

Introducing the Hungarian orchardist network

Historically, popular imagination in countries of Central and Eastern Europe has nurtured a romantic vision of traditional peasantry and a wealth of biodiversity in cultivated and wild species.

However, the period since the accession of new Member States to the European Union, notably Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary, the three Baltic countries and Malta in 2004 and Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, has seen the intensification of the East-West contacts and revealed the plight of rural communities in the respective countries. Certainly, the introduction of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and European legislative framework for seeds has exacerbated the loss of agricultural biodiversity. However, one should remember that the loss of local and traditional varieties was triggered already several centuries ago, in the course of a series of major agricultural restructurings applied at different times in history.

Hungary, covered with vast plains, is today a major cereal producing country in the EU, to the point where it is regularly confronted with the difficulty to sell its surplus grain. Tradition of the cereal production on a large scale dates from the 18th century, when the ambitious plans for economic development of the Habsburg Empire imposed regulation of the river Danube and its tributaries in the objective of facilitating water transport of goods. This work involved the draining of floodplains causing a radical transformation of their landscape. Once perfectly adapted to fishing, farming, beekeeping, horticulture and fruit growing, lands along rivers were now devoted to intensive cereal culture in order to supply for the rest of the empire. These interventions resulted also in the disappearance of the traditional knowledge about water management during floods, which included techniques of fixing the overflow point at the lowest level of a plain, so that water covers the land, and gradual construction of artificial underground channel facilitating the return of the river to its natural catchment.

During the communist period, Hungary continued its focus on large agricultural cultures both to finance its industrialization by the massive export of agricultural products and in order to fulfil its role as a „breadbasket” of the Soviet Union. Apart from the gradual specialization in producing monoculture corn and wheat, the process of forced collectivization and centralisation of agricultural activities has greatly undermined cultivated biodiversity. However, after the 1956 uprising against the Soviet Union, the communist regime in Hungary relaxed its policy of collectivization, enabling farmers, who had become landless farm workers following the first wave of collectivization in the 1950s, to practice subsistence agriculture. These practices restricted agrobiodiversity to a few backyard-garden species (e.g. beans) and especially fruits (including apples, pears, plums, cherries and nuts) in old abandoned orchards. Local varieties of fruit trees also survived and are still present in cemeteries and national parks.

The actors of crop biodiversity in Hungary

The contours of the nationwide movement for the protection of agricultural biodiversity in Hungary are emerging slowly. So far the movement has been characterized largely by unconnected actions of local initiatives. However, some intensification of interactions has started to take place in recent years.

Among the main players are national parks, such as Aggtelek and Bükk, both located in north-eastern Hungary near the Slovakian border, and Órség, in the western part of Hungary near the Austrian border. These parks have commissioned researchers to identify fruit trees on their territories with the aim of identifying and protecting local varieties. Several academics, including botanists and ethnobotanists, sociologists and specialists in environmental issues, as well as representatives of the Ministry of Environment have become interested in the issue of agricultural biodiversity. Until recently concerned mostly about the issue of genetically

modified organisms and to this end having established a moratorium on the maize MON 810, the Ministry of Environment has now recognized that it is equally important to protect crop biodiversity. Accordingly, it has been considering taking steps to change the current national legislative application of the European legal framework for seeds.

However, there is also a more organised network of those passionate about crop biodiversity. They are members of the Hungarian network of fruit growers functioning since the early 2000s. Considering the historical developments and policies of Hungary as well as their effects on agriculture, it is not surprising that more structured mobilizations aiming to protect agrobiodiversity in Hungary have been born first around local fruit varieties. The network, still of informal status, consists primarily of young farmers committed to auto-subsistence gardening, amateur gardeners and associations working for the protection of the environment and biodiversity. Members meet on an annual basis to evaluate undertaken activities and plan future projects of the network. A network's discussion list have been also established, where fans of fruit trees can solicit and share information on pruning techniques and grafting, discuss exchange of seeds or grafts, send traditional and new recipes or inform about their activities.

Ormánság Foundation – a key player of the Hungarian movement for agricultural biodiversity

The Ormánság Foundation played a key role in the establishment of the Hungarian network of fruit growers and today continues to be a driving and innovative force of this group. The Foundation, created in 1991, aims to develop general and detailed development plans for the rural area of Ormánság, in the south-western Hungary near the Croatian border. Apart from economics, tourism and infrastructure, these plans include specifically the aim of establishing a sustainable landscape management with a special emphasis on the protection of cultivated biodiversity. Being located on a former floodplain surrounded by the Danube to the east and its tributary, the Drava River, to the west, the region Ormánság has kept the remains of the historical abundance of agricultural biodiversity, such as old trees still growing in fruit orchards or in wild forests. Preservation of this agricultural heritage and culture is a priority.

The Ormánság Foundation maintains a protected orchard, extending over 3 acres, originally granted to it by local authorities for conservation and use over a period of 75 years. In the orchard there are hundreds of local varieties of fruit trees, mainly apples, pears, plums and hazels. The activities of the organization include also the inventory and description of identified old fruit varieties and maintaining of old orchards through Hungary and Transylvania (western part of Romania). The Foundation organises regular trainings on pruning techniques and grafting. Additionally, it copies and distributes among local villagers and a small circle of supporters information materials promoting local fruit varieties. In collaboration with six local authorities in the region, the Foundation has worked for the reintroduction of communal tree nurseries. These practices were common in the 18th century, when each village had its own tree nurseries and put at the disposal of inhabitants plants introduced into orchards or public places.

The principles of “adaptive orchards”

The activities for crop biodiversity undertaken by the Ormánság Foundation are rooted in the holistic orchardist concept developed by the organization – the so-called “adaptive fruit growing”. This approach views orchards as an integrative part of a particular landscape and ecosystem. This basic observation translates in practice into several principles. Firstly, the rationale and the role of orchards are not purely economic, i.e. production of agricultural goods generating financial profit. Orchard maintenance involves first of all a relationship of proximity to the environment and a capacity of observing the evolution of nature in order to accompany this process by adapting to orchards' natural transformations. This harmony is only possible through a regular presence, which can be provided by local communities contrary to distant

investors. Secondly, besides “classic orchard fruits”, such as apples and its processed products from an apple tress, orchards offer also other „fruits”, such as hay and firewood, whose consumption is not only necessary for the ecological balance of orchards but also has a potential to strengthen the economic independence of a farm. Beekeeping, mushroom picking, vegetable and grain cultivation among fruit trees are other examples of multiple use management of orchards benefiting both nature and famers. Finally, the preservation and use of traditional skills connected to orchard maintenance and fruit processing are closely related to the “adaptive fruit growing”.

“Kalaka” – a new form of collective organization inspired by the past

The concept of fruit growing is linked to the central role of the community in maintaining orchards. It might be a traditional local community or new forms of collective organization. For example, the Ormánság Foundation performs the maintenance of old orchards in a form of organization bearing the name “Kalaka”. It is a type of voluntary community work with cultural roots in the Carpathian Basin. Today, it is practiced primarily in the “Székely” region (Harghita and Covasna counties) in Transylvania (Romania). “Kalaka” is considered an action of exchange (the person whose orchard is cleaned participates in the maintenance of other orchards), a donation gift (when there is no expectation of reciprocity in the short term, but possibly in the long term if the person also helped with fruit trees) or a charity (when there is no expectation of reciprocity or returned support at all). The work performed at the orchards (cutting, grafting etc.) is free and the orchard owner has only the responsibility to provide accommodation and meals in return for the work done. The orchards are identified on the basis of the biodiversity of trees they contain. They may belong to individuals or institutions, such as parishes, which are not necessarily members of the Hungarian network of fruit growers.

The future of crop biodiversity in Hungary

Beside better coordination within existing initiatives, one of the biggest challenges for the survival and emergence of crop biodiversity as a genuine agricultural alternative remains the involvement in the movement of more farmers and consumers. Several newly adopted laws could facilitate this process. The transposition into national law of the EU directive on marketing of conservation varieties of cereals and vegetables aims to encourage dissemination of local varieties at risk of genetic erosion. Meanwhile, the new national decree on processing and direct selling by smallholders opens new opportunities for local products, whose production has been encouraged by the crop biodiversity movement.

Csilla Kiss
Védegylet (Protect the Future)
Bartók Béla út 19
1114 Budapest
Hungary
email: iroda@vedegylet.hu
tel.: +36 1 279 15 95
fax: +36 1 279 15 96
www.vedegylet.hu



This article has been produced with the financial assistance of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of Polish Green Network and its partners and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union. The article has been produced also as a part of the project “Central European partnership for sustainable agriculture and food sovereignty” co-financed by the International Visegrad Fund.