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Prospects for the future: Community supported agriculture in Hungary

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ABSTRACT

Alternative food supply systems have been a subject of increasing interest for many decades in various perspectives of food and agriculture studies. This paper contributes to the discussion by examining how farmer led Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) movement in Hungary creates an alternative in the dominant food regime. To examine CSAs future potentials, semi-structured interviews with producers, consumers-members, and experts, a consumer-member survey, and secondary data sources were utilized. We analyse ambiguities or uncertainties of production, logistics, economic viability, and community formation to sort out social and material practices that co-produce goods and values centred on sustainability. We conclude that CSAs create open and democratic spaces of active and direct producer-consumer cooperation and thus present a model for rethinking our food system. However the scaling up of these experiences is the main challenge today.

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1. Introduction

The future for food and farming became a question that is hard to avoid – activists, analysts, celebrities, policymakers create alternative visions. Big business raised the stakes in this – futures for food and agriculture are being shaped by new wave of financial actors (Clapp, 2014). Furthermore, in evidence-based policymaking agricultural production systems that supply environmentally and ethically preferable food are receiving ever more attention (Karner, 2010; Pretty et al., 2010). Academic interest on the futures for food has been informed by various sustainability ambitions ranging from climate-friendly diets (Vinnari & Tapio, 2012), sustainable consumption practices (Vinnari, 2009) co-creating sustainable eating futures (Davies, 2014), ethical consumption and fair trade (Lekakis, 2014), food justice and food sovereignty (Shiva, 2004), and resilience for food security (Barthel & Isendahl, 2013). Still, the present conditions and future prospects of alternative futures for food, or viable alternative foodways are relatively understudied. Recently Hurley (2008) convincingly argued that futures studies has an uneasy attitude towards food issues, has not taken up food as a topic and did not analyse positive examples of food movements to direct us towards futures based in healthy, diverse, and joyful communities. True, that

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scholarly examinations and debates of food futures are predominated by a technology-oriented productivist approach¹ which tells less about the role of food communities and social practices of citizens and consumers to construct more sustainable future food landscapes. A more integrated food system approach seeking the sustainable ways to food production, processing, distribution and consumption activities is only rarely used (Green & Foster, 2005), such as visioning exercises to anticipate imminent changes in the agribusiness sector (Chapuy, 2010). Recently Davies (2014) urged food future discussions to include more consideration of social practices after finding huge discrepancy between the stakeholders' focus on technological solutions and the lay participants' rejection of such approaches. Still, in sustainable future visions the topic of food (especially local, fresh, seasonal, and environmentally more appropriate food consumption) is still one of the most inspiring cross-cutting themes for stakeholders (Carlsson-Kanyama, Dreborg, Moll, & Padovan, 2008; Király, Pataki, Köves, & Balázs, 2013; Quist & Vergragt, 2006). Also interdisciplinary food futures research could meaningfully contribute to the understanding of new forms of sociality around food and the re-shaping of socio-economic networks of food (Hee-jeong Choi & Graham, 2014). Furthermore, the role of policies on actors have been investigated, analysing the way it affects smallholdings, associations of micro-small enterprises and the local retail sector (Gagliardi, Niglia, & Battistella, 2014). Therefore we share Hurley's (2008) optimistic remark that the futures studies community is suitably diverse, open enough, and supportive enough of each other's perspectives that we can think and write about food more often and within a spectrum of localised, alternative futures.

Emerging from this spectrum Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) has a recognized future potential in transition to sustainability (Bloemmen, Bobulescu, Le, & Vitari, 2015; Nost, 2014) and has been often cited as a vibrant niche element in the robust growth of the local food sector (Renting, Schermer, & Rossi, 2012). By definition, CSAs are community-based agriculture cooperatives based on long-term partnership and risk-sharing between one or, in some instances, several producers and their consumers Henderson (2003). A CSA relationship implies the capacity to extend beyond economic exchange to include social roles, motivations and benefits for both farmers and consumers. CSA, in a sense, attempts to re-embed food production and consumption as economic activities in just and reciprocity-based social relations where conventional economic roles (such as producer and consumer) turn to social ones (members of a community) and, consequently, non-price considerations take on greater importance (Hinrichs, 2000) than in conventional market exchanges. CSAs are considered as potential laboratories for catalysing social change to enhance consumer-producer cooperation and regain citizens' control over the ways in which food is produced (Henderson, 2003).

Community Supported Agriculture implies that a community is built around producing and consuming food. A group of equally committed and active members (consumers and farmers) is, therefore, constitutive of a CSA. While the literature on the expansion of the CSA movement in so-called developed countries is extensive, not much information is available on the situation concerning so-called post-socialist countries, such as the ones in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). This paper attempts to partially fill this gap and examine the CSA movement as experienced in Hungary, a CEE country still in her post-socialist cultural transformation phase. Though the CSA movement itself has no long tradition in the country, some individual leadership efforts have a history of their own; while the economic significance of CSAs is still marginal in the country, it seems to have a growing future potential. Policy makers at national and municipal levels now explicitly encourage operators to start community food programs. In 2012, the National Agricultural and Rural Development Strategy was created to help the institutional changes required to localise food system. Since then, locally grown food is, in general, more valorised, more and more market opportunities are created for small-scale family farmers (Balázs, 2012; Balázs, Bodorkós, Bela, Podmaniczky, & Balázs, 2009).

The article is divided into three sections. First, a literature review is provided in order to outline the theoretical-conceptual frameworks that shaped the present analysis. The focus is on the everyday practices of farmers and consumers around the CSAs. The review provides context to CSA development pathways by discussing their emergence and development in the last decades in Hungary reflecting also on policy context (legal-institutional background). Second, we present the materials and methods we used for researching CSAs in Hungary. In the results section socio-technical, cultural, and economic features will be examined characterizing the emergence of farmer-led CSAs in Hungary. In the final discussion, it will be argued that farmers in Hungary play a critical role in institutionalizing new forms of local food supply by investing into several dimensions of social life. It will be emphasized that, to consolidate their operations and sustain (financially) successful farm activities, CSA farmers tend to rely on an altruistic copying strategy and refrain from sharing full range of costs. We regard this as a fundamental difference from the North American and Western European CSAs, a deviation from the original economic principle of sharing all risks and rewards. In the CEE context of weak civic engagement and difficulties to trust others, CSA farmers take on the extra work to bring together members of the local community, nurture bonds of affinity and teach consumer-members about sustainable diets and local food systems. To highlight this socio-technical, cultural, economic paradox, the term "agriculture supported communities" will be

¹ Sciencedirect reports a remarkable 60,759 results for keywords "futures studies" and, "food" in academic publications (journals, books, reference works). Most of these publications produced from 2010 are techno-science oriented (focusing on innovations in brain research, physiology and behaviour research, neuroscience, pharmacology, biochemistry) and do not address complex societal problems or reflect on challenges of the legitimacy/hegemony of the corporate food regime.

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