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LANDRACES ARE COMMONS

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www.nbu.ac.uk/biota/e-conference.htm

Summary: Local varieties are not only a genetic resource, but, much more than that, they are a common heritage and endowment of rural communities where over generations they have been selected, maintained and handed down, and, sometimes, can also be a good economic opportunity.

Varieties, populations and clones of crops may be defined *local* - and, more, *traditional* - when they have cultivated in a place with continuity, in the time of generations, and in that place are known with at least one proper name.

They are characterised by their having been handed down from one generation to the other, from mother to daughter, from hand to hand, following a family or community custom: and it is this very act of "handing down" that makes the word "tradition" meaningful. Regardless of how wide the traditional area of cultivation may be (as large as a parish, a valley or region), of the duration of the continuity (two or more generations), and of the kind name the varieties are known (of learned or dialect origin, coined or modified by the imagination), because the name of the notoriety always is that "true": its presence in the community lexicon is in itself evidence of a relation to the place and sign of an embedded relationship of memory and identity.

The variability of local varieties is not only the result of an adaptive answer to environmental pressure, but also a cultural product: the issue of a process of selection and domestication carried out by farmers, in the slow time, to privilege some characteristics - shape, resistance, palatability, productivity - over others, by practices usually socialized and shared on a local scale. All this makes local varieties a repository of customs and knowledge, and betrays their partial nature of "handcraft", when not even - for those who are able to read in them the alphabet of time - of "documents". Their existence is tightly interwoven

with local agronomical knowledge, cooking recipes and the shaping of landscape - over time they have been accompanying dowries, the spread of mother language, the mobility and the nostalgia of emigrants, up to become, for the communities of places in which they have co-evolved, a "mirror" in which one may reflect and recognize himself.

Their value cannot be understood unless we keep into account their context of time, place and community which has made and still makes them what they are; just as a word is not fully understandable out of sentence. In other words, we may preserve and develop our agricultural heritage only if we preserve and develop the rural context in which it has been produced and evolved. Outside this context, and away from primary role and interests of farmers, and from on-farm dynamic conservation, they remain but amateur collector's items, kitchen-garden knick-knacks or museum heirloom, exercise in good-will or mere support for genetic information; but such an approach to local varieties really is reductive and, to a certain extent, may even be deceptive. Nevertheless, all that concerns the history and culture of a community is mostly overlooked by those who institutionally deal with biodiversity, or reduced to folklore. For those who ignore or overlook the historical and community context of local varieties, only the preservation of their genes appears to matter – what begins and ends in gene-banks and in research institutes.

If local varieties are common heritage, then the rights and consequential benefits deriving from their use concern only the local communities which, by selecting their shape and behaviour, have preserved and handed down them¹. But community rights over heritage varieties cannot easily be inscribed into categories of public or private law, they exist on the same plan as the material, juridical or symbolic expressions of that community – as are customs and commons, the places for feast and prayer, the mother language and the nets of the

¹ On this principle, often but also eluded, a collective work of protection and economic development has been carried out in the Genoese province since 1996, initially focalised on the recovery of a few traditional potato clones and now extended to other garden crops, progressively involving farmers and restaurants, generating, over the years, a commercial net – still closed but constantly growing, and a channel for information on biodiversity [see: www.quarantina.it].

gossip. And the commons, the cultural expressions of the community, its resources and heritage, for their intimate nature, cannot be abolished neither sold, appropriated neither expropriated. So are the landraces. And the power of maintaining and reproducing them and changing their seeds.

Freely and reciprocally.