

**transformative  
social innovation  
theory**

# **Transformative Social Innovation: Transnational Seed Exchange Networks**

**A summary of the case study report on Transnational Seed Exchange Networks.**



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## About TRANSIT:

TRANSIT is an international research project that aims to develop a theory of Transformative Social Innovation that is useful to both research and practice. It is co-funded by the European Commission and runs for four years, from 2014 until 2017. The TRANSIT consortium consists of 12 partners across Europe and Latin America. For more information, please visit our website: <http://www.transitsocialinnovation.eu/>.

## About this Document/ Disclaimer:

This is a summary of a case study report on Transnational Seed Exchange Networks. Both, the case study reports and this summary, were guided by empirical research questions based upon a preliminary conceptual framework of the TRANSIT-project. These questions concern inter alia:

1. Emergence of Social Innovation
2. Transformative Social Innovation dynamics
3. Agency in (Transformative) Social Innovation

This summary presents the interpretations of the researchers, and does not necessarily reflect the views and nuances of the initiatives and respondents themselves. For a full account of each transnational network and local case, including interview quotes and expressed nuances by respondents, we refer to the case study report, which is available via [communication.transit@ihs.nl](mailto:communication.transit@ihs.nl). Both the case study report, as well as this summary document, are the basis for future research activities and publications.

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# 1. Introduction to Seed Exchange Networks

Seed exchange has existed as a social practice for thousands of years in different cultures, as a way to maintain genetic diversity and health of crops. It is only in the last forty years, with the revelation that such diversity has been rapidly decreasing due to industrialization of agriculture, that a new type of seed exchange networks has formed. These new networks are consciously aimed at changing social relations surrounding agriculture by preserving, recreating, and relearning knowledge about seeds and diversity, creating new practices and ways of organizing social networks surrounding seed exchange, and framing them as a different way of thinking about agricultural systems.

We looked at a few intersecting regional hubs of activity: the Seed Savers Exchange (SSE) in North America; the Seed Saver Foundation (SSF) established in Australia; the Let's Liberate Diversity (LLD) network (and a related but separate international networking effort coordinated by Arche Noah of Austria) within Europe; and Navdanya, led by the prominent Dr. Vandana Shiva, in India; as well as a few examples from Latin America and Africa, where seed-saving and exchange is a key part of work done by agroecology and organic movements.

Literature to date mostly has focused on individual country or movement case studies. Few studies, however, have looked at the interaction between seed movements as a transnational network. Here, we explore how and to what extent local, national, and regional seed initiatives are coalescing into a global seed network or movement, what is the overall vision that unifies them globally? What types of social innovation and transformation are they bringing about, individually or collectively?

This transnational seed network case study covers a time frame from the mid-1970s until today, with special emphasis on the working of the European Let's Liberate Diversity (LLD). We chose local manifestations to illustrate different grassroots models: the seed swapping case in Hungary, Magház civic network for agrobiodiversity, and Seedy Sunday Brighton, UK's largest and oldest community seed swap network.

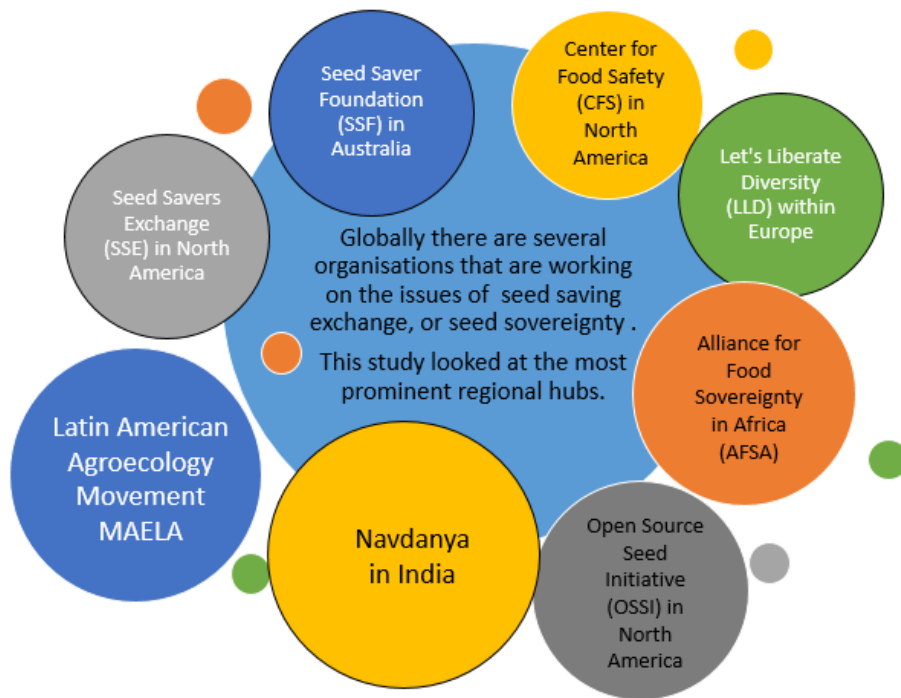


Figure 1: Intersecting regional hubs of seed networking. Source: authors.

## 2. The Emergence of Social Innovation

Seed saving and exchange as locally-grounded customs for the maintenance of genetic diversity and social networks pre-date the foundation of any official new seed networks or organizations in many parts of the world. In many cultures, wedding rituals and other community traditions have functioned as the means to hand seeds down to the next generation and maintain genetic diversity, though protection of diversity was rarely the explicit goal. The first new dedicated seed networks started in the US, Australia, and India and a few countries in Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, but only in the 2000s in much of Europe, Latin America, and Africa. SSE in the United States began in 1975, SSF in Australia was founded in 1986, Navdanya was founded in India in 1987. The movements in Switzerland and Austria, where the movements began in the 1980s and 1990, are an exception to many other countries in the rest of Europe, where many of the national seed networks began in response to the GMO debates in the 2000s. In Latin America there are strong seed networks in various countries, founded through the 1990s and 2000s, such as Brazil, Ecuador, Chile, Colombia, and others.

Each individual movement has its own aim and mission, but common elements echoed across many of these national and regional groups include: the protection of agricultural biodiversity, cultural heritage, and the skills and knowledge that sustain it; creation of seed banks or other means of ensuring access to seeds; facilitating exchange of seeds and knowledge among farmers (and in many cases with the scientific community); and the promotion of legislation at all levels that promotes all of the above. Cooperation across national and regional borders occurs as necessitated by changes in the social context, particularly as regards legislation.

Social innovativeness of new seed exchange networks lies in the fact that

- sharing of seeds creates co-habitation and harmony with other species
- the material exchange of seeds entails the interpersonal sharing of knowledge and values through which social relations are built and reinforced
- exchange of seeds happens across borders, create alternation outside of the localities where the seeds have gained their histories and meanings in the first place
- seeds become the intermediaries that change social relations across time and space
- seed exchanges are publicly framed and performed both as convivial social events and as political campaigns
- seed exchanges can be dispersed and expanded to other contexts
- successful events emerge as a result of community development, and can also reinforce successful community development.

Seed networks have been most innovative in the realm of doing, knowing, and framing, but have so far been organizing more at the national and regional levels and not at the global level. The desirable pathway of organising on the global level is contested within the movement. This also means that seed networks may at this point still be seen as SI-clusters that cooperate across networks in various configurations rather than a fully integrated transnational network.

### 3. Transformative Social Innovation dynamics

The most prominent element of the social context for seed exchange networks is the seed legislation that promotes high yielding varieties at the expense of genetic diversity, and the compulsory registration of all seed varieties which limits access to seeds. The proposed revision to EU seed legislation in 2013 became a key space of negotiation around which European seed networks were forced to try to reconcile their differences in framing seed politics: this became a question of whether seeds are free and should be considered part of the commons, or rather common property that should be governed by strict rules.

The complexity of the seed laws, the differences in the standpoints of farmer, seed-saver, and gardener organizations, the changing socio-economic contexts create diversity within the global seed movement. The plurality of framings reflects the diversity of meanings of seeds in different social contexts, yet also the great scope of potential they carry for innovation towards transformative social change.

Seed exchange initiatives in Hungary and UK highlight the social innovations dynamics generated at local and national level. Both initiatives build on a positive vision of society which creates alternative values for doing, organizing, framing and knowing. As a primary contribution to transformative change Seedy Sunday and Magház go beyond the dissatisfaction with the existing conditions and organise seed exchange events as experimental and empowering arenas where farmers, hobbyists, practitioners gather to create new social relations.

## 4. Agency in (Transformative) Social Innovation

Agency is regarded as an emerging phenomenon, a relational effect of the configurations within and between different approaches. On the transnational and local levels divergent configurations of agency have been created. The intersection of divergent efforts may have the most possibility for social innovation and making new pathways.

As for organising a possibility for social innovation lies with the focus on legal issues through formal lobby organisation that can also create empowering participative engagements with society. New ways of doing emerged not only in practice of seed exchange but also in professionalised transnational organisations that encompass many initiatives and grassrootsing of context-sensitive local initiatives relying on leisure based volunteering. New ways of knowing emerged in sharing and collecting knowledge about seed varieties, creating scientifically sound and complex messages to different stakeholders or single, clear central message to the whole society. New ways of framing begun in positioning seed exchanges discursively as social and political acts rather than only as agricultural practices, and in the active focus on seed legislation that also gives space for internal differences.

Local seed exchange initiatives primarily develop social agency by encouraging people to regain their autonomy in cultivation of food and plants. Beyond the actual seed saving and exchange agency emerges as creating a new community by sharing the know-how and experience. Local seed initiatives successfully contribute to find the way around harmful seed legislation and create alternatives, gain support for seed legislation campaigns.