

The role of Nordic NGOs in the conservation of plant genetic and cultural resources

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There are representatives of the Finnish, Swedish and Norwegian seed savers at this seminar, who will speak for themselves. But I want to give a very brief presentation of “what the NGOs can do that the GOs can’t”.

In the Nordic countries there are rather big NGOs in Finland and Sweden, a smaller one in Denmark, and in the other countries members of plant clubs or garden societies who are working with PGR. And as we have heard, both the status of national programmes, the number of varieties found in the different countries and the ways they are dealt with differ quite a lot. Basically this reflects the policy of the agricultural establishment in combination with the natural environment.

But I think we do have something in common as NGOs. First of all, we are not the best when we deal with conservation in the gene bank meaning of the word. The way an NGO maintains a variety is not the best at keeping the gene pool constant over time, because we grow the plants very often, so they undergo a constant selection pressure.

In SESAM and Frøsamlerne we try to be sure that more than 2 people at a time are managing each of the old varieties - that means that we try to spread out the responsibility for the variety to a lot of people. The result, of course, is that the way we make a selection in the case of open pollinated varieties differs quite a lot. In my opinion, this form of selection is quite similar to the way local varieties were handled in earlier times. So you can say that what we are conserving is not varieties but a way to handle them. This provides advantages: a variety will be forced to be able to live in the changing environment. But, of course, at the same time each variety undergoes frequent small changes in its gene pool, either through selection or through drift in small-scale populations.

The NGOs also participate in locating (inventorying) old varieties and in donating new accessions to NordGen. And we are trying also to collect the stories about each variety collected. We take part in a lot of local markets and other events where farmers, gardeners and people who are “just interested” meet, and my own experience is that every time we do so, we will find new old varieties of great interest.

So what I think we should do (and up to a point we do so) is to collect the stories and the plants, make sure that the donors are aware of the importance of their participation in conservation, and make the story and the plant (together) available to other interested people, and (if the variety falls into NordGen’s mandate) donate the variety and its story to NordGen.

We do also have the goal of putting PGRs into our kitchens again. I have been talking with our Swedish friends about all these Swedish varieties of dry peas - kokerter. This crop has also been very important in Denmark in earlier times - back in the 1800s. Nowadays we do not have a real name for them. If you translate directly into Danish it should be kogeærter, but if I called them this, no one would be able to understand me. We have “gule ærter” - the name of a dish, and at the same time the name of an industrially processed, shelled, split and pre-cooked type of cooking peas. We have to re-introduce these dry peas into Denmark, and I believe we have got the same issue in the other Nordic countries. And the NGOs are the right actors to deal with that.

E.g. we have received a small portion of Lollandske Rosiner - a Danish local variety of drying pea. It seems to have really good cooking qualities and I think we have a really good opportunity to introduce such a variety in the "NOMA" concept - we could make it modern to be old-fashioned.