

COMMONSFEST 2015 IN ATHENS

Summary of intervention by Vasso Kanellopoulou, representative of Pelti (www.peliti.gr)

SEEDS(1) AS A COMMON GOOD and EXISTING LEGISLATION WHICH DEPRIVES US OF THIS COMMON GOOD

Seed is the first link in the Food Chain. Central Control of seed implies control of our food and immense political power. Seed should be a Common Good with a decentralized distribution. These are prerequisites for Democracy. In the past all seeds were Common Goods. We collectively inherited a tremendous number of plant varieties created by farmers during the 10.000 yrs since agriculture started. These farmers used wild plants to create food crops. The creation of this wealth of agricultural biodiversity was based on three pillars: a. freedom for saving seeds and re-planting them the following year, b. free seed exchange between farmers, and c. the farmer could freely take the seed to other countries

In our days many farmers are being deprived of these freedoms due to existing legislation. The seeds that we collectively inherited are being lost, returning gradually to their wild status. According to Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN, 75% of genetic variability of cultivated crops has been lost during the 20th century. Non Governmental Organizations like Pelti are trying to save the remaining 25%. These Common Goods have a large genetic base which supports their adaptation abilities, a quality which is very important for a period of climate change. Thus they have a great potential for the future, as they can offer us new adapted varieties. Several scientific studies have proven that these seeds are more nutritious than the industrial ones. These seeds are also resilient and do not particularly need chemical inputs when cultivated.

One of the basic reasons for this loss of traditional seeds is legislation. For example European legislation does not permit the marketing of seeds unless the plant variety is registered in an official catalogue. This registration is based on criteria that are not suitable for the traditional seeds but are suitable for the privatized seeds produced by the seed industry. Accordingly they are excluded from the main market. European law treats traditional seeds as an exception with a separate catalogue which imposes geographical and quantitative restrictions!

It is clear that existing legislation mainly supports privatized seeds that are "protected" by Intellectual Property rights or patents. Although in the past all seeds were Common Goods by now in the so called developed countries our food is based on privatized seeds sold by an oligopoly. For example in Europe, 98% of conventional vegetable seeds in the market originate from 5 transnational companies. In theory, after expiration of the Intellectual property right on the privatized seed, it becomes a Common Good. In practice this does not happen as companies take out the registration from the official catalogue and it is difficult for the farmer to go through the registration procedure.

THE WORK OF PELITI: Pelti started 20 years ago in the North of Greece. There are now 15 local teams all over the country and one in Bulgaria. The focus lies on positive actions aiming at saving traditional varieties (the purity) while in parallel disseminating to many

cultivators the genetic material along with the knowledge for seed saving. Our tools are publishing, public speeches, seminars, seed exchange, festivals international conferences (on April 2015 Peliti organized an international meeting on the commons) as well as international networking aiming to change existing legislation. A network of cultivators keeps the purity of many traditional varieties but in parallel, seeds are disseminated to many amateur and professional cultivators so that the genetic wealth travels again and adapts through evolution to create something new- a new Common Good.

(1) Seeds and other plant reproductive material

Note: this speech did not cover GMOS it focuses on conventional seeds (traditional and industry produced)