

DYNAVERSITY

Asociația pentru Sustinerea Agriculturii Țărănești (Romania)

Case study analysis



DYNAmic seed networks for managing European diversity:
conserving diversity *in situ* in agriculture and in the food chain



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PART 1: DESCRIPTION

1.1 Contextualising the case

ASAT (the Romanian association for supporting peasant agriculture) is a network that gathers all of the existing local and solidarity-based partnerships between producers and consumers, also called Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). According to the definition coined by URGENCI (the international network on CSA), “a CSA is a direct partnership based on the human relationship between people and one or several producer(s), whereby the risks, responsibilities and rewards of farming are shared, through a long-term, binding agreement.”

In the European project called Dynaversity (Dynamic seed networks for managing European diversity), our goal is to understand how CSA can help to foster cultivated biodiversity initiatives on-farm. Our hypothesis is that this close partnership between consumers and farmers offers an excellent background for the cultivation of traditional/local/peasant seeds on the farm.

Our case study fits ideally to the research topic because, from the beginning, a particular emphasis has been put within the ASAT network on the issue of traditional seeds. Indeed, upon the initiative of a core group within the network, an obligation was introduced in all partnerships: the farmers must use a minimum of 30% of traditional/local seeds within the total amount of seeds used on their farm. The information collected for this case study originates from interviews conducted with Mihaela Vetan, the President of the ASAT network; Brindusha Birhala, an active member of the network, farmer and researcher; and Marcel Has, a vegetable grower.

The national ASAT network was declared and registered as an association in 2014. The first ASAT groups, however, date back to 2007-2008. Mihaela Vetan has been involved in the project since the very beginning in 2007. When they started to identify a producer to begin a partnership in 2008, with the help of URGENCI and CREAMAP (a French AMAP dissemination network), a first group was created around a producer, coupled with consumers and with someone from a University of Agriculture for this first group assemblage as well. The development of the first initiatives happened in the frame of several projects supported by the European Social Fund and the Fondation de France. This support enabled key ASAT actors to be involved in various visits in France and in other countries (International Symposia in Japan, California, China, and Greece). Besides being the president of the network, Mihaela is now a volunteer who is trying to support new ASAT partnerships, to organize educational events, and to communicate with mass media. Since 2008, she has also been a consumer in one of the oldest ASAT partnerships. Marcel Has has been a member of the network since 2011 when he started the first distribution in Timisoara. He is a vegetable producer and his entire production is sold through ASAT. He works on his farm with his wife Tatiana.

In 2018, the ASAT network was composed of 10 vegetable producers and 240 “families”.

1.2 « Doing »

1.2.1 Properties WITHIN the initiative (closure)

The question of seeds within ASAT partnerships cannot be fully dissociated from the country’s history. Indeed, after the communist period, the Western European market economy-based agriculture model was promoted. Advertisement campaigns to sell “modern” seeds from the Netherlands were common in this time period. As a result, farmers became attracted by modern varieties and less confident in traditional or local seeds. On the contrary, the ASAT network had a real role in challenging the farmers’ point of view on seeds. It started to organize meetings with experts and farmers from other countries with specific knowledge and practical experience working with traditional/local seeds. Their goal at the time was to raise awareness among ASAT producers. In 2014, the ASAT network decided that the farmers who are members of the association should have to cultivate a minimum of 30% of traditional/local seeds on their farms. Their duties included listing all the vegetables grown in the annex of the contract, specifying the varieties cultivated.

**ANEXA 3. Lista de produse planificate, calendarul estimativ
al distribuției și conținutul estimat lunar al coșului**

	Tip de legume	Cantitate planificată /coș	Tipuri de semințe propuse
1	Anghinare de Ierusalim (topinambur)	750 g	Traditional
2	Ardei capia (2 soiuri)	1,5 kg	Tradițional sau ecologic
3	Ardei gogoșar (2 soiuri)	1 kg	1 soi tradițional sau ecologic și un soi convențional
4	Ardei gras (3 soiuri)	1.5 kg	1 soi tradițional sau ecologic și un soi convențional
5	Ardei iute (2 soiuri)	5-6 bucăți	1 soi tradițional sau ecologic și un soi convențional
6	Broajbe (napi suedezi)	1 buc	Ecologic si traditional
7	Cartofi noi	2 kg	Soi convențional
8	Castraveți (2 soiuri)	1 kg	1 soi tradițional sau ecologic și un soi convențional
9	Ceapă uscată (galbenă și roșie)	1 kg	Soi convențional
10	Ceapă verde	2 legături	Soi convențional
11	Dovleac plăcintar	1 buc	1 soi tradițional sau ecologic
12	Dovlecei (zucchini, alb și galben)	2 buc.	2 soiuri tradiționale și ecologice și unul convențional
13	Fasole verde (2 soiuri: urcătoare și joasă)	1 kg	1 soi tradițional sau ecologic și un soi convențional
14	Frunze aromatice (fenicul, cimbru, mentă, salvie, măcriș, leurdă)	1 legătură	Soi traditional, conventional si cultura spontană
15	Gulii	2 bucăți	Soi convențional
16	Lobodă	2 legături	Soi tradițional sau ecologic
17	Mangold	1 legatura	conventional
18	Mazăre	1 kg	Soi tradițional sau ecologic

Contract partnership for Marcel Has, listing the vegetables grown in this farm and type of seed or variety cultivated for each species. "Soi traditional" means traditional variety

Some ASAT farmers produce seeds of crops such as beans, pumpkins, cucumber, tomatoes, peppers, eggplants. When they cannot produce their own seeds, however, the ASAT network helps farmers find local or traditional seeds, making the link with artisanal peasant seed companies or with community seed banks that can provide some seeds. The ASAT network also puts the producers in relation with some gene banks or with University seed banks (some research institutes even own a catalogue of seeds). For instance, Marcel Has has been receiving traditional seeds from specialized associations in Romania (EcoRuralis) and from the Seed Bank of Suceava in Austria. He has also bought from small producers involved in saving traditional seeds in various locations. While he has had a good collaboration with the Seed Bank of Suceava, the quantity of seeds he received from them has understandably been limited.

For the couple Marcel and Tatiana, they produce a large diversity of vegetables (more than 30 varieties) and sell to a group of 50 consumers in at least 40 distributions per year. Their participation in an ASAT partnership has increased their productive capacity. Now, for example, they can undertake important investments, thanks to the financial support provided by their "Asatians" (committed consumers), in the form of 2 greenhouses, an irrigation system, and others. They have also been increasing their knowledge about Agroecology. They have saved and multiplied 100 traditional tomato varieties. In 2019, Marcel Has used 50% traditional seeds for his production of vegetables.

Each year, the partnership between the consumers and the farmer is evaluated. This fosters discussions between the members about the varieties grown and about their taste. Consumers also participate in looking for the local/traditional seeds they want farmers to grow. They can also swap local seeds with farmers if they wish.

1.2.2 Properties BEYOND the initiative (outreach)

Each year, the ASAT network organizes an annual meeting for farmers, where they can exchange seeds. This does not happen too often because farmers generally don't produce seeds for others. During the interviews, however, the informants reckon that seed swapping between ASAT farmers does exist, though in a very informal way. In the interview,

there was no single mention of any exchange with farmers out of the network.

Marcel Has, for instance, despite being heavily involved in activities of the organization, has not been involved in seed swapping in this way.

1.2.3 Transformative effects beyond the initiative

During the meeting between farmers, ASAT network core members facilitate discussions about how to cultivate traditional seeds. Sometimes, experts on specific issues related to seeds are invited. Moreover, farmers are also used to talking with consumers during these events, because most of them are interested in traditional seeds and can also help farmers find seeds.

Marcel Has, for instance, has become aware of the issue of seeds after he entered the ASAT network. In 2015, when the ASAT network decided to introduce the obligation to cultivate a minimum of 30% traditional seeds, Marcel understood best the importance of this issue. He agreed that it was a good decision as otherwise the risk that producers involved in ASAT could start using more hybrids and conventional seeds, supposedly more “productive”, could increase. Furthermore, he agreed that the association should maintain their decision. He said during the interview that “saving and using traditional seeds is one of the characteristics that differentiate us from the other way to do agriculture”. Moreover, the ASAT network facilitates information about traditional seeds, thanks to consumers or experts invited.

Furthermore, the ASAT network encourages each partnership to conduct some basic evaluation every year in order to solve issues that could arise in the relationship, or also to inform consumers about challenges (i.e. pest problems on a crop). The decision-making process chosen by the network is horizontal, where meetings happen between all the members (consumers and farmers). This allows members to deal with several issues (including the seed issue) in a collective dynamic. This decision-making process together with the annual meeting and the periodic evaluations makes knowledge and seed circulation among the partners more fluid. Furthermore, at least one farm visit should be organized for the ‘eaters’ every season.

1.3 « Organizing »

1.3.1 Properties WITHIN the initiative (closure)

It is interesting to note that the ASAT network was acting informally until 2014. The decision was made in 2014 to register the network as an association in order to protect the ASAT label, which was registered under the law of property rights at the same time at the national level. Becoming an officially registered association was part of a strategy to avoid co-optation and to ensure the network’s sustainable growth, as well as its recognition at the national level.

Nowadays, all the ASAT network’s members meet at least once annually in order to make the most important decisions. It was during one of these yearly meetings, in 2014, that the association took the decision that all producers wishing to be part of the ASAT network should cultivate at least 30% of traditional seeds. In each ASAT partnership, the consumers and the producer may decide to increase this percentage - depending on the interests of consumers, and on the motivation and experience of the producers. The producer declares in an annex to the contract which vegetables will be grown using traditional seeds. This decision has also been a way to clarify the motivations of the producers involved in the network: three of the producers decided to leave the network in 2015 after the condition was enforced. It is difficult to know if their departure was a way to protest against the imposition of a new obligation, or if it was rather the sign that some farmers had been using ASAT partnerships in an opportunistic way, without any actual implementation of the principles of “peasant” and organic agriculture.

The farmers also have to agree with other conditions to be members of the ASAT network. These conditions include respecting the ASAT Charter and principles of operation, providing information and evidence of compliance with the Charter, including financial statements showing expenditure items for the money collected from consumers. They also have to participate in at least one annual meeting with other ASAT producers and members; trainings of organic farming and seed multiplication; and the organization of at least one annual visit to evaluate the partnership with consumers (after which a copy of the meeting report is sent to the network). Moreover, the farmers must conclude in a written contract with each consumer, treat equally all consumers registered in the ASAT partnership, and also encourage consumers’ involvement in preparing the shares for the weekly distribution.

Since 2014, the network has had a governing board (consisting of a president, vice president and secretary). Except from minimum rules, which apply for every partnership, such as the use of 30% of traditional/local seeds by each farmer, the periodic evaluations, and the annual meetings, each partnership has full autonomy to decide which vegetables should be cultivated, the price, and the payment process. Moreover, the association is sustained financially by consumers’



Source: <http://asatromania.ro/galerie-foto/>

PART 2: ANALYSIS

2.1 Knowing

2.1.1 Properties WITHIN the initiative (closure)

The meetings and workshops organized for all the ASAT network members allow knowledge to be shared and created. However, a lack of resources could be one significant barrier to such events as it costs a lot to the network to organize and host these events. The network would like to collect more funds, in order to be able to invite experts from other countries, such as France, where the CSA model is more spread and recognized.

2.1.2 Properties BEYOND the initiative (outreach)

The network seems to enjoy a strong legitimacy at the national level: several institutions have been approaching the ASAT network for various reasons. For instance, the ASAT network has a pending request from a university of agriculture in Romania, in order to develop a program for the dynamic conservation of traditional seeds. This university considers ASAT as a reliable partner for conducting joint activities together on the local/traditional seeds.

ASAT network farmers are also regularly asked to share their practices.

2.1.3 Transformative effects beyond the initiative

Concerning the issue of seeds, most of the farmers are convinced about the importance of traditional/local seeds and some are also advocating for them. Some ASAT producers didn't use such seeds before entering the network, and only began to use them some time afterwards. There is an example of an organic producer who started buying organic seeds only once she started to be a network member. She clearly challenged her perspective and, after 2 years, she began to use traditional/local seeds.

2.2 Framing

2.2.1 Properties WITHIN the initiative (closure)

This initiative aims at promoting a model of solidarity-based cooperation between farmers and consumers. The objective is also to allow small producers better access to the market. Moreover, the ASAT network is working with socially challenged farmers with a low educational background and/or financial resources. The ASAT network wants to help such farmers to improve their economic situation in spite of the difficulties they are or were facing at the start. The ASAT network can help the producers by supporting them in understanding the model and helping them to prepare their

budget. Moreover, the ASAT network supports them in creating and strengthening the consumers' groups, by organizing public campaigns and by facilitating farmers' communication with consumers (for instance through Facebook). The ASAT network also links farmers to the source of traditional seeds, and allows them to participate in trainings, exchanges, and visits organized by the core network members. One could say that the initiative operates for the benefit of the whole society, promoting a new model of solidarity between farmers and eaters, giving a better economic situation to farmers, and allowing partners to have their own collective space to deal with all kind of issues.

2.2.2 Properties BEYOND the initiative (outreach)

The organization of public events allows the network to raise awareness about seed issues among a wider public.

2.2.3 Transformative effects beyond initiative

The ASAT network is reframing seeds, crops and food definitions shared among the partners, mostly by organizing collective events, where different visions can be confronted. These events also show the wider public what can be cultivated and help them discover the huge diversity of crops that exist. For instance, in the past three years, during the summer the ASAT network has been organizing a public event about the diversity of tomatoes, because some farmers cultivate many different varieties. Each year, this event is greatly appreciated by participants because it's the only time they can see such a diversity of colours, shapes, tastes and smells. During this event, participants can discover the existence of such different and beautiful varieties of tomatoes and gain greater understanding and perspective of the contained amount of diversity available in supermarkets.



Source: Photo found on the ASAT network website, which shows a diversity of tomatoes.

<http://asatromania.ro/galerie-foto/>

2.3 Networking

In the ASAT network, we identified three different kinds of actors operating as bridges:

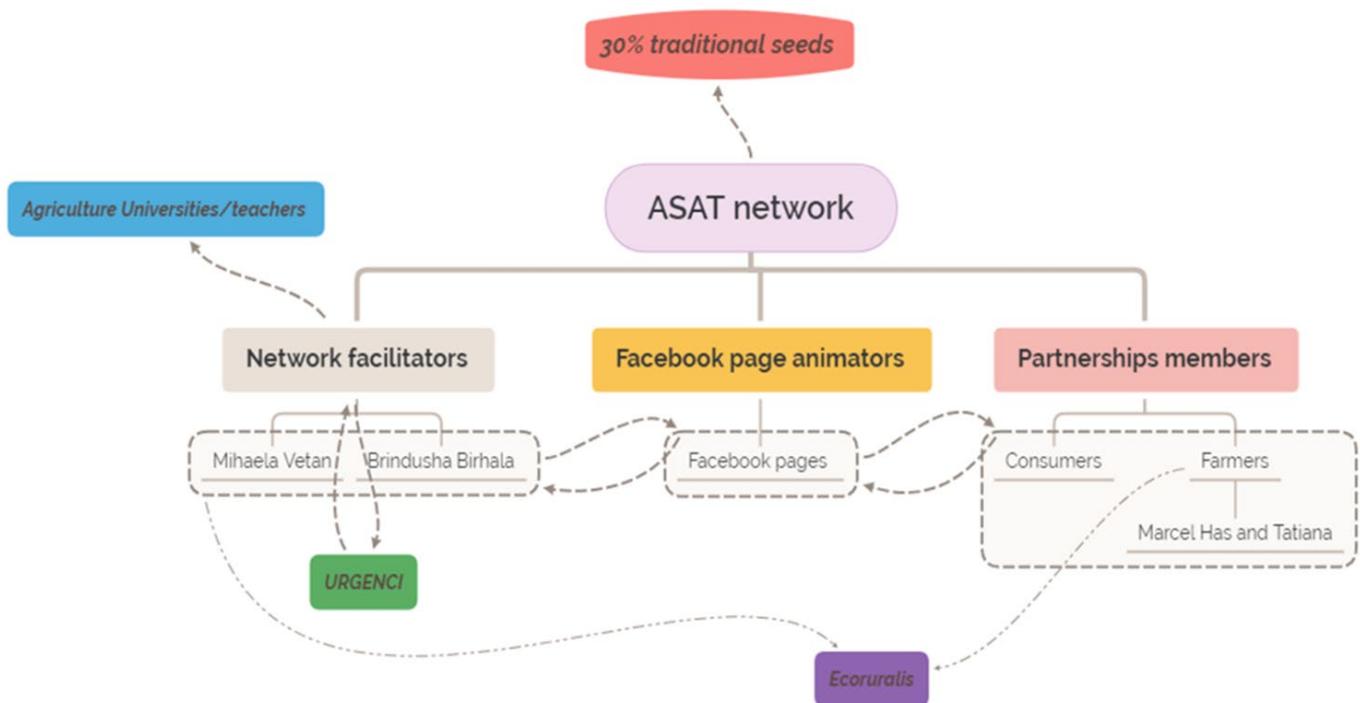
- Network facilitators, such as Mihaela Vetan or Brindusha Birhala, who remain educated, committed consumers and board members of the ASAT network. They make the link between farmers and consumers;
- The Facebook page animators who communicate about the ASAT network and also about each partnership, allowing all the members to collaborate. These Facebook page animators are ASAT network members with IT skills; and

- The partnerships members, including consumers and farmers, such as Marcel Has who are committed to traditional seeds through the 30% obligation.

Some objects also operate as bridges. This is the case for the Facebook pages, the consumer's satisfaction/interest questionnaire, and the annex in the contract indicating the vegetables grown with traditional seeds. These three objects are key elements of the network formed around traditional seeds. Their explicit function is to bind individuals.

Furthermore, since the beginning, the ASAT network has associated many different collaborators to its activities, people who can help the association to have a very wide and trans-disciplinary approach and communication on food, crops, and agriculture. For instance, teachers (in political science, agriculture, sociology) help the association to communicate, in a pedagogical way, about their activities to a broader public, also reaching young students through the creation of high schools programs on food and agriculture. Moreover, some people from the IT domain facilitate communication on the internet to reach a broader public. IT persons, as an example of this, launched some discussions about the role of new technologies in the agriculture sector and whether the ASAT producers are able and willing to use them. In some cases, consumers with IT skills have helped producers to learn how to use some tools to smoothen the communication with consumers, to open a bank account, and to use online platforms for payments.

In these ways, people from different areas operate as bridges to broaden ASAT collaboration with the civil society.



The scheme illustrates the three pillars in the ASAT network which are the network facilitators, the Facebook page animators, and the partnerships members. The Facebook pages operate as bridges between the network facilitators, the consumers, and the farmers. The relations with URGENCI and with the agriculture universities in Romania are allowed by the network facilitators. The farmers and the network facilitators are also in relation with Ecoruralis, the Romanian small-scale family farmers' union and a member organization of La Via Campesina, strengthening peasant organic farming in Romania and providing traditional seeds to farmers.

PART 3: SUMMARY

The ASAT network started in an informal way but the need was felt by the founding members to formalize the network, in order to protect itself from co-optation, clarify its leading principles, and ensure its financial stability and recognition at a national level. The network is well known and recognized thanks to the wide diversity of actors involved (consumers, farmers, teachers, universities) that allow the issues dealt with in the network to reach a broad public.

Moreover, the collective dynamic allows all members to exchange knowledge and to manage problems collectively. The issue of traditional seeds has been placed, with some success, among the top priorities of the network and yearly events have been organized to ensure a high profile for this particular issue. This dynamic has been secured through the collective obligation for ASAT farmers to use at least 30% of traditional/local seeds. Furthermore, periodic evaluations of the partnerships are done, which pave the way for further improvement, the creation of new activities, or the increase of awareness on new topics, when necessary.



Source: <http://asatromania.ro/galerie-foto/>

Note: for further and in-depth information on transformative effects and the broad categories of doing, organizing, knowing, framing, see the article by Bálint Balázs and Guntra Aistara, which can be downloaded here: <http://www.ijsaf.org/index.php/ijsaf/article/view/9>