

COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE (CSA)

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Summary

Farms of CSA types are a viable alternative to trade of agricultural products coming from conventional agriculture. These farms are faced with a number of policy issues related to product, price, distribution and promotion. In order to elucidate the issues listed above, we have investigated the literature of specialty.

Farmers must make more flexible the content of basket both quantitatively and in terms of the nature of food products offered. Consumers need information on ways of preparation or preservation of products. The growth of the processing degree in farm, and inclusion in the offer of services in ecotourism represent effective options to satisfy consumers.

To offset the negative impact of high prices measures should be taken in reducing costs, more flexibility in rescheduling of payments due from customers and compensate for the lack of financial resources with the provision of farm work or subsidize a portion of the basket value from private or government sources.

Delivery of baskets should be both at fixed points and at customers domicile. Farmers must provide customers the possibility so that they could harvest themselves the products they will buy. Negative influence of prices will be reduced by establishing an effective communication policy with the market, by organizing events on the farm or nearby towns, through blogs and social networks, and through participation in fairs and exhibitions. A greater customer involvement in farming activities will lead to the implementation of an effective marketing mix.

Keywords: *ecological food products (organic), agriculture supported by community, products basket, community, subscription*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Currently, conventional agriculture is characterized by an abundance of products offered at very low prices because there are adjacent costs that are not included in prices, being supported by society: soil erosion, loss of biodiversity, groundwater contamination, pollution due to high consumption of fossil fuels and use of pesticides. While conventional agriculture falls increasingly under the control of transnational corporations, in the last two decades have proliferated as a counterweight the organic agriculture forms that are characterized by more personal relationships between producers and consumers.

Agriculture supported by community is a partnership between farmers and the local community in which are delivered to customers periodically by subscription, baskets of organic products produced by the farmer. Organic Farms of CSA type offer solutions to these problems of modernity and members who engage in activities other than payment of subscription and reception of basket have higher satisfaction than other members.

In countries with developed organic agricultural sector, have set up several organic farms of CSA type, but not all have developed, sometimes being recorded failures caused by different factors. Marketing mix implemented by organic farmers is one of these factors that determine the failure or success of such initiatives. To determine an optimal marketing mix, we have investigated the specialized literature that consists of articles from journals, books, and reports of various institutions that have provided funds for the study of these agricultural initiatives.

Optimizing the basket content has a great importance in the proliferation of these agricultural initiatives. Nature of products and related services that are offered to customers must be carefully established. The increase of consumers' awareness about the products and services offered, and also the degree of processing on the farm can be very important option for farmers.

Identification of some ways to offset the negative impact of higher prices is a priority direction for action. These farms require also the streamline of certain logistics aspects, such as the modalities of delivering baskets. Communication of farmers with market must take into account the available resources, of their low experience in communicating with customers. Identification of those means of communication with a favorable report results / resources allocated determines the success of these farms.

2. COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE

There are numerous variations in which CSA works. There are offered several types of subscriptions for families large or small, weekly or twice a week. Thus, some forms of CSA allow subscribers to harvest some of the goods which are intended for them, are organized rustic feasts or various festivals, subscribers involving more or less in farm work. The model was first applied in Germany, Switzerland and Japan, spreading further in several variants and other countries [7].

Subscribers become like shareholders at farm because they pay some money before the season for farmers to have enough funds to start work on the farm but also to ensure that there will be customers for organic products produced on the farm. In the years with problems there is a risk that a part of the production to be compromised but subscribers will bear some of the losses in the sense that they will accept to be shipped fewer goods or of lower quality. Similarly, in years of overproduction subscribers will get more products. Moreover, there is a possibility that cannot be delivered a particular type of vegetable due to arise of some problems, but to be delivered large quantities of other vegetables if there is overproduction [8].

There are numerous benefits for both farmers and consumers:

- locally produced foods are transported on a shorter distance to beneficiaries
- local community control over food supply and, consequently, a greater degree of food security
- money spent on food remain in the community, which determines a multiplier effect
- local food can be eaten fresh, with more nutrients
- production risks are shared with consumers
- farmers are encouraged to cooperate with other farmers
- enables women to work. Much of CSA systems are based on work done by women on farms that do not have other jobs [5]
- stimulates farmers to cooperate in order to provide consumers a wider variety of products [18].

Flexibility is a very important element and can treat the success of such initiative. Money paid in advance by the "shareholder" means its willingness to accept risk and to give priority in supporting the farmer. Relationship between farmers and consumers is symbiotic because the farmer can pursue his passion for gardening without being pressed for loans or need to have high crops and consumers receive quality food. Many farmers that practice conventional agriculture are pressed for loans taken before the season and that have to be repaid throughout the season, although they begin to collect money until after the ending of season when they sell their production, which may be much lower than the estimates in some years with problems. In CSA type risks are borne by consumers.

What distinguishes CSA systems from other forms of organic farming and local consumption is the emphasis on creating community around the earth and food [4].

In these initiatives are involved farmers, consumers, group organizers and sometimes support non-governmental associations and peasant farming. Group organizers help collect data on the nature of the application, to collect money, to a good communication between farmers and subscribers and to organize social and educational activities. Families with children are very receptive to these activities because children have the opportunity to acquire beautiful and useful experiences in nature. CSA systems contribute to the development of rural communities and the personal development of those involved [12].

There are many variations of CSA farms type according to their organization. Thus, a first variant of CSA initiative is led by the farmer, who already has experience in agriculture and provides to community locally produced foods based on a prepaid subscription. The second variant is the CSA initiatives led by the community, who organizes a farm where community volunteers or professionals workers in agriculture are employed by the community. Partnerships farmer - community is the third type of CSA initiative and has as specific the fact that appears at community initiative that negotiates a partnership with a farmer. In this variant power is held by both the farmers and the community. The latter variant is the CSA initiatives that are in community property and characterized by the fact that production is not sold to subscribers but is shared by the community members, the purpose of establishing not being a commercial one [17].

The group organizers are involved also helping farmers in activities related to planting, harvesting, baskets transport, sharing information about the progress of work on the farm towards other subscribers. Farmers must provide a large amount of work because they have over 30 types of vegetables cultivated on the farm. They don't have time to look for new subscribers, this task should be left especially to the group's organizers.

CSA farms that have a group of organizers are characterized by higher incomes than farms that do not have a group of organizers, because subscription has a higher value and there are more subscribers. Most farms use 2-3 seasonal employees and some of the work is provided by farmer's family members or by subscribers. Farms that do not have a group of organizers have more employees because subscribers do not provide work for farm [11].

The beginning period of the CSA system is of great importance because the lack of experience in agriculture or in managing a large number of subscribers can directly affect farm profitability. In this regard prove to be of great help some grants that are given to farmers, which as they gain experience in organic farming can supplement their incomes by organizing trainings or by using other distribution channels [17].

CSA systems are to a lesser extent accessible **to consumers** with low incomes, although there are some situations in which these consumers have access to these products because of the price subsidization by those with higher incomes [9]. Also, in some cases are involving churches or non-profit organizations that support the farm by organizing events to raise funds so that lower income families can benefit from the products of a CSA farm [15].

At the end of each year the farmer must conduct a opinion poll regarding the satisfaction of subscribers in order to fix any problems that may occur and to continue the practices that improve customer satisfaction.

3. PRODUCTS THAT ARE PART OF THE BASKET

Some CSA systems allow subscribers more flexibility in choosing the composition of **products** baskets, so that the rate of renewal of contracts for future years to be as large as possible. In some cases, consumers can go to the farm and they can fill their box with the fruits and vegetables they want [16]. Also, there is even the possibility of harvesting by consumers, variant that is practiced especially in case of fruits that come from bushes, because in this case it takes a lot of work to manually crop and farmers cannot afford to purchase cars for a small area planted with shrubs trees.

Also, the variety of fruits and vegetables with which consumers can provide from the farm is a problem for some consumers because some of them have to change their habits in order to cook turnips, parsnips, Jerusalem artichokes and Swedish turnip, kale and different types of cabbage.

Consumers of agricultural products provided by non-organic farming system benefits from a higher degree of autonomy regarding the possibility of choosing products that will be consumed, but this greater autonomy has costs related to environmental conditions, the underdevelopment of local economies choked by imports and related to sanogenetic and organoleptic characteristics of the products.

Most CSA farmers use traditional varieties of fruits and vegetables which are characterized by greater taste, greater resistance to pests and diseases but have a less commercial look. In many countries were established traditional seed banks that collect and distribute sometimes free seeds of traditional varieties to farmers.

The herbs used to flavor prepared food enjoy a growing demand in recent years. It is also noted an increased interest from consumers for fermented foods such as pickles, yoghurts and other traditional products like jams, syrups [1]. Processing of the products within farm is a great way of protection against changes in commodity prices on the market and a way to retain more value in addition to farm.

Vegetables are present in 78% of CSA farms offers and the following products as importance are meat, fruits, eggs, dairy and grains [17]. Though local consumption of organic products is growing, the success of a CSA farm type is clearly conditioned by the quality of products and services. CSA Farms differentiate their products and services offerings from year to satisfy their customers to a greater extent. More and more CSA farms type diversify their services offering agro-tourism services to consumers interested in spending a few days in a natural and pleasant environment, where they can observe the specific of organic farming, can explore the surroundings or participate in food preparation. Children have a great receptivity to these activities and must be attracted by organizing specific activities for their age.

4. BASKET PRICE PROVIDED BY CSA FARMS

Although CSA systems have a very important community component, it should not be neglected the economics aspects of price because if the price is not right the "shareholders" will not return next year. Also a very big difference between the incomes of farmers involved in CSA programs and consumers' income can prove to be an impediment in terms of building the relationship farmer - consumers.

The most important factors in determining prices are fixed and variable costs of production and prices practiced to other nearby CSA systems. Less important factors in pricing are the competition that comes from the non-CSA area and subscribers' revenues [19].

Certification costs are a factor that causes the increase of the organic products price sold by CSA. There are times when farmers reach an agreement with subscribers so that organic certification not to be made in order to avoid additional expenses. This is possible especially for farmers who have managed to establish a close relationship with consumers, there is trust between them and there is no need for a third party to ensure the organic nature of the

products. The authorities could encourage farmers stimulating the establishment of non-profit non-governmental organizations to make the certification activity.

Small farmers that are operating in CSA system set subscription prices by different values and different financial standards compared to large CSA farms. In order to ensure long term success farmers must learn to set prices based on cost, customers' availability to pay and according to other items related to farm financial management.

The difference between prices in CSA systems and supermarket prices change more and more in favor of supermarkets and hence results an urgent need for farmers to communicate effectively with consumers in order to diminish the importance of this barrier.

There are other solutions to reduce the importance of price as a barrier of which the most important being:

- Some of the subscribers with higher material possibilities pay extra for as low income families to afford purchasing subscriptions
- Creation of financial funds from which families could lend in order to prepay a part of the subscription cost
- More flexible schedule of payments that must be made by subscribers
- Possibility to offset some of the money that must be paid with work on the farm for a few hours per week
- Subsidize a part of the subscription with government funds so that also low-income families to receive an adequate share of nutrients from food [2]

It is very important the motivation for which the farmer chooses to work in CSA system because if his motivation is financial he will be disappointed because revenues are not very high. More money falls upon the farmer in comparison with the situation where he would use distribution channels with intermediaries but they must take into account that will have to bear the costs of managing a large number of clients.

5. BASKET DISTRIBUTION

Some of the farmers who sell their products through CSA using other short **distribution** channels (farmers' markets, restaurants, direct sales from the farm) and less long distribution channels (processors, wholesalers or other intermediaries). The basket is delivered to the consumer at home, at a fixed place, or consumers can come to the farm to pick it up. It requires flexibility also in this regard because there may be consumers who cannot travel to pick the baskets and prefer to pay extra for them to be delivered in a convenient place [2].

Some CSA systems have provided ways of helping subscribers who do not have cars hooking up with subscribers who have cars and stay in close areas.

There are farmers who have managed to build warehouses in order to serve customers almost all year. In the absence of these deposits the attendance period reduces to 18-20 weeks.

6. PROMOTIONAL COMMUNICATION

For future CSA system is essentially to implement educational activities with children from schools and nurseries or young people from neighboring villages. A **promotional communication** through traditional means (advertising, sales promotion, public relations, participation in fairs and exhibitions, and trademarks use) is difficult to put in practice because of insufficient funds. Organization of events on the farm is a cheap mean of communicating with the market. Local churches can contribute to the establishment and development of CSA systems.

Regarding the communication methods that can be used, the list is comprehensive: direct conversations between farmer and shareholder, emails, websites, communications to farmers' markets, special events on the farm, farm advertising, mass media and various social networks [19].

The language that should be used must be adjusted and lower-income families who generally have a modest education. Communication should be directed to the propensity towards women that start at 70% subscription to CSA and local leaders so that efforts of organizing a CSA system to come from the community. The communication must contain also ways of preserving food for winter and food preparation recipes.

These systems are characterized by trust that exists between farmers and consumers, confidence that grows because there is a continuous and transparent communication. Farmers must notify subscribers' accurate information on costs borne by the activities of the production of organic food. Thus, consumers are also informed about the incomes that farmers will have as a result of the collaboration with customers [3].

7. CHALLENGES OF THE CSA FARMS TYPE

One factor that hinders the development of CSA-type systems is the desire of consumers to have freedom of choice regarding the source from where they will supply. From this point of view is absolutely necessary that farmers to ensure consumer requirements satisfaction at a quality level that they desire, so that consumers feel less need to seek other sources of supply for organic products [4].

The increasing mobility of labor is another important reason that explains the failure of farmers in terms of subscriber retention. Generally, farmers see in a CSA system more than sustainable agriculture, wanted to create a sense of community. Helplessness to create a sense of community hinders a lot CSA systems development, very important being the role of group organizers in this way.

Insufficient flexibility in choosing composition of the basket delivered may come in contrast to the wishes of consumers that although agree with this new consumption philosophy do not renew their subscriptions [14]. Consumers need to adapt their program to the activities involved by the membership degree of CSA system (must be at home within a certain time of the week or have to come in a fixed place to take the basket), which can be difficult for those who want more freedom in life.

The agricultural land is another issue because if the land is not owned by the farmer and is leased by him there is a risk that after a few years in which he constantly improved soil quality the owner will not accept to lease the land anymore. Also, CSA farms are located usually near urban areas where land value is high, making it difficult for farmers to buy land for farming. Some of the subscribers have gone so far in creating a community that bought agricultural land under common ownership and hired a farmer to supply fruit and vegetables.

Young farmers have a higher availability than older farmers to produce and market products under the CSA system. It is found mainly in Western Europe that young farmers do not have access to agricultural land that are expensive and are more in elderly farmers' property.

Consumer satisfaction depends on a number of factors such as:

- flexibility in the choice of products that are part of the delivery basket
- products quality improvement
- supply only those items ordered

The success of a CSA system is conditioned by a number of factors. Farmers must mutually share from their experience, to start with few subscribers, to establish an organizational group to help them periodically to certain activities, try to find customers in a certain area so that it does not consume too much resources to meet the needs of too dispersed clients from geographical point of view.

Not to be neglected the educational component that is currently carried further by farmers. Both farmers and consumers must learn to adapt their behavior to support community interest [10]. In the CSA systems there are some vegetables that some subscribers are less familiar and do not know how to cook them. In this regard it is noted the effectiveness of some educational programs in which subscribers are taught to cook on farms.

8. CONCLUSIONS

For these systems to proliferate subscribers would need to be more involved in farming activities or to pay a higher sum of money for their subscription. Sustainable agriculture that does not exploit nature cannot compete with unsustainable agriculture and needs special conditions in order to function.

In an increasingly globalized world, CSA systems contribute to building a community around farmers, who become like family doctors, "family farmers." Although money becomes less important in a CSA system, prices must be set correctly so that these systems to stand in a society where almost everything is monetized. Typically there is familiarity and empathy between farmers and consumers but in a CSA is building a coalition of support for agriculture.

CSA systems give individuals the opportunity to act in a more sustainable way for them and the communities they belong to. Registered capital accumulated through such an initiative may disappear if individuals lose their enthusiasm but a lot of money remain in the area and have a multiplier effect on the local economy.

Farmers must remain open for subscription patterns change depending on customer preferences. Cooperation between farmers and subscribers must take place in a way that subscribers to be very satisfied and flexibility of subscription packages is a key factor in the development of CSA. Also, another factor that will determine the success of these farms is their reputation that must grow as many potential customers have not yet heard of this way to supply with clean and fresh fruits and vegetables.

CSA type farms must organize themselves in a national network led by the nation's capital through which this concept to be promoted more effectively. Media coverage lack of successful models leads to the development of these systems slowdown. There are countries such as France, where the Association for Preservation of Peasant Agriculture (AMAP) involves in the organization and operation of CSA farms leading to a higher growth rate of these systems.

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