

GEVES: the beginning of a long history

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GEVES is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year! In 1981, when I arrived at INRA as Deputy CEO, GEVES was 10 years old and still in its infancy, whereas the institute already had a 35-year history...

Bringing together various activities previously spread over some of the many stations and experimental units of the Department of Genetics and Plant Improvement (DGAP), GEVES was from the outset a hybrid being, and therefore particularly vigorous if the laws of genetics can be applied here... Varietal identification and seed quality were the main activities of GEVES at the time, partly financed by the seed industry; this contribution was to prove essential throughout the life of GEVES. I still remember, on the first Monday afternoon in November, at rue de Grenelle, my first INRA management meeting, chaired with the natural authority that was his by Jacques Poly, assisted by Roger Bouchet, a bioclimatologist; the five scientific directors were of course there, each one watching over the interests of the scientific sector he was in charge of with proprietous care. Jean Marrou, who was in charge of the large plant production sector at the time, did not fail to alert me on the same day to the group's very particular situation. The Department of Genetics and Plant Improvement (DGAP), with more than a thousand people (researchers, technicians and many field workers who were given tenure a few years later), was the most important department at INRA, managing numerous stations and experimental fields. It was naturally jealous, this being accentuated by the historical rivalry at INRA between the plant and animal sectors. The GEVES was then attached to the DGAP, but thanks to its activities in the service of the seed industry, it benefited from precious revenues of its own: part of this revenue was used to win the goodwill of the managers of the research stations where each of its teams was located. The balance was fragile, as research tolerated the less noble service activities, which in return provided it with indispensable resources.

It should be pointed out that until 1981, INRA had been placed under the exclusive supervision of the Ministry of Agriculture, which had asked it to host various service units: in addition to GEVES, there was a soil testing laboratory in the North, the Centre de traitement de l'information génétique (CTIG) in Paris in charge of indexing all dairy cows in France, and a wine testing laboratory near Dijon. That year, however, INRA came under the joint authority of two ministries: the Ministry of Research research, which allocated most of INRA's resources, and the Ministry of Agriculture, which contributed only marginally to the institute's funding: agriculture now only financed the service missions mentioned above and grouped together under the heading of complementary missions. Internal jealousies, external weaknesses: Jean Marrou knew how to be insistent when a cause was close to his heart: it was most often between 7.30 and 8.30 p.m. when the offices in the rue de Grenelle were empty that he came knocking at my desk... Feeling that the system was in danger, assisted by Huet, head of the DGAP, and Claude Hutin, the first director of GEVES and a fine negotiator who was very attached to the group's future, they made me understand the complexity of the situation and the general interest in supporting this type of activity at INRA.

Back to the origins

It must be said that the importance of plan breeding, and controlling seed germination quality, was not questioned by anyone. The Permanent Technical Committee for Plant Breeding (CTPS) had been created in the midst of the wartime shortage, by decree of 10 March 1942, and held its first constitutive

meeting on the following Thursday, July 2, under the chairmanship of the General Secretary for Farmers' Issues and Rural Equipment, and the Director of Education and Research, one of the departments of the Ministry of Agriculture which managed to survive eighty years of public life, under the Vichy regime and then under two republics, with practically no change in its name or scope, which is quite a record! Some seed producers were physically present, such as de Vilmorin, Tézier and Benoist, as well as Lucien Brétignières, a professor at Grignon, and Charles Crépin, Director of the Epoisses station, near Dijon, which used to be part of the Railway Company, which was nationalised in 1938; Charles Crépin was to become the first director of INRA in 1946, when the institute only had a little more than one hundred researchers. Jean Bustarret, then a researcher at the Versailles agricultural research centre, also took part in this decisive meeting: he had been welcomed and trained in his first position at Epoisses by Charles Crépin, whom he called "my master"; he would become the fourth CEO of INRA in 1963. From the very beginning of the CTPS, the public authorities wanted to closely associate research and the seed industry. Seven sections were created, with titles not far removed from those of the current CTPS sections, while taking into account the constraints of the time; thus, after an intervention during the session, the "potato" section became "potatoes and Jerusalem artichokes"... We also note the insistent demand for collaborators: without skills, which are rare in this field, any public policy is doomed to failure, and it is crucial to remember this point when reflecting on the GEVES. The central role of Jean Bustarret, whose activity in the field of seeds has had a profound impact on our planet, cannot be overemphasised: it is to him that we owe the International Convention for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants adopted in Paris in 1961, which created the Union for the International Protection of New Varieties of Plants (UPOV).

The French national Seed Testing Station (SNES) had been created in 1884 and in 1908 was attached to the newly created Fraud Control Service. In 1953, Jean Bustarret obtained the transfer of the SNES to INRA, initiating a long-term strategy aimed at gathering the tools to support a growing seed sector. Without this transfer, the SNES would have followed the whole of the Directorate of Fraud Control, which was separated from the Ministry of Agriculture in 1981 to be attached to the Ministry of Finance, and the GEVES would never have been created. In 1967, he appointed an INRA researcher, Claude Hutin, to head the SNES. Jean Bustarret was CEO of INRA in 1971 when GEVES was created: he obviously played a decisive role in the creation of this tool. The grouping of dispersed forces, the long-term management of rare skills, and a financial strike force thanks to the pooling of resources previously dispersed among various research stations were the keys to success. He chose as director the man who would enable GEVES to structure and develop: this was Claude Hutin, already the head of SNES, director of research at INRA, a skilful, clear-sighted man who identified himself all his life with the organisation he was called upon to direct. Jean Bustarret retired the following year, in 1972. His successor was Raymond Février. A change of era: after the period of the 'vegetalists', the 'animalists' - including Jacques Poly - were to lead INRA for about twenty years.

Perils and opportunities

With the change in INRA's supervisory authority in 1981, appetites were to be unleashed. Research in the strict sense needed resources, biotechnologies were emerging, and INRA was called upon to account for its research in this field, and was reduced, like Monsieur Jourdain writing prose without knowing it, to reclassifying a certain number of its previous activities under the name of biotechnologies. The pressure on GEVES's resources became stronger. I had been convinced by Claude Hutin; with the help of one of my assistants, Jean-Claude Bousset, the worst was avoided; Jean-Claude Bousset was a remarkable financial director of INRA. A pianist of great sensitivity, he had thought of making a career out of it, but was dissuaded by his family and directed towards what was considered

to be more serious studies in finance and accounting. Without forgetting his initial vocation, he gave appreciated recitals from time to time, and his passion gave him an artistic turn of mind. His excellent knowledge of the arcana of his profession and his great creativity allowed us to set up sometimes bold but never risky projects which we used to discuss at length together. The GEVES was thus protected and strengthened. Better still, with my agreement, Claude Hutin gradually strengthened its financial autonomy in relation to the DGAP's 'supervision', transforming GEVES into a quasi-department of INRA, with its own arbitration of resources. It was clearer this way, as its activity was ultimately of a different nature from that of the DGAP researchers. Finally, in 1985, during a global reorganisation of INRA's structures, including the creation of new centres based on regional divisions, GEVES was set up as a department, with Claude Hutin naturally appointed as its head: the end of a sequence during which patience and perseverance had finally paid off.

The law of 15 July 1982 on the orientation and programming of research and technological development in France profoundly modified French public research, by generalising the notion of evaluation, by giving tenure to staff, including INRA workers who became technicians, by allowing the valorisation of research and the creation of subsidiaries. It offered other welcome opportunities, such as the creation of public interest groups (GIP) between public or private entities, with civil status and financial autonomy. INRA, with Christian Hérault, in charge of development, devoted a lot of energy to the seed sector, and very quickly, in October 1983, the subsidiary Agri-Obtentions was created to manage the plant varieties that INRA had in its portfolio or wished to develop.

For GEVES, the road was to be longer. But when I left INRA for the first time in 1986, GEVES, at 15 years old, was autonomous, visible and recognised: it could continue its development and structural organisation.
