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“Use of Geographical Indications to Support Locally Adapted Agriculture” Elli Broxham, SAVE Foundation

Importance of agrobiodiversity

Biodiversity is not only about wildlife, it is about also the richness of agricultural breeds and seeds. Today both wildlife and agrobiodiversity are endangered. This agrobiodiversity is essential for our food security. Agrobiodiversity is endangered because many old breeds have been replaced by high performance breeds, which produce more meat and milk. Old species of plants are replaced by high yielding crops. This process was considered economically necessary but has led to the critical endangerment of many traditional breeds. Some breeds have even become extinct, others have only a few living examples still in existence.

Even though many of the old breeds and varieties are not as productive as their modern counterparts, they possess qualities such as high fertility, hardiness and resistance against harsh weather conditions and disease, all of which could be very important in a changing economic and climatic situation. The traditional breeds and varieties have been adapted over generations to satisfy the needs of farmers and the conditions of their local environment. They are not only genetically interesting, they also hold a value as a piece of cultural heritage.

SAVE Foundation

In order to conserve endangered breeds and seeds even in only small populations, it is necessary to act before it is too late. In many countries in Europe, there are organisations supporting and promoting the conservation of agrobiodiversity. The SAVE Foundation, founded in 1993, acts as a European umbrella organisation for these organisations. It promotes and coordinates activities to conserve endangered breeds of domestic animals and cultivated plant varieties.

The SAVE Foundation also acts practically, in areas where there is, as yet, no national organisation in existence. The SAVE Foundation and its Partners make up the European SAVE Network. The SAVE Network comprises of 20 partners in 15 European Countries. SAVE collects data, both historical and from the present. It also assesses conservation work, raises the alarm where conservation work is lacking and facilitates crossborder monitoring of old and endangered rare breeds and cultivated plant varieties.

European Livestock Breeds Ark and Rescue Net – ELBARN

ELBARN is a 3 year NGO-run project. The SAVE Foundation manages the project, the Project is coordinated by EuroNatur and the further partners are The Society for the Conservation of Old and Endangered Livestock Breeds (GEH, Germany), Living Heritage Centre (SLE, Belgium) and RARE (Razze Autoctone a Rischio di Estinzione, Italy). The project is funded by the EU under Regulation EC 870/2004.

The objective of this project is to create a European Livestock Breeds Ark and Rescue Net, by which is meant:

- Identification, networking and documentation of “Ark and Rescue Centres”,
- Ensuring that “Ark and Rescue Centres” will be established all over Europe,
- National/regional contact persons to co-ordinate Rescue actions,

- A database that holds easily accessible information about Rare Livestock Breeds, their uses and locations,
- Developing marketing strategies to promote use of Rare Livestock Breeds
- Enhancing biogeographical-regional breeding co-ordination.

In the context of this project, five workshops have been held in 2008 and 2009. One of the main discussion points of the workshops has been the marketing of the products and services of locally adapted breeds. The goal is to make the in situ conservation of these breeds economically sustainable and, therefore attractive to farmers.

Geographical Indicators (GI)

As part of the project, to aid the discussion, data was collected from stakeholders about the use of geographical indicators and other certification possibilities for helping to market products. This data shows that geographical indicators are in use for many products throughout Europe – in Spain alone, there are over 40 different GI protected products (meat and dairy). This type of labelling gives added value to products. This type of product sells traditional taste and cultural values, promotes healthy eating, environmental respect and respect for animal welfare. Through the promotion of a wide variety of products genetic variety is being conserved. There are many other schemes for labelling products also in use, from private, local or regional labels through to internationally recognised bodies such as Slow Food. The products sold under these labels, in Central and Western Europe at least, are aimed at the high-earning sector of society as “quality”, “exclusive”, “fine food” and so on.

Producers face problems in marketing locally adapted breeds, these are:

- limited demand for products – products are unknown
- once products in demand, irregular supply due to seasonal fluctuations
- varying quality, especially in the appearance
- limits on production development
- administrative complexity in labelling process
- inadequate commercialization channels
- consumer trust damaged by frauds

Due to these factors it is difficult for producers to compete with commercial farmers and imported products.

Additionally, many of the labels available for use to producers of the products of locally adapted agriculture do not specifically mention the breed of animal used for the product but only the geographical region or the production method. The SAVE Foundation and the participants in the ELBARN workshops identified the need for the following points to either be incorporated into existing labels or to be the basis of a new label:

- the livestock must belong to an autochthonous breed (or breed traditional to that region)
- livestock must be kept in a free range, extensive environment
- the production must be local, extensive and small scale
- livestock must be a valuable part of the cultural heritage
- specifications for Animal welfare must be respected,
- participating farms should run a herd book or should be a member of a breeding organisation which runs a herd book
- quality should be guaranteed (seasonal fluctuations are accepted for natural products but feeding guidelines have to be respected)
- traditional, artisan processing should be used
- the distribution should respect rules of fair trade
- manufacturing should regard as minimum EU Organic regulations

Conclusion

What is missing in current labelling schemes is a vision of a broad genetic basis for European agriculture and food production. Although there is a trend towards “regional production”, “extensive production”, “animal welfare”, “cultural heritage” or “biodiversity” there would not appear to be many new guidelines in development or in view. A shortened production and supply chain should be strived for in the interest of product traceability, environmental protection and reducing distribution costs. Locally adapted, traditional livestock breeds and cultivated plants, from extensive, local production can often fulfil all these criteria.

The products made from these breeds and plants are, mostly, “quality products” intended for niche markets. These products are, however, often only seasonally available and in small quantities, which makes marketing difficult. These products need a protected marketing structure. In general, agriculture in Europe is tending towards a growing gap between small-scale and industrial production. Even in organic agriculture, which started as local and smallscale, small farmers are competing with industrially produced organic products from a few high yield breeds and crops. It is high time to reverse this trend and to move to promote locally adapted agricultural systems, which bring a multitude of benefits for consumers, farmers and the environment.