

Seed Diversity and Sovereignty in Europe: Building a roadmap for the future

Introduction

There is an urgent need to promote active networking and reflection by diverse social actors working on issues of seed conservation, diversity and sovereignty. In response, Global Diversity Foundation is organizing the 1st European Community Exchange (ECE) on seed diversity and sovereignty from Saturday 23rd September to Wednesday 27th September 2017 in Barcelona. This event, uniquely designed for members of the European 'community' working on issues surrounding seeds, will gather the important work carried out on different fronts, help us amplify our diverse efforts and allow us to co-create a unified plan for future coordination on a European scale. The ECE on Seeds will feature peer-to-peer interaction and 'think-tank' style concertation in stimulating indoor and outdoor venues in Barcelona, combined with pre- and post-event interaction through an online platform. In addition, the ECE will include a 2-day joint activity with the DIVERSIFOOD consortium (<http://www.diversifood.eu/>) that will focus on community seed banks and related collaborative actions.

Background

Seeds and other forms of plant germplasm represent the initial stepping-stone in any human food system of the world. The rules and laws governing their breeding, reproduction and distribution clearly define affordability, availability and accessibility of food, as well as the rights that people have on such resources.

During recent decades, complex European legislation on the registration, certification and marketing of plant reproductive material has been largely detrimental to small farmers. The current policy scenario increasingly privileges the commodification of seeds, primarily benefiting corporate agribusiness while leaving aside small producers and consumers within local networks. The future of seed policy is not very promising, especially if treaties such as the TTIP and similar agreements are put into place.

In addition, the current crisis of European farming - spurred by rural exodus and urbanisation, dwindling resources, water, air and soil pollution, large-scale migration, climate change, and many other factors - exacerbates the challenges of maintaining seed diversity and sovereignty.

In response to this troubling context, various advocacy organisations and policy networks have emerged along with cooperatives and individuals that are developing seed breeding and conservation programmes. We are not always talking among ourselves or with those

who are decision-makers on these issues in policy arenas. For these reasons, we need to come together to forge a cohesive approach to achieve seed freedom.

As we explore the complex economic, environmental and social parameters of seed diversity and sovereignty, we cannot fall into the simplistic idea that all old ways are good while all new ones are bad. Instead, we need to find common ground where innovation and tradition are combined while limiting excessive external regulation and control. Inspired by a preliminary survey conducted by the Salvia Foundation, we have already identified some key questions related to current challenges and solutions for maintaining seed diversity and sovereignty, subdivided into three major areas:

Community & regional seed banks and action (DIVERSIFOOD joint activity)

- Why is cultivated and wild seed diversity being lost in Europe?
- What is the link between seed conservation and community-based, participatory on-farm plant breeding?

Seeds as commons

- If we agree that international agreements (ITPGRFA and CBD) have so far failed to protect seeds-as-commons, what specific alternatives are there at the supra-national level?
- What is needed to take seed-sharing/exchange networks to scale?

Participatory on-farm breeding and multiplication

- What is the best model of collaborative research by farmers, scientists and cooperatives on viable community-based seed systems?
- What is the status of innovative, diversity-based breeding efforts that use seed communities rather than single varieties?

These and other issues will be at the heart of the European Community Exchange in Barcelona 2017. Other important issues, such as intellectual property rights on germplasm, open-pollinated varieties or ways of scaling up sustainable breeding, will be addressed at possible future meetings.

Concept

The 1st European Community Exchange (ECE) on seed diversity and sovereignty is designed for members of the European 'community' working on issues surrounding seeds. It seeks to promote dialogue, exchange and collaboration across existing sub-regional networks and across specialty areas of work (e.g. advocacy, breeding, conservation, policy, social movements, urban/rural interfaces) within the region.

The Global Environments Network (GEN; see below), the umbrella under which the event is being organised, has experience convening diverse groups and using interactive processes to incite fresh perspectives on - and new solutions to - old problems. We are teaming up with veterans of the European seed initiatives to ensure an enlightening and productive event. We will invite 20-25 people from diverse disciplinary and regional backgrounds, including activists, advocates, plant breeders and seed conservers, academics, policy-makers, and farmers.

A few days prior to the ECE, the DIVERSIFOOD consortium (see below) will meet in Rome to discuss community seed banks. Participants at the latter meeting will join us in Barcelona for a day of exchange and interactive activities on community seed banks (24 September), and some of them will stay on for the full ECE. This overlap between events will provide participants at both with the opportunity for broader dialogue and networking, and ensure that our roadmap for the future is inclusive of actors, initiatives and issues surrounding seeds in Europe.

The ECE is not just a one-off event, but also a moment of encounter in a longer interaction through which participants will engage with each other - before, during and after the event. This commitment, merging a much-needed community exchange with a think tank approach, will lead to the collective design of a regional roadmap on seed diversity and sovereignty.

In order to kindle the collective spirit of innovation, we will create a strong group connection, provide stimulating inputs, enter spaces of deep reflection and take the time to build a common future. For this reason, GEN Community Exchanges, including this ECE, are intensive 5-day events, rather than classic 3-day conferences made up of lectures, presentations and discussions. In addition to asking well-known experts from within the field to provide keynote speeches, we invite young, dynamic and perhaps unconventional trailblazers who operate at the field's edges to stoke creative thinking within the group. Many other experts will be present to participate fully in the creative process, ensuring that the outcomes are grounded in long-term experience and gained wisdom.

Content

The event is designed to forge and sustain creative alliances and launch a productive solution-seeking process to address ongoing challenges related to seeds. It features peer-to-peer exchange and mentoring, visits to transformative initiatives and dialogue across boundaries.

Topics we propose to cover

- Community & regional seed banks and action (DIVERSIFOOD joint activity)
- Seeds as commons
- Participatory on-farm breeding and multiplication

Locations for field-based activities

- Germplasm bank and living collections of the Botanical Garden of Barcelona (Barcelona)
- The Baix Llobregat Agrarian Park and its farms (El Prat del Llobregat).

Expected outputs and outcomes

Expected outputs are (1) a cohesive, collaborative roadmap for action on seeds and plant breeding in Europe to be widely shared and (2) a rich, multimedia report including case studies, session results and a video.

Expected outcomes comprise exchange of ideas and issues amongst actors from across the spectrum, a more inclusive European-wide network of actors working on seeds at all scales, and initial proposals for collaborative actions to protect seed diversity and sovereignty that can be shared with interested foundations. We also expect to determine approaches to increase cross-scalar - and cross-pollinating - dialogue and exchange between grassroots movements, academic/research institutions and policy-makers.