

Transcription  
Hannes Lorenzen European Parliament  
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Thank you. Regarding the question of agricultural biodiversity today, some people might believe or might try to make us believe that seeds mainly concern breeders and companies. You might have discovered that it is not the case. The conservation of the great variety of seeds, the great diversity that farmers have created over centuries has become a common task of breeders, farmers, gardeners and consumers. And they should not only be encouraged to conserve that diversity, but people should be allowed to use it in a good way.

We have just heard from Mr. Bazzanti how regions and how people have tried to do conservation work and to make use of their seeds - their local seeds, farmer's seeds, the gardener's seeds - from the bottom up. Seeds grow from the bottom up. Laws usually come from the top down. And the question is, how can we politically achieve that they meet where we have a chance to reach the goals which have been repeated so often, in international conventions, political commitments and European regulations? I think there is a will to do something; it is now clear that we are losing biodiversity; it is clear that we have to do something about it. But as you could hear from Mr. Flüh, there are difficulties to make laws that really help people to do that job. And if I may start from the top down, and from the perspective of institutions like the European Commission, there is something like fear, fear of change, fear to lose control and to lose quality.

Mr. Flüh has said he believes that the laws, the European laws, have been able to preserve the quality, a high quality of seeds. Yes, but what is the quality of seeds? If you look at the criteria that the common catalog and the seeds laws are demanding for seeds to be authorized to be sold on the market, you will find uniformity, stability and homogeneity. Yes, it is limits that are described, limits, not possibilities. But in response to climate change, we need lots of possibilities for seeds to adapt to these changes, not limitations in the genetic base.

*(Applause)*

In the European Common Catalog for seeds, the commission has always said, that there is no problem of genetic erosion. We are receiving more seeds in the catalog. Yes, but more hybrid seeds, not more traditional seeds, not more genetic diversity - but less. And that was exactly the problem which the Parliament started negotiating with the European Commission in the late 80s and 90s. I believe there were real misunderstandings about the reasons for genetic erosion, but there were also interests behind these misunderstandings.

The Parliament said, we want conservation of biodiversity in agriculture and food, more possibilities to improve quality, resistance etc. on the local level. The Commission understood: we need material for research, and we want to conserve material for biotechnology. What a misunderstanding! When we said, we want more exchange of good practices, we want farmers to exchange their seeds, we want gardeners to exchange their seeds, the Commission understood: exchange of material between selected research institutes in Europe.

When finally the EU regulation and the program on conservation, characterization, exchange and use of genetic diversity in agriculture was adopted, we thought the time of

misunderstanding was over. But most of you know, at least those who are NGOs didn't get access to support from these programs because the Commission interpreted the work program as a coordination of seed specialists, gene banks, research institutes. I remember quite well the discussion I had with some responsible person in the European Commission at that time. When I said, why do you not involve NGOs? Why don't you involve people who really have practical experience with seeds on farms and gardens?

The answer was, you could just as well invite your grandmother or your football club to do it, because they have no competence in it. And that is really the problem. There is a fear that there could be people involved who have no academic career, but seeds are not about academics. Seeds are about possibilities for gardeners and farmers to do what is needed in order to preserve biodiversity and consumers to have a choice to say we want this seed.

You might be surprised when I talk here in favor of seed liberalization. I think we need liberalization of the seed market. We need people to get access to what they really want, and not limits with derogations. Mr. Flüh was just talking about derogations. Now, I tell you what kind of derogations the Commission has proposed in the new seed marketing laws. There should be derogation for conservation varieties in small quantities from the requirements which are set for certified seeds. Many years ago the Parliament has asked for this derogation in order to support the seed savers throughout Europe to exchange and preserve their local seeds.

Let me just read an article to you which is in the new draft legislation: *Each member state shall ensure that for each conservation variety the quantity of the seed marketed does not exceed 0.5% of the seed of the same species used in that member state in the growing season or a quantity necessary to sow 20 hectares, whichever is the greater quantity.*

Twenty hectares in a member state! Then, there are limits expressed that member states should impose on the marketing of these seeds. Why are these limits set? Well, I tell you that the seed industry is very strongly opposing liberalization of the seed laws because they want to market their new varieties, and they want to reduce the number of old varieties in the seed catalog.

*(Applause).*

After the Parliament had reached a compromise with the Commission on the conservation varieties, - we were not happy with the expression of conservation varieties, we wanted more variety - almost ten years past to get a proposal for implementing this piece of legislation. And this new proposal is not encouraging the seed savers, it defines limitation. And this will allow the seed industry to pursue seed savers who market or exchange seeds and breeders trying to further develop seeds of good quality which respond to the needs of organic farming, climate change or simply the interest of consumers to taste their own local traditional varieties. There is still much work to be done to change laws and limited mind sets of lawmakers and fears of civil servants to lose control. But much more important is that seed savers and farmers continue and enlarge their networking and their practical work in farms and gardens. Don't let yourself be discouraged by laws which are not up to date!

I would like to conclude by mentioning two success stories, in order not to be too critical, but also to link up to what Mr. Bazzanti said. There is a lot of movement, a lot of engagement of people, from the bottom up. Seeds are about democracy, they concern farmers' rights, the possibility to care for our future in our own responsibility, in our own regions. Seeds are also

essential for the question whether we want GMOs in the EU or not. Seeds and democracy are very closely linked – our seeds are our seeds, our seed markets are our seeds markets – and it is not the multinational seed companies that should dictate to us what we have to do.

Let me mention the experience of an association in France called, Kokopelli. They do wonderful work, in order to sensitize the public to use the seeds, and they have been selling, and distributing, and exchanging, and describing a whole catalog, which you will find back there. Dominique Guillet has brought it to show what people can use, and what they should use.

Kokopelli has come into trouble with the French government. They are accused of unfair competition by selling seeds which are not certified and in the catalog. Kokopelli has a lawyer here Blanche Magarinos-Rey who might express some more specific details of that problem. Kokopelli just continues practicing its seed distribution policy because the laws need to be liberalized. So the pressure must come from the bottom up through practice, through using the varieties and making something out of it.

The second example is from Germany. People in Germany now know Linda. Linda is the potato with a very nice taste; it grows very well in organic farming, and people wanted to buy Linda. But the breeder of Linda at some point wanted to withdraw the variety from the market which would have meant that nobody would be allowed to plant and market Linda any more. Friends of Linda asked: Is it not common heritage of people who grow and eat that potato? Well, the common catalog and the seed laws seem to have become a catalog of a few, of the few varieties, and a few who have interest in that catalog.

The good part of the story is: farmers and consumers campaigned together against that decision and won in a civil court. Linda can continue to be used. And I think that is a great success. In this way, the bottom up movement of seed savers will grow, like the movement against GMOs. Thank you very much for your attention.