

Promoting Organic Plant Breeding in Europe

Project Newsletter February 2017



Editorial

Dear Reader,

We invite you to join our networking activities and to tell us about best practices of breeding organic plant varieties, cultivating them or turning them into delicious food. Our project is not big, but we are happy to contribute to the important work of an international and diverse network of people that are dedicated to take care of the basis of our food system: Seed, plant varieties suited for organic farming and agro-biodiversity.

Our food system is at the crossroads between further “industrialization” and the conservation and further building of diverse, resilient structures. Global corporate companies are increasingly taking control of the genetic basis of our food. The mergers of ChemChina with Syngenta, Bayer with Monsanto and DuPont Pioneer with Dow, if approved by authorities, would accelerate the concentration in the seed market. Many companies aim to push plant varieties made with new gene technologies to the market and to claim property for plant varieties by applying for patents. High time to strengthen alternatives – independent plant breeding in small and medium sized enterprises, participatory breeding, seed networks - to build a resilient, sustainable food system that delivers tasty and healthy goods.

With great pleasure we share this 1st newsletter with you. This first edition will present the goals of the project *Promoting Organic Plant Breeding in Europe* as well as review the project’s main activities of the year 2016.

Yours sincerely,

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The Project 'Promoting Organic Plant Breeding in Europe'

The project '*Promoting Organic Plant Breeding In Europe*' was initiated by the Demeter International e.V. EU Liaison Office in Brussels. Aiming to promote the development and use of organic varieties on a European scale, this project provides a platform for networking and discussion among organic plant breeders and stakeholders. In the context of this project the EU Liaison Office is organizing a series of events which cover several topics concerning organic plant breeding. Activities also include communication activities such as a website providing basic information about the need for organic varieties and a set of factsheets for different target audiences.

Why this project now? While several breeding initiatives already work on a professional scale and have found financial support, most still lack financial stability. There are still European regions without organic breeding initiatives, mostly in the Mediterranean countries, and consequently there is lack of organic varieties suitable for these regions.

Links with other project: Two members of the project team, Lina and Antje, will also assist in IFOAM EU activities for the EU funded project "LIVESEED", with project partners all over the EU and FiBL and IFOAM EU as project leaders. More information will follow soon!

Background: Organic Breeding, Organic Seed

The modern plant varieties, bred for high yield and homogeneity, are poor in intra-varietal genetic diversity, whereas traditional varieties (or populations) are richer in genetic diversity. Both, traditional and modern "industrial" varieties are not optimal to obtain stable and appropriate yields in organic farming. Since some decades, several initiatives of breeders and farmers are breeding varieties suited for organic farming, under organic conditions. They focus on developing holistic approaches of breeding, while the breeding mainstream increasingly turns towards the use of molecular techniques. In order to define the common approach of organic plant breeding, plant breeding rules have been added to the [IFOAM organic standard](#) in 2014.

However, organic plant breeding is still a relatively small sector and few varieties have been bred specifically for organic systems. However, considering the small finances spent in this branch, organic plant breeding has already impressive results to show: A range of tasty and suitable varieties in cereals, vegetables and fruit. Measured against the huge budgets conventional breeding programmes or research in genetic modification burned in the past years, organic breeding is a success story that should be extended and promoted through better financial support.

The EU organic regulation and organic seed

The organic sector strives to apply organic standards to the entire life cycle of the plant, including the production and use of inputs such as seed. Therefore, the use of organically multiplied seed is part of the EU organic standard (current regulations 834/2007 and 889/2009). However, due to the limitations to organic seed availability and varietal choice, regulations allow organic producers to apply for exceptions from the rule of using organic seeds (so called derogations). To increase the use of organic seed in the organic sector needs to be tackled with higher ambition in many member states, through targeted measures such as national lists of crops for which the use of organic seed is compulsory, better information on the availability of organic seed and information on the performance of certain varieties under organic conditions.

The rules under the current EU legislation only concern the multiplication step which must be made under organic conditions – breeding is not yet part of the EU organic regulation. Whereas it is far too early to make the use of organic varieties compulsory, it would be a step towards its promotion if the new organic regulations would set a legal frame to recognise organic plant breeding. The discussions on the revised organic regulation are under way since the EU Commission published a [proposal](#) in March 2014.

An example: Organic Seed Use in France and Italy

The percentage of seed used by organic producers that is organic varies widely among countries. For example, in Italy a recent survey found that in the organic sector overall, 66% of *purchased* seed is certified organic, i.e., the remaining 34% is non-organic. However, because of a high proportion of seed saving in Italy, only 44% of seed is purchased; therefore the effective percentage of certified organic seed is much lower (29%). In France, a survey among organic vegetable growers found that 82% of them are intensive organic seed users, i.e., that more than three quarters of their seed is certified organic (Döring *et al.* 2012).

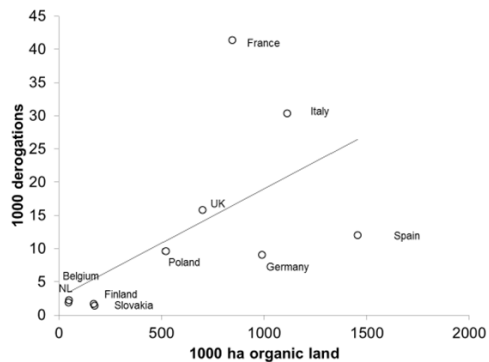


Figure: Numbers of organic seed derogations plotted against organic land area. Shown are the ten countries that had the highest numbers of derogations in Europe; data for 2010, based on Willer *et al.* 2012 and national seed derogation reports (unpublished compilation by N. Sinoir & F. Rey, ITAB, France).

Project Activities in 2016

We have started to work on this project in January 2016. Activities include mapping organic seed initiatives in Europe, preparing networking events as well as information material on organic varieties. In 2016, the following events have taken place:



Public Event: *Who pays for Seeds? Thoughts and Discussion on Financing Organic Plant Breeding*

This event was organized in May 2016 in cooperation with [IFOAM EU Group](#) at the [European Social and Economic Committee](#). The main speakers of the event were Mrs Maria Heubuch, *Member of the European Parliament (The Greens/EFA)* and Dr. Johannes Wirz, *senior scientist at the Research Institute at the Goetheanum*. During this event ways to finance organic breeding were presented and discussed by more than 50 stakeholders.



Experts' Workshop: *Promoting organic varieties - breeding and cultivation in Europe*

This workshop took place in May 2016 in Brussels. This workshop formed the kick-off event of the Project. The aim of the workshop was to sharpen the vision and objectives of our project, as well as to create synergies and to avoid overlaps with other projects working on similar topics.



Experts' workshop: *Traders, Retailers and Consumers: What is their role in Organic Plant Breeding?*

This workshop took place in December 2016 in Amsterdam. It was organized in cooperation with [Estafette Odin](#) and was supported by the [IFOAM EU Group](#). The aim of the workshop was to find ways to raise awareness of Organic Plant Breeding among the whole organic food chain, focusing on the consumer's perspective as well.

Planned Activities

After wrapping up the activities of the first project year, we are now busy to organize following events and fundraise for further activities. For 2017, you can already look forward to the **third project workshop** in cooperation with [Bingenheimer Saatgut](#) and [Kultursaat e.V.](#) in Germany on 22nd -23rd of June 2017. While seeing organic plant breeding and marketing of seed in action, this workshop will serve to exchange best practices in building breeding networks and market seed.

We are working on our website www.organic-plant-breeding.org, we are collecting best practice examples to fill our website and you are welcome to contribute. We are producing and distributing factsheets and newsletters aiming to inform the organic sector about organic plant breeding issues.

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Project Supported by:

