

CONFERENCE REPORT

“WHO PAYS FOR SEEDS?”

THOUGHTS AND DISCUSSION ON FINANCING ORGANIC PLANT BREEDING



Date: Wednesday, 25th of May 2016

Time: 09:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

Venue: European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), Room:
VMA3 Rue Van Maerlant2, 1040 Brussels

Organized by: Demeter International e.V. EU Liaison Office in
cooperation with the IFOAM EU Group.

This public event was organized in the context of the project “Promoting organic plant breeding in Europe” which is initiated by the Demeter International EU Liaison Office and the Salvia Foundation. Demeter International has been a pioneer when it comes to the development of varieties that are adapted to the low input production system of organic agriculture. Cooperation partner IFOAM EU is the umbrella organization of organic farming in Europe, active for better legal conditions for organic farming (and organic breeding and recognition of organic plant varieties) since 2003 in Brussels.

Plant breeding worldwide is subject to dramatic structural change. Many formerly independent small and medium breeding companies have been bought by multinational corporations over the past years. Moreover, many conventional plant breeding programs focus nowadays on GM technologies, especially the new gene technologies such as CRISPR-CAS, zinc finger nucleases and others. The preservation of agro-biodiversity and the development of varieties for specific local conditions or purposes such as organic farming are hampered by the EU seed regulations that are adapted to the industrial breeding sector as well as the lack of finances. Against this background, with the organic market as well as the number of organic farmers and processors in Europe, the need for organic varieties is

more urgent than ever. During this event ways to finance organic breeding were presented and discussed by more than 50 stakeholders.



Mrs. Dilyana Slavova, *President of the Section for External Relations at the European Economic and Social Committee*, opened the event referring to the long cooperation the EESC has with Demeter International and stated that organic plant breeding is one of the topics that the EESC is working on. Plant breeding is as old as agriculture, our crops are the result of thousands of years of selection and evolution. Modern agricultural plant breeding has become an industry like any other especially in the last decades and for some crops like cotton it is highly profitable. She ended her speech by saying

that it is essential to produce high quality food while reducing detrimental environmental impact.

The introduction speech was held by Dr. Andreas Biesantz, *Head of the Demeter International EU Liaison Office in Brussels*. He mentioned that the use of organic seeds will progressively become compulsory under the EU organic regulation and that this together with the need for adapted varieties is a challenge for the organic sector. Therefore, organic plant breeding must move forward.



“The most crucial obstacle of organic plant breeding is its financing”. Dr. Andreas Biesantz, Head of the Demeter International

EU Liaison Office in Brussels.

During her welcoming speech, Mrs. Maria Heubuch, *Member of the European Parliament (The Greens/EFA)* mentioned that biological diversity is a key to facing climate change, but also to assuring that our food remains diversified and tasty. She explained that there are sufficient reasons why organic agriculture needs its own seed-breeding that takes into account the specific needs of organic farming. Organic farming works under different conditions and therefore requires specific demands on diverse cultures and varieties.



“The more the market for seeds is controlled by a few companies, the smaller the biological diversity of the plants offered to farmers”. Mrs. Maria Heubuch, Member of the

European Parliament The Greens/ EFA.

She also explained that just like organic agricultural research as a whole, organic cultivation is chronically underfunded and this has led to a situation in which the suitable seeds for organic cultivation are lacking. Due to this situation, many are trying to find quick solutions and find the cure in the so-called "new breeding techniques". These new

technologies, as well as the resulting new organisms, can be patented, with all the negative consequences for the biological diversity, for agriculture and for consumers. Furthermore, she stated that the European Parliament has confirmed, December 2015, that patents on conventionally grown plants may no longer be considered. The EU-Commission has been asked to clarify unmistakably, that the European legislation does not cover such patents. She also referred to the European Commission which wants to promote the use of organic seeds and gradually make them compulsory, but there are too few varieties that can be used due to the fact that seed production has been neglected for years. Last but not least she referred to the need of the creation of a public database which will show which organic seed materials are actually available on the market in the Member States.

The presentation of the study *“Who pays for the seeds”* followed, by its co-author Dr. Johannes Wirz. At the beginning of his speech the author stated that all organic bred seeds are considered to be a common good. They may belong to a single breeder or a single company that markets varieties, but they are considered to be a heritage of mankind. This is the reason why most of ecological plant breeding is a non-profit business.

***“Seeds are a particular common good:
Inexhaustible and dependent on continuous
breeding efforts”.***

Dr. Johannes Wirz, Goetheanum Switzerland.



He reiterated that organic agriculture is looking for optimal production, in contrast to conventional agriculture which is looking for maximal yields. He explained that organic plant breeding is related to a number of common goods such as the creation of varieties suitable for organic production, the enhancement of agro-biodiversity, ecosystem services, knowledge transfer and education and last but not least the respect of the integrity of the plants. He presented a survey of the existing sources of funding organic plant breeding. The sale of seeds constitutes the smallest percentage (only 0.4%), royalties amount to 8%. These are very modest revenues for the ecological plant breeder. On the other hand the contribution by foundations is more than 50%. The value chain is supporting breeding initiatives in different ways and to varying degrees. Donations from individuals cover 8.7% of the breeding activities. These are people who often want to see plants developed and produced in a respectful, “non-violent” way. Financial support of foundations and individuals adds up to 2/3 of the eco-breeding. This substantial contribution is provided for philosophical or idealistic reasons. On the other hand, for the time being public funding is low at 8.5%.

One of the most important future challenges for financing organic plant breeding is long term funding. Breeders need to have the guarantee that their breeding activities will be continuously supported not only year by year but rather by long term commitments for several years. Access to public funds as well as raising public awareness for the necessity of ecological plant breeding are fundamental for the development of new varieties, the

contribution to agro-biodiversity, the improvement of ecosystem services and mandatory for education of next generation breeders – a must for the supply of the organic producers with ecologically bred plant varieties.

At the end the problem of derogations to use conventional (non-treated) seed in organic farming was presented. A high number of derogations mean low investment in organic seed production and concomitantly limited availability and a low number of farmers using these seeds.

Contributions by stakeholders:



“Organic breeding needs to be transparent, decentralized and embedded in society”.

“The only sustainable varieties are the open pollinated, they connect the past and the future”. Mr. René Groenen, Kultursaad.

“The current regulatory framework we have in place, besides being very complex and not easily understandable, it does reflect the innovation model of the beginning of the 20th century when private plant breeding began to differentiate from public breeding. This innovation model, still entrenched in our current regulation, is a major barrier - a stumbling block - to test and develop new innovation models and to come up with different strategies to develop plant diversity”. Mr. Klaus Rapf, Arche-Noah- Austria.



“Organic plant breeding should not be supported only by foundations, it should be supported by circular economy”. Mr. Stefan Doeblin, Living Seeds Sementes Vivas SA. Portugal

“The derogation (use of untreated, conventional seed in organic farming) in the organic regulation should end but the organic markets from certain regions or certain underdeveloped productsshould not end with it”. Mrs. Fulya Batur, Arche-Noah- Brussels.



“In the UK the government is not interested in supporting organic agriculture and 80% of organic open-pollinated seed sold in the UK is imported from overseas”.

“The Seed Co-operative was formed to focus on organic seed production, on plant breeding and on the education of professional growers, home gardeners and the general public”. Mr. Peter Brown, Seed Co-operative UK.



“You could have synergies with gene banks and major initiatives in in-situ and ex-situ. You could have lot of advantages by using pre-breeding efforts done by gene banks. This is not direct funding but in a way it’s saving you a lot of funding”. Mrs. Anette Schneegans, European Commission DG AGRI.

“Maybe we should think about the regulatory framework more than asking the Commission to fund organic breeding projects because in the end, even if you have organic bred seed, you may not have a market demand for that, due to the current legislation (derogations system)”. Mrs. Alessia Cogliandro, European Seed Association.



Last but not least, Mrs. Antje Koelling, *Demeter Germany*, stated that if someone sees how the organic sector has been developed in general, it has always been a dialogue between consumers and producers. Behind the whole organic idea there are really strong ideals. If we think these ideals, to the last consequence, we have to strengthen organic breeding and seed production. She concluded by saying that we still have to convince farmers and gardeners, we have to communicate to consumers to buy and specifically ask for products that are made of organic varieties.

“It’s our task to tell consumers about organic varieties and to further develop this dialogue with them”. Mrs. Antje Koelling, Demeter Germany.



There is not one solution for financing organic plant breeding. We should have the right mix of different approaches and measurements (models) to finance it. Everyone is in favor of the effort made by the organic sector to have more organic bred varieties. The aim is to overcome the derogation in the long term but that must be achieved carefully without destroying the organic sector.