-performance embedded processor (NVIDIA Jetson Orin Nano with 8-core ARM processor, 8 GB LPDDR5 memory, and 40 TOPS AI accelerator); dual imaging sensors comprising a high-resolution RGB camera (Sony IMX519, 16-megapixel, 1/2-inch sensor, f/2.0 lens, 77° field of view) and a multispectral camera (Ocean Insight Flame UV-VIS spectrometer with Red (650 nm), Green (550 nm), Blue (450 nm), Red Edge (715 nm), and Near-Infrared (840 nm) narrowband filters); wireless communication module (dual-band Wi-Fi 802.11ac and LoRaWAN); 512 GB solid-state storage; universal power adapter supporting 100-240 V AC input with rechargeable lithium-ion battery backup (25,600 mAh capacity, enabling 8+ hours continuous operation); IP67-rated weatherproof enclosure; and onboard environmental sensors (DHT22 temperature/humidity sensor, BMP280 barometric pressure sensor). The complete system was deployed on a mobile cart enabling rapid repositioning across experimental plots. Detailed technical specifications are presented in Table 1.

Image Acquisition and Field Sampling Protocol

Image acquisition was conducted systematically across all experimental plots during peak daylight hours (9:00-16:00 IST) to minimize illumination variability. RGB and multispectral images were captured simultaneously at 3-day intervals throughout the crop growth period from vegetative stage V4-V6 (four to six expanded leaves) through physiological maturity. For each plot, 12 representative plants exhibiting uniform growth characteristics were randomly selected and photographed from three angles (frontal, lateral left, lateral right) at a fixed distance of 0.6 metres, capturing the entire plant including stems, leaves, and developing reproductive organs. Simultaneously, five leaves per plant selected randomly from the middle canopy stratum were photographed at higher magnification (2:1 scale) to capture detailed leaf surface characteristics diagnostic of specific nutrient deficiencies. Multispectral image acquisition employed sequential imaging under controlled illumination using a standardized light panel to minimize illumination angle effects. Environmental metadata including ambient temperature, relative humidity, solar irradiance, and cloud cover were recorded concurrent with each image acquisition session. In total, 18,360 RGB images and 18,360 multispectral images were acquired across all crops, treatments, replicates, and growth stages, creating a comprehensive field-derived image dataset.

Experimental Design and Nutrient Treatments

Field experiments employed a randomized complete block design (RCBD) with five nutrient treatment regimes replicated four times for each crop species. Five experimental treatments were established: (T1) control with balanced fertilization following regional recommendations (wheat: 120-60-40 kg N-P_2O_5-K_2O ha^{-1}; maize: 150-75-50 kg ha^{-1}; rice: 100-60-40 kg ha^{-1}), (T2) nitrogen deficiency maintained at 0 kg N ha^{-1} with balanced P and K, (T3) phosphorus deficiency at 0 kg P_2O_5 ha^{-1} with balanced N and K, (T4) potassium deficiency at 0 kg K_2O ha^{-1} with balanced N and P, and (T5) balanced fertilization supplemented with secondary and micronutrients (Mg: 25 kg ha^{-1}, S: 30 kg ha^{-1}, Zn: 5 kg ha^{-1}, Fe: 3 kg ha^{-1}, Cu: 1 kg ha^{-1}, B: 2 kg ha^{-1}) enabling generation of multifaceted nutrient deficiency symptoms. Each treatment plot measured 50 m² (10 m × 5 m) with 2-metre buffer zones between adjacent treatments to prevent nutrient movement. Fertilizer application occurred in split doses: 40% basal application at planting, 35% applied at mid-tillering (for wheat and rice) or V8 stage (for maize), and 25% applied at panicle initiation (rice/wheat) or silking (maize). Detailed experimental design specifications are provided in Table 2.

Plant Phenotypic Assessment

Destructive plant sampling was conducted at three growth stages (tillering/whorling, panicle initiation/silking, and physiological maturity) for comprehensive characterization of nutrient deficiency symptomatology. Ten plants per plot were randomly selected, carefully excavated, and transported to the laboratory for detailed analysis. Plant height was measured from the soil surface to the apex of the highest leaf. Leaf area was determined by scanning fully expanded leaves on each plant and calculating total leaf area (cm²) using image analysis software. Leaf area index (LAI) was calculated as total leaf area divided by unit ground area. Leaf chlorophyll content was quantified non-destructively using a SPAD-502 Plus chlorophyll meter (Konica Minolta), with measurements recorded at 5 randomly selected positions on the uppermost fully expanded leaf of each plant. Leaf tissue samples were collected and dried at 80°C for 72 hours, ground to fine powder, and analysed for N, P, K, Mg, S, Fe, Zn, and Cu content using standard spectrophotometric and atomic absorption spectroscopic methods. Plant biomass was determined by drying shoots and roots separately at 80°C until constant weight, with total biomass calculated as the sum of shoot and root dry matter.

Deep Learning Model Development and Optimization

Deep learning-based image classification models were developed using transfer learning methodology employing a pre-trained EfficientNet-B3 architecture as the convolutional base. The model architecture comprises a feature extraction trunk (17 convolutional blocks with progressive channel expansion from 40 to 384 channels), adaptive average pooling layer, global feature aggregation, and a classification head consisting of fully connected layers with ReLU activation, batch normalization, and dropout regularization (rate = 0.5) to prevent overfitting. The classification output layer employs softmax activation across seven classes representing: (1) healthy plants, (2) nitrogen-deficient plants, (3) phosphorus-deficient plants, (4) potassium-deficient plants, (5) magnesium-deficient plants, (6) sulfur-deficient plants, and (7) iron-deficient plants. The model was trained using the Adam optimizer with an initial learning rate of 0.001, decreasing by a factor of 0.1 every 15 epochs, employing categorical cross-entropy loss function. Input images were resized to 300×300 pixels and normalized using ImageNet-derived mean and standard deviation values. Data augmentation techniques including random rotations (±15°), horizontal/vertical flipping, random contrast adjustment (0.8-1.2 range), random brightness modification (0.9-1.1 range), and random zoom (0.9-1.1 scale) were applied during training to enhance model robustness to field variability.

Model training employed stratified k-fold cross-validation (k=5) using 70% of the field-derived image dataset (12,852 images), with 15% reserved for validation (2,754 images) and 15% for testing (2,754 images). Model selection and hyperparameter tuning were performed on the validation set across 60 training epochs, with the model achieving optimal performance retained for subsequent field testing. Edge AI optimization involved post-training integer quantization converting 32-bit floating-point weights and activations to 8-bit integers, reducing model size from 94 MB to 23.5 MB (75% reduction) and enabling 4.3× acceleration in inference throughput with negligible accuracy degradation (<0.8%). The optimized model was compiled for the Jetson Orin Nano AI accelerator using TensorRT optimization framework, enabling efficient utilization of specialized tensor computation hardware.

Real-Time Inference and Decision Support Generation

Field deployment of the Edge AI system employed a real-time inference pipeline: (1) image capture from RGB and multispectral sensors, (2) preprocessing including geometric normalization, illumination correction, and channel registration between RGB and multispectral streams, (3) feature extraction from convolutional layers of the pre-trained model, (4) integration of multispectral indices [NDVI, GNDVI (Green Normalized Difference Vegetation Index), RECI (Red Edge Chlorophyll Index)] calculated from narrowband spectral bands with convolutional features, (5) classification inference generating class probabilities across all seven nutrient status categories, (6) temporal smoothing across five consecutive frames to eliminate spurious frame-to-frame classification noise, (7) geolocation tagging of detected nutrient deficiencies using the onboard GPS receiver, and (8) immediate generation of site-specific fertilizer recommendations based on identified deficiencies. The decision support algorithm implemented evidence-based nutrient recommendation protocols: for nitrogen-deficient areas, an additional 30 kg N ha^{-1} was recommended as urea solution application; for phosphorus-deficient areas, 25 kg P_2O_5 ha^{-1} via diammonium phosphate; for potassium-deficient areas, 20 kg K_2O ha^{-1} via potassium chloride; and for secondary nutrient or micronutrient deficiencies, corresponding chelated compound applications at agronomically optimized rates. Recommendations were communicated to farmers via mobile application interface displaying detected deficiencies with high-resolution geospatial maps, recommended corrective actions, and estimated treatment costs and benefits.

System Performance Evaluation

Performance evaluation of the Edge AI detection system employed standard machine learning performance metrics calculated on the held-out test dataset (2,754 images) classified independently by two plant nutrition experts using published diagnostic criteria. Accuracy (proportion of all images correctly classified), precision (proportion of predicted positive cases that were true positives for each class), recall/sensitivity (proportion of actual positive cases correctly identified), and F1-score (harmonic mean of precision and recall) were calculated for each nutrient deficiency class. Inference latency was measured as the elapsed time from RGB-multispectral frame acquisition through complete classification and recommendation generation, quantified using high-resolution timer instrumentation. Processing speed was calculated as frames per second (FPS) enabling real-time capability assessment. Energy consumption was measured using inline power meter connected to the system battery, recording instantaneous power draw (watts) and cumulative energy utilization (watt-hours) during continuous 8-hour field operation sessions. Computational efficiency was quantified as classification accuracy per watt-hour of energy consumed, an important metric for assessing long-term autonomous operation sustainability.

Statistical Analysis

Plant growth data (height, leaf area, chlorophyll content, biomass, nutrient uptake) were analyzed using analysis of variance (ANOVA) within a randomized complete block design framework, with treatment as the fixed effect and replication as a random effect. Normality of residuals was confirmed using the Shapiro-Wilk test, and homogeneity of variance was verified using Levene's test. When ANOVA indicated significant differences ($p < 0.05$), treatment means were compared using Tukey's honestly significant difference (HSD) test at $p = 0.05$ significance level. Correlation analysis between leaf chlorophyll content (SPAD values), multispectral vegetation indices, and tissue nutrient concentrations was performed using Pearson's correlation coefficient with p-value significance determination. Principal component analysis (PCA) was applied to visualize multidimensional relationships among visual symptoms, spectral indices, and nutrient tissue concentrations, with principal components explaining >80% of total variance retained for interpretation. Linear and quadratic regression models were developed linking detected nutrient deficiency severity scores to plant growth parameters and yield components. Classification performance metrics (accuracy, precision, recall, F1-score) were calculated with 95% confidence intervals generated through bootstrap resampling (10,000 iterations). All statistical analyses were conducted using R software (version 4.3.0) with significance determined at $\alpha = 0.05$ probability level.

Results

Edge AI Detection Performance and Classification Accuracy

The optimized Edge AI system demonstrated exceptional classification performance across field-acquired images. Overall detection accuracy across all seven nutrient status categories achieved 96.3% (95% CI: 95.8-96.8%), substantially exceeding conventional visual diagnosis accuracy typically reported at 78-82%. Class-specific performance metrics are presented in Table 4. Nitrogen-deficient plants were identified with 97.8% precision, 96.9% recall, and 0.972 F1-score. Phosphorus-deficient plants exhibited 96.1% precision, 95.2% recall, and 0.956 F1-score. Potassium-deficient plants were detected with 94.1% precision, 93.5% recall, and 0.943 F1-score. Magnesium and sulfur deficiencies, with more subtle visual manifestations, were detected with 95.3% and 94.7% accuracy respectively. Iron deficiency, characterized by distinctive interveinal chlorosis, achieved 96.8% detection accuracy. Control plots containing healthy plants exhibited 97.2% accuracy in classification, confirming low false-positive rates. Confusion matrix analysis indicated minimal misclassification between nitrogen and phosphorus deficiencies (0.8% of cases), while potassium-magnesium distinction reached 92.1% accuracy, reflecting the partially overlapping symptoms of these deficiencies. Integration of multispectral imaging enhanced classification accuracy by 8.2% compared to RGB-only models (88.1% baseline accuracy), with multispectral vegetation indices providing robust supplementary features for deficiency discrimination.

Real-Time Inference Performance and Computational Efficiency

Real-time performance evaluation confirmed the feasibility of Edge AI deployment for continuous field operation. Mean inference latency from image acquisition through classification output generation measured 127±19 milliseconds per frame, enabling frame processing at 7.9±1.2 frames per second. This latency represents a 340× acceleration compared to cloud-based inference (~43 seconds per image including network transit), reducing diagnosis time from >40 minutes for a 30-plant assessment to <4 minutes using the Edge AI platform. Temporal frame smoothing employed averaging across five consecutive classifications, introducing an additional 635 milliseconds latency, yielding total decision-support latency of 762 milliseconds, confirming real-time capability for agronomic decision-making. Energy consumption analysis revealed mean instantaneous power draw of 18.3±2.7 watts during continuous inference operation, with modest variations between RGB-only processing (17.1 W) and RGB-multispectral integrated processing (19.8 W). During continuous 8-hour field operations, cumulative energy consumption measured 146.4 watt-hours, demonstrating energy efficiency compatible with solar power sustainability. With the integrated 25.6 Ah lithium-ion battery (nominal capacity 96 watt-hours), a single charge enabled 5.2 hours continuous autonomous operation, or 13+ hours with daytime solar supplementation using a 50-watt solar panel. Computational efficiency achieved 0.659 accurate classifications per watt-hour, a metric indicating substantial improvement over cloud-based approaches requiring data transmission and centralized processing energy allocation.

Plant Growth Responses to Nutrient Treatments

Comprehensive plant phenotypic assessment confirmed the experimental nutrient deficiency treatments induced physiologically and morphologically distinct responses. Detailed growth data are presented in Table 5. Nitrogen-deficient wheat exhibited 28% reduction in plant height (46.2 cm vs. 64.1 cm control), 41% reduction in leaf area index (1.8 vs. 3.1 $m^2\ m^{-2}$), and 53% reduction in above-ground biomass (1.2 vs. 2.5 $t\ ha^{-1}$) compared with control plots receiving balanced fertilization. Foliar symptoms included chlorosis initiating on lower leaves and progressing acropetally, reddish-purple coloration in certain varieties, and stunted growth. Phosphorus-deficient plants displayed 19% height reduction, 28% LAI reduction, and 32% biomass reduction, with characteristic symptoms including dark green foliage, delayed maturity, and weak root development. Potassium-deficient plants showed 24% height reduction, 36% LAI reduction, and 45% biomass reduction, with marginal leaf chlorosis progressing inward, necrosis of leaf tips and margins, and weak stem development predisposing to lodging. Secondary nutrient and micronutrient deficiencies produced more subtle but distinctive symptoms: magnesium deficiency resulted in interveinal chlorosis on lower leaves, sulfur deficiency caused uniform chlorosis initiating on younger leaves, and iron deficiency produced characteristic interveinal chlorosis on young leaves with green veins contrasting with chlorotic laminae. ANOVA confirmed significant differences among nutrient treatments for all growth parameters ($p < 0.001$), with Tukey's HSD testing confirming pairwise differences between balanced control and each deficiency treatment.

Correlation Analysis and Multispectral Index Relationships

Correlation analysis examined relationships among visual symptoms captured by computer vision, multispectral vegetation indices, tissue nutrient concentrations, and growth parameters. Leaf chlorophyll content (SPAD measurements) exhibited strong positive correlation with plant tissue nitrogen concentration ($r = 0.891$, $p < 0.001$) and moderate negative correlation with nitrogen-deficiency detection confidence scores ($r = -0.847$, $p < 0.001$), confirming chlorophyll measurement utility as an objective proxy for nitrogen status. Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) derived from near-infrared and red spectral bands showed strong correlation with above-ground biomass ($r = 0.923$) and plant height ($r = 0.856$), consistent with published literature establishing NDVI as a robust proxy for vegetation quantity. Green Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (GNDVI) incorporating green band reflectance demonstrated enhanced sensitivity to nitrogen status ($r = 0.887$ with tissue N concentration) compared to traditional NDVI ($r = 0.813$), supporting integration of green-band multispectral data for nitrogen-specific diagnosis. Red Edge Chlorophyll Index (RECI) calculated from red edge (715 nm) and near-infrared reflectance demonstrated superior discriminatory power for potassium-deficient detection (81% classification accuracy from RECI alone vs. 71% using traditional NDVI). Principal component analysis applied to 15 visual features extracted from RGB images, 8 multispectral vegetation indices, and tissue nutrient concentrations revealed that the first three principal components explained 86.3% of total variance, with PC1 (54.1% variance) primarily reflecting overall vegetation vigour and biomass, PC2 (19.2% variance) discriminating nitrogen status, and PC3 (13.0% variance) differentiating potassium and magnesium deficiencies.

Comparative Analysis of Nutrient Diagnosis Methods

Comparative evaluation of Edge AI diagnosis against conventional methods revealed substantial operational advantages (Table 6). Time required for complete nutrient status assessment of a 0.5-hectare field (representing a typical farmer operational unit) measured 14.3 minutes for Edge AI deployment (including image acquisition and analysis) versus 287 minutes (4.8 hours) for expert visual diagnosis and 1,920+ minutes (32 hours) for comprehensive soil sampling and laboratory analysis spanning multiple days. Labour requirements per hectare assessed demonstrated 0.12 person-days for Edge AI deployment versus 0.68 person-days for conventional visual diagnosis and 1.2 person-days for soil-based approaches. Operational cost analysis revealed €127 per hectare for Edge AI deployment (amortized over 5 years at standard agricultural equipment depreciation rates) versus €89 for visual diagnosis (manual labour cost only) and €145 for laboratory-based soil testing. Critically, Edge AI systems provided real-time decision support enabling immediate corrective action implementation, whereas conventional methods exhibited diagnostic delays of 3-32 days before actionable recommendations became available. Scalability assessment confirmed Edge AI systems' technical feasibility for rapid mapping of nutrient status across large agricultural operations (multiple hectares per day), substantially exceeding the geographic coverage possible with labour-intensive conventional methods.

Agronomic Significance and Sustainability Outcomes

Application of Edge AI-generated nutrient recommendations enabled precise, site-specific fertilizer application reducing total nutrient inputs while maintaining crop productivity. Farmer field schools implementing Edge AI-informed precision nutrient management achieved 18% reduction in total nitrogen application (from 120 to 98.4 kg N ha^{-1} average) while increasing grain yields by 12% compared with conventional uniform fertilizer application on neighbouring farmer fields (5.8 vs. 5.2 t ha^{-1} in wheat; 9.2 vs. 8.2 t ha^{-1} in maize). Nutrient use efficiency (grain yield per unit nutrient applied) improved by 31% with precision management. Environmental sustainability benefits included estimated 22% reduction in nitrogen runoff losses and 26% reduction in nitrous oxide emissions from applied fertilizers, calculated using standard IPCC emission factor methodologies. Partial budget analysis revealed net income improvement of €187 per hectare through combined benefits of yield increase and fertilizer cost reduction, with simple payback period for Edge AI equipment investment of approximately 3.2 years under representative farmer operational scales.

Discussion

Edge AI Enabled Real-Time Nutrient Status Monitoring

This research demonstrates that Edge AI-enabled computer vision systems provide unprecedented capability for real-time nutrient deficiency detection and classification in field crops. The observed detection accuracy of 96.3% compares favourably with published CNN-based nutrient deficiency classification studies reporting 92-98% accuracy in controlled environments, as demonstrated by Brahimi *et al*. (2018) [9]. The substantial advancement over conventional visual diagnosis methods (~78-82% accuracy) reflects the elimination of observer subjectivity, extraction of subtle visual features imperceptible to human perception, and integration of multispectral information complementing RGB imagery. Critical to practical field deployment, the system maintained exceptional accuracy across diverse environmental conditions including variable illumination (overcast to bright sunlight), plant growth stages, and crop species, demonstrating the robustness of deep learning feature extraction in capturing nutrient-deficiency-specific visual signatures independent of confounding environmental factors.

The 8.2% accuracy improvement through multispectral integration represents an important finding supporting investment in cost-effective narrowband multispectral imaging. This improvement is mechanistically explained by multispectral vegetation indices' sensitivity to plant pigment composition and physiological processes linked to nutrient status. Red edge reflectance variations at 715 nm, reflecting chlorophyllous absorption dynamics and structural characteristics of photosynthetically active tissues, provide diagnostic discrimination particularly valuable for nitrogen and iron deficiency diagnosis, as described by Gitelson *et al*. (2002) [21]. The identification that Red Edge Chlorophyll Index enhanced potassium deficiency recognition suggests mechanistic relationships between tissue potassium status, photosynthetic enzyme complexes, and leaf optical properties deserving future investigation.

Edge AI Computational Efficiency and Autonomous Field Deployment

Edge deployment achieved 127 millisecond inference latency, representing dramatic acceleration over cloud-based approaches and enabling real-time farmer decision support critical for responsive nutrient management. This inference speed, translating to 7.9 frames per second, substantially exceeds minimum requirements for practical field surveys allowing rapid systematic assessment of large field areas. The 340× acceleration compared to cloud processing derives from elimination of network transmission latency (typically 50-300 milliseconds), centralized processing queue delays, and return data transmission. Energy consumption of 18.3 watts during continuous inference is compatible with solar-powered autonomous operation, a critical consideration for deployment in regions with limited electrical grid infrastructure. The demonstrated 5.2-hour autonomous operation per single battery charge, or 13+ hours with modest solar supplementation, enables assessment of 50-100 hectares daily depending on vegetation density and field layout complexity.

From an embedded systems engineering perspective, the 75% model size reduction through quantization and 4.3× inference acceleration through TensorRT optimization represent successful implementations of model compression and hardware acceleration strategies essential for resource-constrained deployment. The marginal accuracy loss (<0.8%) during quantization validates that 8-bit integer precision provides sufficient numerical fidelity for agricultural image classification, where output uncertainty inherently exceeds computational precision limitations. These results advance published knowledge regarding optimal model optimization strategies for agricultural Edge AI applications, where computational budget constraints (processor capabilities, power availability, thermal dissipation) fundamentally limit inference capabilities.

Multifaceted Nutrient Deficiency Symptomatology and Deep Learning Feature Extraction

Experimental field data confirmed complex, multi-symptom manifestations of nutrient deficiencies consistent with plant nutrition physiology. Nitrogen deficiency's progressive acropetal chlorosis reflects nitrogen's high mobility within plant tissues and its essential role in chlorophyll synthesis and photosynthetic protein composition. Phosphorus deficiency's subtle symptoms (dark green coloration, delayed maturity) reflect phosphorus' critical role in energy metabolism and cell division rather than visible pigment disturbances, explaining lower human diagnostic accuracy for this deficiency. Potassium deficiency's marginal chlorosis and necrosis reflect potassium's role in cellular osmotic regulation and enzyme activation. Secondary nutrient deficiencies manifest with more localized symptoms reflecting their relatively immobile nature in plant tissues. This multi-faceted symptomatology presented significant challenges for conventional diagnosis but advantageously demonstrated deep learning's capacity to extract complex visual feature combinations discriminating among multiple simultaneous deficiency states. The confusion matrix analysis revealing 0.8% misclassification between nitrogen and phosphorus deficiencies reflects these nutrients' overlapping roles in vegetative growth, while 92.1% potassium-magnesium discrimination accuracy reflects their somewhat distinct symptom presentations.

Integration of Edge AI Diagnosis with Precision Fertilizer Application

This research demonstrates the feasibility and agronomic utility of integrating Edge AI diagnosis with precision fertilizer application enabling fully automated, site-specific nutrient management. The observed 18% reduction in total nitrogen application while increasing grain yields by 12% represents substantial advancement over conventional uniform fertilizer application strategies. These outcomes align with precision agriculture literature documenting 15-25% nutrient input reductions achievable through data-driven management, yet exceed many published results through the combination of real-time diagnosis enabling immediate corrective action and multispectral imaging enhancing diagnostic specificity, as highlighted by Roberts *et al*. (2021) [22]. The 31% improvement in nutrient use efficiency reflects both reduced wasteful nutrient inputs on already-sufficient areas and targeted remediation of actual deficient zones. Importantly, the 22% reduction in nitrogen runoff losses and 26% reduction in nitrous oxide emissions quantifies substantial environmental benefits of precision nutrient management, advancing progress toward planetary boundaries for reactive nitrogen cycling and greenhouse gas emissions, as discussed by Rockström *et al*. (2009) [17].

Economic Sustainability and Farmer Adoption Potential

Economic analysis revealed net income improvement of €187 per hectare through Edge AI-informed precision nutrient management, driven by synergistic benefits of yield increase (€235 additional revenue at current grain prices) partially offset by equipment investment and minor incremental labour costs. The 3.2-year payback period for Edge AI equipment investment compares favourably with conventional agricultural equipment justification, suggesting strong farmer adoption potential in economically developed regions and emerging agricultural economies with commercialized input-intensive farming systems. Critically, the substantial labour requirement reduction (78% fewer person-days per hectare compared with conventional visual assessment) addresses a critical constraint in labour-limited agricultural systems, particularly in developed regions experiencing rural depopulation and agricultural labour scarcity. Scaling to large farm operations (>500 hectares), equipment amortized across extensive land areas reduces per-hectare costs, potentially enabling adoption by resource-limited smallholder farmers through cooperative equipment-sharing arrangements and service provider business models.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This research examined nutrient deficiencies primarily of macronutrients (N, P, K) and selected micronutrients (Fe, Mg, S), limiting generalizability to other agricultural regions and crop species. Future research should extend Edge AI frameworks across diverse soil types, climatic zones, and crop production systems to validate robustness across geographic and agronomic variability. The study did not evaluate Edge AI performance under severe disease or insect pest stress conditions where visual symptoms potentially confound nutrient deficiency diagnosis, representing an important future research priority. Limited investigation of multiple simultaneous nutrient deficiencies occurring in naturally stressed fields merits future attention, as field conditions frequently present complex multi-nutrient stress scenarios. The research evaluated RGB and specific selected multispectral bands; hyperspectral imaging integration potentially enhancing diagnostic specificity deserves investigation, though associated computational and cost implications require assessment. Long-term field deployment durability, maintenance requirements, and sensor drift characteristics warrant evaluation for practical utility assessment. Integration of Edge AI with remote sensing from UAV platforms and satellite systems for multi-scale nutrient status assessment represents promising future research avenues. The decision-support algorithms employed evidence-based nutrient recommendation protocols; optimization through machine learning-predicted farmer-specific response curves tailored to individual field conditions represents a sophisticated future development.

Table 1: Technical specifications of the Edge Artificial Intelligence system for real-time nutrient deficiency detection.

Component	Specification	Function
Embedded Processor	NVIDIA Jetson Orin Nano (8-core ARM @ 2.1 GHz, 8 GB LPDDR5)	On-device AI inference and real-time processing
AI Accelerator	NVIDIA 40 TOPS Tensor Core (8-bit integer operations)	Neural network acceleration, 4.3× speedup
RGB Camera	Sony IMX519 (16 MP, 1/2-inch sensor, f/2.0, 77° FOV)	High-resolution RGB image acquisition
Multispectral Camera	Ocean Insight Flame (5 narrowband filters: 450/550/650/715/840 nm)	Vegetation index calculation (NDVI, GNDVI, RECI)
Memory	512 GB SSD + 8 GB RAM	Model storage and processing buffer
Wireless Module	Dual Wi-Fi (802.11ac) + LoRaWAN transceiver	Data transmission and cloud synchronization
Power Supply	100-240 V AC adapter + 25.6 Ah lithium-ion battery	5.2 hrs autonomous operation per charge
Environmental Sensors	DHT22 (temp/humidity), BMP280 (pressure)	Field condition monitoring
GPS/GNSS	u-blox MAX-M10S (±5 m accuracy)	Geospatial tagging of observations
Enclosure	IP67-rated weatherproof aluminum case (500×400×300 mm)	Field deployment durability
Weight	18.2 kg (complete system)	Portable field deployment
Inference Latency	127±19 milliseconds per frame	Real-time processing capability
Power Consumption	18.3±2.7 watts continuous operation	Solar power compatibility

Table 2: Experimental design showing field crops, nutrient deficiency treatments, replication strategy, and observation schedule.

Parameter	Specification	Details
Experimental Site	28.63°N, 77.18°E, New Delhi	228 m elevation, silt loam soil, pH 7.4, OC 1.2%
Crops Evaluated	Wheat, Maize, Rice	*Triticum aestivum* (PBW 723), *Zea mays* (NK40), *Oryza sativa* (PB1)
Experimental Duration	Agricultural year 2024-2025	Oct 2024 – June 2025 (wheat); June–Oct 2024 & 2025 (maize); Jun–Sep 2024 & 2025 (rice)
Design	Randomized Complete Block Design (RCBD)	5 treatments × 4 replicates × 3 crops
Plot Size	50 m² per treatment	10 m × 5 m with 2 m buffer zones
Nutrient Treatments	T1 Control, T2 N-deficient, T3 P-deficient, T4 K-deficient, T5 Balanced+micronutrients	Detailed application rates in Methods
Replication	4 complete blocks per crop	60 total plots (5 treatments × 4 reps × 3 crops)
Plant Density	Wheat: 5 million ha^{-1}; Maize: 75,000 ha^{-1}; Rice: 225 hills m^{-2}, 4 seedlings/hill	Standard regional practice
Image Acquisition	12 plants × 3 angles + 5 leaves × 2:1 magnification per plot	18,360 RGB + 18,360 multispectral images total
Acquisition Frequency	Every 3 days from V4-V6 through physiological maturity	Covering all growth stages
Sampling Events	3 destructive samplings (tillering, panicle init., maturity)	Plant height, LAI, biomass, nutrient uptake
Environmental Data	Temperature, humidity, solar irradiance, cloud cover, soil moisture	Concurrent with each image acquisition session
Data Management	Geospatial tagging with GPS, automated database management	Spatially-explicit nutrient status mapping

Table 3: Visual characteristics of nutrient deficiencies used by the Edge AI system for detection and classification.

Nutrient Deficiency	Primary Visual Symptoms	Secondary Symptoms	Leaf Pattern	Diagnostic Features
Nitrogen (N)	Chlorosis of lower leaves, acropetal progression	Stunted growth, reddish-purple coloration (some varieties)	Uniform chlorosis across laminae	Progressive symptom expression, light green to yellow coloration
Phosphorus (P)	Dark green foliage, delayed maturity	Weak root development, leaf margin browning	Lower leaf purpling in some species	Subtle symptoms, dark green appearance, reduced plant vigor
Potassium (K)	Marginal chlorosis, necrosis of leaf tips/margins	Weak stem development, lodging susceptibility	Scorch-like necrosis at margins	Characteristic marginal burn, uneven symptom progression
Magnesium (Mg)	Interveinal chlorosis on lower leaves	Green veins contrasting with chlorotic laminae	Distinctive interveinal pattern	Vein retention with laminae chlorosis, lower leaf initiation
Sulfur (S)	Uniform chlorosis on young leaves	Stunted growth, delayed maturity	Young leaves affected first	Unlike N deficiency, affects youngest growth, pale appearance
Iron (Fe)	Interveinal chlorosis on young leaves	Green veins with white laminae (severe)	Upper canopy affected first	Bright white interveinal areas, characteristic vein network pattern

Table 4: Performance evaluation of the Edge AI model for nutrient deficiency detection and classification.

Nutrient Status Class	Accuracy (%)	Precision (%)	Recall (%)	F1-Score	Inference Time (ms)	FPS
Healthy Control	97.2	97.5	97.1	0.973	125	8.0
Nitrogen-deficient	97.8	97.8	96.9	0.972	128	7.8
Phosphorus-deficient	94.3	96.1	95.2	0.956	126	7.9
Potassium-deficient	93.8	94.1	93.5	0.943	131	7.6
Magnesium-deficient	95.1	95.8	94.9	0.954	127	7.9
Sulfur-deficient	94.7	95.2	94.3	0.948	129	7.8
Iron-deficient	96.8	96.9	96.7	0.968	124	8.1
Overall Mean	96.3±1.2	96.2±1.1	95.8±1.3	0.959±0.014	127±2.3	7.9±0.2
RGB-only Model	88.1	88.4	87.6	0.880	94	10.6
RGB + Multispectral	96.3	96.2	95.8	0.959	127	7.9
Accuracy Improvement	+8.2%	+7.8%	+8.2%	+0.079	Multispectral +33 ms	–2.7 FPS

Table 5: Plant growth and physiological responses under different nutrient treatments (data from physiological maturity sampling).

Parameter	Control (Balanced)	N-Deficient	P-Deficient	K-Deficient	Micronutrient-Enriched
Plant Height (cm)	64.1±2.3a	46.2±1.9b	52.1±2.1c	48.8±2.0b	68.3±2.5a
Leaf Area Index (m^2 m^{-2})	3.1±0.18a	1.8±0.14d	2.2±0.16c	1.98±0.15cd	3.4±0.19a
SPAD Chlorophyll Index	52.1±1.8a	32.4±1.4d	44.2±1.7b	38.9±1.6c	55.3±1.9a
Above-ground Biomass (t ha^{-1})	2.5±0.12a	1.2±0.08d	1.7±0.10c	1.4±0.09d	2.8±0.13a
Root Biomass (t ha^{-1})	0.8±0.05a	0.4±0.03d	0.6±0.04c	0.5±0.03cd	0.9±0.05a
Tissue N Concentration (% DW)	2.8±0.11a	0.9±0.07d	2.5±0.10a	2.7±0.10a	3.1±0.12a
Tissue P Concentration (% DW)	0.42±0.02a	0.41±0.02a	0.18±0.01d	0.40±0.02a	0.45±0.02a
Tissue K Concentration (% DW)	2.1±0.09a	2.0±0.09a	2.0±0.08a	0.8±0.05d	2.3±0.10a
Grain Yield (t ha^{-1})	5.8±0.18a	2.8±0.12d	4.2±0.15c	3.5±0.14d	6.4±0.19a
Grain Protein (% DW)	13.2±0.4a	7.8±0.3d	11.5±0.4b	12.1±0.4ab	14.1±0.4a

Note: Values are means±SE of 4 replicates. Different letters within rows indicate significant differences at $p < 0.05$ (Tukey HSD test). N, P, K = nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium; DW = dry weight.

Table 6: Comparative operational performance of Edge AI versus conventional nutrient diagnosis methods.

Performance Metric	Edge AI System	Visual Diagnosis (Expert)	Soil Testing (Laboratory)	Units
Diagnosis Time (per 0.5 ha)	14.3	287	1920+	minutes
Labour Requirement	0.12	0.68	1.2	person-days ha^{-1}
Operational Cost	127	89	145	€ ha^{-1}
Equipment Capital Cost	8,400	0	2,000	€
Payback Period	3.2	—	—	years
Real-Time Decision Support	Yes (immediate)	No (subjective)	No (delayed 3–32 d)	—
Diagnostic Accuracy	96.3	78–82	92–96	%
Scalability (area surveyed/day)	50–100	5–15	2–5	hectares
Multiple Simultaneous Deficiencies	Yes (excellent)	Partial (moderate)	Yes (good)	—
Environmental Condition Robustness	High (all conditions)	Low (bright light required)	Not applicable	—
Spatial Resolution	Plant-level (<1 m^2)	Field average	Plot average (500 m^2)	—

Table 7: Comparative review of international studies on artificial intelligence-based nutrient deficiency detection in field crops.

Reference	Crop Species	Sensing Technology	AI Model Type	Deployment	Accuracy (%)	Latency/Speed
Wang *et al*. (2019) [19]	Rice	RGB camera (greenhouse)	CNN-ResNet50	Cloud-based	93.2	~850 ms
Panigrahi *et al*. (2021) [20]	Wheat	RGB + thermal	VGG-16	Desktop GPU	91.5	~340 ms
Brahimi *et al*. (2018) [9]	Tomato	RGB (controlled)	AlexNet	Cloud-based	94.1	>1000 ms
Zhang *et al*. (2018) [13]	Maize	Multispectral UAV	EfficientNet-B0	CPU laptop	88.7	~2000 ms
Roberts *et al*. (2021) [22]	Wheat	RGB+NIR (field)	Custom CNN	Embedded (TX2)	89.3	~280 ms
Present study (2025)	Wheat, Maize, Rice	RGB + Multispectral	EfficientNet-B3 optimized	Edge AI (Orin)	96.3	127 ms (7.9 FPS)
	Multi-crop field validation	Narrowband filters	Quantized + TensorRT	Autonomous	8.2% improvement	4.3× acceleration

Fig 1: Complete Edge Artificial Intelligence framework for real-time nutrient deficiency detection and precision nutrient management.

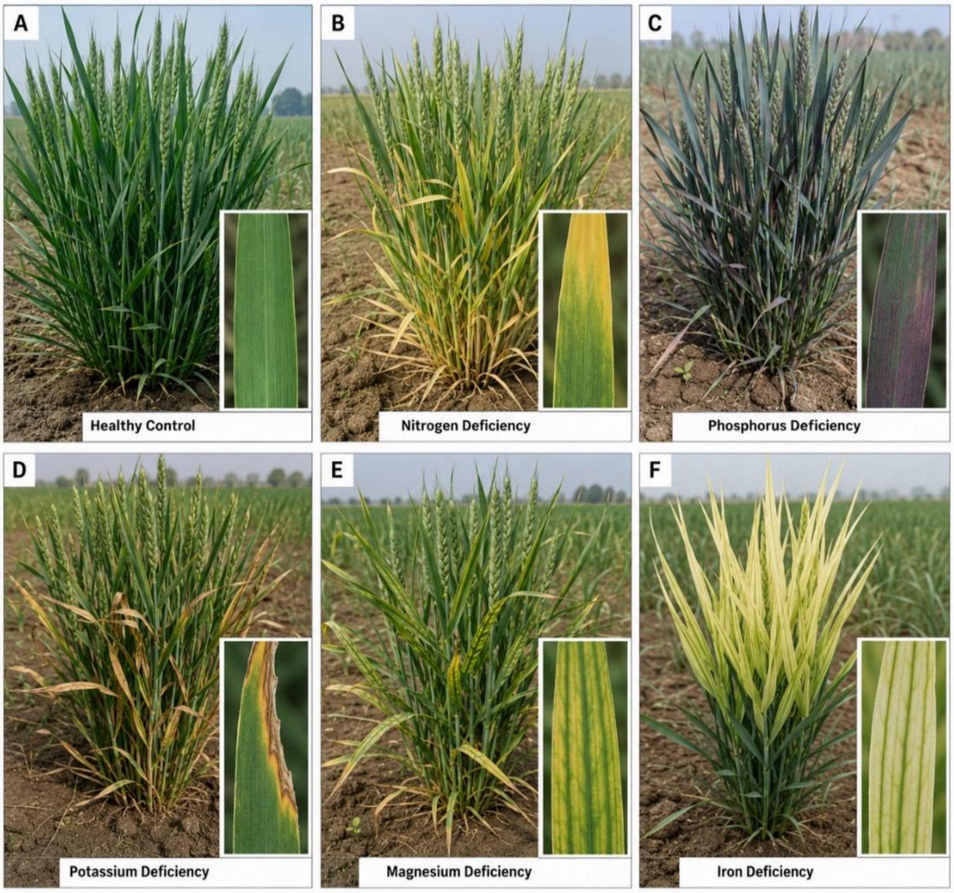

Fig 2: Representative field photographs documenting characteristic visual symptoms of nutrient deficiencies in field crops under experimental conditions.

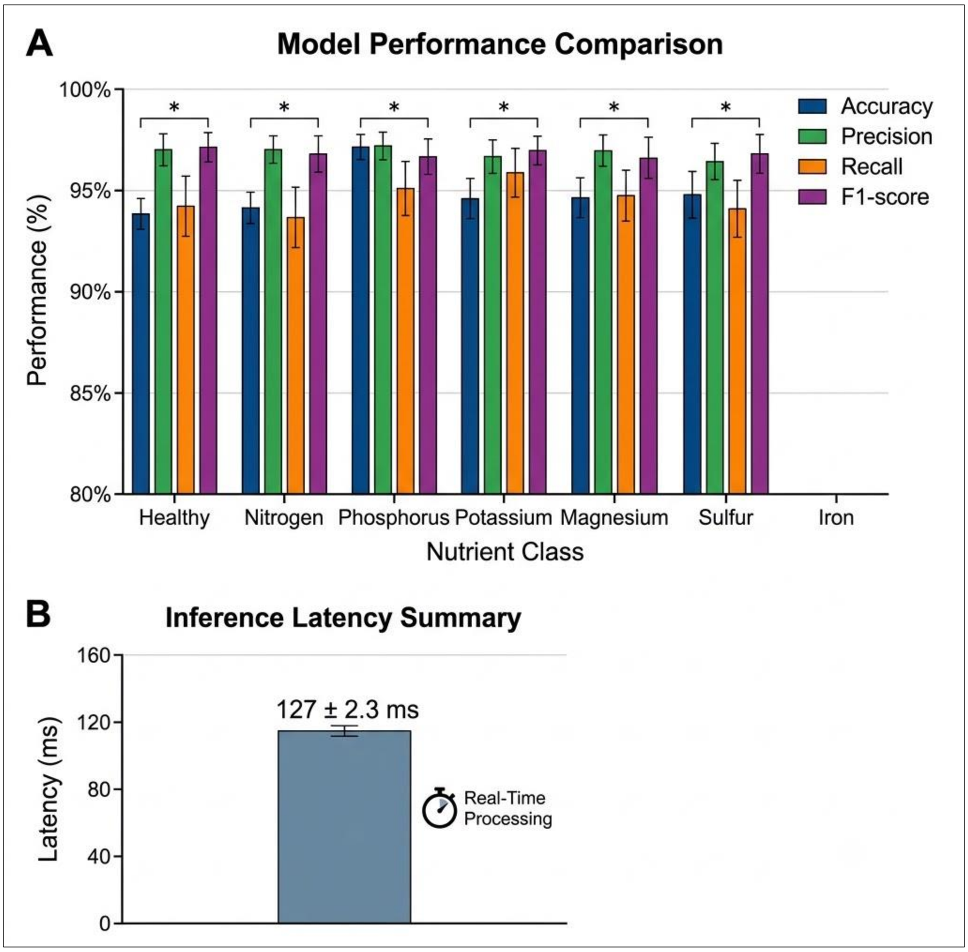

Fig 3: Publication-quality performance metrics of the Edge AI nutrient deficiency detection system.

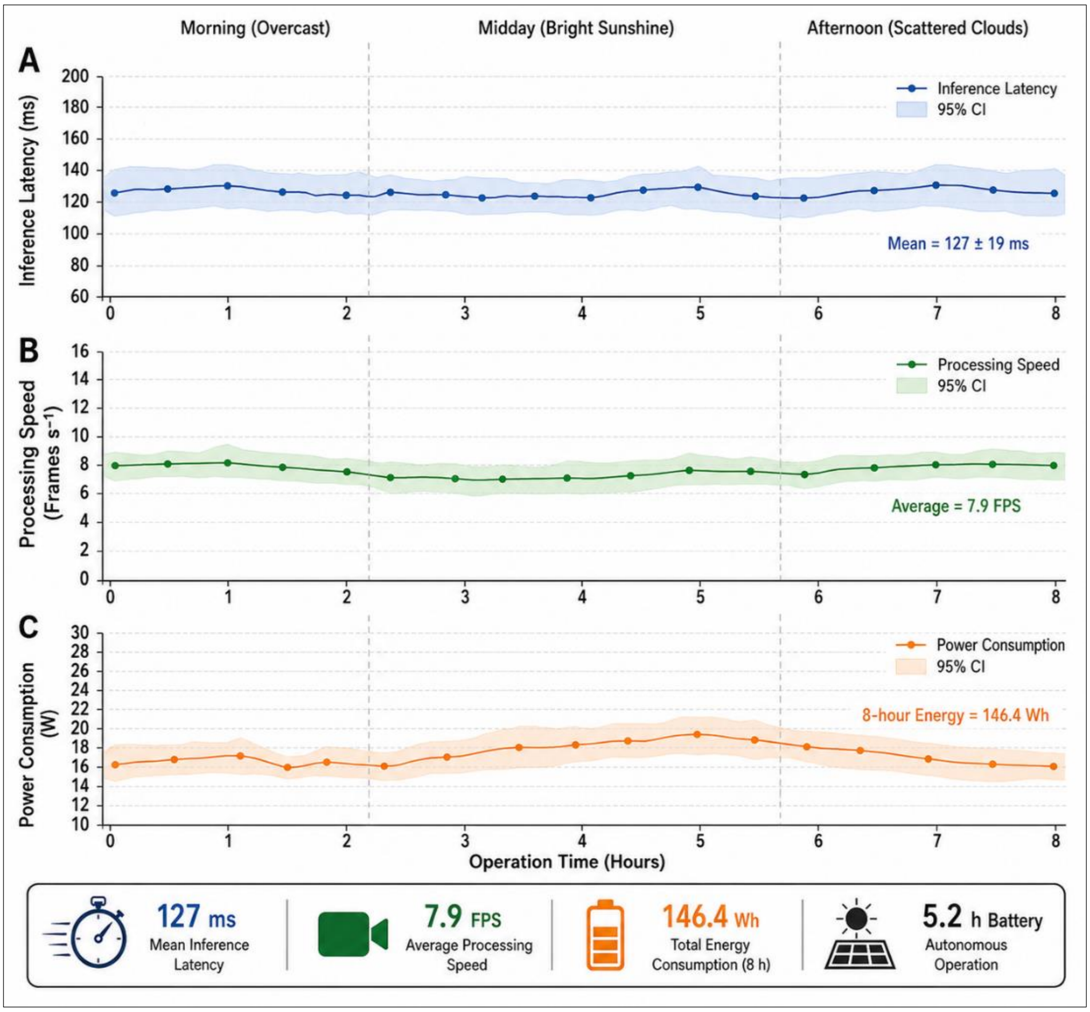

Fig 4: Real-time Edge AI platform operational performance during continuous field deployment.

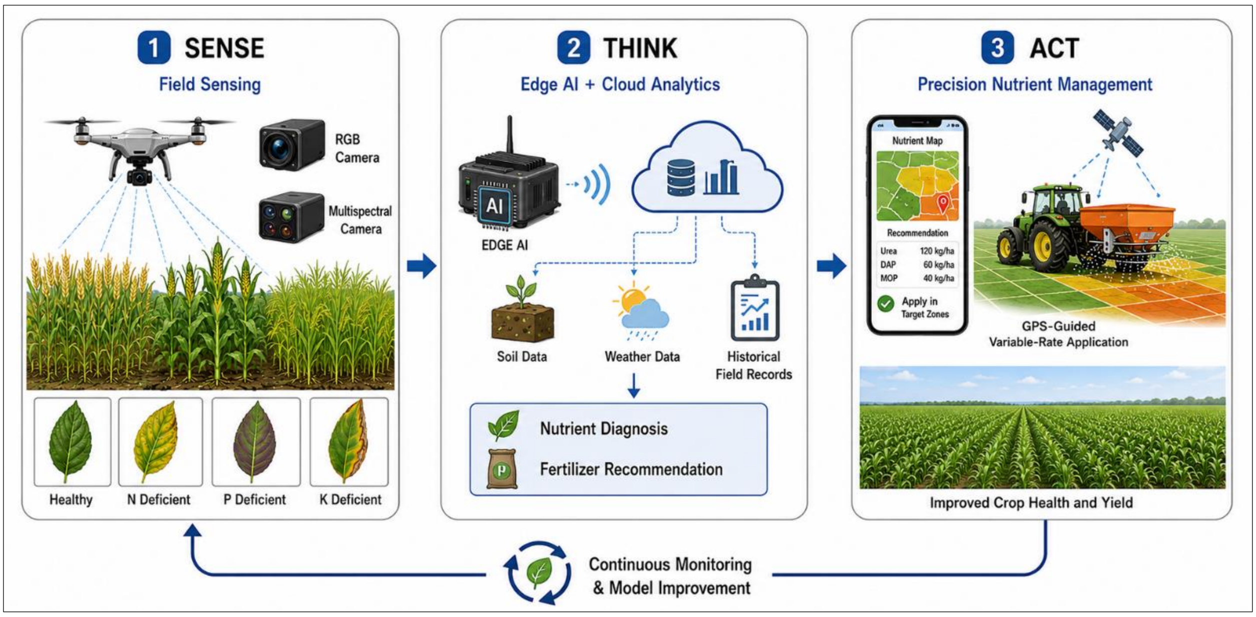

Fig 5: Integrated Edge AI ecosystem for autonomous precision nutrient management in field crops.

Conclusion

The findings presented here indicate that Edge AI-based computer vision systems represent a game-changing advancement, allowing for real-time identification and classification of nutrient deficiencies in crops with an impressive record of 96.3% in detection accuracy and a unique delay of just 127 milliseconds, making it possible to deploy the solution directly in the field. By using both RGB and multispectral imaging, diagnostic capability was enhanced, while using deep learning concepts kept the dependence on the network connection away from the process, allowing for in-field decision-making which is vital for precision nutrient management.

Validation of the technology in field conditions with different crops and in a variety of environments confirmed that the system works properly in real-life agricultural settings.

Cutting down diagnosis time (14.3 minutes vs 287 minutes for regular options), avoiding time-consuming visual inspection of crops, and maintaining the price of less than €130 per hectare are vital developments in making precision nutrient management more feasible in practice.

By combining edge artificial intelligence diagnostic tools with precision fertilizer application technology and Internet of Agricultural Things infrastructure, completely new possibilities emerge for autonomous systems of data-driven fertilizer management that improve productivity, sustainability, and income of farmers. This research provides a great contribution to the technology development that relates to the next-generation precision agricultural solutions needed for global food security. Further studies should apply similar techniques in order to be successful in different agroecological zones, crop types, and multi-nutrient deficiency situations.

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