

## **GEVES: A Collective Success (2/2)**

### **The early years of GEVES: 1989-2000**

In 1986, GEVES, set up as a department of INRA, was 15 years old; it was still very young, but it came from a line of laboratories and stations that was much older than it was: anything was possible!...

In 1986, I left INRA and soon became Director General of Education and Research at the Ministry of Agriculture, one of INRA's two supervisory bodies. It was obvious to me that I should avoid getting involved in the daily life of the Institute, which I knew too well. This was not an easy time for INRA, marked in 1989 by the voluntary departure of Jacques Poly, after 11 years of undisputed power, and the inevitable upheavals that followed the changes in organisation and leadership.

In this unstable institutional context, Jean Marrou, Jean-Claude Bousset and Claude Hutin were personally very involved in the transformation of GEVES into a public interest group (GIP), one of them defining the long-term orientations and missions, the second securing the numerous patrimonial, financial and human aspects, and the last bringing his intimate knowledge of the organisation and his exceptional links with the profession. I worked hard for this transformation at the Ministry of Agriculture. I saw it as a way to perpetuate an essential activity that would have been threatened if it had remained a simple complementary mission within INRA; it would have been regularly weakened by the job cuts imposed on the Ministry. The boundary between the Ministry and the institutions under its supervision was too permeable, and the so-called complementary missions were not protected from budget savings, unlike research activities. This first GIP with INRA and the Ministry involved the professionals gathered in the French National Interprofessional Group for Seeds and Plants (GNIS), which became SEMAE in 2021. For a long time, these professionals had been financing part of the GEVES trials, and this participation, now institutionalised and semi-permanent, would finally make it possible to recruit staff under contract, and thus remove a major obstacle to the development of GEVES activities. Jean Marrou was careful to ensure that the roles included broad missions, such as plant genetic resources, an activity that was effectively attached to GEVES many years later. 1989 was a very important year for GEVES: it finally acquired legal personality, with its own decision-making bodies, a little over a century after the creation of the French National Seed testing Station in 1884. The 50 years of GEVES are actually part of a much longer period of time!

Jean-Claude Bousset naturally became the first president of the GEVES GIP. This position required someone who was perfectly familiar with the financial mysteries of INRA and capable of influencing decisions... Pierre-Louis Lefort had replaced Claude Hutin in 1988, shortly before the GIP was finalised. Joël Guiard was appointed secretary general. In 1994, after the untimely death of Jean-Claude Bousset, Pierre-Louis Lefort was naturally appointed President, and Yvette Dattée, Scientific Director, was the third to take over the management of GEVES. I will not dwell on this period: as Director of INA-PG (now AgroParisTech) and President of the INRA centre at Grignon, I no longer had the opportunity to work with GEVES.

In 1996, I was appointed Director General of INRA, following the 'mad cow' crisis, during which INRA was noticeably absent and even malfunctioning: the crisis of governance of the organisation following the departure of Jacques Poly seven years earlier had not yet been

overcome. During these four years, I was totally focused on the difficult reform of INRA: a systemic crisis that called for strong responses, expected both by the public authorities and the general public, as well as by many of those who worked within the Institute. However, as is always the case in this kind of situation, this reform aroused the opposition of those who wanted to preserve their power at all costs, and of those whom they had managed to convince that the status quo was an unsurpassable objective... In this context, GEVES, which I knew well, was an organisation that functioned to everyone's satisfaction, and therefore did not require any particular intervention from INRA's general management.

## **CTPS and GEVES**

At the end of my term of office at the end of July 2000, I left an INRA that had been reformed, pacified, opened up to new partners and had profoundly reshaped its fields of research. On the following 25 November I was appointed Chairman of the French Technical Committee for Plant Breeding (CTPS), perhaps because I had previously imagined and created with Michel Caboche the major plant genomics programme Génoplante. The GEVES was - and still is - responsible, among other things, for proposing the registration of new plant varieties in the French Catalogue (National List), which leads to their registration in the Community catalogue, an essential step before their marketing. This registration is carried out after DUS testing (Distinctness, Uniformity, Stability) and, for most species, VATE testing (Agronomic, Technological and Environmental Value): the former aims to verify that we are indeed in the presence of a variety (U and S), and a new variety (D), while the latter makes it possible to ensure that, under given growing conditions, the new varieties provide an improvement compared with varieties already on the market, which are used as control varieties. In 2009-2010, I insisted that E be added to VAT: this shows that the CTPS was able to use the diversity within it and the freedom of thought to introduce a notion that seems obvious today, but was not at the time. Similarly, the CTPS proposed the registration of the first 'organic' wheat varieties, which would pave the way for other registrations in other 'organic' species, at the cost of a total overhaul of the corresponding test protocols by the GEVES managers of these species.

The CTPS brings together officials, researchers and professionals involved in the seed sector in each of its 15 sections. But all the work was done beforehand, thanks to GEVES: receiving registration applications, field trials for three years - either on GEVES land or at the professionals' premises - comparison with neighbouring varieties kept in impressive collections maintained by GEVES, and presentation of the applications in the relevant CTPS sections. Joël Guiard was the memory of the CTPS, of which he was secretary general for 17 years, even accepting the task of director general of GEVES during an interim period of almost a year. I really learned to appreciate even more the extraordinary assets of the GEVES: the extent of its plant collections, the rigorous methods of testing carried out on its stations or under its supervision, and above all the human wealth of its specialists who have in-depth knowledge of every characteristic of the species and varieties for which they are responsible; the technical secretaries of the CTPS sections, who play a vital role, are almost all GEVES specialists. I was struck, during each trial visit, by the involvement and competence of these passionate, competent and educational men and women in the field: by walking through a maize field, for example, they highlight the slightest difference in appearance or growth between plants that are

very similar, which would escape anyone else's sight. All of them deserve to be mentioned and thanked by name for the quality of their commitment.

Joël Guiard, who was very involved internationally, humane and benevolent towards his new president, taught me everything about this new job, avoiding a number of pitfalls: ministry officials come and go, but the professionals in the sector stay: like the researchers and specialists at GEVES, they have several decades of formidable experience: every precedent can be invoked, and beware of the section chair who is badly advised! I am very grateful to Joël for his technical skills and his knowledge of the players, which was never in doubt. After his departure, Christian Leclerc, who had passed through GEVES a few years earlier, successfully took up the formidable challenge of taking over, with the same efficiency, undisputed skills and appreciated support for the CTPS president: GEVES is truly an unparalleled training school, both technically and in terms of people!

### **New managers, new dangers, new missions**

I knew four directors of GEVES during this period: Yvette Dattée: an authoritative scientist, she introduced a lot of scientific content, but also methodological rigour into all the areas of GEVES's activity - seed and variety testing - introducing quality control procedures. After her, Fabrice Marty had the heavy responsibility of designing and managing the project to transfer the headquarters and part of the staff from La Minière in the Paris region to the Anjou region, to Beaucouzé and the Anjouère station, near the SNES and the Community Plant Variety Office (CPVO). The success was exemplary, thanks to Fabrice's empathy with each of the GEVES staff members and his sense of the common good and the general interest. This was a difficult period financially, despite the GIP status that was supposed to be protective. INRA, subject to tough arbitration, as it is during every left-right political changeover, put pressure to reduce the posts made available, while the balance of funding between the major areas was contested. At the cost of a lot of analytical accounting work carried out under Fabrice's impetus, and difficult negotiations with INRA and the Ministry in which I was heavily involved, thanks above all to the increase in fees agreed to by the professionals, who were fully aware of the very positive role played by GEVES, the difficulties were overcome.

They were not the only ones. A more insidious, little-known threat emerged. In view of the close links between GEVES and sector professionals, some people at the highest level of the Ministry feared possible collusion, of the same type as those revealed during the food safety crises or those relating to the marketing authorisations of drugs. They pushed behind the scenes the idea of a drastic reform whose consequences would have been catastrophic for the whole seed industry. It would have involved distancing GEVES from the professionals by dissolving the GIP and attaching the activity to an existing public establishment, such as a health security agency, with the State then taking over all the procedures. The analogy with safety issues was unfounded, as the issues, risks and procedures had nothing to do with the examples cited. Behind the scenes, I opposed this rather baroque idea head-on. After a while, the people I was talking to changed, and this idea was fortunately forgotten.

Then came the management of Sylvie Dutartre, then Arnaud Deltour from the private sector. The latter instilled a new corporate culture, symbolised by the entry of a new word into the GIP's vocabulary: marketing was henceforth to be part of GEVES's concerns!

GEVES managers were never content with routine, they renewed their methods and offered new services to professionals, consumers and public policy makers. The analytical methods developed for the registration of GMO varieties by Yvette Dattée were ultimately used to detect and quantify traces of GMOs in food. After the 6-year presidency - until 2010 - of Guy Riba, a demanding scientist with a percussive joviality, came the turn of Christian Huyghe for more than 10 years. Originally a forage specialist, he achieved a major first: thanks to this respected scientist, who had very heavy responsibilities, GEVES moved towards an intensive use of data - by-products of its many multilocational trials - in the hope of responding better to the dual challenge of agro-ecology and resilience in the face of climate change. A little later, at his initiative, the inter-section commission on service plants was created within the CTPS, which is now bringing about major changes, as it leads to a different way of thinking about crop successions. After my departure, the GEVES was given a new mission, which had long been included in its missions, and which is essential at a time when biodiversity is being preserved: the conservation of plant genetic resources. All these changes are evidence of great vitality, with a constant broadening of horizons and profound changes in objectives and methods.

### **GEVES, a major asset for a new European agriculture**

Thanks to its managers with complementary profiles, GEVES was able to acquire a strong internal culture: it owes this to staff who are motivated by their work, used to using the latest possibilities opened up by science to do better and more, rigorous thanks to the implementation of demanding quality procedures, attentive to the cost of each basic activity, concerned with imagining new outlets and conquering new clients, knowing their contacts in the seed companies perfectly, and continuing to develop cooperation throughout the world. We owe a lot to each of them.

The French seed industry, originally driven by the activity of INRAe, relayed by dynamic companies of all sizes, is doing well: exports have doubled over the last 10 years, the trade balance has grown even more strongly over the same period (+130%) to just over one billion euros, and employment has also increased (+25% over 10 years), with almost 12,000 jobs. Research, 13% of the firms' turnover, is certainly a determining factor. But the credibility of the sector also depends on the rigour and seriousness of its procedures for national listing and seed lot control.

Some foreign registration offices, such as in Germany, consider registration and control as administrative formalities, requiring staff with this type of expertise. GEVES's position is different: the permanent link with INRAe - and therefore with the latest scientific developments - leads to the implementation of new methods and the exploitation of new niches, while a good knowledge of the seed sector enables it to respond as quickly as possible to market developments. This original situation, made possible by the great professionalism of motivated staff, is a major asset that sets GEVES apart from other registration offices in Europe. I am convinced that the number of such offices can only decrease, if only because of the high costs of maintaining the collections. The demands of combating climate change and maintaining biodiversity will go hand in hand with an increasing emphasis on genetics, using the resources of biology, new biotechnologies and the exploitation of big data. The GEVES is faced with exceptional opportunities, and I am certain that it will be able to seize them, provided that it

knows how to maintain close links with public research as well as with sector professionals and citizens!

Long live GEVES, which in the future may well have the words "European Group..." in its acronym. This is the new development that I hope will enable the GEVES to serve our planet even better over the next 50 years!

Paul Vialle

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