



## SEED SAVING IS A STRUGGLE: THE EXAMPLE OF A BIODIVERSITY AND DEMOCRACY HOTSPOT, TURKEY



There is an on-going paradigm change within the scientific and institutional discourse. One expression of this change was the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and other People working in the Rural Areas (UNDROP), in December 2018. It includes paragraphs on the right to seeds. The right of farmers to access seeds was established on the basis of a parallel with the right to access medicines. At the same time, several studies have stressed the need for micro-nutrients that are best provided by diversified food diets, including intra-specific diversity. This discourse is also reaching consumers, traditional seeds are getting more trendy.

Some examples of consumer-driven initiatives might shed a light on this on-going process. Let's visit Turkey, which is both a hot-spot for cultivated biodiversity and for political diversity.

Since the massive riots in 2013 linked to the defence of Gezi park in Istanbul, the ecological movement, understood here as a social movement combining different forces rather than as an established political force, has remained strong. The modes of operation chosen by its participants have evolved. The issue of agro-biodiversity has been on the agenda of the ecological movement since its beginnings. Seed saving and seed swapping have always been part of the tool-kit. This is demonstrated by this quote from Mustafa Alper Ülgen, from the association Ciftci: *"We had to carry an environmental struggle in Kazdaglari Region. First of all, we tried and collaborated a lot to stop the operation of gold mines in the region of Bayramic. Especially in our village, we had an influential campaign. Afterwards, in order to raise awareness on local seeds and production, we organized the first seed exchange festival in Bayramic and since then we have organized 5 more"*. This context is interesting: traditional, local seeds are perceived as a tool of resistance and social cohesion of the opposition.

Food, farming and seeds have been invested by activists, in a context of shrinking spaces of democracy. There are several local and solidarity-based partnerships for agroecology (LSPA) in Turkey, even if they can not be called "CSA" *stricto sensu*.

The **activities are similar, but the modalities are different**: no prepayment, but urban groups with connections to multiple producers, who place collective orders on a regular basis, with a vision of solidarity.

Ceyhan Temürcü, an active member of several organisations, is our perfect guide into the ecosystem of the Turkish local food movement.

First stop: the DBB Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) that is moderated by Ceyhan. DBB is the abbreviation for the Turkish name of "Natural Food, Conscious Nutrition Group".

It is a group of people who aim to directly access healthy food produced through environment-friendly methods, and to take responsibility for achieving this. 35 producers and 200 families are involved in the group. DBB is in no way a product supplier for its participants, and never plays the role of a middleman. One of its objectives is to foster collective work on seeds: *"Many farmers are saving their seeds, adapting and sharing them (...). In our village, Tahtaciorencik, for example, the farmers have often asked us for seeds; we have our own small seed bank and we do seed sharing"*. The group takes part in large-scale events on the importance of on-farm management of local seeds; this group started more than a decade ago.

These events have fostered the protection of local varieties in Turkey. Seed exchange festivals are civil society's answer to the negative developments in the national legal frame.

There are also more formalised partnerships. Let's stop at the Ankara-based co-operative, called **Günesköy**, which functions as a collective where producers prepare veggie boxes to be delivered to families. These families are considered as "farm supporters". The description on the collective's website reads as follows: *"A non-profit co-operative, aiming to demonstrate sustainable ecological alternatives in Central Anatolia (...) and to connect people by developing farming along ecological principles, using and sharing local seeds."* Since 2005, organically certified vegetables have been produced and distributed to families who join the annual scheme. The Central Anatolian climate enables the production of 20-25 varieties between July and November. An average of 60-80 families have been receiving the weekly share.

Network members can freely interact on the web or face-to-face. During a visit to the collective in October 2017, we witnessed a lot of exchanges: some urban participants are looking for small plots to start small scale

organic farming, others are looking for seeds for their relatives in other villages.

The **Turkish CSA network**, a grassroots organisation created in 2018, does not have any official membership, and also hosts exchanges on seed issues. It federates different initiatives, where locally produced organic vegetables are delivered to the up to 100 families who subscribe. A lot of food communities have been popping up in Turkey during the last few years. The overwhelming majority are informal organizations, and their work is based on voluntary contributions. There are such initiatives in Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir...

Sometimes, urban dwellers come to the farmers and realize they don't speak the same language, but both sides still manage to interact, through mutual respect and careful listening. The consumers' objective is to provoke an anamnesis around local seeds: what are they? What are their characteristics? How can they be used and reproduced? How can people coordinate better, and map the initiatives?

Ceyhan is convinced that the questions about biodiversity are encoded in the genes of the CSA movement: *"Listening to various members, it seems to be a natural result of*

*community support that members reclaim crop diversity. When a producer starts to sell directly to communities, then the communities always seek diversification, simply because they want to eat different things".*

