Greece / Griechenland / ΕΛΛΑΣ

Situation of conservation and seed work in Greece

Kostas Koutis, AEGILOPS, Network for Biodiversity and Ecology in Agriculture, Focal Point Office - Ano Lehonia,Volos 373 00, Greece - Tel. and Fax : +302428094558, - Email : info@aegilops.gr - Website: www.aegilops.gr

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?

Greek movement for agrobiodiversity has its roots in organic agricultural movement from 80s . Organic farmers along with enthusiastic gardeners and 'organic consumers – being in urgent need to get and use local adapted varieties and consume tasty products- are those supporting non governmental actions for the protection of plant genetic resources. These groups are also pioneers of the campaign against GMO's.

Most of the agrobiodiversity NGOs like AEGILOPS and other recent local newtworks and institutions (Arcipelagos,'Network of Grevena , etc) are trying to set up small scale local seed banks while others are trying to save and promote local landraces through primarly the exchange of the seed among farmers and amateurs (PELITI

There is also environmental interest from schools to set up small scale genebanks and grow local landraces for schoolgardens and students homes. All the aforementioned groups consist greek agrobiodiversity movement.).

AEGILOPS Network, consisting from organic growers, is also trying to achieve systematic seed (GMO-free) production (recently from wheat landraces) and evaluation under organic conditions.The organization, recently took also initiatives to promote peasant rights, farm-saved seed and to face seed legislation obstacles. This initiative targets on a more broad campaign to be set up in Greece for peasant rights mainly from organic, consumer, biodiversity and anti – GMO NGO's.

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?

Many young organic farmers seek for old varieties but they don't really know neither where to find seed nor to select and reproduce the varieties. So, most of them buy imported seed of varieties that are not really suitable for the farming conditions of Greece. Additionally there is no evidence for adaptability of traditional crops such as sesame to organic agriculture, though there is a living traditional knowledge about growing these crops without many inputs one generation before. This knowledge should be documented and also passed to the feature organic farmer along with the seed.

AEGILOPS Heritage Wheat Program , the last 4 years, is being evaluating and selecting landraces which can thrive in various organic environments. This On Farm Conservation procedure let landraces evolve and adjust to the next coming changes of climate, which is the most important for food security of the region and globally.

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

The main legal obstacles have to do with farm saved seed and commercial use of landraces. Organic farmers are now obliged to use organic seed from registered (uniform)varieties been written in Common Database and National Lists. Landraces cannot be easily registered- populations and non famous varieties not at all- so in fact formal European Organic Agriculture leaves out biodiversity from organic farms.

The farmers are also obliged to apply for derogation to use their farm saved (organic produced) seed which is (formally) being considered non organic and no registered. Organic farmer cannot use his seed and more seriously seed form landraces. Wheat growers of heritage varieties face extra problem with premiums for hard wheat. In order to take the premium they reveal false labels of registered varieties. It is very disappointing that unions of organic farmers in Greece accept silently to sign application for derogation(for their farm saved seed) in order just to take organic premiums. They accept to import registered 'organic' varieties recanting their local landraces and seed.

Under those circumstances the fight must be given in various fields. One of them is to change legal frame and an other to insist using our seed in a non legal way. Their is another, medium, to fight the system with its weapons. That is systematic (farmer) seed production for farmer networks.

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?

Greek Gene Bank of National Agricultural Research Foundation(NAGREF)- established in 1981 by the Ministry of Agriculture at the Agricultural Research Centre of Macedonia and Thraki under the support of FAO -preserves at least 10.000 germplasm accessions of cultivated and wild plants belonging to 66 genera and 169 species of crop plants and relatives (Wheat, Barley, Maize, Rice, Oats, Gabbage, Sugar Beet, Carrot, Onion, Eggplant, Grapevine, Minor Fruits),.. Apart from NAGREF, a number of field collections, or seed samples of traditional crop varieties or breeding material are also stored at a number of Agricultural Universities, Technological Education Institutions, Botanical Gardens and other scientific organisations. The Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Chania (MAICH) on Crete island, has modern long-term seed storage facilities where the germplasm of endangered endemic Cretan plant species and of old vegetable varieties is safely conserved (approx. 2000 accessions). It has also facilities for storage of the DNA of 60 olive varieties and a number of varieties of tomato, melon, beans and eggplant (DNA gene bank).

There is at least a 10 years old close cooperation history between Greek Gene Bank and NGOs like AEGILOPS. Samples of seed were given for cultivation and regeneration to organic farmers. Regenerated seed and also landraces been collected and preserved by farmers were been given back to the Bank. Despite its wiliness for collaboration GGB was often unable to satisfy many requests for germplasm, since the maintained seed is of minimal quantity and funding and expertise shortages were not allowing massive regeneration under scientifically acceptable standards to produce sufficient seed quantities for both conservation and distribution. So Gene Bank seemed to understand the real interest and concern of farmers, environmentalists, ecologists and the general public, for the protection and conservation of traditional varieties – finding in them the most important partners- and NGO's seem also to understand the weakness and political unwillingness of formal system to « invest» in plant genetic resources

Although the cultivation of GMO crops is not permitted in Greece and there is a current scepticism about how easy they could alter dramatically the genetic traits of their wild relatives nothing can assure us that in the next years the GGB will not accept a possible «coexistence of organic, conventional and GMO crops .

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

In the last years some progress was made with the approval of projects that would provide new administration, seed storage and laboratory facilities and would enable a thorough survey of the country through a large number of exploratory and germplasm collecting missions and an extensive regeneration, multiplication and characterisation/documentation of the collected germplasm. *On farm* and *in situ* (or Genetic Reserve) conservation would be an apriority among the priorities for the coming decade, through either national or EU programmes. According to the Second Country Report concerning the State of Plant Genetic Resources (PGR) to FAO (2006) among the major administrative, legal and policy issues for the coming decade were (except funding) the technical coordination and the encouragement of the activated role of the Gene Bank as a coordination body at national level and extension of its activities on regional level. On the other hand the major priority issues focused on the management of the PGR, regarding were the following:

1. The inventory of PGR, including all the stages and procedures (characterisation, documentation, assessment, ect.), sufficient to a long-term plan of conservation.

2. The implementation of *in situ* and *on farm* conservation schemes, particularly in marginal productivity agricultural areas of the Greek islands and Mainland Mountains, for the protection of landraces and wild relatives.

3. The development of a national plan for the protection of the germplasm of various crops currently facing the danger of extinction.

4. The utilisation in breeding programmes (conventional or advanced genetic engineering tools) for the assessment of the PGR and certainly the adaptation to low input farming systems using traditional landraces as starting material and the promotion of quality products.

5. The establishment of a network for monitoring agricultural biodiversity to prevent further genetic erosion, and the adoption of indicators to monitor the effectiveness of the new EU policies in protecting biodiversity, wildlife habitats and agricultural landscapes.

According to the same report "*All the aforementioned priorities and targets should be successfully accomplished as long as all the PGR stakeholders (Universities, research sector, NGO, private sector, ect.) in Greece strongly contribute and cooperate*".

NGOs would play their role and contribute if only they are asked to do so and they are accepted as an equal contributor to the major task of preserving national PGR. Secure peasant rights and access to PGR are regarded by the agrobiodiversity movement as preconditions.

Kostas Koutis, AEGILOPS, Network for Biodiversity and Ecology in Agriculture, Focal Point Office Ano Lehonia,Volos 373 00, Greece - Tel. and Fax : +302428094558, - Email : info@aegilops.gr

Website: www.aegilops.gr

AEGILOPS Network for Biodiversity and Ecology in Agriculture is a network of ecofarmers in Greece, having as main activities, in one hand, the conservation of heritage varieties/traditional agricultural knowledge and on the other hand, the reintroduction of these varieties into everyday agricultural practice (on farm conservation). Among main targets of AEGILOPS is also to upgrade the role of the farmers to the preservation of biodiversity of their agroecosystems as well as their rights to take part in the management and benefits of agrobiodiversity.

Kostas Koutis
Organic Agiculturalist

MSc, Plant Breeding, PhD student working on local wheat varieties adapted to organic conditions. (Organic Breeding)
AEGILOPS Coordinator, Heritage Wheat Program responsible
Network Coordinator of former Workshop for Ecological Practice (WEP) between 1995 -2000 for the Preservation and Exchange of Heritage Varieties.