



## ORGANIC PLANT BREEDING

### Workshop Report

# Let's get real – how to build up your organic plant breeding business

*16 - 18 May 2018, Portugal  
Demeter-International e.V. & Sementes Vivas*



### Workshop outcomes in a Nutshell

- Key message: 'Collaboration instead of Competition' is needed for the further development of the organic plant breeding (OPB) sector
- Organic plant breeding at the centre: EU project LIVESEED aims to improve competitiveness of the organic seed and breeding sector and encourage greater use of organic seeds.
- Building up trustworthy relationship among supply chain actors via 'participatory breeding' and 'system-based breeding' helps to address a broad range of sustainability aspects
- Organic plant breeding activities are underrepresented in the Mediterranean and in Central European countries. Building up those activities starts with raising consumer awareness, strengthen organic food and farming, promote the use of organic seed and improve the national legislative frameworks
- Sustainable business models and reliable funding sources are of utmost importance for the OPB activities in every country
- Watch the short film "[Organic plant breeding - Act and think and do it!](#)" which sums up the key findings of the WS and includes interviews of the speakers!
- Follow us on [twitter!](#)

"Let's get real" – the 4<sup>th</sup> experts' workshop of the project "Promoting Organic Plant Breeding in Europe" aimed to inspire people to become active and start a business in the field of organic seed. First steps for setting up organic breeding networks and businesses were demonstrated and discussed, with special consideration for countries where organic plant breeding (OPB) is not well developed yet.

The project "Promoting Organic Plant Breeding in Europe" was initiated by the Demeter-International e.V. EU Liaison Office in Brussels in 2016. The workshop was organised in cooperation with Living Seeds-Sementes Vivas (SV). and was supported by the IFOAM EU Group.

Plant breeders, seed initiatives, farm advisors, organic farmers, representatives of seed production companies, scientists, academics and other interested stakeholders from 11 countries (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Greece, The Netherlands, Bulgaria, Portugal, Spain, Croatia, Hungary, Austria and France) joined the workshop. The two-day workshop offered presentations, discussions, opportunities for exchange and a visit of the breeding fields, greenhouses and processing facilities of Sementes Vivas (SV).

## Collaboration instead of competition



*Photo 1: Workshop participants at the fields of 'Living Seeds' exchanging ideas*

Getting insight into the work of Sementes Vivas was the entry of the workshop – the opportunity to look around on the fields, talk with breeders on the spot and see the seed processing facilities. **Stefan Doeblin**, CEO of SV, gave a presentation about the history, the principles and the future of the company. He follows the principle “Collaboration instead of Competition”, which means that he aims to build networks for seed exchange and knowledge transfer with partners in 6 Mediterranean countries. That way, market entry and revenue generation will be faster, and costs will be lower, due to synergies in learning, machinery use, manpower and materials. **Pedro Moreira** from the University of Coimbra (ESAC-IPC) complemented the speech with an analysis of the needs of the organic sector for organic seed and the facilities which are needed to support the communities with organic seed production and organic plant breeding in Portugal. Also, he presented the development of plant breeding in maize and other crops in Portugal and highlighted the work of the University of Coimbra regarding OPB.

**Freya Schäfer**, FiBL Germany, shared some of the first findings of the European project LIVESSED. The main objective of the project is to improve competitiveness of the organic seed and breeding sector and encourage greater use of organic seeds. She spoke about the role of databases for organic seed availability that have been developed in some countries. The system comprises three categories - C1: no derogation possible = organic seed must be used, C2: derogation is possible case by case, C3: general derogation. The aim is to bring more species into category C1. To make the system function, a national expert groups who advise the competent authority on the implementation of the organic regulation is needed. Experts analyse the yearly derogation report, market situation and obstacles. They give recommendations for the categorisation of crops/selection types, national rules and further measures.

**Maria Carrascosa**, Red de Semillas, spoke about participatory breeding and seed co-operations in Spain. In the country there is a public data base for organic seeds which is managed by the Ministry of Agriculture. Although it exists, there is no real progress in the use of organic seed. In the period 2007-2012, even a downward tendency was observed: the authorisations of nonorganic seeds are increasing (period 2009-2016). Maria proposed to authorise the seed exchange between organic farmers, create a legal framework for artisanal microenterprises and develop a national strategy for the dynamic and collective use of plant

genetic resources for food & agriculture (PGRFA) with implications in organic agriculture and coherent proposals.

## Strategies to promote organic seed



*Photo 2: Participants in working groups discussing different country-based cases*

In the afternoon session, three working groups discussed about OPB business opportunities in European countries where the OPB sector is not well developed yet. Croatia, Hungary and Bulgaria were taken as examples.

### Croatia

**Sendy Osmicevic**, founder of ZMAG<sup>1</sup> (Green network of activist groups) presented the initiative. ZMAG is the first network in Croatia addressing sustainable seed production and aims to set the foundations for the development of organic plant breeding in the country. As there is still a lack of public awareness for organic seed in general, working group participants agreed that first steps to move forward include capacity building and further development and stabilization of the network:

- Raise public awareness via campaigns, social media communication activities
- Organization of capacity building workshops, seed swaps
- Develop sustainable funding for the activities
- Find partners along the organic supply chain (connect seed producers, farmers, processors, retailers, consumers)

---

ZMAG aims to create a Community Seed bank (CSB) owned by its members through Community Seed networking and knowledge sharing. They have produced brochures covering topics of sustainable shopping, community supported agriculture and seed saving.<sup>1</sup>

## Hungary

**Judit Fehér**, from the research institute of organic agriculture in Hungary (ÖMKi), presented a short summary about organic farming, organic seed use and organic plant breeding in the country. The main issues regarding the use of organic seed is that the market is almost non-existing, there are only a few entries in the national seed database, organic seed production is not recognized by most of the seed value chain actors

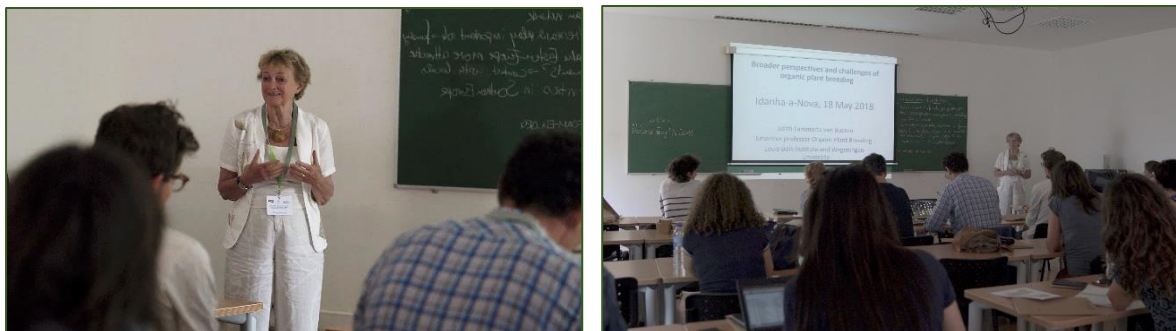
The working group participants agreed that in order to increase the production and use of organic seed, the whole organic sector should better develop first. Some of the ideas were to:

- Include organic farming in the education programmes for young farmers
- Create social media campaigns on the values and importance of organic agriculture.
- Establish ecotourism, such as organic trail networks, and develop premium strategies for exports.

## Bulgaria

**Tsvetanka Dintcheva** from the Maritsa Vegetable Crops Research Institute in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, gave an overview about farming conditions and the organic sector. In Bulgaria, organic is still quite small with about 7262 organic farmers. Six research institutes work on different organic crops such as cereals, plums, cotton and vegetables. Many crop varieties used today stem from earlier state breeding programmes, also other old varieties are used. Through aggressive marketing of seed companies from foreign countries, many varieties that are not so well adapted to local conditions are also used in Bulgaria. The group agreed that networks of seed producers and farmers are key to come to the use of more locally adapted varieties. For those networks, also cooperation with likeminded organizations that promote sustainable food and farming would be an asset and could help to bring greater attention to organic seed and organic plant breeding. In Bulgaria, a breeder who wants to start a plant breeding business needs financial support either by the state, or by private investors or donors.

## How to build true relationships?



*Photo 3: Edith Lammerts van Bueren, emeritus professor OPB Louis Bolk Institute and Wageningen University*

On the second day of the workshop **Edith Lammerts van Bueren**, emeritus professor OPB Louis Bolk Institute and Wageningen University, gave an inspiring speech about the new perspective of “system-based breeding”. “Trait breeding” is nowadays a common wording in breeding research, as many scientists and breeders come from molecular biology. The innovation of organic breeders lies in the consideration of the whole system within which knowledge is generated and within which plants are bred, raised, harvested, processed, sold and used. Therefore, the “system-based breeding” is to be established. Lammerts sees a kind of “organized irresponsibility” in many modern business systems. She promotes change to this approach and considers the whole food chain in responsibility for organic plant breeding. System based breeding aims to build up true relationships between the actors of the organic food chain and deliver to a broad range of sustainability aspects: Social justice, Food security, Quality and safety, Food and seed sovereignty, Agro-biodiversity, Ecosystem services and Climate robustness.

Contact: [info@organic-plant-breeding.org](mailto:info@organic-plant-breeding.org).