

Diversity of cultivated plants and peasant seeds

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1. Who is saving the diversity of cultivated plants and/or fighting for peasant rights of saving seeds in your country? Who is involved in GMO-free seed production? Are there new groups or networks that are setting up?

Many small farmers cultivated old variety and traditional crops. Most of them are in the mountain areas and less favored areas in the periphery of the countries. For example close to the borders with Greece and Turkey.

There is no special organization dedicated to fighting for peasant rights but AGROLINK Association started to work in this direction and we were more motivated with the visit of a French farmers group in Bulgaria in March 2007. AGROLINK hosted the visit and organise a tour in the regions with villages where people cultivate diversity of plants and they produce own seeds.

There is also a regional organization in the village of Smiliyan (Rhodope mountain) called Smiliyan bean which worked for 15 years very enthusiastic and with long term vision to protect local varieties of beans and other vegetables like maize, potato, pumpkin. AGROLINK Association is the main organization working on GMO free production. There is a coalition of several NGOs "GMO free Bulgaria". Until now there are 5 municipalities declared as GMO free. The main reason is not to allow cultivation of GMO crops on their territory. There is also several state scientific institutes which are dealing with cultivated old and local varieties of crops and fruit trees like Institute for plant genetic resources in town of Sadovo, Institutes for orchard in Kyustendil and in Plovdiv, Research Institute for in the town of Pomorie on the Black sea and others.

2. Please give some examples for using cultivated biodiversity. How do you see the importance of peasant, local or traditional varieties for agriculture and vegetable gardening?

One of the most successful examples for using cultivated biodiversity is the group working in village of Smiliyan. They have a special museum for Smiliyan bean, organise every year a festival "Smiliyan bean". The organization promotes and advertise Smiliyan bean and attract tourists to their region. They work very professional and in a good cooperation with all the population in the village. The group has established a NGO and became member of the Slow food movement. People working in the area to protect old Smiliyan bean create job for local population because they have good marketing strategy bringing together idea from conservation bean and vegetable but also tourist center, museum, working with other farmers activities as milk and cheese production, local restaurants and artists.

Thanks to the location between Black sea and Mediterranean seas, influenced by many mountains, plains and valleys Bulgaria has one of the most rich biodiversity in Europe. One of the ancient governments in Europe population in Bulgaria for thousand of years has been cultivated big diversity of broad range of species and varieties of crops and animals. During the communist time some of the areas went to industrial way of production with intensification building mega agri-complexes with a small choice of crops and varieties. But there were also many regions now called less favored areas mainly in the mountain and close to borders with Turkey and Greece. There are not influenced by industrialization because neglected by communist regime but there is potential in this regions to protect diversity and old traditional agricultural practices. The Smiliyan example is a good model for that. Bulgarians love their vegetables and fruits taste and freshness and worry for the current big invasion of foreigner seed and imported vegetables and fruits without any taste and aromas. If somebody start to work in this direction and promote local biodiversity of seeds farmers will plant it and consumers will buy. There is big potential for that.

3. Which are the main (legal) obstacles that constrain you? How can you avoid them?

A. There is no any legislation in Bulgaria on agricultural landraces and varieties which are naturally adapted to the local and regional conditions which will protect local seeds and varieties. Even more becoming member of EU Bulgaria harmonized almost all legislation with EU Directives and Regulations but there is no one law or legislation dealing with cultivated biodiversity.

B. Entering in EU from 1st of January 2007 Bulgarian government has forbid direct sales of farmers' production at their farms and on the streets. There is old tradition in Bulgaria that small farmers sell their production directly at their farms or people from big cities go to the villages near to the city to buy directly from farmers. The government says now that it will not allow anymore. Farmers should sell only to registered traders, wholesalers or market places. In 2006 11.6 % of GDP in Bulgaria belong to agriculture, 24 % of the population lives in rural areas. This much more than in Western European countries. Forbidden direct sales will lead for disappearing a huge number of small farmers and also cultivated biodiversity.

C. Very aggressive advertisement of foreigner seed companies: from the Netherlands, France, Germany, USA.

D. Strong lobbies of multinational companies for advertisement in the newspapers, magazines, promotion the new foreigner hybrids of seeds. Working directly with farmers giving them promise for fast income and profit.

I see the possibility to avoid these obstacles working on:

A. To develop national legislation on cultivated biodiversity. For that we need to cooperate with other EU countries and to see what kind of legislation they implement. To accept the most appropriate legislation which can work and reliable for my country.

B. To lobby at European level as we are member of EU to develop legislation for cultivated biodiversity at European level.

C. To lobby at national level among policy makers, farmers and consumers to promote cultivated biodiversity.

D. To establish a network of farmers who breed old varieties and peasant seeds and to promote their production.

E. To cooperate with other organizations from abroad working on peasants seeds to exchange experience, practices and skills. To be part of a European network of cultivated biodiversity.

4. Which are the public gene banks in your country? What is the cooperation with them like? Do the gene banks have public access? How do they assure GMO-free quality?

The main state institute served as a gene bank is the Institute for plant genetic resources in town of Sadovo. We have a good connection with them but only at official level. They work as a closed system and even cooperation with other research institutes is not very open. Some of the researchers in the Institute in Sadovo are ready to work with company like Monsanto. The official statement of the institute is they are gene bank of Bulgarian agriculture plants and they work is only to preserve Bulgarian seeds nevertheless old and new.

5. What are the perspectives of public gene banks for the future in your country?

It is difficult to say. It is depend of the policy at national level but also it is depend of the person who manages the Institute. For example Director of the Institute in Pomorie hardly works on biodiversity and old varieties of fruit tree. She has clearly position against GMO and cultivated biodiversity.

6. Is there any other important information that you want to share?

There is a need to establish a platform for cultivated biodiversity at European level. A web site where people can see different practices, people work, legislation in different countries and European level will be very useful. An active network where different people and organization can participate will do people's feeling that they a part of big group and they are not alone.

A strong movement with many active organizations and people will change the situation and will help to save biodiversity.