



VALORISATION STRATEGIES: SHIFT FROM FOOD LABELS TO CITIZENS' RESPONSIBILITY FOR COMMONS

Brands and labels: the usual market tools

A few groups of producers who belong to the RSP have been involved in developing and producing their own farmers seeds for many years. To valorise their work, some expressed interest in using a common identifying sign. RSP consequently decided to test its own private label or brand for a period of two years, 2016 and 2017. The experiment was conducted with a member of RSP in Brittany, in northwestern France

Results of the experiment

RSP learned several lessons from the experiment:

- It is difficult to struggle against intellectual property rights (IPR) on living organism while developing a brand which itself is a kind of IPR;
- A brand transforms the shared value of seeds, which is determined by usage rights (i.e. rules drawn up by the group of actors who manage the seeds), into a market value determined by property rights. For example: when RSP was ready to test its label, the biggest French supermarket chains tried to capture the value by means of a large scale communication campaign. They settled on a market value through a brand, without taking usage rights into account;
- Brands/labels set standards at a wide scale and often end up standardising products and practices whereas what is required is a diversity of practices;
- A product label or brand does not inform consumers about real practices and autonomy on the farm. For instance, it is impossible to distinguish products stemming from seeds produced on the farm from products stemming from seeds sold to farmers by artisanal seed companies;
- Establishing product specifications and ensuring traceability, which is required for certification, is a complicated and permanent process that requires considerable financial investment;
- A brand creates a market segment for products identified as stemming from farmers' seeds, but in the meantime hybrids resulting from biotechnology processes are increasingly used to breed hybrids. This fact is hidden from consumers as well as from farmers, even on the organic market;
- The niche market or market segment created by a label will be filled by population varieties which are already on the market and will not help renew cultivated biodiversity. Indeed, there is a gap between the time needed for collective dynamic management and the speed with which long chain markets require large volumes of products produced from seeds of available varieties, which are rather homogeneous. This renewal process is

AT FIRST GLANCE

How to identify food products stemming from peasants seeds in long supply chains and respect the ethical principles of community seed banks? Experiences from the French farmer seed network Réseau Semences Paysannes (RSP).

Embedding crop diversity and
networking for local high quality
food systems



one of the key targets of the network and relies firstly on the re-appropriation of know-how by farmers who can select their own varieties;

- Consumers need to be able to identify products stemming from industrial varieties, obtained by biotechnological processes protected by patents more than they need to identify farmers varieties in a small market segment or a niche market.

Alternative to a brand based of the concept of commons

Based on the results of this experiment, RSP decided to stop developing a label and gave up the idea of a private brand. Instead, RSP chose to explore the possibility of working with the framework of commons, an innovative approach. Commons are based on a resource (in this case seeds), a community of users and rules drawn up by the community to manage the resource.

Commons are usually managed locally and actions implemented by farmer seed networks in our opinion should concentrate on local and regional empowerment. This is in opposition to the development of consumers in big cities and producers in rural area, which leads to the industrialisation of agriculture and, in parallel, to consumers simply looking for food with or without the brands and logos that correspond to many consumers' financial means.

In the framework of commons, the rights of users take priority over property rights. RSP is now engaged in discussion with all users in supply chains with the aim of building a fair and transparent supply chain with values shared between all the stakeholders involved, in order to ensure the sustainable renewal of cultivated biodiversity.

In so doing, our attention turns to the need for in-situ conservation and on-farm breeding, which are usually not included in the value chain and which still depend on volunteer work.

This approach is currently being explored in two cases: a vegetable supply chain, which involves farmers and processors (tomato sauce), and a cereal supply chain for flour and bread, which involves millers, bakers, and retailers.

Based on the first experience with the framework of commons, RSP has come to the following conclusions:

- RSP strongly believes that bringing back diversity to the field and the plate will only be achieved by promoting and practising a peasant agro-ecological model with a large number of small mixed farms using diverse and locally adapted seed varieties, and not by enabling increasing industrialisation of the organic sector.
- All the actors of the organic sector should join forces and insist on complete transparency in breeding processes to avoid having varieties originating from breeding techniques that do not comply with organic principles.
- RSP practitioners consider seeds, together with their know-how, as a common good which should be sustainably managed by all users from the field to the plate. For this purpose, the appropriate means are required, because, as Gandhi put it, there is "an inviolable connection between the means and the end as there is between the seed and the tree."

Suggested Readings

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/294085495_Droits_de_propriete_industrielle_et_communs_agricoles_Comment_reponse_r_l'articulation_entre_domaine_public_biens_collectifs_et_biens_privés
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