

# Sprouting Up...

## Liberating diversity: from defence to offence...

In February 2003, an important and innovative conference brought together 300 farmers in Auzeville, France, and launched the Farmers' Seed Network (see box) to help European farmers regain control the seeds they grow and reproduce.<sup>1</sup>

The situation in Europe with respect to farmers' rights to seed is getting worse. The few seed companies that supply all the seed do so to feed the continued intensification of industrial agriculture – seeds for uniformity and mass production, but not seeds for the small farmer or for variety. Europe now has some of the strictest laws in the world on the production and use of seeds through a combination of marketing laws and intellectual property rights. It is now impossible for farmers to use and exchange the seeds they have bred and adapted to their particular agro-ecological area.<sup>2</sup>

The restrictions placed on farmers has now led many to believe that the only way forward is to move from resistance to offense. This means taking back control of plant breeding based on diversity, adaptability and change. To this end, a European Seminar on Seeds entitled "Liberate Diversity" was held in Poitiers, France, in November 2005. Four different areas of struggle were addressed:

**Alternative laws and rights to biodiversity** – These include public or collective lists, conservation varieties, organic seed lists, collective rights, free use of public seed collections, and the free exchange of seeds amongst farmers. In particular, there is a need to know how these alternatives can be enacted within the current framework of European laws.

**Legal obstacles to alternatives** – Legal barriers to saving, using and exchanging seeds in Europe.

**Research for biodiversity** – Ways of involving farmers in the entire research process. The French organisation INRA (Institut Nationale de la Recherche Agricole) is already working with many farmers to produce such diverse seeds.<sup>3</sup>

**Fighting contamination** – One of the major issues for Europe this year is the acceptance of coexistence between GM and non-GM agriculture. Coexistence threatens farmers' seeds as contamination from GM varieties is impossible to control. This workshop looked at what steps could be taken now in either living with or overturning coexistence.

There are already several initiatives that farmers have already established to produce and use local (or traditional) varieties of wheat (and its close links with bread making), maize, and various vegetables. One important strategic pointer that came out of the workshop was the importance of working with farmers from around the world, and ways of doing this were discussed.

### Key players in France

The Réseau Semences Paysannes (RSP) is a network of 26 member organisations, which includes farmer and organic farming organisations, artisanal and seed producers organisations, development organisations (regional and national), and organisations dedicated to conserving and enhancing agricultural biodiversity. This network has been growing in the past two years with more and more farmers becoming involved, not only in France but also in many other European countries. Farmers have also been involved in a number of activities such as training each other in the art of seed selection and reproduction, farmer exchanges, working with INRA researchers in developing farmer varieties, and with other European farmers working on directive 98/95/CE. RSP has been involved in many other activities and publications, many of which can be seen on their recently launched website: [www.semencespaysannes.org](http://www.semencespaysannes.org).

The CNDSP (Coordination Nationale de Défense des Semences de Ferme, National Coordinating Organisation for the defense of Farm-Saved Seed) brings together several unions and farming organisations. It was started back in 1989 when in France the government tried to make seed cleaning illegal. Seed cleaning is a process used to remove weed and poor quality seeds from farm-saved seed often done in lorries which visit each farm. Although seed-cleaning itself was never made illegal, there are still constant legal attacks against the continued use of farm-saved seed and it is becoming increasingly restricted.



<sup>1</sup> GRAIN (2003), "Farmers organise around seeds," *Seedling*, April 2003, [www.grain.org/seedling/?id=233](http://www.grain.org/seedling/?id=233). <sup>2</sup> Guy Kastler (2005), "Seed Laws in Europe: locking farmers out", *Seedling*, July 2005, [www.grain.org/seedling/?id=343](http://www.grain.org/seedling/?id=343). <sup>3</sup> [www.semencespaysannes.org](http://www.semencespaysannes.org)