

From Seed Exchange to Seeds of Change:
Organic farmer seed production and social relations
in Latvia and Costa Rica

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Abstract

This paper explores the changing roles of seed production and use in the ecologically and culturally diverse Latvian and Costa Rican organic agriculture movements. In both countries, historical agricultural traditions combine with recent regional economic integration processes to define what types of seeds and their reproduction are promoted or prohibited. In Costa Rica, a long tradition of farmer seed saving and exchange was recently recognized as a right in the new Law on Organic Agriculture, but will be overturned if Costa Rica joins the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). In Latvia, specialized breeding programs date back to the late 1800s, and seed legislation has changed along with changes in political regimes. Now, according to European Union (EU) laws, seeds must adhere to intellectual property rights regulations to ensure varietal purity, as well as meet organic standards. Metaphors of kinship and relatedness are utilized in strikingly different ways in these two cases, with profound environmental and social consequences. I argue that this is not a mere contextual difference between field sites, but rather signals a displacement of social relations that is necessary for the commodification of seeds. It is a transition from emphasizing both the genetic mixing and the social exchange of seeds, as in Costa Rica, to valuing the genetic purity and ownership rights of varieties, as in Latvia. This shifts the kinship metaphor from relations among the people exchanging seeds to the lineage of the seeds themselves, and has the effect of “cutting” social networks. The Costa Rican model of farmer seed saving, selection, and exchange promotes on-farm biodiversity, resilient social networks, and strong farmer knowledge systems, while in Latvia specialized breeding and the use of exclusive varieties contribute to genetic erosion, promote expert–farmer hierarchies, and devalue farmers’ experiential knowledge.

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