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Seeds in organic farming in Indonesia: Falling through the sieves of regulation and practice

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Abstract

Organic agriculture relies on agrobiodiversity to unfold the potential of site-specific farming practices. Seeds are a central aspect of these social-ecological artefacts as the outcome of hundreds of years of intimate interaction between people and plants. The regulatory framework officially governing the emerging organic sector poses challenges to the procurement, exchange and handling of seeds in Indonesia. Based on extended interviews with breeders, farmers, activists and entrepreneurs in organic farming between 2017 and 2019, I reveal the contradictory seed management at the level of governance, and politics as well as innovative practices for transformation. As Laksmana (2023) shows, there is insufficient clarity in organic farming regulations on what constitutes organic seeds (BSN 2016). The Law No. 12/1992 on the Plant Cultivation System in Indonesia makes it illegal for farmers to use non-state-registered seeds. Organic farmers run in danger to be prosecuted for attempting to become more independent by storing and using their own seeds, while the state simultaneously encourages the use of local resources in organic agriculture. On the other hand, Laksmana and Padmanabhan (2021, 87–88) demonstrate how seed sovereignty, defined as farmers’ rights to access, reproduce, and save seeds (Kloppenborg 2010) becomes central to farmers identifying and engaging with the concept of food sovereignty. Thinking through different concepts of seed governance aligned to private property, stewardship and commons, I juxtapose the regulatory ideas with the practices and imaginaries of practicing farmers, activists and breeders to throw light on the contradictory and potentially harmful environment disincentivizing agrobiodiversity maintenance and use.

Keywords: Agrobiodiversity, breeding, Indonesia