

Organizational practices, social values and economic measures in Community Supported Agriculture: A historical overview

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Summary: (500 words)

The dominant industrial economic model leads the society into major ecological and social dead-ends. These short-sighted practices are largely diffused in agriculture, too, and the agricultural and food systems are currently subject to a convergence of crises. Innovative agricultural systems capable of rebalancing nature and mankind, are required to overcome the impasse. The pioneering and inspiring role of agriculture justifies the focus on it. Agroecology is a well-established practice where production is simultaneously environmentally friendly, socially fair and economically beneficial. Initiatives like Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) fully adopt agroecology.

The (CSA) concept was born in the 1980s in the United States and has been expanded throughout the world. CSA is a “concept describing a community-based organization of producers and consumers. The consumers agree to provide direct support to the local growers who will produce their food. The growers agree to do their best to provide a sufficient quantity and quality of food to meet the needs and expectations of the consumers. ” (Lamb, G. 1994). The concept translates into multiple forms: consumer-directed, farmer-directed, farmer-coordinated, farmer consumer cooperatives (Polimeni, Iorgulescu, Shirley 2015).

We argue that CSA is a relevant grass-root initiative for a post-growth economy. Food production is the fundamental requirement for life and sustainable human activities. Moreover, it is the necessary condition for the survival of human society. Besides being ecology friendly, CSAs have organizational practices, social values and economic measures departing from mainstream economic assumptions of self-interest, competition and profit maximization. CSAs adopt a holistic perspective of producers and consumers, based upon values like trust, cooperation and ecological responsibility as a result of collective initiatives of people sharing the same thoughts, values and motivation through their proposals of new ways of consuming, satisfying their needs and desires, organizing and transforming the social and collective life and the societies at large. The concept of “community” stands as a founding principle of developing sustainable post-growth economies.

There is an abundant literature on CSAs, especially in the US and in Europe. In the present paper, we focus on the main characteristics that make CSA organization a good candidate for economic, ecological and social transition towards degrowth.

Our methodology is grounded in the institutional (T. Veblen), evolutionary and ecological economics (N. Georgescu-Roegen). In this perspective, we chose the historical analysis of our subject.

In the first part, we present the CSA “model”. Unlike mainstream modeling methods, we define and look at CSAs through institutional, historical lenses. Our “model” is the mapping out of institutional features and their evolution through time. Then we discuss the limits of the model and finally we attempt to analyze and theorize the organizational practices, social values, and economic measures underlying this model.

To attain these objectives, we proceed to an historical analysis of the literature on CSA. We analyze the legal status of the CSA, the business model, the investment policies, the risk sharing, the management style, the social values, the objectives, the measurement system for the financial, social and ecological domains and the agronomy put in place.