

Title: An Appeal for the Commons: Public Plant Breeding in an Era of Privatisation

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ABSTRACT

Plant breeding occupies a decisive position in transforming agriculture through developing new varieties that enable the integration of the input markets supplying agriculture, a phenomenon typified by the development of genetically modified plants. Agricultural research and various activities related to seed delivery systems are increasingly becoming privatised – partly as an outcome of policy advice from donor countries and organisations and as well as a consequence of regulatory changes required from multilateral agreements, such as the *trade-related intellectual property rights* agreement of GATT. Irrespective of the origin of the factors motivating the withdrawal of the public sector, which are not separable, a common rationale is identifiable: private investments in agricultural research remain sub-optimal because of difficulties in appropriating the returns, which can be enhanced by providing legal rights, such as plant breeders' rights, and the withdrawal of the public sector from select activities.

The paper approaches the debate from an evolutionary economics perspective, which critically questions the proposition that private investments in agricultural research suffer from problems of inappropriability. This is achieved by a theoretical critique of the characterisation of *science* as a public good, which is supported by the empirical identification of methods of appropriation, often independent of the availability of intellectual property rights, that breeding companies tend to adopt to control the diffusion and use of plant varieties. An examination of the general nature and content of private agricultural research is mixed, though there is overwhelming evidence, across countries, of the dependence on basic research conducted within the public sector, either nationally or globally. Recognising the importance of public sector agricultural research, the paper presents a strong case for maintaining agricultural research within the public domain as means of enabling diverse stakeholders to influence the nature and direction of research.

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