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News | 07.05.2013

Plant it and make it grow

Seed diversity is crucial for our food



Most of the food we eat comes from seeds. Seed diversity is the basis of our food chain and our food security depends on it. Decreasing it impacts on the choice of the food we eat, and local fruits, vegetables and cereals can disappear from our fields and plates. Seeds are also humanity's oldest common heritage, at the origin of farming practices handed on from generation to generation. Exchanging seeds between farmers and gardeners has been the source of diversity, disease resistance, adaptation of plants to climate change and high quality taste for thousands of years. But, since the 1960's successive EU legislation has contributed to the decrease in seed diversity, privileging and selecting some species for industrial use. This legal framework, which was supposedly intended to protect farmers from poor seed quality, was introduced as a tool to select varieties and value reproductive material adapted to the modern agricultural system. The Common Catalogue of Seeds is at the core of this legislative framework. This official seed register only lists seeds of 'commercial variety' that may be purchased and used by European farmers or are also protected by 'plant variety rights'. Registration in this catalogue to be legally marketed is a real obstacle course. To reach this holy grail, plant varieties must go through a sophisticated registration and certification process which checks their Distinctness from other existing varieties, Uniformity and Stability as well as their quality (e.g identity, freedom from disease and germination capacity). Not to mention that fees for certification may be up to 10,000 euro per variety. Unsurprisingly, this strategy to increase yields and develop the breeding sector actually ended up granting exclusive rights and patents to big seed companies and agro-chemical corporations rather than farmers and small breeders, and has consequently contributed to the loss of countless local varieties. Another big boon for big companies is that genetic deterioration means less variety on the market and thus more market share for themselves. Throughout the years the Greens have criticised the European legislation on seeds and pushed to negotiate separate criteria for organic seeds and separate certification conditions for local varieties. Green legislative

reports on seed marketing laws have introduced some exemptions for the marketing of traditional seeds. But unfortunately these improved steps only concern some varieties ('Farm Saved Seeds') and the seeds can be used only on the farmer's own farm in return for payment of a reduced - but still existing - fee to breeders[1]. Besides, the currently existing derogation for 'conservation varieties' threatened by genetic extinction[2] only allow for the selling of moderate quantities of these varieties. The EU new legislative proposal on seeds published on 6th May further increases exclusive rights for a handful of big companies, which could lead to further uniformity and pest sensitive breeds, increased reliance on just a few varieties, and decreased food security. The new proposal belongs to a broader package of measures on food safety. The plant reproductive material package including seeds, replaces 12 existing directives by a single EU wide regulation which no longer gives any room of manoeuvre at the national level to interpret the legislation in favour of certain small scale activities of seed savers and small breeders. The fact that the text was co-drafted by a representative of the GNIS *Groupement National Interprofessionnel des Semences et Plantes*, the privately funded French federation of private professionals of the seed industry, also calls into question whether this is a matter of conflict of interest. When it comes to genetic erosion, the Commission's text admits the problem but does not relate it with the current registration and certification system. The problem of small farmers and breeders affected by the restrictive criteria imposed by the catalogue and unable to afford the fees remains unchanged. Instead of opening the market and exempting heterogenic varieties from registration and certification, the EC introduces the concept of a *niche market* which still restrict quantities benefiting from the exemption and limit the amount of employees and annual turnover of companies allowed to make available such varieties on the market. Last but not least, only varieties proved to have existed on the market before can benefit from this exemption and farmers who want to exchange and re-use such seeds on local level must be registered as professionals so that their seed production and marketing can be controlled. The Commission's proposal will now be examined by the European Parliament under the co-decision procedure. The Greens/EFA group will keep pressure on their demands to support seed diversity. The whole concept of compulsory registration and certification of varieties which supposedly protects farmers and consumers from the propagation of pests and disease is actually disrespectful of farmers' rights and agro-ecological practices, including crop rotation and mixed cultivation. It only benefits big seed and agro-chemical companies and erodes biodiversity. Furthermore, the scope of the regulation should be limited to commercial activities and not impact seed exchange or seed saving activities. On the other hand, small enterprises should only be obliged to comply with basic rules such as description of variety and labelling. We must keep planting, saving and exchanging seeds freely. This is the way to preserve and adapt our very basis of food and contribute to the European movement of citizens, breeders, farmers, to save seeds[3] and crop diversity for future generations. As simply as Vandana Shiva says, "the system of seeds based on monoculture is wrong and inappropriate. The biodiverse system has produced more food, and biodiversity means that seeds must be in the hands of farmers."

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[1] Small farmers producing less than 92 tonnes of cereals annually or less than 185 tones of potatoes are exempted from the payment of the fee. [2] Latest directives introducing derogation for the registration of traditional varieties :

- http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2008:162:0013:0019:EN:PDF,
- http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2009:312:0044:0054:EN:PDF,
- http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:32010L0060:en:NOT

[3]Examples of civil society movements for seed diversity :

- http://www.seed-sovereignty.org/EN
- http://www.kokopelli-seed-foundation.com/index.html
- www.saveourseeds.org
- http://www.navdanya.org/

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Contact person



Nelly Baltide

Advisor on Development

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