

Press release

EkoSeedForum ends with encouraging results - 150 participants from 21 countries discussed in Poznan on organic plant breeding and organic seed

The "EkoSeedForum - European conference on organic seed, organic plant breeding and agrobiodiversity" in Poznan has been concluded with encouraging results. With around 150 participants from 19 countries the interest in this conference exceeded the organizer's expectations. "The conference aims to support the development of an independent organic plant breeding and seed production sector in Central and Eastern Europe, and we are glad that our university was chosen as venue," said the vice chancellor of the University of Poznan, Grzegorz Skrzypczak, in his opening speech. Bernhard Jansen, managing director of the main organizer EkoConnect - International Centre for Organic Agriculture of Central and Eastern Europe e.V., stressed that it was about far more than just the supply of seeds for organic farming: "Seed breeding is about nothing less than our future. Because we are to some part what we eat, and we eat what we sow". Seed diversity must therefore remain a common property and should not be subjected to the economic interests of a few corporations.

The first part of the meeting dealt with the development of organic plant breeding in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), which happens so far only in a few countries, such as in Latvia, Estonia, Slovenia and Hungary. Gebhard Rossmann from Bingenheimer Seeds AG presented the network of the initiative group for vegetable seed from biodynamic and organic farming, that has been doing pioneering work for 30 years in the production of organically multiplied seeds, preservation of valuable varieties as well as the new breeding of open-pollinated varieties for the professional organic vegetable gardening in Central Europe. He made it clear here that there is no alternative to the further development of an independent organic plant breeding for organic farming. The requirements for varieties for organic farming were different with respect to nutrient uptake, weed suppression, disease resistance, and above all taste than in conventional breeding. In addition, the varieties from conventional breeding increasingly include techniques that do not fit to the principles of organic farming, such as i.e. cell fusion. Last but not least the free reproducibility of seeds is an important principle, which is hardly possible in conventionally bred varieties. "If the organic sector does not build up its own breeding, it will soon lack suitable varieties," Rossmann declared.

Strong interest of the participants was also met by the presentation of the FAIR-BREEDING® concept by Michael Fleck, director of Kultursaat, from Germany. In this project organic wholesalers and retailers give 0.3% of their turnover with fresh fruit and vegetables to the organic and biodynamic breeders of the Nonprofit-Association "Kultursaat", who are in turn intensifying their breeding activities especially on cauliflower. Since the start of the project in Winter 2007/2008 up to 100.000 EUR could be raised. "With regard to the CMS-hybrid debate this sum is not yet sufficient, but by the long-term commitment and the contribution of trade and associated consumers regarding content and finance we are on the right track. We would appreciate if this model could act as good example for others," said Michael Fleck .

René Groenen, organic gardener and breeder from the Netherlands, encouraged participants who were interested in starting organic breeding: "Every organic farmer who is interested in a crop and ready to learn and cooperate can be a breeder" Breeding worked like that for millennia and so nowadays organic

farmers, which are no longer satisfied with the available varieties, began again with breeding. Monika Messmer, breeder at FiBL Switzerland and President of the European Consortium for Organic Plant Breeding (ECO-PB) showed in her presentation that organically grown varieties and varieties for organic farming necessarily would have to be tested in the official variety testing under conditions of organic farming. "Our studies have clearly shown that most of the well-suited varieties for organic farming would not be approved if they were tested only under conventional conditions," says the scientist. The variety testing under organic conditions in most countries CEE is not yet possible, which should be changed by the Member States.

On the subject admission requirements of organic varieties Edward Gacek, Director of the Polish Research Centre for Cultivar Testing COBORU, surprised the participants. He was very open to suggestions on that admission examination of varieties for organic farming should also be under organic farming conditions: "We've had such considerations for several years. We could imagine to test very soon under organic conditions and are grateful for suggestions from the organic sector. Our doors are open." "The second part of the conference focused on increasing the use of seed multiplied under organic conditions. In the CEE countries this is still a largely unsolved problem. Often only less than 10% of the seed used in organic farming originates from organic propagation. This represents a significant distortion of competition and gives seed producers little incentive to produce organic seed. The fact that the EU organic regulation will require the mandatory use of organically propagated seed and will allow only a few years exceptions according to its current revision draft only increases the need for action.

Klaus-Peter Wilbois from FiBL Germany demonstrated in his presentation that more transparency for organic seeds offer would be necessary to ensure that the suppliers were able to sell their organic seeds and increased their offer. Modern databases such www.organicxseeds.org could provide this transparency. Here availability could be checked at any time, also for the past. "An Excel table at a hard-to-find online location can not perform that," Wilbois said. The Member States were asked to use practical solutions. Wilbois also pointed out the great opportunities that lied in the increased use of organic seed: "Organic seed production is an interesting branch of which many farmers could benefit." Ilze Skrabule from the Latvian Priekuli Plant Breeding Institute explained, that consumers in CEE often know little about organic production and seed origin was not a big issue for them. Organic farmers would regularly complain about the high prices of organic seed. Much more public relations work were necessary to create awareness among consumers and farmers.

The recommendations made by the Gebhard Rossmann went into the same direction. In a presented positive example from the Netherlands, a significant intensification of organic seed in supply and use had been successful by the fact that all parties sat with positive motivation and good will around one table, including the trade. According to Rossmann this plays a crucial role and should be included by the legislation. Decisive is communication up to final consumers who expect pure organic products: Whole food starting from the seeds.

With reference to the third conference emphasis, the conservation of crop biodiversity, Klaus Rapf of the Austrian organization Noah's Ark was able to show many cooperation projects of conservation initiatives and organic actors. Margarita Vishnyakova of the Russian Vavilov Institute in St. Petersburg pointed to the numerous varieties with origins from all over Europe which lay in the biggest gene bank of Europe. The material would not only preserved, but also intensively researched on, such as soya beans for cultivation in northern latitudes. She invited conservation initiatives, farmers and agricultural organizations alike to cooperate.

Within the meeting, several new co-operations could be agreed on, and participants expressed a generally very positive feedback on the event. Many participants agreed that this first international European East-West- organic seed conference should have a follow-up event and signed up in corresponding invitation lists. EkoConnect offers thereupon a shared exhibition stand for interested stakeholders as well as a workshop at the 9th Organic Marketing Forum on 1st of June 2014 in Warsaw. Who would like to be invited to future meetings should send a note to info@ekoconnect.org.

The EkoSeedForum was organized by EkoConnect e.V in cooperation with the University of Life Sciences in Poznan, under the patronage of IFOAM EU Group (Belgium) and with the partners: ECO -PB (Switzerland), Foundation on Future Farming (Germany), Association for old varieties and breeds (Poland), Kultursaat e.V (Germany), Forum for Organic Agriculture" Mieczyslaw Gorny" (Poland), Bingenheimer Saatgut AG (Germany), SAVE Foundation (Switzerland), Agrolink (Bulgaria), the University of Göttingen (Germany), Noah's Ark (Austria) and Seed Guardians (Slovenia).

The EkoSeedForum is the second international event, that EkoConnect and its partners organize in Poland in 2014. The other conference is the 9th Organic Marketing Forum in Warsaw in June 2014: www.organic-marketing-forum.org.

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