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MSc Environmental Governance 2012
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Local Food Systems and Community Supported Agriculture

Introduction

The current globalised food system and the interlinked unsustainable practice of industrial agriculture are leading to a number of environmental and social problems. Among others these issues are the degradation of soils and the pollution of water, the loss of farmland and small-scale family farms, the threat of health of farm labourers, the reduced vitality of rural communities, loss of direct relationships between growers and consumers, and the endangering and loss of numerous of indigenous and traditional varieties of plants and animals (Goland 2002; Cone and Kakaliouras 1995; Cone and Myhre 2000; Hawkins et al. 2003).

A number of scholars emphasised that purchasing and consuming food makes us directly part of this globalised food system, and thus unwitting contributors to the social and environmental degradation it creates. Nevertheless people are largely ignorant of the environmental and social costs associated with the current food system (Goland 2002; Kloppenburg et al. 1996). Researchers and activists have developed approaches to support local food systems to solve the problems associated with a global industrialised food system.

In these approaches the "promotion of local food systems is premised on the belief that in order to create a more sustainable agriculture, those who eat (not just those who produce) will need to develop a philosophy and act on a set of values that are congruent with a sustainable agricultural future" (Goland 2002: 14). Hence, the goal is the connection of consumers both to the farmers who grow the food for them and to the land that produces it to create a number of social and economic benefits for farmers, consumers, society and nature and help to rebuild community (Goland 2002: 14).

The variety of elements of local food systems is wide. It includes farmers' markets, direct marketing, food co-ops, 'buy-local' campaigns, institutional buying agreements, and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). Especially Community Supported Agriculture is able to assert local control over food systems (Adam 2006: 3) and embodies values with sustainable agriculture, community development, and food security. These elements are according to Paul Fieldhouse (1996: 43) "of vital importance to the long term health and well-being of individuals and of the

ecosystem." Some scholars are even designating CSA as "antithesis of contemporary food production, processing, and distribution." (Cone and Kakaliouras 1995: 31)

Therefore I focus subsequently on Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) as a crucial element of local food systems by defining and describing its main elements and varieties in a first part. A second part works out the benefits of a CSA for farmers, consumers and society and nature. Thereby a special focus lies on the question: what motivates consumers to take part in a CSA. Finally I give a brief conclusion.

What is a CSA?

Definition:

Community Supported Agriculture is a direct partnership between a farmer/grower and consumers to share the risks and benefits of food production. A community of individuals "pledges to support a farm operation so that the farmland becomes, either legally or spiritually, the community's farm." (Bougherara et al 2009: 1490) Usually CSA members make a commitment to support the farm throughout the season by paying an annual up-front fee which includes the costs and risks of growing food along with the farmer, in exchange for a regular (usually weekly) share of the future harvest (Adam 2006: 2; Goland 2002:15; Hawkins et al: 15).

Origins of CSA:

The origins of CSA date back around forty years. Several Japanese women were concerned with the increased price of food and asked therefore local farmers to grow directly for them. The farmers approved, on the condition that a number of families agree to support them. In Japanese, this concept is referred to as "teikei" meaning "partnership", but is literally translated to mean "food with the farmer's face on it" (Schnell 2007: 552; Swanson 2000: 1).

Variations:

CSAs vary in origin, size, costs, form and organisational structure. The number of members differs from less than forty up to a few hundred. Likewise varies the membership cost between around $200-500 on an annual basis (Goland 2002: 16; Adam 2006: 2).

CSAs are created in two different ways. The first form is called 'Subscription CSA' and is initiated by the farmer. The main organisational tasks are taken by a farmer who makes most of the management decisions. In this form the farm work is not dependent on subscribers. A possible permutation is the farmer cooperative. Thereby two or more farmers organize to produce a variety of products for the CSA basket. In 2006 Subscription CSAs constituted more than 75 percent of all CSAs in the US (Adam 2006: 2).

The second form of a CSA initiation is by a group of consumers. It is called 'Shareholder CSA'. Its main feature is a "core group" that organises subscribers and hires the farmer. Possible "core groups" may be a non-profit organisation and land may be purchased, leased, or rented (Adam 2006: 2). In progress the "core group" serves as a decision making body and takes over many responsibilities for organizing the work of the CSA. Those include the recruiting of new members, "scheduling on-farm work parties, organizing distributions, setting budgets, managing accounts, and even determining what will be grown and setting share prices" (Goland 2002: 16). Some of these CSAs may be with a decided social justice goal to provide food security for disadvantaged groups.

The involvement in a CSA may include work at the farm or in the distribution process. While some CSAs offer the opportunity to work a given number of hours in exchange for a partial or full reduction, others require their members to work (Cone and Kakaliouras 1995: 31).

Different forms of distribution are possible. The pick up gives members the opportunity to pack their own share and saves labour for the grower and/or other members responsible for coordinating the distribution, but is only possible when the distance between farm and shareholder homes is appropriate. In those cases a central distribution site or several different sites are advantageous. A last alternative are bagged shares to the shareholder's front doorstep (Adam 2006: 2).

By means of the differences within origin, size, costs, form and organisational structure each CSA has a distinctive character. But all have the necessity of a strong communication between growers and members and a complex scheduling and task management in common (Adam 2006: 2; Goland 2002: 16).

Benefits for growers, consumers and society:

Benefits for growers/farmers

The main benefit and reason for a farmer to take part or organise a CSA is the share of the risk of food production. This means in detail that the growers share the economic risk of climate or pests that may leave them with no product to market as well as the risk of selling produce in a flooded market where prices will be low. Due to the fact that the annual fee of the members is a share of the harvest and not a distinct amount of food, these economic risks are shared by the whole CSA community (Goland 2002: 16).

Growers for CSAs have got a guaranteed market within the season. Therefore they do not have to spend time during the growing season searching for markets. Furthermore the annual fee is usually paid up-front, often before the growing season when the most investments are needed to

be taken. This lowers the financial pressure on the grower and prevents the dependency on loans each season (Cone and Kakaliouras 1995: 30).

Some authors strengthen the aspect that growers benefit from the fact that they are able to reduce loss and waste of harvested farm produce and have a direct connection to the people who benefit from their work (Hawkins et al 2006: 20).

Benefits for consumers:

The main benefit for consumers taking part in a CSA is the regular receipt of fresh, sustainable grown, organic, local food. The fact that they can associate a face with the produce provides the consumers with a measure of trust even in the absence of any certification process.

O'Hara and Stagl (2001: 546) argue that "multiple dimensions of interaction and communication are relevant to establishing the trust lost in disembodied markets". And while personal interaction may not be a guarantee for trust, it may "fill the vacuum created by the erosion of faceless commitments in illusive global markets as facework commitments are reestablished"

According to a study by Cooley and Lass (1998) consumers of a CSA pay significantly less than they would for equivalent amounts of both organic and conventional produce at retail groceries. Reasons for the lower costs of CSA arrangements are less intermediaries and absence of any costly third party certification (Bougherara et al 2009: 1490-92).

Bougherara, Grolleau and Mzoughi (2009: 1491) conclude that "long term contracting between farmers and consumers can be more transaction cost economizing than the traditional and impersonal retailing" if difficult-to-measure characteristics like social, political and environmental concerns are desired by the households.

What motivates consumers to participate in a CSA?

According to a number of different studies (O'Hara and Stagl 2001; Bougherara et al 2009; Cone and Kakaliouras 1995) the main motivations for joining a CSA is freshness, organic produces, support of local farms, concerns for the environment, reduced packaging, knowledge of the production and distribution process as well as health issues. Sharing of risk with the farmer and a sense of community are far lower important motivations. All studies agree in the result that money is only a secondary consideration when deciding to participate in a CSA.

Bougherara, Grolleau and Mzoughi (2009: 1494) draw the conclusion that "environmental and social credence attributes [such as an environmentally-friendly process, TF] are statistically significant drivers of CSA commitment." Likewise Farnsworth (1993: 97) states that "social and environmental objectives dominate their decision to join"

Benefits for society and nature:

Through the usage of less energy for transporting and marketing of the food, the preservation of farmland, the reduction of waste streams and less packaging (Kittredge 1996: 255-57), the hidden costs associated to our globalised food system are reduced. CSA relies on regional appropriate food varieties and production methods, and preserves small farms producing a wide variety of crops. Thereby it maintains biodiversity, promotes local genetic diversity and ecological knowledge, and supports safe proven farming technologies rather than commerce-centric technologies (Goland 2002: 15; Fieldhouse 1996: 45; Hawkins et al 2006: 20). Furthermore the community benefits economically, because the food dollars are kept circulating locally (Kittredge 1996: 2556) and socially, because a renewing of the sense of community well-being is taking place (Fieldhouse 1996: 45-47).

Fieldhouse (1996: 44) stresses that "Community Shared Agriculture contributes to building food security by emphasizing local production to meet local needs. By setting up a direct consumer-producer relationship, it shortens the food chain, thus reducing the opportunity for disruption by factors beyond individual or community control." Following Adam (2006: 2) it may insure major urban areas against sudden disruptions of the food supply line.

According to Cone and Kakaliouras (1995: 28) CSA arrangements change the nature of agriculture as a capitalistic enterprise and address as new institutional arrangement "multiple societal needs—healthy food, healthy land, and healthy social relationships."

Conclusion

The presented introduction of Community Supported Agriculture and its benefits for growers, consumers, society and nature is showing a notion of consumers' potential for reforming the current unsustainable globalised food system towards a sustainable local one. CSAs are important tools in creating the kind of food system, a local one, which can help to correct the environmental and social problems associated with our current food system. One of its main strengths is thereby the approaching of problems of the environment, land, and agriculture as a connected whole (Cone and Kakaliouras 1995: 28) and its potential to help people make the link between the food they eat and the environment and community around them. Some even identify in CSAs a "significant step towards decommodifying food" (Hinrichs 2000: 301).

Successful change of food systems is possible when consumers consciously decide for a socially and environmentally sustainable local food system, e.g. by participating in a CSA.

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