

# Commons, Nature and Territory.

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“Seeds Heritage of the People at the Service of the Human kind”, under this slogan, in 2003 Via Campesina started international campaign of seeds. The MST (Movimento Sem Terra/Landless People Movement), has been the main partner of this campaign in Brazil. The campaign has pursued a double goal: giving local farmers the control over their seeds and promoting *in situ* biodiversity conservation. In this paper, I will briefly explore the role of expertise in achieving that double goal. I will start by providing a historical background so that the audience has a view of the context in which Via Campesina’s campaign took place.

## **Seeds: from Commons to the Intellectual Property Rights.**

Since the 1960s, the modernization of the countryside has involved a systematic effort to stabilize and standardize nature. Importantly, the traditional and local seeds were transformed in industrial varieties by stabilizing their genetic composition in experimental fields. Industrial seeds became more trustworthy because they were produced by following scientific procedures. In Brazil as in many other countries, the state created expert institutions that should take responsibility for certifying the quality of the new industrial varieties of seeds. Those seeds were designed to be more productive. After being certified by experts, those seeds should be registered in the National Register. Increasingly, seeds became a commodity under the rule of intellectual property rights.

Scientific knowledge was used to stabilize the genetic composition of the seeds, making them predictable. Based on this predictability, the Brazilian state created a system of rural credit and insurance. Farmers who were not using standardized technologies could not profit from those economic advantages. This was a reason why, many farmers decided to adopt an industrial model of agriculture. Increasingly, farmers stopped cultivating and conserving their local agro-biodiversity.

In Brazil, as in other industrialized countries, there has been a strong link among the standardization of nature (seeds), expert knowledge and power relations. Inspired by Bruno Latour, it could be said that by applying scientific knowledge, the Brazilian state could transform the local seeds into “immutable mobiles”. The seeds were removed from their natural space and time (the ecosystem). They became pieces of standardized nature that could be inserted in a system of intellectual property rights. They could be transported, exchanged and used in long distance locations. In this way, some actors of the state and the industry could perform and increase their power, acting as if they could control nature in the socio-economic networks of the Brazilian agriculture. Scientific knowledge allowed them to “act at a distance” (REF).

## **Activist Seeds: Contesting Property, Science and Acting at a Distance.**

“Think Globally, Act Locally” has become a principle of action for the anti-globalization movements. Let me explain how Via Campesina and particularly the MST, has contested modern ideals of “acting at a distance”, science and rule of the intellectual property rights.

In 2005 Lula government authorized the production and commercialization of genetically modified crops. MST representatives understood this action as going one step forward

towards the commodification of agriculture. They argued that with the GM crops farmers would totally lose their control over seeds as they would become totally dependent on long distance centres where the GM technology was produced. In order to recover the local control over seeds production MST created Bionatur. This is the main project of MST within the frame of Via Campesina's campaign "Seeds Heritage of the People at the Service of the Human kind". In addition, Bionatur belongs to the ANA (National Association for Agroecology). The ANA is formed by representatives of MST, other social movements, NGOs and academia. It works as an expert body of the grassroots organizations.

Bionatur is an enterprise for the production and commercialization of seeds. It aims to supply poor farmers with IPRs free seeds. Bionatur/MST, represented by members of the ANA has claimed for the recognition of the value of the Creole seeds. These are seeds that local peasants have used and improved over generations. Their main scientific feature is their high genetic variability. They change every year as they adapt to the changes of the local ecosystem in which they belong. In 2006, the state approved a new "law of seeds". The category "local, traditional and Creole seeds" was included in this law. This exacerbated the conflict between the rural movements and the state. The ANA claimed that the law of seeds was a first step toward the inclusion of Creole seeds under a regime of IPR. Nevertheless, the ANA and the State agreed in that Creole seeds should somehow be included in the national legal system for two reasons: first) they should be protected otherwise they would be under threat of biopiracy; second) if Creole seeds were not included in the system of rural credits and insurance, farmers would be reluctant to adopt them. Now, the big question became: how to introduce the Creole seeds into the legal system? How to register them? As mentioned, the main feature of these seeds is their genetic variability. For their very nature, they cannot be stabilized and standardized and therefore, they do not fit within current IPR codes. The ANA/MST proposed an alternative system, it was called the "Geographical register". In the normal national register the quality of the seeds was defined in terms of genetics. But in the geographical register, seeds varieties should be described in terms of their location and their variable phenotypic characteristics. In other words, local people would have to guarantee the quality of these seeds on the basis of their local knowledge.

This alternative register should not be based upon trust on science but on the local knowledges. Local farmers should account for the reliability of Creole seeds. But, to what extent were these seeds trustworthy? And, for whom? A geographical register of this kind may work well when applied to the local scale. However, it cannot guarantee the quality of the seeds in other time/space scales. Therefore, the geographical register made difficult the continuation of the national system of insurance and credits for poor farmers. This alternative register would be highly unstable since the Creole seeds vary with every harvest. In addition, farmers would use the local names, but often one name would refer to different varieties of seeds, while in other occasions the same variety would be referred to by several names. Hence, it is difficult to see how this alternative register could make possible to identify seeds varieties in the long distances. Farmers living in long distances could easily distrust of the quality of MST seeds. It was unlikely that MST or other social movements could take responsibility for the Creole seeds, assuring that these seeds would be productive and safe.

This case raises an interesting question for debate: for the case of agro-biodiversity conservation, how to create alternatives to the IPRs system that are workable in a globalized world?

