

36 Spain

The seed network, Resembrando e Intercambiando

Members of the Red de Semillas

The Spanish seed network, Red de Semillas: ‘Resembrando e Intercambiando’ (re-sowing and exchanging) is a decentralized organization of a technical, social and political nature that has been active for the last 14 years. In April 1999, a small group of people involved in the organic agricultural, ecological and rural development movement in Spain organized a workshop in Madrid on agricultural biodiversity issues in which they laid the foundations of the organization. Later, in 2005, a non-profit association was established and nowadays, the seed network is an informal federation that brings together 26 local seed networks that are distributed throughout Spain (Red de Semillas, 2008). The members of the Red de Semillas are farmers and farmer organizations, technicians, agricultural experts, supporters of responsible consumption, local action groups, university staff and students, activists in ecological movements, researchers and other groups and people interested in developing a different agri-food system. The main objectives are the reintroduction of local, traditional and farmers’ varieties, inspired by an agro-ecological framework (Altieri and Nicholls, 2000), the concept of food autonomy and the central role of family farming. The aim is to help coordinate activities among the various local seed networks and promote their participation at national and international levels.

Specific objectives are to:

- support and facilitate conservation and use activities carried out by farmers;
- facilitate and support access, production and exchange of seeds among farmers;
- raise public awareness about the importance of agricultural biodiversity in the agri-food system;
- promote local and traditional varieties among consumers;
- create employment in rural areas through seed production and trading at a local level;
- reclaim the development of public policies intended to facilitate farmers’ rights to conserve, use, exchange and sell their own seeds;
- ban genetically modified crops from the Spanish agri-food system.

These objectives are accomplished by the local seed networks and also by working groups of the Red de Semillas. These groups are focussed on topics

such as national and international seed regulations, traditional knowledge, microenterprise management and organization, seed exchange, national and international relations and communication.

Working at the local level

To develop an integrated approach to working with local varieties, it is essential to include farmers and consumers in all activities. These actors are closely linked and a collective effort is needed to improve the use of local, traditional and farmers' varieties. Seed networks are the structures that create space to develop such joint activities.

Recovery of traditional knowledge

The Red de Semillas develops various research projects at the local and national levels. One area is the recovery of traditional farmers' knowledge about the management of local varieties. The people who know about the production and use of local varieties are the farmers who have been working with them for many years. Members of local seed networks interview farmers to recover their knowledge related to traditional varieties. The information is synthesized and a report is prepared to share the results. Those most interested in these reports are farmers who want to work with local, traditional and farmers' varieties. This is an example of farmer-to-farmer learning.

Participatory work in describing, testing and evaluating local varieties

In 2011, the local seed network in Andalusia carried out an in-depth study of local traditional knowledge. Seventy small farmers were interviewed, and the network subsequently published guides to the management of 50 varieties of four vegetables and seven fruit trees (Red Andaluza Semillas, 2011a, 2011b; Sanz García, 2011).

This type of research is very important because there is a dearth of information about local and traditional varieties in terms of morphology of the plants, uses and production. To encourage more people to use these varieties – both farmers and consumers – there is a need for sound technical information. In Andalusia, a group of seven farmer-researchers, with technical support from the local seed network, is carrying out research on variety descriptions, on-farm testing and evaluation of the crops in terms of yield and resistance to diseases and pests under organic conditions (Red Andaluza Semillas, 2012). Through participatory action research they have prepared protocols for the description of 15 vegetable species, discussed the most important elements to take into account in the research and the most appropriate vocabulary to use and interacted with consumers to find out what information is important to them.

Training and counselling

The Red de Semillas organizes and delivers many training activities. Each year they hold workshops aimed at farmers in several regions. The main topics include seed production (vegetables, cereals, fruits), traditional preparation, and uses and management of community seed banks and seed exchange networks. In terms of counselling, the Red de Semillas provides advice, at local and national levels, to farmers who want to start producing and selling their own seeds. This includes instructions about administrative requirements and procedures.

Seed exchange networks

Farmers in Spain used to exchange seeds of local varieties with their neighbours, but nowadays this practice is in decline. In general, Spanish farmers no longer save seeds. Seed exchange networks are mechanisms to help farmers obtain seeds of local and traditional varieties through a revival of exchange practices. Interested farmers donate seeds to the exchange network and they are pooled in a collection, as in a seed library. Farmers who have shared seeds can obtain seeds from the collection in return. In Andalusia, the local network has built an exchange system that in 2013 had 400 members and more than 300 varieties available (Red Andaluza Semillas, 2013). Exchanges can be carried out by regular mail or directly at seed-exchange workshops that the network organizes.

Consumption

Farmers need to sell their products to be able to continue producing; thus, consumers are the cornerstone in the conservation and use of local varieties. Based on this insight, the Red de Semillas carries out a large number of activities that involve consumers. The objective is to raise public awareness about the importance of local varieties in the agri-food system and to promote the consumption of these varieties. The main methods the seed network uses to reach consumers are:

- informative conferences in universities, schools, women's associations, etc.;
- information points in schools, local markets, consumers associations and small shops (the latter two are very important allies for developing local food production and short supply chains);
- tasting activities where consumers are invited to sample local varieties and provide their evaluation.

The tasting sessions have two objectives. The first is to find out which varieties are favoured by consumers: because they are sweeter, they have a better smell, etc. This information helps farmers identify varieties that consumers like and this stimulates marketing. The second aim is to help consumers reflect on their

sensations while eating. People tend to eat without thinking, and it is important to teach our minds and bodies to think about our senses: touch, smell, sight and taste.

Knowledge transfer: publications

The Red de Semillas publishes information about its research, projects, reflections, conclusions and methods. All these publications are available free on the network's web site, which operates under a creative commons licence (www.redsemillas.info). The objective is to share knowledge and experience.

Internal workshops for reflection

Each year the Red de Semillas organizes an internal workshop for reflection. This is a three-day meeting, held in Madrid in winter, in which representatives from all the local seed networks participate. This annual meeting includes the following events:

- a one-day training workshop on a topic suggested by the local networks, such as seed health, management of seed exchange networks, etc.;
- two days of meetings during which members reflect on and discuss:
 - political issues related to agricultural biodiversity: seed law, seeds in organic agriculture, farmers' rights, etc.;
 - internal aspects of the organization;
 - development of the tasks of the working groups;
 - other technical and political topics.

Cultivated biodiversity fair

This is the Red de Semillas' main open event. At the cultivated biodiversity fair, local varieties are displayed, debates and conferences are held and contacts are established among farmers, researchers, consumers and local residents (Plate 26). Each year the fair is celebrated in a different region, and all the local seed networks participate, enjoy and work together for three days. In 2013, the Red de Semillas held its 14th fair.

'Cultivate diversity. Sow your rights'

Since 2009, the Red de Semillas has been engaged in a political campaign (www.siembratusderechos.info) to demand a change in the public policies related to the conservation and use of local varieties and seed production. This is a long-term effort that so far has not led to any concrete policy or legal changes. 'Cultivate diversity. Sow your rights' is focussed on:

- demanding a legal framework that allows farmers to produce and sell their own seeds – this means respect for farmers' rights to save, use, exchange and sell farm-saved seeds and propagating material;

- demanding strong support from public administrations for the task of recovery of our cultivated heritage;
- visualizing the importance of small farming and organic production systems, the use of local varieties, the recovery of traditional knowledge and local culture;
- fighting against an agriculture of patents and genetically modified organisms.

The main impact of the campaign has been to link several Spanish organizations working on such related topics as organic farming, ecology and rural development and focus the collective work on defending local varieties and farmers' rights.

Building alliances

The Red de Semillas is working hard to build an international movement. The network participates as an active member of a European organization called Let's Liberate Diversity (www.liberatediversity.org), which brings together various seed networks from European countries such as France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. The network also collaborates with international platforms, such as the International Movement of Organic Agriculture (www.ifoam.org) and No Patents on Seeds! (www.no-patents-on-seeds.org) and has good relations with seed networks in Latin American countries, such as the Mexican organization Red de Alternativas Sustentables Agropecuarias (www.redrasa.wordpress.com) and the Latin American Agro-ecological Movement (www.maela-agroecologia.org).

References

- Altieri, M. and Nicholls, C. I. (2000) *Agroecología: Teoría y práctica para una agricultura sustentable*, Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Medio Ambiente/Red de Formación Ambiental para América Latina y el Caribe, Mexico DF, Mexico, [www.agro.unc.edu.ar/~biblio/AGROECOLOGIA2\[1\].pdf](http://www.agro.unc.edu.ar/~biblio/AGROECOLOGIA2[1].pdf), accessed 3 September 2014
- Red Andaluza Semillas Cultivando Biodiversidad (2011a) 'Fichas de saber campesino. Vol. I', www.redandaluzadesemillas.org/IMG/pdf/Ficha_Saber_Campesino_RAS_31ago2011.pdf, accessed 3 September 2014
- _____ (2011b) 'Guía de conocimiento sobre utilización y manejo tradicional ligadas a las variedades autóctonas. Vol. I', www.redandaluzadesemillas.org/IMG/pdf/guia_RAS_calidad_baja.pdf, accessed 3 September 2014
- _____ (2012) 'Informe: Descripción de variedades tradicionales andaluzas en fincas agroecológicas de Sevilla, Córdoba, Cádiz y Málaga', www.redandaluzadesemillas.org/IMG/pdf/121231_Memoria_RAS_Descripcion_VVLL_HEX_P-V_2012.pdf, accessed 9 January 2014
- _____ (2013) 'Red de Resiembra e Intercambio de variedades locales de cultivo: listado existencias Banco Local. Otoño – Invierno 2013', www.redandaluzadesemillas.org/IMG/pdf/130530_listado_banco_local_rei_temporada_o-i-2013.pdf, accessed 3 September, 2014

- Red de Semillas (2008) 'Dossier de la Red de Semillas "Resembrando e Intercambiando"', www.redsemillas.info/wp-content/uploads/2008/06/dossier-rds.pdf, accessed 9 January 2014
- Sanz García, I. (2011) 'Estudio sobre conocimiento campesino en relación con el manejo de las semillas en una comarca de interés agroecológico: la sierra de Huelva', Master's thesis, Universidad Internacional de Andalucía, Baeza, Spain, www.redandaluzadesemillas.org/IMG/pdf/Conocimiento_campesino_en_relacion_con_el_manejo_de_las_semillas_en_la_sierra_de_Huelva-Sanz.pdf, accessed 3 September 2014