



DYNAVERSITY

Magház
(Hungary)
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

In the spring of 2011, the very first seed exchange event took place in Szeged as part of the 5th Let's Liberate Diversity international conference. The inspiring organisers were the ESSRG (Environmental Social Science Research Group), Csilla Kiss from Védegylet, and László Kiss. The purpose of the conference was to promote seeds that had been forced out of the formal seed market, to boost the practice of seed exchange, and to stimulate seed saving techniques by small-holders or hobby gardeners. From the Hungarian point of view, Magház was not yet formed, but the conference served as an inspiring initiative that later was followed by other similar seed exchanges in the country. Moreover, two years earlier than the seed-swapping event in Szeged, in 2009 an open day on agrobiodiversity was held in the Parliament, which contributed to the easier mobilisation of people involved in seed issues.

From 2012, Csilla Kiss continued to actively organize (or co-organize) international events and workshops in different European countries like Austria or France. These events made it possible for Hungarians interested in and enthusiastic about agrobiodiversity and seed saving, such as Orsolya Kiss Kovács, László Kiss, Renáta Bocsó, and Judit Fehér – who later became the founders of Magház - to learn about and experience successful examples of seed networks and related good practices across Europe.

A year later, in 2013, the 6th Let's Liberate Diversity conference was organised in Basel hosted by Pro Specie Rara (Csilla Kiss was also an organiser of the event.) This event marked a milestone because Judit Fehér and László Kiss presented the central concept of a Hungarian civil seed network and gave the network the name Magház ('Seed House'). Therefore, Magház was officially established in this year and founded by Orsolya Kiss Kovács, László Kiss, Renáta Bocsó, Attila Juhász, Bálint Czúcz, and Judit Fehér. During this event, two more enthusiastic members, Hunor Török and Dorottya Kiss, joined Magház. Both Török and Kiss are the leaders of a nature protection initiative called the Bese Association. The cooperation formed between Magház and Bese Association that started that day at the conference has made it possible for Magház to have an organisational background through the Bese Association and has enabled the joint partnership to apply for grants and to improve their work on seed saving. The first booklet of Magház, for example, entitled the "Practicality of Seed Saving", was published under the Green Source programme of the Ministry of Agriculture in 2014, a publication made possible by the official organisational support of the Bese Association. The booklet is available from the website of Magház and also provides free access to useful tips and advice on picking, breeding, drying and storage of seeds. The EU-funded GROW project also boosted the initial development of this seed saving network as they were able to attend several international exchange events with this support.

In the same year, Magház organised an international workshop to take place in Nagyszékely and Budapest in order to understand the Hungarian legal background related to agrobiodiversity and informal seed saving and seed swapping events. Fortunately, no bottleneck was identified. The Ministry of Agriculture stated that no legal barrier existed to make difficult the exchange or sale of seeds at a certain quantity.

From 2015, the activity of Magház was gradually set back due to personnel changes. While some of its founders left the network and other personal issues arose for other team members, the network was still kept alive thanks to Judit Fehér, Dorottya Kiss and László Kiss.

It was revived again in 2017 when a new EU project, Farmers's Pride, came together with the Hungarian Research Institute of Organic Agriculture to provide a formal framework of activity. From 2018, the recruitment of volunteers has become even stronger, and today Magház tries to transform and refresh its activity with new members by expanding and promoting its mission through seed exchanges. For the time being, the two main organizers remain Judit Fehér and Dorottya Kiss. They work together with several volunteers.

Regarding seeds and crops, for the present Magház only distributes landraces or special vegetable, herb, and some fruit seeds in seed exchanges.

1.2 « Doing »

1.2.1 Properties WITHIN the initiative (closure)

As Magház is still a developing a network initiative, it does not have a central office in the country. Every volunteer is scattered throughout the country, though there are active self-organized communities, or hubs, that can be considered main members. These hubs are in Szeged, Miskolc, Pécs, Budapest, and Kecskemét. Magház avoids centralization. Instead, it is formed through the regional individuals and communities who participate in these hubs.

Seed production and multiplication activities are currently categorized as follows:

(a) The main seed-saving place is located in Nagyszékely (Tolna county), a seed collection facility, where a considerable amount of seed is shared within the network (approx. 7-800 packages/year). These seeds are packaged and labelled in Hungarian and English and are distributed to different parts of the country by Magház volunteers during seed exchange events. In the case of Magház, the biggest contributor of seed is organizer Judit Fehér. However, from 2019, thanks to the on-farm project started by Magház, the seed-saver sites were expanded by 9 more farms. These partnering farms will also produce seeds for the common seed pool of Magház. In this case, the aim is to distribute, and to distribute mainly to people who are concerned and willing to put something back as an exchange for the seeds. In this way, the seed distribution is growing more deliberate, which needs more energy and time. Within 3 years, the aim is to sell seeds, and primarily those varieties that have been selected based on their good performance in on-farm trials. Through this, it is hoped that Magház will reap some financial gains.

(b) Several local seed exchange events are organized in the country independently from Magház. During these events, saved seeds are shared among individuals, farmers, hobby gardeners, etc. The aim of these events is to create opportunity for local communities to exchange and become familiar with new seeds and their properties. Very importantly, these events are self-organized. Thus, the biggest contributors of seed are all of the communities and participants who exchange seeds during these local events. Since there are so many exchanges happening throughout the country, often at the same time, it is incredibly difficult for Magház to participate in every event. When Magház is able to attend an event of this nature, besides expanding distribution of its own seed collection, it is also about to get new seeds from locals. These seeds are then tested in Nagyszékely or another volunteer's garden. Nevertheless, Magház is continuously promoting these local events using its online platforms such as their website and Facebook page.

1.2.2 Properties BEYOND the initiative (outreach)

Magház does not sell seeds for profit. Therefore, the commercial market is purposefully avoided. If Magház or other local communities organize an exchange event, seed circulation is strictly non-commercial. Seeds are not bought. Rather, they are swapped for other seeds. In case one does not have seeds for exchange, they are encouraged to fill out a survey or participate in a quiz, or seed recognition game, that will give them a package of seed. The point of these events is not to profit, but to make connections, get the conversation going, and to share knowledge. However, every local hub has the freedom to alter the rules. For instance, there are a few local seed-swap occasions, such as in Szeged, where those who do have seeds can purchase empty packages for a price and may then ask for seeds (500 HUF (100/packet)) to fill them. Another example, visitors in Pécs who do not have seeds for exchange are able to buy seed and it is still considered fair trade.

1.2.3 Transformative effects beyond the initiative

The booklet called 'Practicalities of Seed Saving' is the only offline material that enables Magház to reach beyond the network and spread the knowledge of seed saving to interested parties still unaware of its activities. Their online platform is likely their strongest communication tool, consisting in their website, Facebook page (1160 followers) and Facebook group (148 members). These tools hold the network members together while also allowing them to spread knowledge to a wider audience. Magház also has creative plans for the future, as founder Judit Fehér explains: "We plan to organize a nationwide lecture series in the country inviting all of the prominent and competent persons as presenters in order to spread the name of Magház and to strengthen the network with new incomers by creating local hubs that are able to disseminate the same knowledge within their communities".

Magház cooperates with the Hungarian Center for Plant Diversity (NÖDIK), located in Tápíószele, from which the local network members and volunteers occasionally receive seeds. They organize seed exchanges together, invite each other to related events as lecturers or presenters, and share a volunteer who works for NÖDIK. Cooperation with NÖDIK enables Magház to create and circulate knowledge beyond the initiative. NÖDIK is a reliable partner in matters of the provision of professional knowledge on seed conservation, botany, and appropriate ways of seed saving by small holders. This year NÖDIK has also launched an on-farm project to encourage gardeners, farmers or any interested others to propagate landrace and special seed varieties through *in situ* seed conservation techniques directly. The project is expected to reach gardeners and small-holders who have not yet been exposed to seed saving and own-propagation of seed.

Beyond NÖDIK, Magház has connections internationally. As the major inspiration for Magház, the Austrian organization Arche Noah provided seeds to Magház in the past, but it is mostly a role-model for Magház.

Magház also has extended international connections through EU-funded projects and partnerships, all of which helping

them to communicate about specific Hungarian issues regarding seed saving.

1.3 « Organizing »

1.3.1 Properties WITHIN the initiative (closure)

Magház has no legal entity. The network organizes itself on a volunteer basis, which makes the structure difficult to formalize or even to hold the volunteers together on the long run. Only the very committed members remain together, but together they form a core around which the other team members or volunteers revolve around.

The organizational structure has changed much over the years, as it was mentioned in the history of the network. Currently, Judit Fehér, Dorottya Kiss, and László Kiss (mainly in Szeged) are the main coordinators or decision-makers of the network. Judit is responsible for national and international project management, seed production in Nagyszékely, and education-related outreach. Dorottya is responsible for connecting with local seed exchange events and communities, managing Magház's online presence (website, Facebook) and disseminating information. They decide on the main direction of Magház but prefer to make decisions collectively with other volunteers. The communication within the network is horizontally arranged and the volunteers are encouraged to take initiative of their own within the organization (i.e. to organize or to participate seed exchange events, to give lectures, or to recruit members).

1.3.2 Properties BEYOND the initiative (outreach)

The following devices are used by Magház to reach beyond the network, ranging from the strongest to the weakest:

1. Online communication enables the network to connect with members, and to also reach wider audiences and international networks through their website and social media accounts. Currently, these platforms are used to share and post information on agrobiodiversity, seed conservation, seed saving, landraces, and on related topics, both in Hungarian and in English languages. A specific group is working on translating English materials to Hungarian in order to make interesting and useful articles for non-English speakers. The website uses a map containing upcoming seed exchanges all around the country to inform everyone about the details and to connect the different local hubs.
2. Personal representation: From this year, Magház has actively started participating in local seed exchange events happening throughout the country as an exhibitor, presenter or co-organizer. Furthermore, their participation in international projects helps them to advertise the network in other countries as well.
3. Informal representation: Since most of the members attend other agriculture-related events, conferences, workshops, informal word is spread about Magház and its mission in order to gain new acquaintances and to recruit new volunteers.

1.3.3 Transformative effects beyond the initiative

Empowering actors to reclaim crop diversity is not consciously managed at the current time as it is not a pressing issue for the network. What has been more important has been the creation of a strong, committed volunteer base which would be able to take on structural tasks and can be counted upon and, ideally, formalize a legal organization. As Dorottya has stated it: "Magház only tries to influence the local communities through knowledge-sharing, networking, and seed exchanges to self-organize and to create their own knowledge hubs. But, we are aware it needs to be done in a more structured way."

PART 2: ANALYSIS

2.1 Knowing

2.1.1 Properties WITHIN the initiative (closure)

There are two major forms of knowledge creation and sharing within Magház:

(1) Collecting and storing of existing literature and knowledge in relation to agrobiodiversity, landraces, or seed saving in written or electronic form which is then circulated within and beyond the network. The most common form of sharing knowledge is through online platforms such as the Magház website or Facebook page. The 'Practicalities of Seed Saving', an information booklet created by Magház, is available online and offline as well.

(2) Attending local seed exchanges, relevant workshops and conferences, sharing knowledge through networking and lectures, and by connecting with people in general. Magház prefers to connect directly with people as it finds the impact of direct human interaction to be greater than the more indirect contact opportunities.

While there are no taboo subjects excluded from discussion within the Magház network, there is a limit regarding the dissemination of scientific or debated information online so as to avoid overwhelming their followers.

2.1.2 Properties BEYOND the initiative (outreach)

Magház has been formally acknowledged by the Hungarian Ministry of Agriculture, as was mentioned previously. As the Ministry has officially stated that organizing seed exchanges is not illegal, the network's activity does not interfere with any legal measure. Despite this, however, the network's relationship with the Ministry is not strong. The publication of the Practicalities of Seed Saving booklet was a useful tool toward legitimizing Magház beyond the network as it has contributed to widely promoting their name, logo, and mission. "Informally, the Practicum was a huge step in promoting the activity and the name of Magház, several external experts acknowledged our work and the booklet reached all parts of Hungary," explained Judit. The network has a very strong policy on the advantages of human interaction, therefore their most effective way of legitimization is still seed exchanges (local or their own) where they are able to personally connect with other people.

2.1.3 Transformative effects beyond the initiative

Magház was created in response to the devastating results of intensive, large-scale agriculture and its impact on local, small-scale farmers. In this way, acting to promote small-scale farmers, Magház's mission challenges the traditional stakeholders of industrial agriculture and the formal seed market that they have come to control. Overtly, however, Magház is not aggressive about its ideology as they do not protest against seed companies, breeding houses, or research institutes as a part of their mandate. For their minimal outreach in Hungary, Magház does not pose a threat to the actors of the formal seed market in Hungary, nor do they intend to do so in the future. They do want to inform the public about alternative solutions and techniques about agrobiodiversity and seed saving. To accomplish this, Magház aims to strengthen itself by gathering together as many enthusiastic seed lovers as possible in order to be capable of influencing a bigger audience and in this way achieve a wider outreach.

2.2 Framing

2.2.1 Properties WITHIN the initiative (closure)

The mission of Magház is to preserve the biological diversity of cultivated plants in the Carpathian basin; to promote ancient and neglected plant species and varieties; and to encourage the possibility of success for the techniques of small-scale seed saving and breeding. At the same time, Magház is dedicated to boosting small-scale plant production by agroecological principles and raising awareness of the rights and interests of farmers as breeders in order to encourage more individuals to grow their own veggies and have their own gardens. Finally, Magház works to create a network for sharing knowledge.

Their primary target group is comprised of small-holders, hobby gardeners, vegetable growers, subsistence farmers, and the plethora of other individuals interested in chemical-free cultivation or propagation of seeds.

2.2.2 Properties BEYOND the initiative (outreach)

Currently, Magház is only capable of publicizing seed issues for free because it does not have a central budget for publicity. Its method of communication, therefore, is limited. The booklet, articles, and posts on online platforms are all tools that Magház uses to promote seed issues. As was mentioned previously, the most effective way to publicise the network is through personal appearance and presentations during seed-swap opportunities.

2.2.3 Transformative effects beyond the initiative

“Magház adapts to generational changes. Our parents were not taking care of seeds, they just bought them,” Dorottya explains, “Therefore Magház brings back this traditional practice giving it a scientific basis. The main redefinition is preserving diversity which has long disappeared from an average grower’s garden.” It is very important to note that Magház has its own mission and framing of its activities, while the local communities and hubs linked to the network have the freedom to redefine concepts about seed or food as pertains best to them. Magház acknowledges that different regions in Hungary have different characteristics and needs regarding seeds or food, and for this they understand and accept that a diversity of definitions could emerge from this assemblage of hubs working together. These decentralized concepts are welcome, and this is what makes Magház diverse. Common themes of these definitions centered around ancient, Hungarian varieties, special taste, forms, colours, and exotic varieties.

2.3 Networking

Magház gives attention to who they send to network on seed exchanges, choosing those who have the most experience with seed saving or agroecological techniques. Essentially, every volunteer who attends or is present in a seed exchange is regarded as a ‘bridge’. The Magház booklet can be referred to as an object that ‘bridges’ as it allows networking through its content that can serve as a good starting point for conversation. Magház has also started to use seed quizzes, questionnaires, and seed identification games to get in contact with and to create interest among and between strangers.

The plants themselves, as exotic varieties or sometimes unknown Hungarian landraces, can also serve as very useful bridges because people can easily become curious about their cultivation and taste (examples of this would be okra, mouse melon, and cape gooseberry).

As was emphasized before, workshops, presentations, seed exchange events, conferences, field trips, and visual materials are fundamentally important for networking while social media activity provides a useful vehicle to connect populations of interested people virtually.

PART 3: SUMMARY

Though Magház has no legal organizational framework, the enthusiasm and commitment of its core members are so strong that the initiative was able to revive after challenging times. Therefore, the people in accordance with the concept and mandate of Magház have great power to carry on issues and flexibly reorganize themselves when necessary. Nevertheless, the establishment of a legal organisation will be inevitable Magház wants to continue their work in a structured manner without losing volunteers and enthusiasts.

Briefly, I would like to share my observations and experience with one of the seed exchange events organised by the Center for Plant Diversity (NöDiK) in Budapest. Magház participated as the second biggest seed exhibitor on this event and also promoted the program via its online platform. The Magház team was comprised of 6 volunteers who shared the tasks among themselves. One-hundred packages of seeds were brought by Magház and about 60 seeds were brought by volunteer Orsolya Máthé. Each of these seed packages was neatly labelled and accompanied by the Practicalities booklet, some leaflets, seed quizzes, questionnaires and a seed recognition game. Twenty-nine packages remained at the end out of the initial 160, marking a successful seed swap. Magház received 44 new packages of seeds through exchange, some of them labelled though the majority were not. During the event, the participants received seeds from Magház, not just through exchange for another seed, but also for filling out a seed quiz, a questionnaire, or for playing a seed identification game.

The event was partly official as the Minister of Agriculture, István Nagy, and the director of NöDiK, opened the seed exchange together, followed by a series of presentations about the advantages of organic farming and the consumption of organic products. There was a focus in these presentations on how to build a small organic garden at home and on fruit landrace and an interactive presentation about the grafting of fruit trees.

What I observed during this event was that Magház could be an exceptional platform to bring people together who are doing similar things at home on topics of seed saving. For instance, the volunteers met a very young farmer at the table of Magház asking for seeds who turned out to be an amateur breeder and tester. A conversation unfolded quite quickly, and the amateur breeder and tester proceeded to join the table of Magház as an “exhibitor”, bringing his crops and seeds from his car and putting to place them on the table next to Magház’s seeds. This type of networking is what makes these

seed exchanges unique and makes for a great way to link strangers to the work of Magház. Hopefully, Magház has benefitted as well by expanding with new volunteers.

Finally, I would like to emphasize the potential of digital and online tools, such as social media advertisement, videos, website optimization, that are essential to target and to reach a wider audience in a more directed way. They are currently not used by Magház as their usage requires financial input which is not available. For this purpose Magház would benefit from forming as an official organisation.