



The right to seeds: tensions and debates

By Tamara Perelmuter

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the centrality of food and production linked to family, peasant and indigenous agriculture. Access to healthy food and the organisational framework around food supply are long-standing concerns, but in recent years they have taken on a new impulse in the public arena. In this article, Tamara Perelmuter addresses the debate on food sovereignty and links it to the dispute over the sovereignty of seeds in Argentina, a key link in the agri-food chain.

During 2020, the debate on food sovereignty became a major public issue following the frustrated expropriation of the Vicentín company. But also because the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures of Preventive and Compulsory Social Isolation (ASPO, in the Spanish original) demonstrated the centrality of the production of healthy, available and accessible food, but above all, sovereign. At the same time, it became clear that it is family, peasant and indigenous farmers who produce the food we eat. It also became clear that they have a great organisational network that has existed for a long time, being central in the supply of food through fairs, local markets and fair trade networks last year.

The food debate connects us to the whole agri-food system, at the origin of which are the seeds on which everything else depends. They are the first link in any agri-food chain. A country's food sovereignty and agricultural development depend on their possession, production



and trade. They are also an essential reservoir of the biological and cultural diversity of peoples.

From a botanical point of view, the seed is the reservoir of life, transmitting the characteristics that will give continuity to the species. However, from a broader perspective, it interrelates biological, social, identity, cultural, spiritual and economic aspects. Historically, they were considered common goods as they were improved and shared by farmers all over the world who maintained control over them, which led to great diversity as a result of human labour.

It is important to note that there is no single type of seed and its diversity entails disputes over its definition and meaning. The question is: who, where and for what purpose are the processes of guarding, selection and improvement carried out? On the one hand, there are the so-called commercial seeds that are part of the formal or certified seed system. This includes, above all, hybrid and transgenic seeds, where the role of laboratories and companies, especially transnationals, is central. The market for these seeds is currently one of the most concentrated: three transnational companies control 60% of the world seed market: Bayer-Monsanto, Corteva (merger of Dow and Dupont) and ChemChina-Syngenta.

On the other hand, there are local seeds whose selection, improvement and conservation process takes place in the territories and is guided by farmers' criteria. They have a broad genetic base that makes them adaptable and responsive to different production, environmental and social conditions.



Here we find native and creole seeds, which constitute the informal system, also called the local, or farmers', seed system.

Today, we are facing a new movement of enclosure whereby that which was still common or not entirely subsumed to the logic of the market is finally becoming a commodity. And seeds have not been left out of this process.

From the mid-20th century onwards, two milestones in the technical transformation of seeds took important steps in this direction. On the one hand, the appearance of hybrid seeds (mass-produced in the framework of the Green Revolution) broke the seed-grain identity and, therefore, meant the separation of the farmer from his ability to replant and the beginning of dependence on the companies supplying the inputs. On the other hand, the expansion of biotechnologies applied to agriculture gave rise to transgenic seeds, generating major changes in the strategies of privatisation of knowledge, enabling new mechanisms of capital accumulation.

In a coordinated manner, legal mechanisms have been developed to accompany the changes in the forms of appropriation: seed laws, which require compulsory registration and certification; asymmetrical contracts between companies and producers; and, above all, intellectual property laws. In this way, these common goods that have circulated freely for thousands of years can now be privatised and controlled by a person or company that claims the right to obtain a new variety.

In Argentina, transgenic seeds occupy more than 67% of the sown area. They were introduced in 1996, together with the accompanying biotechnology package. This led to transformations in the national agricultural system, with significant increases in production,



intensification of agriculture and specialisation of agricultural exports.

The flip side were the tremendous environmental and social consequences, which directly affect agrobiodiversity (and therefore the availability of seeds), such as the concentration of productive land; deforestation and vegetation clearing; contamination from the massive use of agrotoxins; and evictions of indigenous and peasant communities.

This is why seeds are an important source of power and disputes. And this is the understanding of family, peasant and indigenous farming organisations that have long been resisting the onslaught of a model that dispossesses them. But also the biotech companies, which have identified the enormous value of seeds and their associated technological packages in the control of world agriculture.

Activism in defence of food sovereignty and seeds

Despite the systematic advance of seed enclosures, different studies show that a high percentage of crops in countries in the global South are still local varieties, self-supplied seeds or seeds acquired from informal systems. This data points to the need for farmers to have access to diverse, locally adapted seeds, while at the same time demonstrating the importance of local seed systems for global food production, which is in tension with the vision of agribusiness corporations.

Activism in defence of food sovereignty and seeds, i.e. diverse actions that oppose the enclosure of seeds and the loss of agrobiodiversity and defend individual and collective rights over seeds, is therefore gaining momentum.



In this sense, the first decade of the 21st century was marked by intense mobilisation in global seed policy. In January 2003, La Via Campesina (LVC) - a transnational peasant movement that brings together various organisations from all over the world - launched the international campaign "Seeds: people's heritage at the service of humanity", a slogan that was so powerful that it is still used today. On the one hand, the campaign challenges the notion that seeds belong to everyone and, therefore, to no one. On the other hand, it disputes the idea that they are the property of states, as stated in the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA). On the other hand, the LVC asserts that they belong to the communities that cultivate them, but they are a heritage at the service of humanity and are therefore implicitly not freely available for private appropriation.

In relation to the above, in the late 2000s, LVC and other organisations proposed the concept of "seed sovereignty". This represented an important paradigm shift as it is supposed to be in dialogue with food sovereignty, another key notion also put forward by that organisation. In order to attain food sovereignty, family, peasant and indigenous farmers must regain control over what they produce and how they produce it, while seed sovereignty implies maintaining complete autonomy over all seed activities, including seed reproduction. In this way, there was a shift from an initial perspective that was primarily focused on defending the right of farmers to their own use, to promoting and defending a radical change in agricultural practices. Thus, the right to save, reproduce, use and exchange their seeds is understood as a central battleground in determining who controls food and agriculture.

Finally, another development in relation to the defence of seeds was the Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working



in Rural Areas (UNDROP), adopted in 2018 by the UN. It explicitly recognises the right to seeds, stating that all states shall, among other things, "support peasant seeds and promote the use of seed resources and agrobiodiversity".

Disputes in Latin America and Argentina

In Latin America, activism in defence of seeds coincided with mobilisations against genetically modified (GM) seeds. Strong campaigns were established in several countries, such as the Colombian Free Seed Network, For a GMO-Free Brazil, and Mexico's Sin Maíz No Hay País (Without Maize There Is No Country), among others. And they were coordinated regionally through the Network for a GMO-Free Latin America. Early on, the "Stop Fumigating Us" campaign was launched in Argentina, which was later joined by multiple assemblies in Buenos Aires, Santa Fe, Entre Ríos and Córdoba, which joined forces to resist fumigations. This year, the actions of agricultural cooperatives, social organisations and environmentalists against the approval of GM wheat were added. This is the world's first GM wheat with "HB4 technology" resistant to drought and water stress, approved by the national government in October 2020 (although its production is subject to final approval by Brazil, which imports 50% of Argentina's wheat).

Many of the activist campaigns that have been developed have to do with actions carried out by social, environmental and family, peasant and indigenous farming organisations to reverse the progress of legal enclosures of seeds (defensive) and/or to create regulatory frameworks and public policies for the protection of local seeds (proactive).

In Argentina, seeds have been the focus of debate and popular mobilisation around the discussion on the modification of the Seed



Act, which has not yet materialised due to the resistance that has arisen from multiple sectors of society and the diverse and contradictory positions within the state.

In 2014, the Law on "Historical Reparation of Family Farming for the Construction of a New Rurality in Argentina" (Act No. 27,118) was passed, a government initiative but which took up a historical claim of the sector's organisations, which decided to go on the offensive and not just resist the modification of the Seed Law. Among other elements, it foresees the promotion of local, regional and national family farming fairs to support direct contact between producers and consumers; and it creates the Centre for Native Seed Production (CEPROSENA, in the original Spanish), introducing a new element to the discussion on seeds in Argentina.

Although specific regulations for the act have not been yet developed, it is enabling the deployment of numerous public policies aimed at the sector. In the case of seeds, the most important is the recent launch of the nation-wide "Semillar" programme which aims to ensure access to quality native and criollo seeds adapted to the environment and the recovery of agrobiodiversity. This is attained through the supply, creation and/or strengthening of systems for the rescue, improvement, multiplication and exchange of native and criollo seeds for the sustainability of peasant and indigenous family farming systems, promoting cultural identity and territorial rootedness.

However, the struggle to preserve and further develop agricultural biodiversity is not limited to legal strategies and disputes, but begins with the daily work of communities in their territories. This is complemented by territory-grounded activism through experiences aimed at safeguarding, exchanging, reproducing and improving



native, creole and adapted seeds, which are linked to the traditional practices of peasants and indigenous peoples, and are currently associated with agroecology. Thus, family, peasant and indigenous farming organisations, environmental movements, researchers, and various state bodies have begun to replicate agroecological production experiences, while at the same time developing campaigns, building daily practices, and establishing institutions aimed at preserving native and creole seeds, germplasm, and ancestral knowledge.

The debate on food sovereignty, which has taken hold in the public arena in recent years, provides a unique opportunity to multiply these experiences in order to move towards a transition to a different agrarian and food model. The debate is in fact an asymmetrical conflict between two models - the one that deepens transgenic monoculture, based on the private appropriation of nature, on the one hand, and the one based on diversity, agroecology and the vindication of seeds as the heritage of peoples at the service of humanity, on the other - and how this debate develops and is resolved will have profound implications for the future of our country and humanity as a whole.

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