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Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) – A practical Answer to some Dilemmas of Sustainability?

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Introduction

“We are all farmers – some are active, others are less active”. This statement from one of the consumer-participants in a CSA-farm illustrates the core of CSA: Consumers and farmers share ownership and responsibility for food production and distribution.

In cooperation with Sifo, Oikos and Grønn Hverdag, Norges Vel has collected experience about CSA from other countries through publications, general information and visits, and we have supported and followed up a few examples of CSA-farms in Norway during the last 3 years. This presentation describe some of the findings, try to identify some of the dilemmas of sustainable consumption and analyze whether and how CSA actually represents an answer to them.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is an emerging model within agriculture- and food-policy with direct linkages between food consumers and producers. It seems to have started in Japan and Germany at about the same time, in the mid 1960s, without any direct communication between the two initiatives. Today we find most CSA-farms in USA.

Background

Japan 1965: Japan experienced a tremendous industrialization and economic growth, and increased the import of cheap food. Japan's own agriculture was industrialized by using more artificial chemical inputs, more industry-processing of the food, less local markets and others. There occurred serious scandals with diseases and poisonings caused by agriculture chemicals used in the imported as well as the Japanese food.

Consumer organizations in Japan, especially in the urban regions, invited farmers to a new kind of cooperation which was named Teikei. Teikei means cooperation or partnership, but the word also has a wider meaning, something like "Food that shows the farmers face". The idea was that if the farmers produced fresh and environmentally friendly food to the consumers, they would pay the costs.

In Germany CSA was introduced as a practical answer to the ideas common in the bio-dynamic societies about mutual responsibility for land and food production between consumers and producers. Buschberghof farm outside Hamburg was one of the first CSA farms, and it is still running very well with about 100 member families who receive their weekly support of a wide range of processed and non-processed food.

In the 1980s the idea was introduced in USA, and has become a success with more than 1000 CSA-farms in operation (Daniel Lass, 2003). The US Department of Agriculture has established an information and service office for CSA, see www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/csa

In Europe there are a few CSA farms in Germany, England, Netherland, Switzerland, and now there are 3 in Norway. Information in English is found at Soil Association in England, see www.soilassociation.org. CSA in Norway may be studied on www.andelslandbruk.no.

Some argue that the term CSA should be changed to ASC (Agriculture Supported Community) because the implementation of the model has shown that agriculture offers elements in addition to food, elements that have become scarce and attractive. It offers awareness, participation and knowledge about the very basic natural processes in farming, it offers social relations within the group of farmers and consumers, and in many cases it offers contact with animals. These elements are increasingly exclusive in our society.

What is CSA?

In Japan the basic goals were local self-sufficiency, organic production and direct co-partnership between farmers and consumers.

The **co-partnership** between farmers and consumers is to reach common goals about local and environmentally sound production of food to local consumers, at a price that cover the local costs, including a decent salary for the farmers. It means that the consumers do not buy products, - they buy a share in a defined production. If it is a good year and the yields are high, there will be more products, if there is a poor year there will be less. The defined production is decided upon in a yearly “general assembly” – normally in January – where the farmers and/or the board of the CSA suggest a plan and a budget for the coming year. The plan and budget is discussed and perhaps adjusted due to wishes from the consumers. A contract, usually for one year at the time, is signed. The price of one share is simply the total budget of the farming, or the defined part of a farm-production, divided upon the number of consumer members. The payment is done independent of the amount of food delivered. Membership in a CSA normally does not include ownership to the property/the farm.

CSA is not only a way of direct marketing, it is as well a way of **communication** between the farmer(s) and the group of consumers. They have equal ownership to the production and the products, and in many cases this is formalized in a **new legal organization**. If the CSA is organized as a company/cooperative, like Øverland in Norway, the communication is partly formalized in the board and the general assembly. In addition there is a whole range of non-formal ways of communication like weekly e-mails, social events, posters near the field etc. Where there are made no new organization, but simply made individual agreements between the farmer and each consumer, the non-formal communication is extremely important to maintain mutual trust, and to solve practical issues.

Basic qualities of a CSA as we see it are:

- ❖ Written agreement between consumers and producers about the production plan and budget.
- ❖ Transparent economy
- ❖ Real sharing of risks and rewards.
- ❖ Organic production. In principle the model may be used for all kinds of farming, but there are hardly any non-organic CSA-farms.

JOAA summarized the following 10 principles for Teikei in 1978:

1. To build a friendly and creative relationship, not as mere trading partners.
2. To produce according to pre-arranged plans on an agreement between the producer(s) and the consumer(s).
3. To accept all the produce delivered from the producer(s)
4. To set prices in the spirit of mutual benefits
5. To deepen the mutual communication for the mutual respect and trust
6. To manage self-distribution, either by the producer(s) or by the consumer(s)
7. To be democratic in the group activities
8. To take much interest in studying issues related to organic agriculture
9. To keep the members of each group in an appropriate number
10. To go on making a steady progress even if slow toward the final goal of the convinced management of organic agriculture and an ecologically sound life.

Experiences from Norway

After three years, there are three CSA-farms. The three are extremely different when it comes to farming practice, land area, consumer involvement and distance to cities/population densities:

1. ØVERLAND, Bærum 2006	2. OMMANG, Løten 2007	3. HUSBAKKEN, Jølster 2008
Ownership: Øverland Andelslandbruk BA rent land from Øverland farm/Norges Vel	Family owned farm	Family owned farm
Farmland: 14 daa intensive gardening. (The whole farm is about 400 daa + forest)	452 daa cultivated land + forest and mountain pastures	Small
Products: Diff. vegetables, herbs, potatoes, flowers, a little fruits and berries	Diff. cheeses, diff. meat, diff. grain/flour, honey, egg, vegetables, potatoes, herbs	Diff. vegetables, diff. meat, egg, “old house” for celebrations, “open farm” for visits, “Christmas package”

Consumer involvement: Established and managed by consumers only. 75 shares divided on 123 members	Established by the two farmers (man and wife). 25 shares.	Established by the two farmers (man and wife). 8-10 members.
Labour Employed part-time gardener. Some voluntary work	2 farmers, 2 farm-workers, some voluntary work	2 half-time farmers. Plans to combine it with social work (“grønn omsorg”)
Organization: Cooperative w/elected board. Indiv. agreements between the cooperative and the consumer	Indiv. agreements between the farm and each consumer	Indiv. agreements between the farm and each consumer
Payment: All paid in advance, before 1. May.	All paid in advance, before 1. May.	50% paid before 1. May, 50% before 1. October.
Internal communication Weekly el. Newspaper. Web (project). Self harvest. Social gatherings Yearly evaluation	El. mail when needed. Web (project) Social gatherings	El. mail when needed Web Social gatherings

Two more places have been seriously assessed and several more have received information and are considering to establish a CSA.

The assessment was done by exploring the resources of the farm, examine the interest of the farmer(s), and making a questionnaire and an introduction meeting for those consumers who we assumed would be the most interested. Those were members of two organizations for organic agriculture (Oikos) and “green consumption” (Grønn Hverdag), and parents and teachers at the local Waldorf Schools. A certain degree of population density seems to be needed for the establishment of CSA; Oslo/Bærum has enough consumers, Solør has not.

Dilemmas of Food consumption and Sustainability

1. Distance and food security

“If you control the food, you control the people”.

In our every day shopping we are forced to choose among goods produced in all parts of the world. Norway import about 50% of the food (measured in calories), Japan import 61%. The FAO-conference in Rome last week concluded that we need more free trade of food to reduce hunger and secure food availability in the world.

The counterstream in this discussion is to reduce the global trade and increase local and regional production and distribution. CSA is definitely an extreme variant of local food, and a practical reaction to the growing global food market.

2. Local or organic

There is a political discourse going on about choosing local or organic, if it is not possible to combine. Especially in the USA this discussion seems to be hot, ref TIME magazine on March 2, 2007, where it is stated that *“for food purists, “local” is the new “organic”*.

The basic principles for organic production says that a) The production should be based on local resources, and b) There should be a close relationship between the producers and the consumers. Therefore organic is supposed to be more local. The reality is a growing global market for organic food, which slowly find their way in the same market channels as the conventional. Therefore some argue that the transport pollution for these organic products makes it more environmentally sound to buy local conventional products.

3. Two-ways communication?

“The swollen commercialistic market and food industry intercept the communication between producers and consumers, eventually misleading the both of them. Therefore consumers are also responsible, even if they are unaware of it, for this evil circle. Teikei is not only a practical idea, but also a dynamic philosophy to make people think of a better way of life either as a producer or as a consumer through their interaction” (JOAA, 1993)

CSA presuppose absolute transparency about the production and a close two-ways dialogue between the farmers and the consumers.

4. Economic sustainability

The two Teikei-farms I visited in Japan reported good economic sustainability for the farm.

From USA Daniel Lass conclude that the CSA-farms had greater gross farm income than most US farms, and that the product price for members were about equal to the price of similar organic food in the shops. The members of CSAs earn more and have higher education than average in USA.

In Norway it is too early to conclude. Seen from the consumers point of view, we have evaluations from Øverland from the two years 2006 and 2007 with the following question and answers:

	Yes, fully	Yes, partly	No
Do you think that the outcome/products is reasonable compared to the price of your share? (2006 – 2007)	16 - 11	6 - 10	2 - 4

The members are very satisfied, but more so the first year. But again, - it is too early to conclude. In the same evaluation were comments like *”Even if I think there is a mismatch between price and output, it does not mean that I am dissatisfied. It is not for the money we and many others do this.”*

5. Mainstreaming

Can CSA develop and be an important part of agriculture as well as society without losing its very special characteristics? We experience that the practice is sometimes quite equal to box schemes or farm shops, and it is difficult for some to see the difference. We also meet farmers who see the potential of payment in advance, but are not willing to share any decision-making about the farming. It takes some time to change the thinking from “price pr. kg or litre” to “costs for one share”.

Those consumers who do not experience the yearly meeting where farmers and members discuss and agree upon farming practice and share price, nor the joyful situations when production is higher than expected and the price for the production share is constant, cannot fully understand the special quality about CSA.

CSA will probably never be mainstream. The importance may be more in quality than quantity – it may be as arenas for innovation and development of new economic and social practices.

Literature

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