

COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE – OPPORTUNITIES AND PERSPECTIVES

Corina Ene¹

Abstract

This paper presents the concept of “Community Supported Agriculture” (CSA), aiming to underline its characteristics and advantages for all parties involved in the process.

Creating such a partnership between farmers and consumers means more than just providing food on an established basis, but also helps small-scale farms and rural communities to better achieve their role, sharing benefits and risks with the consumers.

Nowadays, CSA tends to be more and more an effective alternative for industrial agriculture approach, which promotes both sustainable development, food safety and nutritional balance in the same time.

Key words: *Community Supported Agriculture, food, farm, consumer*

Introduction

“Community Supported Agriculture” (CSA) represents a socio-economic model for producing and distributing food having as main endeavor to directly connect consumers to food producers. The concept is identically named in the US, being a synonym to “Community Shared Agriculture”, as used in Canada. In Japan (where about 25% of the households participate in a CSA), the equivalent term is *teikei*, meaning “putting the farmer’s face on food”.

This particular dimension remains essential throughout the whole range of activities, as means basically a partnership doubled by a mutual commitment between a group (community) of supporters (consumers) and a specific farm (producer). This kind of relationship provides a direct economic and social connection between food production and consumption.

¹ Lecturer phd., Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiesti, Faculty of Economic Sciences, B-dul Bucuresti, No.39, 100.680, Ploiesti, Romania, tel: +40726259030, e-mail: enecorina@yahoo.com

A CSA is composed of a community of individuals who offer support to a producer/farmer, whereas customers and farmers share the risks and benefits of the entire process by which food is produced. At basic level, this system usually consists of personal delivery or lift of a weekly basket of vegetables and fruits - sustainably grown - during the growing season (approximately June to October). In return, consumers, pay a subscription fee, becoming at the same time not only food buyers from particular farms but also “members” of those farms. For that matter, CSA activities provide more than *just* foodstuffs, offering different opportunities for eaters to become practically involved in the ecological and human community that effectively supports the farm.

This concept was born in the 1960s in countries such as Japan, Germany and Switzerland [11], as a response from various communities concerned with food safety and the urbanization of agricultural land. Thus, customers and farmers formed cooperative partnerships to finance organic agriculture.

CSA system actually consists of a group of people buying shares for a portion of the expected harvest of a farm.

Recent developments of food systems have also been associated with growth in local food systems. In the US, evidence from national surveys suggests significant demand for locally produced foods; consumers are more willing to purchase - occasionally or always - fresh produce directly from growers. Also, other research had shown that nearly 50% of the respondents purchased food directly from farmers either by visiting farmers’ markets, joining a CSA, or buying direct from the farmers [11]. This is reflected by a significant increase in the CSA number in the US: from 2 in 1986 to over 1400 in 2010. A growing number of CSAs have also in Europe since the early 1990s.

The practice in the field (mostly in the US) has shown that targeted customers could be mainly local institutions such as: schools, colleges, food services and catering organizations, foodstuff retailers etc.

Community Supported Agriculture – features, goals, benefits

CSA-type arrangements can take many forms, but the commitment between members and the producer - to support the farm throughout the growing season, by previously purchasing a share of the season’s harvest – is essential. In exchange, the producer pledges to provide, doing his best, a supply of seasonal fresh produce all along the growing season. As a consequence, the farm is guaranteed a solid, reliable market for a diverse selection of crops (usually certified organic), on the basis of a guaranteed yearly income.

Since its creation in the 1960’s, the CSA system’s principle was to increase the access to locally grown foods for one region’s consumers by:

- promoting consumer education in order to increase the demand;
- increasing the number of growers and their capacity using marketing techniques, specific technology and by extending the use of food safety practices – which lead to a grow in the supply.

Such an initiative needs to develop the necessary infrastructure that enables more institutions and retail to offer locally produced foods, and to pursue planning production and delivery activities with local interested partners.

Each CSA farm makes its own arrangements with its members since being involved with a CSA operation always means sharing the benefits as well as the risks of farming.

The *benefits/rewards* include: knowing where, how and by whom the food is being produced; having a direct connection with the people involved in producing the food; supporting the kind of farm administration that is good for the land, environment and consumers.

CSA initiatives provide multiple *benefits* to consumers and farmers alike:

- *Support local economy* by guaranteeing a consistent income for farmers before the growing season begins;
- *Make community connections* by building a greater sense of community on local scale;
- *Enjoying fresh local food products* (often harvested the same day the consumer receives it), which is preferable to eating foods shipped from thousands of miles away;
- *Applying seasonal menus*: eating mostly the types of foods locally grown and cultivated encourages a seasonal approach to preparing meals.

The main *risks* include weather and pests and they become bearable when shared by a group of subscribers. Traditionally, CSA supposed a one-time payment at the beginning of the season, but over time had become more flexible, offering different payment systems and rhythmicity. Mostly, consumers are exposed to higher risk by paying in advance, regardless of the realized quantity and quality of the harvest.

As a result of the CSA system functioning, the risks of production are shared *equally* between all those who benefit, this being a key-difference between CSA and the industrial classic food system. But although the risk-sharing may be attractive for farmers, creating a CSA also means increased *demands* on producers, as they must re-allocate time for communicating with consumers and give up some control and autonomy. This new paradigm which brings consumption and production closer to each other compels farmers to allow people repeatedly visit the farm, at various times, which may give rise to a significant psychological barrier for many farmers. Nevertheless the producer can establish limits in the relationship with consumers, such as: closing off part of the farm, or for part of the day, restrict the types of jobs undertaken by members etc.

CSA exists in many different *forms*; around the world there are many variations on this theme, such as:

- consumers receive a weekly bag of food products rather than harvesting themselves;
- farmers can serve one group of consumers together to offer an even wider range of food products;

- consumers can pay farm investments in return for several years' harvest;
- consumers can “adopt” a fruit tree (getting fruit in return) or a cow (and visit the farm at times).

CSA farms usually provide a wide variety of seasonal vegetables, but also they may offer unusual varieties (or different options for : honey, fruit, flowers, eggs, wool/yarn, meat or other specialties) at an additional cost.

Most CSAs have between 35 and 200 members. A typical offering would be 2.5 to 5 kilos of produce per week (enough for 2 or 3 people). In terms of price, a detailed three-year study in the US showed that CSA shareowners would have paid 37% more at their supermarket for conventionally grown food [6], while other sources underline that “CSA is not about cheap food”, but a broader perspective on improving the use of local resources for the benefit of all.

Some authors [9] emphasize that CSA may be an efficient instrument for building community among farmers and non-farmers, developing connections that alleviate the conflict at the rural-urban interface.

Developing a CSA local system: what it takes

Judging by the organizational approach of the CSAs, one can distinguish several types of CSA [6]:

- *Subscription or farmer-driven* (the most common): the farmer organizes the CSA, makes most of the management decisions. The shareholder or subscriber is not very involved in the farm.
- *Shareholder or consumer-driven*: the initiative and the most decisions belong to consumers; they organize the CSA, hire the farmer and establish the products' types.
- *Farmer cooperative*: means a farmer-driven CSA in which two or more farms pool their resources to supply customers.
- *Farmer-consumer cooperative*: the farmer and consumer co-own land and other resources and work together to produce food.

In terms of organizing a CSA, one can identify *three* main groups involved [10]: the farmers (they do all the actual farming work as they consider appropriate, make annual farm plan, grow, and harvest the crops), the core group (usually consists of 5-12 people, including farmers and consumers; it deals with food distribution, collecting payments, organizing events, preparing the budget, paying the farmers, dealing with legal issues, finding more consumers), and consumers (this group also includes farmers and bear the responsibility of financially supporting the farm and of entirely using the produce).

Any initiative of this kind requires building a strong partnership in order to develop a local viable food system that will not only provide healthy sufficient food but also help protect the environment, reduce energy consumption and circulate money in the community. Thus, such a system will generate effects on land, agriculture, farmers,

consumers – mostly social and economic consequences.

The key-step for launching this approach is to convince retailers and institutions to purchase food directly from farmers. This must be supported all the way by educational events involving local foods, popularizing the initiative, increasing consumers' awareness of the benefits, drawing various organizations to use local foods in events, coordinating direct market sells from farmers to institutions, as well as consumer and producer surveys.

Community building represents an important part of the CSA approach; most farms encourage consumers become involved, planning seasonal or special events and encouraging members to pay visits on an established basis. In some cases, involvement in the farm comes as a part of membership.

As an example, in 2007, in the US, a “Buy Fresh Buy Local” marketing campaign was launched to increase education and awareness of the successes and opportunities in a local foods movement in Minnesota.

For consumers, selecting a CSA could be a tough task, requiring taking into consideration several *factors*, as follows: location, pick-up site/delivery day, length of season/number of deliveries, types of produce and other food items, opportunities for involvement.

CSA Initiatives: the way to go

Today, middle and low-income countries become more and more oriented towards locally-based food markets, as a response to changes in society. In the same time, smallholders face serious challenges derived from the rapid spread of dynamic modern retailers, wholesalers and food processors and the need to provide consistent, high quality supplies in required volumes, and in the same time complying with safety, environmental and social standards.

However, consumers in developing countries become more concerned about the food quality of food, which means an opportunity for small scale agricultural producers, especially those close to urban centers. New initiatives (including CSAs) have appeared globally in various forms, in which farmers and consumers have jointly developed food systems that are adjusted to the local possibilities and needs.

CSA farming is a familiar concept in the *US*, which has not been adopted yet on a wide scale in other countries. Data collected in 2007 by the U.S. Department of Agriculture [11] indicates that **12,549** farms reported marketing products through a CSA arrangement.

To have a look at other countries, in *Vietnam*, for instance, a growing group of concerned urban consumers is willing to pay a higher price for “safe” (pesticide-free) vegetables [8]. Unfortunately, many urban consumers don't have the option to grow vegetables for their own consumption, so CSA may help in spatial planning.

In *Mexico*, during the mid-nineties was formed the “Circle of Responsible Production”

[8] which brings together producers, consumers and promoters that share common goals about achieving food security, environmental justice and the provision of healthy food.

In *Brazil*, a CSA initiative started in 1997 at the Serra Grande plateau has given the consumers access to organically produced food at lower prices than available through conventional retailers, while also enabling producers to receive a double guaranteed income that of the regional average.

In the *Netherlands*, there are over 100 CSA initiatives, about 80 % of which are organic farms.

CSAs are also a innovative and relatively new, still small part of *China's* food system (unofficial counts say there are about 100 CSA projects)[5]. CSAs may act as instruments to address the lack of reliably safe food in the general marketplace, given that China is confronted with food confidence problems.

Conclusions and Perspectives

Today, throughout the world, the CSA concept is raising more interest as it simultaneously supports increased production and use of locally grown food, thus helping the development of a regional food system that provides healthy nutritious foods, promotes healthy environment, and also creates economic opportunities for entrepreneurs in this field.

By its features and functions, the CSA system is able to provide healthy sufficient food for a large range of consumers, improving healthy eating habits for people of all ages and promoting sustainable development for the environment at the same time.

Throughout the world, CSA applications reflect how rising concerns of urban consumers can enhance co-operation with producers, rebuilding the balance between rural and urban areas, between global and local food chains, and intensive and small-scale food production.

In a context of growing globalization of food systems, several questions *about*: the sufficiency and safety food supply, the impact of production on the environment and animal welfare, and the fairness of trade along the food chain - are increasingly raised. These recent consumer concerns have led to growing interest in safe, healthy, fairly traded products, and also to local solutions where socially conscious consumers buy directly from producers. According to specialists [3], small farms work as key actors for regional food security, being more productive and resource conserving, and more resilient to climate change. That's why all over the world, small-scale farmers are diversifying their production and income as a response to the changes in the world's food systems.

CSA may be outlined as an efficient direct marketing approach that encourages local, environmentally sustainable food production, besides the positive contribution of consumer involvement.

Connecting through CSA seen as a social movement, farmers and consumers can benefit from an agriculture that provides quality food while preserving the ecological and social basis necessary for coming generations, which means sustainable agriculture and food consumption.

Nowadays we witness the need strategies for rural revitalization, for a sustainable agriculture paradigm [7] which promotes the renaissance of rural communities. Farmers' markets, ecologically grown products and CSA represent some current examples of the new agriculture paradigm.

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