

Market Shares or Risk Sharing? Results from the Worldwide Census of Community -Supported Agriculture (CSA)

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Abstract

Community -Supported Agriculture is a membership -based direct partnership whereby the risks of a more sustainable production are shared between producers and consumers. It is characterized by long-term commitment and upfront payment. This contribution presents the results of the first worldwide CSA Census and looks into how CSA principles are implemented in self-identified CSA initiatives. It proposes a typology of CSA models based on a set of 3 key dividing lines: multi-farm CSA versus single farm CSA, 100% CSA farms versus hybrid models and co-managed CSA farms (where members are taking part in the farming activities) versus farmer -managed CSA farms.

Introduction and Objective

The market pressure is growing and weighing on the practitioners' capacity to fully implement the CSA principles (Galt 2015). Limitations have been identified, in connection with the hybrid nature of CSA: it is at the same time an economic exchange and a social partnership. Sometimes, the balance is lost, to the advantage of the economic dimension, especially in a changing local food landscape. This paper appraises how the principles of community -supported agriculture are interpreted and implemented in different contexts. How are the key principles of CSA articulated into different "types" around the world? What are these CSA types and how are they spread?

Methods

This overview of CSA in the world is mainly based on 2 sorts of materials to determine what most of the responding CSA initiatives have in common and what makes them different from each other. First, one-to-one interviews have been conducted with CSA network coordinators. The objective was to collect first-hand data about CSA in each country. Additionally, a survey for CSA organizers was collectively drafted through a participatory process. Even if not statistically fully representative, with around 550 CSA from 40 countries answering compared to an estimated total of 12,000-15,000 groups worldwide, this is still an unprecedented collection of data.

Results and Discussion

There are major differences about what "doing CSA" means. There is in particular a division between multi-farm CSAs, where members are connected to several farms beyond the vegetable growing farm, and single farm CSAs. From one country to the other, the dominant model is different: the multi-farm CSA model is the rule and the single-farm CSA model the exception in France, while it seems to be the exact opposite in the US.

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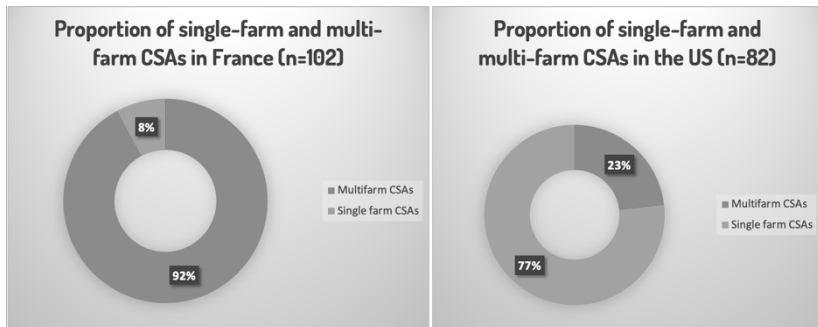


Fig. 1: Proportion of single-farm and multi-farm CSAs in France and in the US.

Another key division is related to the economic model of the farms engaged in CSA. There is a major difference between farms that use CSA as one among several marketing options and farms that are selling the entirety of their production solely to the CSA members. The approach of CSA is radically different. Only around 60% of the responding CSAs report at least half of their farmer's income is sourced from the CSA operation.

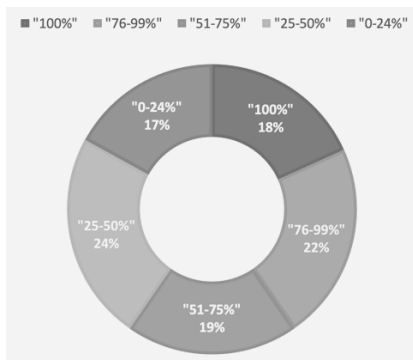


Fig. 2: What percentage from the farmer's income comes from the CSA?

Third, the low level of positive answers for "Shared responsibilities of farming activities", when asked "Which CSA principles are implemented in your CSA?", tends to show that CSA members are generally not in a co-management position. Even on the contrary, the involvement of members into farm management or farming activities is not a distinctive characteristic of CSA. Only some of the core CSA principles are unchallenged: direct and long-term partnership and risk sharing. Other principles, in

particular those related to the members' participation in farming activities, are not considered to be implemented in the responding initiatives.



Figure 3: Which CSA core principles are currently implemented in your initiative?

Conclusion

Our study shows that, beyond the shared common ground of a long-term partnership between producers and consumers based on the principle of risk-sharing, there is room for various interpretations of the CSA principles. The “idealistic CSA model”, where partner farms are selling 100% to CSA and where members are co-managing the farm, is not the dominating model in the CSA movement.

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