

Community Supported Agriculture in Switzerland: A Photo-elicited Story of Idealists and Pragmatists Shifting Paradigms in Agriculture

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Abstract: Community supported agriculture (CSA) is a producer-consumer union aiming to shift the predominant paradigms in agriculture and associated economics towards social justice, fairness, and participation. In an explorative study of eight Swiss CSAs, the main challenges, along with pathways to addressing them, were studied using grounded theory in a mixed methods approach. In-depth photo elicitation interviews were held via skype with a core group member of each CSA followed by a cross-check of results through an online member survey. It became clear that members of core groups are often filled with enthusiastic ideas but experience a sense of deflation when they realize that the members follow a more pragmatic approach to the implementation. Involving members lowers the workload of the garden/farm group and fosters social interactions, an important component in managing expectations. Social capital generation was shown to be a slow process and mainly dependent on the efforts of the core group. Nevertheless, CSA offers a vessel in which a diversity of alternative economic activities, norms, and values can be tested on a small scale. Focusing on embeddedness in the local context during the establishment phase of the CSA, and starting a co-creation between members and the core group from there, was shown to be more beneficial for the long term existence of the than trying to adopt a concept from another context.

Keywords: Social capital generation, community building, alternative food networks, fair income generation, photo elicitation

Introduction

The term CSA is used to describe alternative food networks (AFNs) that include the direct linkage between producer and consumer based on a long term agreement to share risks, responsibility and rewards of food production, create more socially just working conditions for the producer and ensure sustainable food production (White, 2015). This type of food production is however highly dependent on manual labor and the prices are often still not reflective of the true costs involved in food production (Galt, 2013). In addition, members seem to have less interest in the communal aspects, which leaves the organizers longing for the social capital they initially envisioned (Cone & Myhre, 2000). This study explored how Swiss CSAs perceive the challenge of managing expectations, balancing the burdens and rewards of work and building social capital, and what solution pathways they use to address these challenges.

Method

Grounded theory, as first conceptualized in 1967 by Glaser and Strauss, was chosen as the research approach. Mixed methods were used for data collection. First, eight in-depth interviews based on photo elicitation were held via Skype with core group members. Secondly, a quantitative survey based on two sets of 24 Likert scale questions was sent to the CSA members to check whether the perception of the core group aligns with the perceptions of the members.

Qualitative Results

If there is no clear structure and project management, it shows through in the communication with the members. A written agreement between member and core group, meaning a formal document with terms and conditions, is a reliable tool to clearly communicate expectations and principles to new members. Especially in young CSAs, the workload can become higher than expected due to lack of experience leading to an imbalance between burden and rewards of work. The most common strategy to lower the workload is using the member base as a resource of work power. CSAs combined field work and communal experience regularly throughout the year. With the feedback collected in personal communication, member surveys and workshops, the core group can better combine the expectations of all parties. It showed that the motivation of the core group depletes when the consideration of expectation of core group and members is not balanced; leaving the core group feeling exhausted and overwhelmed with the responsibility of food production, member coordination, and administration.

Quantitative Results

Results of the Importance-Satisfaction-Analysis (Figure 1), as carried out accordingly to Galt *et al.* (2019), show that 'fair work conditions', 'trust in core group' and 'quality of vegetables' are overall the most important aspect of CSA for the members. Interestingly, most aspects appearing in the region of possible overkill relate to the active participation of the members in the CSA, which suggests that the communal experience is less important to CSA members.

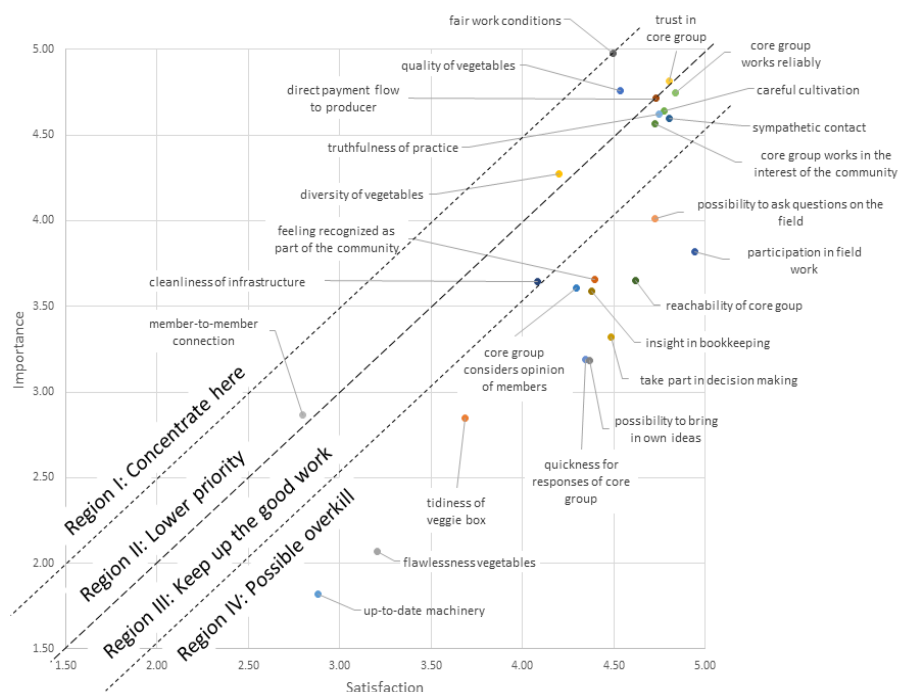


Figure 1. ISA of current CSA members as performed by Galt *et al.* (2019).

Discussion

Due to the divergence of priorities and expectations, as well as the financial dependency of the core group on members, the core group members may slide into what has been termed “preemptive self-exploitation” (Galt, 2013) describing the imbalance between rewards and workload. The results of this study agree with those of Cone and Myhre (2000) who suggest that regular participation yields higher rewards for the members stimulating a sense of civic responsibility and connectedness. Consistent with the results of White, (2015) the willingness to reinvent themselves every season means that CSAs move forward as a co-evolution between core group and members.

Conclusion

The core group should invest their energy in setting up the food production and member participation scheme in their first years to build a solid basis from which they can branch out. The meeting of core group and members on the field is the intersection of work and community and, thus, an essential part in balancing burden and rewards of work and generating social capital. It became clear that the acceptance of the slowness of processes, transparent communication, and opening space for members and organizers to co-create with the available resources and thus allowing practices to evolve organically is much more rewarding long term than trying to force a predefined narrative.

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