

Preconference “Seed”
“THE SEED SOURCES OF ORGANIC FARMERS IN ITALY”

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Introduction

This paper presents the result of the survey done in 2010 by AIAB on the seed sources in Organic Agriculture (OA) in Italy. The aim of this work is to better understand and clarify the relationships between the formal and informal seed system (Almekinders and Louwaars, 2000) and quantify the role of the latter in OA. In a time where the choice of the varieties to grow will be in the hands of public institutions or seed industries (GRAIN, 2008), it is pivotal to check the needs of Organic farmers and the seed they are sowing. The questions addressed were:

- a. Are Organic farmers still self-producing seeds?
- b. Are they using only varieties listed in Official National Catalogue?
- c. What is the role of old varieties not listed anymore or local varieties in organic systems?
- d. What is the role of exchange amongst farmers in the supply of new varieties?
- e. What are their needs in term of variety characteristics?

This survey was undertaken within the EU project SOLIBAM and in the framework of the Italian National Plan on Organic Seed.

Methods and materials

To answer these questions AIAB carried out a survey of 250 organic farms, asking farmers what seeds they use and why they ask for derogations. The farms were selected to represent all regions of Italy and to represent both small and large farms. The questionnaire used is semi-open giving the opportunity to farmers to express their opinion freely.

Figures and tables

The first fact that emerges is the strong presence of the so-called farm saved seed, produced from commercial, old or local varieties (see Table 1). About 50% of farmers said they make use of their own seed and this figure is likely to be an underestimation of the real percentage if one considers the small percentage that received the seed from other farmers or from relatives and friends. Obviously, the relationship between seed

bought and saved depends on the species involved and the relations of the farms with the market (in general direct selling favours farm diversification and the search for particular varieties linked to the territory).

farm saved seed	relatives/friends	other farmers	market	research
50,63%	0,63%	3,34%	44,40%	0,99%

Table 1: The sources of seed.

The split by Regions is showed in table 2 and it is interesting to note that the situation is different according to the geographic area. In the South of Italy it is more common to find farm saved seeds (see table 3), while in the North the percentage of farm save seeds is less than 40%.

Abruzzo	33%
Basilicata	78%
Calabria	87%
Campania	63%
Emilia Romagna	21%
Friuli VG	23%
Lazio	58%
Liguria	43%
Lombardia	24%
Marche	46%
Molise	61%
Piemonte	42%
Puglia	39%
Sardegna	62%
Sicilia	47%
Toscana	50%
Trentino AA	50%
Umbria	85%
Veneto	36%

Table 2: Percentage of FFS split by Regions

North	34%
Centre	56%
South	72%

Table 3: Data of FFS by geographical area

About 34% of the seed purchased by the farmers interviewed is in derogation (see Table 4). This means that only about 60% of the seed purchased comes from specifically organic seed (certified as such).

Organic certified	Derogation
66%	34%

Table 4: The proportion of organic and non-organic certified seed in seed purchases

As shown in Table 5, the 45% said no variety for the species concerned is included in the national database of organic varieties and 28% that the variety chosen by the farmer is not present. Another reason for asking for the derogation is the unavailability of the supplier to deliver in time for planting (11%). It is interesting to note that about 10% of respondents said they invoke the exception for agricultural biodiversity conservation (i.e. on farm conservation of landraces).

No variety of species is available in the database	45,20 %
The supplier is unable to deliver the material before seeding, despite an order made on time	11,30%
The variety chosen is not in the database, and the varieties available are not adequate	27,68%
For research and experimentation in open field	4,52%
For variety conservation purposes agreed by the competent authority	7,91%
Use of conventional untreated seeds for green manure (reasons for price)	1,13%
Insufficient quantities	1,69%
High prices of organic seeds	0,56%

Table 5: The reasons to ask for derogation to the use of organic certified seed

The survey has revealed the presence of varieties not registered in the official catalogue, reproduced by the farmers themselves. The origin of this seed is varied in the sense that they may come from other farmers, relatives or even from public research (many are local or old varieties no longer on the National Catalogue and thus not marketable). Especially in the case of cereals many organic farmers have had access to material from the public seed banks in order to set up an on farm conservation project.

In the case of soft wheat next to commercial varieties we found: Solina, Abbondanza, Frassineto, Iervicella, Gentil Rosso, Piave, Canova (local or old varieties bred at the beginning of last century). For durum wheat the situation is different and old varieties are less cultivated, with a concentration especially in Sicily (e.g. Timilia, Majorca, Farro lungo). In the case of vegetable the cultivation of landraces is due not only to having varieties suitable for organic farming but also to cultivating varieties related to specific quality characteristics and brands, such as, for example, geographical indications. Not always, in fact, these local varieties are registered in the catalogue and, still more difficult, their seed organically certified are available on the market.

Conclusions

These data, although limited to a small number of farmers, point out that in Italy the organic seed system is still based on what we can define an informal system in which the role of farmers in seed production is important. To improve the quality and ensure a better choice of varieties to organic farmers, it is important to address three main aspects of seed production.

1. Training. Given the percentage of organic farmers that use farm saved seeds, it becomes important to increase the quality of the seed produced through training programs and / or assistance on the specific topic of breeding and seed saving. If, in general, the farmers interviewed have shown interest in the theme of variety choice (as a qualifying factor in their production process), it has also shown that the reproduction of the seed in the farm is closely linked to the technical skill of the farmer and, therefore not the prerogative of all.
2. Research. The lack of suitable varieties (for quality, cultural, social reasons) is a fact emphasized by many farmers in justifying the derogation to use non-organic certified seeds. It will be important in the future to improve the portfolio of varieties offered to organic farmers also through specific programs of participatory plant breeding (Wolfe et al., 2008). The fact that we found many on going collaborations with public research indicates the willingness of farmers to be involved in plant breeding.
3. Legislative issues. The interest shown by the farmers interviewed for the use of local varieties in their production systems and the experiences that are taking place in Italy on this theme, stressing the importance of having an appropriate legal framework that can support this process and allows the commercialization of seed of varieties that are not homogenous (Wolfe et al., 2009). In particular, we refer to the possibility of finding a link between the legislative rules on conservation varieties (Bocci, 2009) and organic farming, with the goal of having a specific exemption for those who maintain agricultural biodiversity. This possibility is highlights in the EC regulation 889 on organic agriculture in its article 45.5.d.

This survey could be a useful starting point for a thorough discussion on the role of seed in organic agriculture in developed countries. Too often we think that informal seed systems are important only for small farmers in Southern countries and we don't realize that even in Northern countries these systems play an important role, especially in the case of organic agriculture.

References

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