

Global Coalition of Open Source Seed Initiatives (GOSSI)

Mission Statement

GOSSI is an international coalition of organizations and individuals - farmers, seed keepers, plant breeders, activists - working to ensure that seeds can be freely used and shared in perpetuity

Vision and Mission

The Global Coalition of Global Open Source Seed System Initiatives (GOSSI) envisions a world in which all seeds are free to be used, saved, shared, and bred by anyone. Such freedoms will enlarge the number and diversity of individuals, groups and organizations engaged in plant breeding and seed saving. GOSSI works to strengthen the role of farmer-based and participatory breeding and to support seed systems that are unencumbered by the use restrictions usually applied in the dominant, market-concentrated seed sector. Freely accessible, locally adapted, high performing, “open source” seed is urgently needed to cope with the severe social and environmental challenges now facing agriculture and food supply. The key to the generation and distribution of such freely accessible varieties is development of networks of collaborating breeders, seed companies and farmers committed to sharing.

The Problem

The freedoms to access and use seeds continue to be rapidly eroded and radically circumscribed globally. The prevalent mechanism by which these restrictions are being implemented is the worldwide imposition of various forms of intellectual property rules and standards. In addition, IPRs such as patents and “breeders’ rights” are being widely supplemented by restrictions associated with variety registration requirements and by contracts such as licenses and Material Transfer Agreements. Although such arrangements are most advanced in the nations of the Global North, bilateral, multilateral and, regional agreements are imposing these restrictions globally. Farmers worldwide increasingly find themselves unable to legally save, share, sell, or breed with their own seeds. Critically, these restrictions also affect small seed companies and breeders in universities, public agencies, and not-for-profit organizations. This growing suite of encumbrances on seed freedoms enhances the power of a handful of corporations that have come to dominate commercial plant breeding and seed sales. The result is a proliferation of uniform, patented, and genetically engineered crop varieties unsuited to the changing needs of most of the world’s farmers. At a time when responses to climate change urgently require enhancing the ingenuity and creativity available for crop improvement and adaptation, IPRs and corporate concentration are radically narrowing the diversity of companies, breeders, and varieties.

The Open Source Alternative

To the interlocked challenges of concentrated corporate power and IPRs, a variety of initiatives around the world have found “open source” and “copyleft” approaches to be a compelling alternative. Open source seeds are seeds, whose distribution and/or sale are accompanied by a formal commitment to preserve the rights of farmers, gardeners, and breeders to freely use, save, replant, and improve them. Critically, this responsibility is extended to their progeny and derivatives. This “copyleft” feature creates a protected commons. It is open to those who will share and excludes those who will not share. Anyone may freely use open source seed – grow it, propagate it, and breed with it – as long as they agree to pass those freedoms on to others. It is important to understand that while open source seed is free with respect to use, it is not necessarily free in price. Open source seed is best understood as “freed” seed,

not “free” seed. Open source seed projects create pools of crop genetic material that cannot be appropriated and monopolized by private interests. These initiatives thereby strengthen the operational independence of farmer-breeders and public breeders, enhance diversity in both the social and genetic foundations of plant breeding, and facilitate the development of effective responses to the challenges of climate change in agriculture.

In summary, an “open source seed system” is an integrated chain of practices linking the breeding, multiplication, use, and exchange of seed. The distinctive feature of “open source seed” is an expressed and explicit commitment—legal, ethical, or organizational—to maintain freedom to use the seed and any of its derivatives.

The GOSSI Group

People and organizations all over the world have been inspired by the potential of open source approaches for seed freedom. Open source is not just hypothetical, it is now a system that has been enacted and is working in multiple locations in the Global North and the Global South. Open source seed projects are operational – which is to say that they are formally constituted and have released a crop variety under an open source/copyleft mandate – in the United States (<https://osseeds.org>), India (<http://csa-india.org/what-we-do/open-source-seeds/>), Germany (<https://www.opensourceseeds.org>), Argentina (<http://bioleft.org>) and Kenya (<https://seedsaverskenya.org/2013/12/03/open-source-seed->). Additionally, there are supportive NGOs in the Netherlands (Hivos), France (CIRAD) and Uganda (Bioversity).

GOSSI - definition, principles and objectives

While the existing open source seed initiatives and their allies are all interested in growing a global community of practice committed to seed freedom, it is acknowledged that social, agricultural, legal, and political circumstances relating to seed systems vary considerably around the world. Open source seed projects have therefore operationalized “open source” in slightly different ways. For instance, OSSI in the USA uses a pledge, while Agrecol in Germany uses a formal license, and Bioleft in Argentina has developed three different licenses for different cases. GOSSI has established a core set of commitments to which all its members can adhere, while also preserving sufficient flexibility for individual initiatives to allow for the demands and requirements of local or national contexts. Accordingly, GOSSI has adopted a set of “core” principles applicable to all open source seed projects and a complementary set of “guiding” principles that can be adapted to local contexts.

Core principles, universally applicable, are:

- Anyone may freely use open source seed - that is, grow it, save it, propagate it, develop it further, and use it for breeding.
- Recipients of open source seed may not privatize the seed or its progeny through exclusive intellectual property rights or other use restrictions.
- Recipients of open source seed must assign the same rights and obligations to subsequent recipients.
- The breeder of open source seed shall be recognized through attribution of credit.
- Benefits shall be shared all along the seed value chain.

These core principles accompany the seed and its derivatives through any and all transfers and exchanges. They guarantee free access in perpetuity and safeguard the freedom to grow and save seed for replanting or for any other purpose; they give the freedom to share, trade, or sell seed to others; they enable the freedom to trial and study seed and to share or publish information about it; and, they

give the freedom to select or adapt seed, to make crosses with it, or to use it to breed new lines and varieties.

Guiding principles to be applied according to national circumstances are:

- Actively promoting social justice (e.g., gender, class, caste, status)
- Rejecting proprietary seed technology that threatens biosafety
- Revitalizing farmer, freelance and/or public plant breeding
- Strengthening farmers' participation in breeding and crop improvement
- Supporting diversified and decentralized seed systems

These complementary sets of core and guiding principles inform **GOSSI's Objectives** which are:

- Learning. To maintain internal fora for members for mutual learning, for the exchange of ideas, and for strengthening members' work;
- Cooperation. To enhance cooperation among GOSSI members on research and development issues of mutual interest.
- Public engagement. To develop means for sharing members' ideas with those outside the platform and for assisting those who want to create their own open source seed initiatives;
- Advocacy. To develop means for participating in and influencing debates, consultations, and policy development on the governance of seed systems at the national and international levels;
- Fundraising. To solicit core funding to support action and implementation of GOSSI's objectives.

Membership and Governance

A steering committee has been established, consisting of representatives of four organizations with active open source seed initiatives, and three representatives from allied and interested organizations. This steering committee will provide leadership during the formative phase of GOSSI's development. It is anticipated that membership in GOSSI may be granted to organizations and individuals sending a letter of intent and agreement with GOSSI's principles and objectives.

1st September 2020