



DYNAVERSITY

# Growing Seed Savers Initiative (Denmark and Baltic countries)

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

The “Growing Seed Savers” initiative is jointly run by the Latvian Permaculture Association, the Danish Seed Savers, the Lithuanian Institute for Natural Agriculture, and the Maadjas NGO in Estonia, as a three-year project funded by Nordplus from 2018-2020. Its aims are to connect the Danish seed savers, who have decades of experience in seed saving and education, with Baltic seed-savers who are just starting. It focuses on seed-saver education courses, collection expeditions, database creation, and seed legislation workshops, but also aims to establish collaboration that extends beyond the project.

As each of the four national partner organizations has its own structure, practices, and experiences, this case study report will highlight examples of how they are attempting to network at the regional Nordic-Baltic level, as well as providing individual examples from each partner organization. The Danish Seed Savers currently have about 950 members, while each of the Baltic groups has only a handful of dedicated seed enthusiasts who group without a formal membership structure. All of them work with a wide variety of crop (and ornamental) plants, though the Latvian Permaculture Association has chosen to start by focusing its seed library on peas.

## 1.1 Contextualising the case

The idea for the joint Nordic-Baltic project was born through interactions among representatives of these groups at Let’s Liberate Diversity (LLD) meetings from 2010, and the subsequent Arche Noah legislation workshops surrounding EU seed legislation which took place in 2015. Each partner organization has followed its own development trajectory before that, however. The Danish Seed Savers was begun by some American and Australian women living in Denmark in 1987 who could not get seeds of particular pumpkin varieties, nor could they afford to import them. They wanted to start a buyers’ group in order to fit within existing legislation by importing the seeds for research purposes. They started as a small local group that has since grown to a membership of over 950, with rapid growth occurring after the 2008 financial crisis.

The Latvian seed initiative started in 2011, inspired by several Baltic delegates who had attended the Szeged LLD meeting. Following this meeting, the five Latvian delegates organized the first cooperative seminar with the gene bank, researchers, and seed-savers. One of the members began organizing annual seed exchanges and founded the seed library. The initiative itself is only one interest group within the broader Permaculture Association, however, and does not have separate membership. Similarly, the Lithuanian group of seed enthusiasts is an informal group that is part of the larger network of Lithuanian permaculture activists, though it does not have a membership list. They began organizing seed exchanges in Vilnius about 10 years ago, each exchange attracting about 100-200 people annually, and in recent years events have spread to other Lithuanian towns. The Estonian Maadjas group began by preserving native sheep breeds in 2010, and only later began to include plant genetic diversity, registering as an organization for it all in 2012. It currently has about 16 active members and maintains good cooperation with the gene bank and researchers.

## 1.2 « Doing »

### 1.2.1 Properties WITHIN the initiative (closure)

There is no joint process for seed production among the four national partner organizations of the Growing Seed Savers initiative. In each of the partner organizations, seeds are multiplied by private individuals rather than in any centralized fashion. They are circulated within each organization slightly differently, however. The Danish Seed Savers have seed adopters, which are 2-3 people who agree to preserve one particular variety of seeds and to reproduce them for others who then multiply them beyond that. Members can find out online which other members have which varieties of seeds available and can use this resource to also contact them directly. There is also one annual General Assembly, as well as an annual Autumn meeting, which both include a “seed orgy” (seed exchange) among members.

In Latvia, a Seed Library is housed in the Ikšķile Free School, though so far there is no distinction between members and non-members who participate in the seed activities. One aim of the Nordplus project will be to recognize members who have attended seed-saver courses, granting them access to a database where they may then also become protectors of particular varieties. So far, all seeds are produced in a decentralized manner and members may exchange amongst themselves, as well as deposit samples of seeds in the library. The original idea of the seed library was for people to be permitted to take some seeds, reproduce them, and return more back to the library than what they had received. As there were concerns about the skill levels and care necessary to maintain the varieties, the idea evolved to now be about developing a network of dedicated variety protectors and a secondary group of seed users. So far, seeds are exchanged in an annual seed event attended by 30-50 people each year. In Estonia, all individuals produce their own

seed, and though it is a decentralized model, about 200 people attend the seed exchanges. In Lithuania, seed is also reproduced by individuals. There is not a list of active members, but several hundred people participate every year in seed exchange events, and a handful of people per year take part in permaculture courses related to seeds.

### 1.2.2 Properties BEYOND the initiative (outreach)

Seed circulation beyond the network is also managed by each partner organization slightly differently, but in all cases social media plays an important role. In Denmark, there are approximately 24-34 markets per year where the Danish Seed Savers sell DSS packaged seeds outside the network, generating about 10,000 Euro per year (see part 2.1.2 concerning the legal basis for these sales). They also have a number of Seed Pop-ups, which are 1-2 day seed exchange events hosted at libraries or other public spaces and are organized by different members who share the same graphic/ visual identity on social media.

In Latvia, the leader of the Seed Library has been organizing at least one seed exchange every year, and the first seed exchanges are now also being organized in other towns. There is also a network of vegetable variety collectors, many of whom are members of an amateur gardening club called "Tomāts," who have officially registered with the state plant protection agency as vegetable variety collectors allowed to sell seeds at fairs and markets. Information about these events is spread mainly through the internet and social media. In Lithuania, there has been one main seed exchange event every year in Vilnius, which attracts a broader range of interested people, as well as several smaller events in Kaunas and elsewhere with lectures and workshops about seeds. In Estonia, there is an active Facebook group run by a woman who has a company specializing in heirloom plants and seeds called "What used to grow in grandmother's garden." Maadjas cooperates with this group to advertise its events on its page, which is followed by over 3000 people, in order to spread knowledge and eventually seeds, to a wider network.

### 1.2.3 Transformative effects beyond the initiative

Within the broader Growing Seed Savers initiative, the four partner organizations are working together to create and circulate new knowledge associated with seeds through the creation of: a series of seed saver education courses targeted at different audiences; the design of a methodology for expeditions to collect old varieties and heirloom seeds in rural gardens; the construction of new seed databases in the three Baltic countries; and a coordinated analysis of seed legislation and desired changes in each of the four countries.

In February of 2019, all partner organizations sent representatives to a "train the trainers" 2- day seed-saving education module in Denmark that will be adapted and recreated in each of the three Baltic countries. This is a deliberate effort to disseminate knowledge in order to stimulate people to value and save seeds, and for the organizations to share their own experiences with one another. Besides the education courses, the project members will develop a joint methodology for seed mapping and collecting expeditions, and for database creation, which will make knowledge available to a broader network. Another important component of the project is the analysis of legislation. This puts the members of the seed-saving groups in touch with Ministry officials and scientific experts in order to create a dialogue, and hopefully a more diversity-friendly legislation.

## 1.3 « Organizing »

### 1.3.1 Properties WITHIN the initiative (closure)

The Growing Seed Savers Project has its own organization structure, where one organization is responsible for each of the main project activities (education, database, expeditions, and legislation), and the work is organized into separate committees around these topics. The coordinator of each activity, thus, tries to gather the knowledge, experiences, and insights from all the partners and make them available to share in the network.

Each partner organization also has its own more formal or informal structure. The Danish Seed Savers have a very organized structure with a Board of Directors, comprised of 5 members and 4 substitutes who are approved or elected by the General Assembly. In addition, about 120 of their 950 members are active volunteers in the organization, working in 10 different groups to coordinate all the activities of the organization. The Latvian and Lithuanian cases are slightly different because the seed-saving initiatives are one activity within broader permaculture organizations. Therefore, there are no organizational structures for the seed saving activities, per se. There are 5-10 active leaders of seed-related activities in each of these groups. The Estonian network is governed by a board with two members, one specialized in animal diversity and one in plant diversity. There are about 16 very active members in the network; there are no specific roles for different members, but they know one another's' interests and can divide tasks accordingly.

### 1.3.2 Properties BEYOND the initiative (outreach)

In Denmark, there are yearly seed-saving courses which attract new people to gain more in-depth knowledge. In Latvia, the most important structures are the seed exchanges, held every January, and now occasional events held in the spring. In Lithuania, thousands of people take part in several social media groups related to heritage plant and seed exchange. In Estonia, there is a very important collaboration with the Tallinn Open Air Museum which cultivates native and heirloom plants typical of the places from which the buildings were taken. Museums are thus an important way to reach out and educate people beyond the existing network about the importance of preserving old varieties; they sometimes hold seminars and lectures and walks around the gardens there, and the Maadjas leaders are also sometimes hired to do lectures on native plants in other National parks.

### 1.3.3 Transformative effects beyond the initiative

Empowerment happens by encouraging individual responsibility for plant varieties, for example, as variety adopters in Denmark do. Also, the DSSs had a Legume project that they felt was particularly empowering because it involved collaboration between professional breeders and the members themselves. Rather than simply attending a workshop, members were trained by the breeders, propagated the peas and beans, and then contributed both their propagated seed and their knowledge to the project. In Estonia, the leaders so far feel that they are not doing enough for member empowerment, because it is a voluntary organization, and a lot of work is on the chairperson's shoulders. Now that more people are interested in plant diversity, they hope that more of the work can be more evenly distributed. In Lithuania, one of the leaders who teaches permaculture courses emphasizes that people have personal liberty beyond the law, and that saving seeds and growing one's own food are ways to freedom. He feels that many people are still waiting for someone else to change things, and that more people are willing to fight for the right to save seeds in theory than they are ready to save and grow seeds in practice. In Latvia, the leader of the seed library also runs a school garden project where children have an opportunity to have their own garden. In this way all the children experience growing plants and interact with nature in their own environment, thus absorbing knowledge about seeds, plants, and food more deeply than if they only read about these experiences in books. This is a model of experiential learning, teaching and starting to empower children to take responsibility from an early age.

## **PART 2: ANALYSIS**

### **2.1 Knowing**

#### 2.1.1 Properties WITHIN the initiative (closure)

In Denmark, specific forms of knowledge are created through lectures at the two annual meetings and furthermore spread through seed education courses; these include a contextualization of gardening and plant breeding in national histories; scientific knowledge about plant biology, reproduction, and breeding; and practical skills of seed collection, cleaning, storing, etc. These are also becoming the model for the courses promoted through the Growing Seed Savers initiative, but these courses will also include seed legislation. The courses do not, however, include general gardening skills, as these are presumed to be already known by participants. Each country will adapt the seed-saving manual and slides produced by Denmark to its own needs. In the three Baltic countries, because they have been focusing more on spreading the message of the importance of heritage plants and seeds, they have, to date, not included much knowledge on the practicalities of seed-saving, so these courses will help to fill that gap.



Photo 1: Practical Seed-saving activity at Growing Seed Savers Training of Trainers course in Denmark, 2019. G. Aistara



Photo 2: Growing Seed Savers' Training course, Denmark, February, 2019. A. Michelson.

### 2.1.2 Properties BEYOND the initiative (outreach)

In Denmark, a campaign for legislative change helped to legitimate the network. In 2014-15, several members initiated an intense campaign to change seed laws in Denmark. They organized a two-week public seed fair, published a legislative analysis, and held numerous public media presentations. As a result, two main changes were made to the Danish seed law. One change makes clear that seed marketing applies only to the sale of seed to commercial end users. Another change allows farmers, who are considered commercial end users, to buy seeds from other farmers for experimental purposes. This successful campaign greatly popularized the movement and helped legitimize its knowledge. DSS has had a seat in the National Committee for PGR since it was established.

In Latvia, there was a campaign for legislative change in 2012, which included support from other European seed organizations, and LLD, who wrote letters to the Ministry of Agriculture in defense of a farm that had been accused of illegal sale of tomato seeds. Several members also wrote open letters in the press, one speaking as an academic working at a foreign university. As a result, a new clause was entered into the Latvian seed law, defining a new category of 'collectors' varieties, seeds of which that could be legally sold by persons registering as vegetable variety collectors. The international attention helped legitimize the network. Further cooperation with supportive researchers also helps to legitimate their knowledge.



In Lithuania, there was also a recent success in changing legislation which helped legitimize the work of the network. The leaders had approached Ministry officials about the fact that, according to Lithuanian Seed law, seed exchange is illegal. At first they were given an informal indication that seed exchange would be tolerated. Later, they achieved a change in the normative regulations which allows for seed to be made publicly available for exchange in limited quantities, if the grower registers in advance the species, varieties, and amounts. Sale is still not permitted, however. Nevertheless, this achievement has legitimated the network.

In Estonia, the Maadjas group was recently given a seat on the National Genetic Resources commission, which has greatly increased their legitimacy. They also co-plan all events together with other institutions, such as the gene bank or researchers, so that various voices are heard. They write articles for magazines together with researchers, so there are prominent names in the articles which, as well, helps to legitimate the knowledge. Nevertheless, legislative change remains a barrier.

### 2.1.3 Transformative effects beyond the initiative

In Denmark, the DSS have tried to link the issue of seed-saving to climate change. In a recent meeting of a historic national commission on agriculture, the DSS representative stressed the importance of new categories such as heterogeneous materials that are included in the new EU Organic Regulation as means of adapting to climate change, and the role of seed-savers in this.

In both Latvia and Lithuania, the knowledge of seed-saving is intertwined with broader messages of the permaculture associations, including more inclusive and less chemically-dependent, agroecologically-oriented production systems and methods. In Estonia, they have worked hard for nine years to educate people on native plants and seeds, and the importance of saving them by using them, as they are a big part of their culture. They have also tried to make people understand differences between open-pollinated versus hybrid seeds.

## 2.2 Framing

### 2.2.1 Properties WITHIN the initiative (closure)

The common Growing Seed Savers initiative frames its aims as sharing information and experiences among the partner organizations. Meanwhile, each of the national networks has its own framing of the issues.

In Denmark, due to the recent legislative victory, the public framing has been one of injustice to farmers and farmers' rights, as well as taking back food sovereignty. In Latvia, the leader of the seed library frames the project's goals as maintaining cultural heritage and developing a network of seed-savers. The seed library is likened to cultural icon Krišjānis Barons's efforts to collect Latvian folk songs. The director explains that just as every farm used to have its own song, it had its own barley, rye, or hemp variety that was passed down to the next generation as part of the daughters' dowry, and these must be saved as well. She says the hope is that each town or village would eventually have its own locally-adapted seed collection and knowledgeable seed savers who protect them and keep them in circulation, the same way that each locality has its own folk costume and folk songs, and respective choirs who keep them alive.

In Lithuania, the movement leaders frame their goals as finding the heritage varieties that people still have in their gardens in order to preserve the diversity that they still have. They explain that preserving of agricultural biodiversity is important for crop resilience, adaptation to climate change, and maintaining or restoring of cultural and culinary heritage. Cultural plant diversity is a cornerstone of food sovereignty and growing one's own seeds and food is a way to achieve personal freedom.

In Estonia, the main aim is to spread information so that people take responsibility for preserving seeds. The organizers' hope is to save more seeds, rather than grow their organization. They don't feel they have to collect all seeds, or even know about all of them, just facilitate their exchange. Because "every act of exchange increases diversity." It is less about the "fun" of being a seed-saver, and more about the cultural heritage they have to save. It is also not about saving and cultivating any seed, but rather, it is about saving and cultivating particular old varieties local to Estonia.

### 2.2.2 Properties BEYOND the initiative (outreach)

In all countries, the activities of the networks have been spread in the news and in social media. In Denmark, they have also cooperated with the gene bank (NordGen) to include their seeds and publish descriptions of peas and other seeds, about which little information is publicly available. In Lithuania, in addition to seed exchanges, they have been

organizing fairs with lectures and permaculture courses related to seed-saving. They have also been interviewed by journalists, for example, for a culinary magazine where the group has emphasized the importance of old varieties for the traditional kitchen. They have also had dialogue with officials regarding legislation. In Estonia, the organization writes an annual report every year which shows the results of their work, including descriptions of the types of seeds they have found. They have also been interviewed on the news media several times. In Latvia, the leader of the seed library has been interviewed by several news programs, appeared on the front page of a women's garden magazine, and been featured on the radio.

### 2.2.3 Transformative effects beyond the initiative

In Denmark, the DSS have reframed seeds, both in terms of farmers rights, which was very effective in the legislative campaign, and in terms of an adaptive measure to climate change, as discussed above. In Lithuania, there has been an ongoing effort to reframe how seed exchange is treated under the law. They feel officials see seeds as vectors of disease, for example, and assume that home-saved seed is of bad quality. They have made specific efforts to try to change this attitude.

In both Latvia and Estonia, seeds have been framed as cultural heritage that is crucial to save, which resonates widely. In Latvia, the leader of the seed library always includes folk songs and dances in seed exchanges, making this connection tangible and the different forms of knowledge and culture intertwined.

## 2.3 Networking

For the Growing Seed Savers initiative, the LLD and Arche Noah joint meetings were key bridges to inspire Nordic-Baltic cooperation. Each partner organization also has its own bridges. In Denmark, their leader for over 30 years was one of the main bridges, who, with her ability to speak with very different target audiences and inspire collaboration, kept the network going. Another bridge was the farmer who helped spur the legislation change campaign, and the mill that had been working with farmers' "illegal grain" all along, and thus helped justify the need for the change.

In Latvia, one of the current board members of the Permaculture Association was the first to study seed issues as part of an academic research project with organic farmers, making connections along the way with the LLD network. She helped facilitate invitations for five Latvian delegates to the LLD meeting in Hungary. This, and the follow-up meetings organized by the attendees, were the seeds that allowed the idea of the network to germinate. Furthermore, the tomato seed legislative scandal, which became known in the press as a "tomato rebellion," was also very important, because it showed the importance of saving and reproducing seed, as well as the absurdity of laws that prevent this work. The leader of the seed library is very passionate about the topic and energizes many others.

In Estonia, the fact that the Maadjas group became a member of the plant Genetic Resources Commission elevated the organization to a new level and helped to network them with researchers. The ability to speak in different languages, has helped the chairperson to connect her professional work to that of the organization. One crop that helped to make a bridge was the potato onion. Varieties of it have been cultivated by communities of Old Believers in the Lake Peipsi area since the 18th century, which were showcased by the Maadjas group together with the Crop Research Institute. This showed the connection between plants, traditional culture, and specialized cultivation practices. It was featured on television and helped popularize old varieties and generate media attention. Also, Arche Noah had served as a bridge by visiting Estonia, which helped to show that the work that this organization is doing is important. Finally, European projects have allowed them to reach out to other new countries that are just starting, for example in Macedonia. Such projects help bring NGO members together and expand the network.

In Lithuania, the shortcomings in the Lithuanian seed law, several articles in media with Plant protection agency officials stating that seed-swap is illegal, as well as little effort from the state to preserve the cultural plant diversity that people in the countryside still maintain, inspired Lithuanian activists to push for change, as did the awareness that seed-saver networks and organisations (e.g. Arche Noah) exist in Europe and that it is possible to reach seed-freedom. They were also inspired by the fact that Latvian activists had achieved a change in their seed law, so these groups acted as bridges for them.

## **PART 3: SUMMARY**

The joint initiative shows us that diversity can breed cooperation, and that international seminars and meetings, such as LLD and the Arche Noah legislation workshops, do bring new actors into networks and facilitate the formation of more in-depth cooperative links that can help create and spread new knowledge about seeds and old plant varieties. Nevertheless, it is important that each local network finds its own distinctive grounding in cultural values to strengthen its resonance. Finally, legislative debate and change can be quite important for bringing the importance of seed issues to the public eye, and thus inspiring more people to become involved. All initiatives expressed that they want to hear success stories from other countries, so they can learn from them, and in the case of the Baltic countries, present them to government officials to help facilitate positive changes.