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LIBERATE DIVERSITY ON FARMS AND IN GARDENS

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Réseau Semences Paysannes (Peasants’ Seeds Network), France, Guy Kastler, General Delegate

The failure of “elite” seed varieties developed by industry. Since 1945 the subsidies of the Marshall Plan and public research have begun to replace peasant biodiversity by the Green Revolution’s “elite” seed varieties. Through them the rush to transform fossil fuel into chemical fertilizers, pesticides, heavy mechanization and often unlimited irrigation necessary to their cultivation, replaced the work of peasants who as a result, were pushed first into factories and later into unemployment. The DUS standards imposed by the catalogue and dictated by industrial seed companies out of their own interests banned traditional varieties by removing peasants’ right to exchange their seeds. Hybrids and later on Plant Variety Certificates (PVCs) have challenged farmers’ ancient right to resow harvested grains. GMOs and patents have further reinforced dependency. In order to bypass the refusal of GMOs the seed industry is developing mutated cereals and vegetables, basically new “clandestine GMOs” exempt from labelling requirements.

This system is failing today. Western Europe is devastated by pollution and the general depletion of water and soil, diseases induced by pesticides and industrial food, the desertification of the countryside and the delocalization of agricultural production in countries with looser ecological and social restrictions. Under these circumstances, Eastern European countries joining the European Union with their millions of small farmers will be obliged to abandon the majority of their traditional seeds in the near future in order to buy industrial seeds from the west. Together with traditional seeds disappear small farmers, who are being replaced by large anonymous agricultural holdings oriented to industrial crops for exportation.

The revival of peasants’ seeds. Biodynamic farmers in the last century were the first ones to understand that the trap was closing first on seeds. They conserved and selected their traditional varieties so they may maintain their independence from an agricultural system heavily based on chemical inputs. Then, hundreds of citizen-based organizations and amateur gardeners’ groups accompanied by regional governments, like in Italy, began to conserve thousands of traditional varieties. With the arrival of GMOs many farmers realize that they need to adopt the same approach if they wish to preserve their autonomy. Since 2003 several hundreds of them gathered in Auzeville, France, and founded the Peasants’ Seeds Network. Farmers’ organizations have joined artisanal organic seed producers in this activity, while respecting each other’s rhythm and specificity: the Network’s strength resides in its diversity and respect of differences. The strategies of firms and laws are international and so are those of the Network. In 2005 the first seminar ‘Liberate Diversity’ held in Poitiers, France, united hundreds of delegates from almost all over Europe as well as from South America, Africa and Asia thanks to collaboration with GRAIN. In 2006 Red de Semillas hosted the second seminar in Bullas, Spain. After Southern venue, the third seminar is opening today in Halle, in the centre of Europe in proximity to the East thanks to BUKO, the Association for GMO-free Seeds and the European Civic Forum. The Rete Semi Rurali will be hosting the fourth edition in 2008 in Italy. These moments for sharing experience have given rise to common convictions:

1. The impossible coexistence with GMOs. Coexistence is the Trojan horse of contamination and transgenic crops. Through coexistence the labelling threshold of 0.9% becomes a right to contaminate. The European resistance represents the last hope of farmers in the South opposing GMOs: if Europe capitulates and accepts coexistence, their governments will also be obliged to give up.

2. Ban patents on the living and the PVC in its 1991 version. Pretending that it is an issue of “the common heritage of Humanity”, the seed industry put its hand on all they could in farmers’ fields, protected them with patents and banned the resowing of harvested grain. Since the 1991 UPOV agreements, the PVC is turning into a patent. The trade of seeds cannot remain free: transgenic and mutated seeds as well as the trade of hybrids and manipulated varieties that destroy traditional and peasant varieties must be banned. The banning of PVC in its 1991 version and of patents will dry up industries’ profits.

3. Farmers’ rights to preserve, resow and exchange their seeds. Industrial seeds are selected to subdue farmers. An increasing number of farmers are beginning to select their own varieties and for that purpose they resow part of their harvest and exchange their seeds. Not through trucks or large boats as does the industry. Small, but regular quantities are sufficient, but European legislation forbids it. Directive 98/95 on conservation varieties had the potential to open a space in this direction. However, nine years following its publication the Permanent European Seed Committee reduces them to open-door antiquities exhibited in small regional museums ensuring that the industry maintains its monopoly. The Peasants’ Seed Network continues to create its own rules for exchanging seeds and to apply them whether they are legal or not. This approach still remains the best way to influence law-making in official negotiations where farmers’ representatives always constitute a minority.

Farmers cannot select seeds manipulated by industry. Sometimes through the help of public research they rediscover their parents’ know-how and combine it with traditional varieties so they may progress together. Some are still cultivated, mainly fruits and vegetables. In terms of cereals, little remains. Traditional varieties collected in farmers’ fields have been closed off into “ex-situ” collections where they degrade because they can no longer evolve. Most of them would have disappeared already, hence the urgency to revive them in the fields. Farmers rarely have access nowadays to these genetic resources reserved to seed companies and researchers. They cannot exchange them freely and sanitary and traceability norms gradually prevent them from resowing their harvests. Yet the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources (ITPGR) recognizes their rights to conserve, resow and exchange seeds and participate in national decision-making that concerns them, but these rights remain subject to national rules. These laws must override national and European legislations that ignore them.

4. Collective rights of farmers on genetic resources. In order to strengthen its domination, the industry decided to contaminate through GMOs the centres of origin of key species that feed humanity: the maize in Mexico, rice in Asia, wheat in Iraq. Here in Gatersleben it organizes the contamination of collections, elsewhere the state abandons them and reduces them to digitalized gene banks allowing to create patented and unstable transgenic constructions as well as merged or mutated genes through marker assisted selection techniques. In the mean time Bill Gates is attempting to close the last ones remaining into an underground bunker. Genetic resources are first and foremost the collective good of communities that have preserved and selected them, not the raw material of the seed industry. They need to be safeguarded, remain public and protected from genetic contamination. Farmers should have free access to collections so they may reintroduce them into their fields before they disappear. In order to protect local traditional varieties from biopiracy, the Rio agreements allow farmers to condition the access to such varieties to farmers’ consent, to describe them publicly with criteria defined by farmers growing them, to keep a sufficiently informal character of exchanges... and simply construct as rapidly as possible the food sovereignty of people.

These two days of exchange will serve to continue and expand reflection on and decide about our future actions: We wish you a useful and constructive meeting!

Guy Kastler, Réseau Semences Paysannes (Peasants' Seeds Network), France, 2007



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