



Bringing Organisations & Network Development
to higher levels in the Farming sector in Europe

A week of events on Seed Sovereignty and Agricultural Diversity

When we organised the second event of the Agroecology Night series on the topic of seeds, we did not know yet that two other events will take place that week also focusing on seed sovereignty and agrobiodiversity. In the end, it turned out to be a very inspiring week, giving us a good picture on the state of the movement, the science and practice of these fields in Hungary and in a more global context. But first, let us have a common understanding of these two concepts:

Agrobiodiversity refers to the variety of animals, plants and microorganisms that are used directly (as crop plants or domesticated animals) or indirectly (as part of the ecosystem surrounding agricultural production) for food and agriculture. In the case of crop plants, agrobiodiversity refers both to the diversity of species and varieties in a given agroecosystem. A high diversity of crop plants support human and ecosystem health and resilience in agroecosystems. Agrobiodiversity contributes to healthy, culturally appropriate diets and enhances farmers capacities to cope with socio-economic changes and climate change. By enhancing diversity, farms can reduce risks, stabilize and increase yields, ensure nutritional balance, spread workload and capture market opportunities.

Over the millenia of agriculture, peasant communities have traditionally used, improved, saved and exchanged seeds for production; during the 20th century however, corporations have developed technologies that restrict these traditional practices. Technologies associated to modern breeding can restrict the free use of genetic resources and the reliance on plants with high productivity on the expense of other traits reduce genetic diversity across crop plants.

Seed sovereignty aims to reclaim seeds and biodiversity as a protected commons and a public good. It reinforces farmers' rights to breed, use, exchange, and sell diverse open-source seeds which can be saved and which are not patented, genetically modified, owned or controlled by emerging seed giants (Hoidal, 2010). The fight for seed sovereignty has grown into a global grass-roots movement strongly integrated into the pursuit of agroecology for food sovereignty and locally adapted food systems liberated from corporate greed. These movements are characterized by inclusion of a wide range of stakeholders (farmers, rural communities, indigenous communities, scientists, NGOs, policymakers), interdisciplinarity, respect for tradition, and adaptation of new technologies.



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On Monday, January 15th the event “**Dynamic Diversity of Organic Farming Networks**” introduced the Diniversity project that aims to analyze and help conserve diversity of crop plants and their wild relatives. Genetic erosion is a global problem, the loss of genetic variety affects all crop plants and results in a weaker capacity of agricultural systems to adapt to changing conditions. The project promotes new sustainable links between stakeholders, while supporting genetic conversation both in-situ (on-farm and in natural ecosystems) and ex-situ (in gene banks). Besides the introduction of the project activities, the event was also a booklaunch for the book “Organic Sovereignties: Struggles over farming in an age of free trade” written by **Guntra A. Aistara**; followed by a roundtable discussion.

Guntra is an environmental anthropologist whose research lies at the intersection of political ecology, food sovereignty, and environmental justice. Her research interests include organic agriculture movements, agrobiodiversity and seed sovereignty, agroecology, permaculture, culinary heritage revivals, multi-species ethnography, and socio-ecological resilience of local food systems. Her new book “Organic Sovereignties” is an ethnographic study of the organic agricultural movement in Latvia and Costa Rica. Although these countries are geographically distant, farmers are facing similar struggles affected by free trade agreements, national and international regulations while trying to build culturally embedded, sustainable livelihoods.

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The **Agroecology Nights** event series is co-organized by Védegylet and the Department of Environmental Sciences and Policy at the Central European University. Between November 2018 and March 2019 the four events tackle different fields of agroecology through movie screenings and roundtable discussions with local and international experts. On Tuesday, **January 16th** the second event of the Agroecology Nights event series took place with the topic of “Seed sovereignty”.

The event started with the screening of the movie “**Seeds of freedom**”, the first part of a documentary trilogy addressing how large industrial agricultural companies affect traditional peasant food and seed systems. Through interviews with international experts and small-scale farmers from across the world the movie helps us understand how the loss of traditional seeds and diversity go hand in hand with the loss of knowledge, cultural practices, livelihoods and food sovereignty. The movie was followed by a roundtable discussion between our invited guests, among them Guntra A. Aistara., Judit Fehér, Ádám Fülöp and Raluca Dan.

Judit Fehér is a biologist and she has always been passionate about biodiversity. She has 10 years of experience in ex-situ and in-situ conservation of landraces/traditional varieties, managing a collection with more than 500 accessions. In 2012, together with some enthusiastic and committed friends, they took the first steps to establish a community network for agrobiodiversity, called **Magház** (Seedhouse). The main aim of the initiative is to promote healthy and diverse vegetable-ornamental gardens, they promote in situ maintenance of agricultural genetic diversity to facilitate the adaptation of crops, hence mitigating the effects of climate change and increasing pest and disease problems. Judit also works at the **Hungarian Research Institute for Organic Agriculture** (ÖMKI) in the **Live-seed Project** that aims to develop organic breeding and seed production in Europe.

With a master degree in ecology from Geneva, **Ádám Fülöp** worked for two years in the Ministry for Rural Development being responsible for the issue of landrace varieties and was also the national focal point for the FAO ITPGRFA (FAO Seed Treaty). In 2012 he quit the Ministry and spent an autumn in the South of France with his family at a farmer-miller-baker's farm, Jean-Francois Berthelot, a well-known activist in the field of dynamic in-situ conservation of old varieties of cereals. In 2014 he was the co-founder of **Pipacs Pékség**, an organic artisan bakery in Budapest. Today, besides the management of the bakery, he deals with the issue of seeds and mills on a practical level: trying to co-create a strong alliance and network amongst the actors in the chain of farmers-millers-bakers.

Eco Ruralis is a peasant association, engaged in small-scale, diversified food production, based on the principles of agroecology. Currently, Eco Ruralis has 10.000 members from all over Romania and it's a member of the worldwide peasant movement La Via Campesina and its European Coordination Via Campesina. **Raluca Dan** works as members facilitator and support, while also dedicating a specific focus on the Right to Seeds program coordination.

The roundtable discussion focused on the **role of heirloom seeds in a globalized food system** as well as why and how we can preserve them. Raluca explained that heirloom varieties were going through selections for generations, therefore they are locally more adapted and resilient to changing conditions; their wide genetic variety serves as a pool for breeders, bringing stability. As Guntra put it, the seed is the relationship between the peasant, the soil and the community. How we treat these relationships will define the food system as a whole. There need to be spaces of innovation where this dynamic diversity is preserved. However, according to Ádám, there is a war in the issue surrounding seeds, the globalized food system is destroying their diversity, associated ecosystems and the

peasant lifestyle. There is a structural inequity in the food system, the deck is stacked against the small scale producers and their traditional seed systems, stressed Guntra.

Public institutions lost a lot of funding related to breeding and conservation. Projects need to focus on bringing these issues back to the public supported with funding and policy change. Peasant knowledge also should be higher valued, and at the center of seed sovereignty movements should be the small-scale farmer. To find and use heirloom seeds for food production, peasants need a lot of commitment: field trials, technological developments both at production and processing level. The European regulation fits in the global trend - seeds can only be marketed if they come from homogenous, distinctive populations - peasant seeds cannot comply with these. Alliances are needed to change this system. Ádám explained the example of France, where the number of small mills is raising again; however in Hungary very few small or organic mills are present. Sometimes the initiative comes from the farmer to reintroduce an ancient variety, such was the case with *einkorn* in Hungary. On the other hand, sometimes long term efforts are needed - he has brought a cereal mixture from France years ago, working together with farmers to grow it, so far without success. This kind of approach needs a strong engagement, without that you can run out of money and time. We need to create opportunities that these effort can become successful - at the policy and the financial levels, stressed Guntra.

Good examples besides the artisanal food producers are peasant and seed saving movements, as well as cooperative international researches for breeding in these fields. Raluca's organization, Eco Ruralis started out as a peasant movement organization, and besides lobbying for small-scale producers they have a wide reach by sending heirloom seed packages to as many as 4000 members annually. Judit is one of the founders of Magház, a non-formal organization working for the preservation of *heirloom* and *open-pollinated* varieties. In Hungary, traditional seeds are often only available in the gene bank, so they need to be reintroduced among with redeveloping the associated knowledge how to grow these plants. Judit is also working for the Hungarian Research Institute of Organic Farming, participating in the Liveseed project that aims to bring together farmers and scientist for organic breeding and seed production.

From a consumers perspective, food is often disconnected from seeds in the consumers' mind – conversations need to start. Farmers are constrained by economic pressures, regulations, consumers - they do not have much room to manoeuvre. Raluca explained, that the fight against genetically modified organisms are a good example for consumer pressure, as it was a strong will of European citizens to keep them out of production. Guntra brought an example from Latvia, where seed laws were changed due to public opinion

after a small scale seed producer company was fined for selling heterogenous, unregistered material.

The night was concluded by a *seed swap*, that was a surprising success in an urban event. A wide variety of vegetable and flower seeds were exchanged, among them Romanian varieties from Eco Ruralis as well as packages prepared by urban and peri-urban gardeners.

The third event of the week took place on **January 17th**, and it was a meeting for current and future volunteers for **Magház**. This meeting brought on very good examples how individuals and organizations can actively participate for the cause of seed sovereignty. Magház is an informal organization run by enthusiastic volunteers. NÖDIK, the Hungarian gene bank of wild and cultivated plant species distributes seeds for the general public but also aims to cooperate more closely with farmers on generating in-situ collections (modelgardens). Most participants were small-scale farmers or home gardeners - collecting and saving seed for years. Some are more interested in traditional Hungarian landraces, some collect tomato varieties from all around the world, but their goal is similar: to enhance their production and promote agricultural diversity. As a recruitment event for new volunteers, it became clear that all fields require help, with knowledge transfer, organizing seed exchanges, creating a seed library or a seed catalogue.

In conclusion, during this week we saw that there is an active movement and research in Europe concerning both the socio-cultural and practical aspects of seed sovereignty, breeding and seed production. Multidisciplinary projects, such as BOND, Diniversity, LiveSeed can bring together a wide range of stakeholders, identify and tackle problems together. Research can also be more informal, when practical aspects guide cooperation between farmers and food artisans. It is clear that the question of seed is deeply embedded in the food system, to bring back and utilize ancient varieties active cooperation is needed from farmers, seed savers, seed banks and artisan food producers. Generally speaking, Europe is not such a bad place in terms of seed sovereignty, but international treaties and a globalized food system are interconnected and affect local food networks as well. Organizations and individuals working in different fields for seed sovereignty have good opportunities through European projects to create international networks of knowledge transfer.

Seed saving and seed exchanges are practices of a silent revolution – they directly contribute to seed sovereignty of home gardeners and small-scale farmers alike; while working

against the brute forces of industrial agriculture. The challenge is to connect people and bring back old varieties with the associated knowledge to grow them. Regardless of professional field, everyone can participate. As consumers, by supporting small-scale producers but also advocating for better policies; as well as farmers by utilising and documenting heirloom varieties.

Resources

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| BOND | https://www.bondproject.eu |
| Diversity Project | http://dyniversity.eu/ |
| Eco Ruralis | https://ecoruralis.ro |
| Guntra A. Aistara: "Organic Sovereignities: Struggles over farming in an age of free trade", 2018, University of Washington Press | |
| LiveSeed | https://www.liveseed.eu/ |
| Magház | http://maghaz.hu |
| ÖMKI | https://biokutatas.hu/ |
| Pipacs Pékség | https://pipacspekseg.hu |
| Seeds of freedom | http://www.seedsoffreedom.info/ |