



EU COUSIN project
7th to 8th of February
Kick-off Meeting
Aranjuez (Spain)
Press release

From 7th to 8th of February in Aranjuez (Spain) at the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, 25 universities, civil society organisations and companies are meeting for launching COUSIN, the new Horizon Europe dedicated to Crop Wild Relatives (CWRs) utilization and conservation for sustainable agriculture.

As the current demonstrations by farmers across Europe and the restrictions on water use due to drought in the middle of winter in several regions of Spain show, agriculture is facing huge challenges. One of them is a more sustainable production of our food, with less negative impact on our natural resources, and food of high nutritional quality to keep our society healthy and to be able to charge adequate prices so that production is not only ecologically and socially, but also economically sustainable. This transition of agriculture can be facilitated by new crop varieties that, apart from productivity, also promote sustainability, be it through increased resistance to pests and diseases or drought, and also through improved crop qualities or by allowing alternative production modes, such as intercropping, that promotes efficient use of resources and beneficial interactions between organisms. However, most of our crops lack varieties with these characteristics, as they have not been in demand since the green revolution and therefore have not been targeted in crop breeding. **Therefore, to introduce disease, pest, or drought resistance into existing crops, we often have to go back to the genetic resources available in our natural and semi-natural plant communities, be they grasslands, pastures, forests or shrublands. In other words, wild relatives are used for genetic improvement of our crops to make them more sustainable.** 'Jabal', a durum wheat variety that was bred by crossing a cultivated variety with one of its wild relatives, gained media attention a year ago for being a variety tolerant to extreme drought. Many other examples like Jabal exist and demonstrate the great value of wild relatives for our future. Our future varieties of wheat, barley, pea, lettuce, or broccoli will depend on the genetic diversity available for breeding and adaptation to global changes. Therefore, the conservation of wild relatives, accessibility to plant genetic material and knowledge of the characteristics of each of their populations is key not only to conserve biodiversity but also to secure our food supply for future generations.

The European project COUSIN, led by the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, is facing this research and development challenge, putting together 25 entities from 12 countries on the valorisation of wild relatives in the food value chain, the conservation of their genetic diversity both in situ and ex situ, their characterisation, and their use as a resource for the genetic



improvement of our crops for greater sustainability. The consortium coordinated by Christian Schöb, distinguished researcher in the area of biodiversity and conservation at the URJC and affiliated to the new URJC Institute for Global Change Research, includes 14 universities and research centres, 5 small and medium-sized enterprises, 1 large company, 3 NGOs, and a public body. From Spain, apart from URJC, the Institute of Sustainable Agriculture of CSIC, the University of Vic, the Agrogenomics Research Centre, the start-up BioCrop Innovations SL and the NGO Aprisco de Las Corchuelas are participating. The 5-year project with a budget of almost 8 million Euros is co-financed by the European Commission through Horizon Europe funds, the Swiss Confederation and UK Research and Innovation.

At the kick-off meeting in Aranjuez between 6 and 8 February 2024 more than 50 members of the consortium are meeting for the first time in person and present their lines of research and development so that COUSIN can achieve the expected impact of increasing the sustainability of agriculture through the conservation and use of biodiversity, particularly the wild relatives of crops.

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