

# WORKSHOP REPORT

## *‘TRADERS, RETAILERS AND CONSUMERS: WHAT IS THEIR ROLE IN ORGANIC PLANT BREEDING?’*

FRIDAY 2 DECEMBER 2016, 12.00-19.00HRS  
Instock, CzaarPeterstraat 21, 1018 NW Amsterdam

This workshop was organized by the EU Liaison Office of Demeter International based in Brussels in cooperation with [Estafette Odin](#) and supported by the [IFOAM EU](#) Group. It was the second experts' workshop organized as part of the project *'Promoting organic plant breeding in Europe'*. The aim of the workshop was to gather experts on breeding, retailing and consumer behaviour from different European countries to exchange ideas, knowledge and best practice models about the communication and involvement of the whole food chain in organic plant breeding. It was well attended by representatives from retail companies, organic seed multiplication/breeding companies and initiatives, breeders and researchers from six European countries (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, The Netherlands and the United Kingdom).

During his inaugural address, **Andreas Biesantz, head of the Demeter International Office in Brussels**, stated that according to estimations less than 10% of cultivated seeds in EU organic farming are of organic origin. Based on the Council Regulation (EC) No 834/2007 for organic production, the usage of conventional seeds is allowed in organic farming, based on exemption rules. On the one hand, not sufficient organic cultivars are available and on the other hand organic farmers and processors don't always accept organic varieties for various reasons. Most organic consumers are not aware of this situation.

***“We have to increase the production and use of organically bred varieties. All actors of the organic food chain have to contribute to reach this goal including consumers.”*** Andreas Biesantz, Head of EU Liaison Office Demeter International Brussels



PICTURE 1: ANDREAS BIESANTZ

### **First Part of the Workshop: Organic Plant Breeding Initiatives in EU countries**

During the first part of the workshop experts presented the current situation regarding the use of organic varieties. Additionally, they presented existing actions/ initiatives that

aim to promote organic plant breeding and organic varieties, in The Netherlands, the United Kingdom and in Switzerland.

**Theo Boon, Director Source and Supply at Odin UA – Estafette Odin BV**, gave a presentation about Odin's current actions. Estafette Odin was established in 1983 aiming to create sale and sale structures for biodynamic products and to create an appropriate supply chain for biodynamic producers and farms, supporting organic breeding.

Organic plant breeding (OPB) has the potential to deliver varieties with better nutritional value but more research should be conducted. Having scientific evidence



PICTURE 2: THEO BOON

indicating the higher quality of organic varieties compared with conventional ones could be a good argument to communicate to the consumers. Theo Boon explained that non-hybrid seeds lose some characteristics such as uniformity and high yield. Additionally, farmers usually prefer to use varieties that they already know how to cultivate them.

***“We have to make people understand that we talk about a new system which is better for the world”.*** Theo Boon, Estafette Odin.

Odin had already several initiatives about OPB such as the three year program *“Divers and dichtbij”*. They are also organizing tasting panels for flavour assessment. At the end of his presentation Mr. Boon referred to the new initiative of the Odin cooperative in which they cooperate with two farmers Rene Groenen and Gineke de Graaf. Together they focus on seed screening, selection and production, vegetable growing, research and awareness raise. Eric Gall from IFOAM wondered how Estafette Odin solved the problem of lower yield of the organic varieties. Theo answered that Odin takes a lower margin and the product is slightly more expensive.

**Edwin Nuijten, researcher at the Louis Bolk Institute**, pointed out in his presentation *‘Key elements for alternative breeding pathways: From farmer participation towards chain based and community based breeding’*, that breeding is becoming more and more a technical/molecular science focused on improving traits. Regulations used to protect first the farmer and the community, but now they tend to protect the companies. This development is not in favour of organic plant breeding. A breeder from the audience referred to molecular tools. He said that they have advantages. They may cost more but by using them it takes less time to create a new variety. The use of these techniques is not ‘black or white’.

Edwin Nuijten explained that currently three groups of varieties are being used in organic farming: conventionally bred varieties, organically produced (multiplied) varieties and organically bred varieties. Of these three the first group is the largest. He added that the current breeding models are focused on the farmer. However, they should from now on focus on the whole food chain.

***“For new directions in organic breeding, two main alternative models (and their combinations) can be used: chain-based breeding and community-based breeding. The first model focuses on shared economic interest whereas the second focuses on shared culture.”***Edwin Nuijten, Louis Bolk Institute



PICTURE 3: EDWIN NUIJTEN

**Bert van Ruitenbeek, director at Stichting Demeter (NL)**, gave a speech on the topic of ‘How to increase consumers’ awareness about organic plant breeding’. He referred to the words of Naomi Klein ‘if the environmental movement, including the organic movement, will not address the direct needs of ordinary people they will fail and become irrelevant’. He wondered if the organic movement is part of the ‘elite’ or if it can be relevant for ‘the man in the street’. In his opinion we have to make it as personal and relevant as we can. It is about taste, health, a little about diversity and it should be affordable for as many people as possible. He recommended that children and young people are one of our main target groups. He referred to the ‘Youth Food Movement’ which exists in The Netherlands and could help to bring our issues into the classroom or give the opportunity to the children to visit organic farms. He highlighted that maybe now is not the ideal time to organize big awareness campaigns but encouraged biodynamic organizations to work more on the connection between farmers, processors and traders.



***“Related to daily problems of the ‘ordinary people’, organic breeding seems to be not high on the list...unless we can direct contact and incorporate them like Odin tried to do with the project with cereals”.*** Bert van Ruitenbeek, Stichting Demeter

PICTURE 4: BERT RUITENBEEK

The [Bioverita](#) label was presented by **Antje Koelling, head of public relations and policy of Demeter Germany**. Bioverita is a label for organic food originating from organically bred varieties which was initiated in Switzerland. This label might help to communicate the good qualities of organically bred varieties. The main goal of the Bioverita initiative is to make organic and biodynamic plant breeding and varieties better known for cereals vegetables and fruits. In order to achieve that, it targets on the whole food chain. Its future aim is to develop a ‘Bioverita’-certification system which will be used by the organic control bodies. It will verify that the product was produced of organically bred seeds. Regarding the economic viability of the Bioverita initiative, it is up to now financed by member contributions. Bioverita already operates in Switzerland, Germany and Italy but it could be a model for the whole of Europe. All in all, Bioverita is at a really early stage of development and it needs to be supported by more initiatives. However it is suggested that all initiatives should use one common logo.

**David Price, managing director of the Seed Co-operative in Spalding, Lincolnshire-UK**, reported in his presentation *'Actors along the food chain: enabling farmers to take up organic seed production and plant breeding'* about the actions of the [Seed Cooperative](#) as well as the current situation in the UK. The Seed Co-operative is the biggest organic vegetable seed producer in the UK and its model is similar to Bingenheimer Saatgut in Germany. Currently in the UK 80% of open pollinated seeds are imported. They import seeds from companies such as Bingenheimer Saatgut, Sativa Rheinau and other small European producers, but they would like to reverse this situation. They are trying to enable the UK farmers to take up organic seed production and plant breeding and make them understand that seeds should be locally produced. Therefore, they participate in several conferences and workshops. They try to network the seed growers and share their knowledge and skills.

***"To be a community-owned seed company we need a community of owners."***David Price, Seed Co-operative, UK



PICTURE 5: DAVID PRICE

## **Second Part of the Workshop: World Café sessions**

The second part of the workshop focussed on discussing different aspects of the topic with the word café method.

### ***Session 1: 'Consumers: How to catch their interest and support for organic plant breeding?'***

OPB is a very sensitive and difficult topic to communicate to the consumers. If we want to raise awareness and involve them it should be indirectly focussing on health, diversity, taste as these concepts are 'easy' to understand. The current situation is promising because there are many initiatives about OPB. The mentality of the consumers has started to change. The experts of this working group were sceptical about the Bioverita logo because consumers are already overwhelmed with logos and claims and there is a lack of trust even for the 'organic' logo. What would happen when an organic product has the Bioverita logo and another one does not? This would immediately lower the value of the second. As a best practice raising consumer awareness they referred to [Nature & More by EOSTA](#), a successful example of transparency related to the quality of organic products which empowers consumers to make informed purchasing decisions.

There should be a system which provides information, if the consumer wants to know more about the product, but not a strict logo.



PICTURE 6: LINA LASITHIOTAKI

***“It is very important to touch the consumers on an emotional level and create a story behind the product”.***

Lina Lasithiotaki, Demeter International, moderator of the first working group.

## ***Session 2: ‘Organic food processors, wholesale and retailers: How can they support organic breeding?’***

The experts of this working group identified as one of the main challenges the difficulty to convince farmers to grow organically bred varieties and particularly open pollinated varieties. The main reason for that is that the food processors usually demand uniformity. The whole food production chain should contribute to OPB. They also agreed that there is the need to communicate the issue to the consumers, either with direct communication in the shops or with signs. This opinion disagrees with the results of the first working group. Communication on the OPB issue should not only be on quality and taste, but also about fairness and transparency of the procedures in the organic sector. Furthermore, they stressed the need to better define and communicate what OPB is. There is a distinction between providing organic seeds and providing organically bred varieties. Apart from that there is a debate about the term OPB. This term needs to be better defined in order to communicate it. Another idea would be to cooperate with like-minded initiatives like [Slow Food](#).

***Retailers and wholesalers can commit buying products that come from organically bred varieties and channel back a part of the money of the sales to OPB.*** Eric Gall, IFOAM EU, moderator of the second working group.



PICTURE 7: ERIC GALL

## ***Session 3: ‘What does the food chain expect from organic breeders?’***

In this working group it was agreed that variety characteristics such as resistances, product processing, taste and nutritional value are important to processors and are usually dependent on the demand of the consumers. In addition, it was agreed that if an organic variety has some disadvantages concerning the mentioned characteristics, the advantages must at least compensate the disadvantages. If, for example, an open pollinated (OP) or organically bred variety has a lower yield, it should at least taste better. Furthermore, it was agreed that the breeders need to advise the farmers on how to cultivate these organically bred varieties in order to have the best results. Apart from that, the new suggested EU legislation indicates that organic seeds must be used in organic farming and for that reason organic farmers should start using organically multiplied seeds instead of conventional. If this happened, we would hopefully get a



bigger market for organic varieties and increase the breeding activities. Last but not least, it was agreed that on the one hand breeders need to check the market demands and on the other hand salesmen should inform the breeders on what the competitors do.



PICTURE 8: ANTJE KOELLING

At the end of the workshop the participants visited the new [Odin shop](#). **Merle Koomans van den Dries, marketing manager at Estafette Odin**, introduced the new shop to the participants.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Participants gave a very positive feedback on the event. Many participants agreed that this workshop was very important as it brought together different stakeholders giving them the opportunity to network and discuss possibilities of new collaboration. The overall aim of the workshop was to discuss and get an insight into the role of traders, retailers and consumers concerning the promotion of organic plant breeding (OPB). During the first part of the workshop experts presented the current situation regarding the use of organic varieties and the existing initiatives for the promotion of organic plant breeding. The second part of the workshop focussed on discussing different aspects of the topic with the word café method.

Concerning the role of consumers; two main points were highlighted. First: children and young people should be more involved focussing on the education aspect. Best practice examples exist in The Netherlands. It was concluded that instead of organizing big awareness campaigns targeting on the consumers, biodynamic organizations – and not only - should work more on the connection between farmers, processors and traders. Second: there was a lively discussion among the participants about the Bioverita initiative. It was questioned whether the use of the Bioverita logo would raise consumers' awareness as they are usually overwhelmed by the number of existing logos. Also, there is often a lack of trust regarding the current ones. Adding one more logo on the products about the production method of seeds could create confusion because organic plant breeding is unknown by the majority of the consumers.

Regarding the role of traders and retailers it was concluded that the whole food production chain should contribute to OPB. Organic retailers and traders should support and promote the use of organic seeds even if this means that they have to take up some

of the production costs themselves. Undoubtedly, there is the need to communicate the issue to the consumers focussing on quality and taste, but also on fairness and transparency. That could be achieved either with direct communication in the shops or with signs. Best practise examples from the perspective of retailers were presented by Odin. In addition emphasis was given to the [Fair Breeding Initiative](#) of [Naturata](#) as it is a best practice example for the contribution of retailers regarding financing OPB. The Fair Breeding Initiative is registered. It legally belongs to Naturata, but Naturata does not own the produced varieties.

Furthermore, there was an interesting debate about the term OPB. The term of OPB should be defined and explained not only to consumers but to the whole organic sector. It was also questioned whether the cooperation with like-minded initiatives like [Slow Food](#) would add value to put the issue forward. However, the cooperation with some NGOs about this topic is challenging as they are not well informed about the value of OPB.

The attention was drawn to the new suggested EU legislation which demands that organic seeds must be used in organic farming from 2021 on. Therefore, there is an urgent need to work further on the issue. Best practice models should be promoted and communicated among the EU Member States in order to create new projects. To sum up, although there are various initiatives, it was underlined that more cooperation among the food chain actors is needed to promote and increase OPB in Europe.

### **Additional Information**

#### **Next Steps of the Project *Organic Plant Breeding in Europe***

In 2017 the EU Liaison Office is planning to organize:

- Expert workshop to take place in Germany in co-operation with Kultursaate.V. and [Bingenheimer Saatgut](#)<sup>1</sup> (first half year, tbc)
- Expert workshop with a focus on promoting organic varieties and organic breeding in the Mediterranean region. To take place in Idanha a Nova in Portugal in co-operation with [SementesVivas](#)<sup>2</sup>. (second half year)
- Updating the website
- 3-4 factsheets
- 2 newsletters

#### **About us:**

[Demeter International e.V.](#) is a non-profit association for organic food and farming. The EU Liaison Office of Demeter International was installed in Brussels in 2002. It has organized numerous events providing a platform for dialogue between stakeholders and policy makers in Brussels and Europe. Since 2013, our office has started working on

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<sup>1</sup>Bingenheimer Saatgut AG trades exclusively open pollinated varieties of organic seeds and plants. It markets seeds all over the European Union and occasionally also beyond the internal market.

<sup>2</sup> This company runs a pilot project for organic seed multiplication and organic plant breeding which could be a best practice model for Mediterranean countries. Sementes Vivas cooperates with farmers, vendors and research institutes to establish the production of high quality organic and biodynamic seeds in Portugal.

political questions related to organic seeds and organic plant breeding realizing its importance. Committed to work on the seed topic in the coming years, a multi-year project was started in January 2016. The project entitled '*Promoting Organic Plant Breeding in Europe*' is aiming to create a platform for dialogue and knowledge exchange among organic plant breeders and actors of the whole food chain promoting organic plant breeding.

For contact and further information: Lina Lasithiotaki, [lina.lasithiotaki@demeter.net](mailto:lina.lasithiotaki@demeter.net)

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