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While UPOV celebrates its 50 years, farmers protest against an institution in the service of the seed industry

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Between noon and 2 p.m. on October 20, more than one hundred sustainable family farmers, members of various associations and committed citizens met across from the International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants (UPOV), to protest on the occasion of the fiftieth birthday of the institution. Their watchword was "For the immediate recognition of the right of farmers to resow and freely exchange their seeds, and to protect them from biopiracy and contamination from patented genes. No to the stranglehold of seed multinationals, the New Plant Variety Certificate of 1991 and any form of patent on plants, parts of plants, their genes, or production methods."

A tree was planted in front of the institution to symbolize the fact that farmers now have observer status there. They showed their determination through the symbolic performance of the "hoe kata". Then packets of "illegal" seeds were distributed and their contents were sowed in the vicinity to illustrate the nature of the farmers' struggle. Those who accept such seeds are currently considered receivers of stolen goods. Pierre Vanek and Philippe Sauvin (of the solidaritéS party) and Anne Mahrer (of the Vert party), candidates for the Swiss federal elections, are among those who accepted the packets.

"With regard to seeds, the situation has long been intolerable for sustainable family farmers, and may yet get worse. In fact the issue raised here affects everyone, as the question of access and of the free reproduction and exchange of seeds by farmers is the only way to prevent multinationals from appropriating and privatizing the entire food chain, and therefore life itself, through the bias of seeds and UPOV," says Pierre-André Tombez, of the agricultural union Suisse Uniterre.

The right of farmers to resow and exchange their farm seeds is essential to the adaptation of crops to climate change, and to the local adaptation which alone enables a reduction in the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. It guarantees the safety of the seed stock and therefore food security.

"Men and women farmers have always kept part of their harvest to resow and exchange among themselves. Whether UPOV wants it or not, they will carry on doing so. What is at stake is the future of agriculture, of sustainable family farming and of coming generations. The right to save, sow and exchange seeds is the foundation for Food Sovereignty," adds Josie Riffaud, of ECVC's coordinating committee.

CONTACTS

Uniterre: Valentina Hemmeler

ECVC: Guy Kastler

