Community-Supported Agriculture Networks in Wales and Central Germany: Scaling Up, Out, and Deep through Local Collaboration

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Abstract: Multiple systemic crises have highlighted the vulnerabilities of our globalised food system, raising the demand for more resilient and ecologically sustainable alternatives, and fuelling engagement in practices such as community-supported agriculture (CSA). In CSA, local farmers and households share the costs and products of farming, allowing them to organise food provision non-commercially around short supply chains. While this may prefigure alternatives to the dominant food system, CSA is considered limited in regard to its scalability and accessibility. While these shortcomings apply to individual CSAs, we know little about whether multi-CSA networks can tackle them by expanding and institutionalising their practices at scale. This paper alleviates this blind spot by investigating local CSA networks in Wales and Germany through a lens of 'food movement networks', identifying their scaling practices and encountered challenges. It draws on semi-structured interviews with CSA actors and observations at network gatherings. The paper shows that local collaboration enables CSAs to integrate their supply chains (scaling out), engage their communities (scaling deep), and participate in food councils (scaling up), while further networking at regional level helps new initiatives start up. It also reveals competitive tensions between neighbouring CSAs, which constitutes a hitherto unknown challenge to CSA's potential scalability.

Keywords: community-supported agriculture; food movements; alternative food networks; collaboration

1. Introduction

The stability of our food system is increasingly shaken by crises. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the vulnerability of global supply chains, including the potential for disruption of international food trade. In Europe and the UK, this was further underlined by trade and border disputes caused by Brexit. Against this backdrop, calls for more resilient and sustainable food system alternatives have rapidly intensified. People's demand for direct food provision from local ecologically sustainable sources has skyrocketed, as has their engagement in alternative food practices, such as community-supported agriculture (CSA) [1].

In CSA, local farmers and households share the costs and products of farming, allowing them to organise their food provision around short supply chains relatively independent of markets [2]. This can offer a prefigurative vision for building non-commercial, participatory, and ecologically sustainable food system alternatives [3,4]. However, due to its niche status, CSA is often considered limited in regard to its scalability and social accessibility [5,6].

These benefits and shortcomings are well-established, yet they are based predominantly on the performance of individual CSA initiatives. By contrast, we know surprisingly little about the extent to which CSAs can tackle these shortcomings by collaborating in larger networks and with other types of organisations, which could enable them to expand, diversify, and institutionally consolidate their practices [7]. This paper aims to alleviate this

blind spot by investigating the scale, practices, and challenges of local CSA collaboration in Wales and central Germany.

Instead of considering CSA a socially innovative business practice, the paper views it through a lens of 'food movement networks' [8], thereby conceptualising CSAs as subjects working towards social, economic, and political change. This enables a detailed analysis of the strategic agency, political aims, and collective identities driving their collaboration, and informs a discussion of their relative achievements and encountered challenges. Collaboration itself is investigated using the notion of 'scaling' practices to differentiate between the ways CSAs can 'scale out' via horizontal diffusion, 'scale up' through institutionalisation, or 'scale deep' via community politicisation [9].

Following a separate publication that examines CSA networks at national level [10], this article offers a qualitative investigation into local collaborative practices of CSAs in Wales and central Germany. Findings are based on semi-structured interviews with local CSA members and regional network organisers, participatory observation at a CSA network gathering in Wales, as well as document analyses of CSA publications and online posts.

The article finds that many CSAs engage extensively in local collaboration with neighbouring initiatives, including non-CSA actors, to integrate their food supply chains (scaling out), engage in community activities (scaling deep), and participate in municipal food councils (scaling up). In Germany, local CSA networks grow increasingly consolidated and, in some cases, institutionally embedded, whereas in Wales a regional cluster group was initiated to support new starters. A significant new finding is the development of economic competition between various neighbouring CSAs, which highlights new challenges to CSA's scalability and underlines the need for external support.

The following section introduces the practice of CSA and the central concept of food movement networks, including their scaling practices and challenges. This is followed by a section on methods and sources. Afterwards, the analysis of multi-CSA collaboration is presented by explaining the shifting scale of collaboration, examining different collaborative practices, and discussing the challenges, benefits, and outlook of collaboration, before offering concluding remarks.

2. Conceptualisation

Our dominant agriculture and food system is defined by highly centralised property ownership and market power in the hands of large agricultural producers and retailers, while the vast majority of farming enterprises are very small in scale and possess limited market share and financial capacities [11]. Socially innovative practices, such as 'community-supported agriculture' (CSA), prefigure an alternative food system grounded in small-scale, ecologically sustainable food provision and community participation. As multiple such initiatives engage in collaboration, they form 'food movement networks' that expand and consolidate their alternative practices at local scale and beyond.

2.1. Community-Supported Agriculture

Community-supported agriculture (CSA) is a form of collective food production and distribution where farmers and local consumers share the costs, risks, and output of farming [12]. By pre-emptively covering the costs of production, consumers ensure the financial security of small-scale farmers, while gaining access to local sustainably produced food, and often becoming directly involving in the production process [2]. This practice matches food production to consumer demand, thereby freeing the process from volatile market competition, while also strengthening more ecologically sustainable short supply chain systems [13].

CSA can vary in terms of business model and work practice. Some CSAs are consumer-run associations growing food on their own or rented land. Others are run by professional farmers themselves who shifted from a commercial to community-supported model [14]. In any case, consumers generally become members of a CSA for an entire growing season and pay a (usually adjustable) fee to receive weekly shares of the harvest, which they

can either pick up from the farm or other distribution hubs, or receive via delivery [15]. Many CSAs rely on members' additional voluntary support, such as helping out on the farm or manning food pickup stations [16]. Besides their economic activities, many CSAs also engage in community outreach and activism, hosting public events at their farms or organising educational programmes for schools, to promote their initiatives and raise awareness about sustainable agriculture [12].

Research into CSA has uncovered a range of achievements and shortcomings. The practice is often praised for establishing close social relations between farmers and households in place of more distanced mercantile relations. Authors note CSA's ability to protect small-scale sustainable agriculture from market competition [17], while enhancing people's nutritional knowledge and improving their diet [18]. The practice is also seen as beneficial for educating people around agricultural and environmental topics, as well as offering them practical insights into alternative non-capitalist economic models [16,19]. Many authors thus consider CSA a social movement that can help bring about transformative changes within agricultural and food systems [3,20,21].

On the other hand, CSA is often criticised for being relatively socially inaccessible, as it requires a degree of financial security, nutritional awareness, and cooking skills to participate in. The overwhelming majority of CSA members thus tend to be white people from well-educated middle-class backgrounds, many of whom are already embedded within ecologically conscious social milieus to begin with [22]. The practice's inherent goals and idealism are also not shared equally among all participants. Most CSAs only have small core groups of activist members who dedicate time and effort to the operation, whereas the majority are primarily interested in acquiring the food [23]. While producers rely on CSA for financial security, these members could easily receive their food from other sources, making membership retention a point of concern [24]. On top of this, CSA tends to leave farmers operating only slightly above the poverty line, making it an emergency solution rather than a preferred choice for many of them as well [6]. These issues have raised concerns that CSA represents little more than a healthy individual lifestyle choice rather than a practice capable of facilitating systemic change [5].

Regardless of how authors assess CSA's qualities, they widely agree that it struggles to reach beyond its economic niche [6]. In the UK, for instance, CSA only accounts for roughly 0.1 percent of agricultural enterprises, employment, and turnover [11,25]. While the small and local scale of CSA allows it to establish strong social bonds and build short supply chain systems, authors warn against falling into the trap of an 'unreflexive localism' that avoids addressing issues of exclusivity or ignores the need for multi-scalar transformation [26]. As Morgan has argued [27,28], even a strategy for economic change rooted in local alternatives still needs to address constraints and utilise opportunities across multiple geographic and sectoral scales.

Consequently, studies of CSA need to place a stronger emphasis on how multi-CSA networks can expand and consolidate the practice. Surprisingly little research has been conducted around this question, but existing studies offer promising insights. Levkoe [29], for instance, demonstrates the existence of close collaborative ties between CSAs and other food initiatives in Canada. Espelt [30] shows how CSAs around Barcelona use collaborative online tools to promote prosumer models. Rommel et al. [7] uncover how German CSAs sometimes share resources and trade with conventional farms to diversify their output.

These contributions are very valuable, yet they still tend to regard CSA networks primarily through a business-economic lens, which largely disregards their activist nature. Instead, by conceptualising them as 'food movement networks' we can examine not only their economic dimension but also their political agency and strategies [8].

2.2. Food Movement Networks

There are many transformative food initiatives besides CSA, such as food councils or food hubs, all of which can intersect and collaborate with one another. These have long been referred to collectively as 'alternative food networks' [31], a term that has become increas-

ingly criticised for being too imprecise to characterise the variety in practices and different degrees of market divergence among food initiatives [4]. Instead, Anderson et al. [32] developed the notion of 'civic food networks' in reference to initiatives that actively pursue non-commercial, participatory, democratic, and sustainable principles. Yet, while their concept is better at highlighting transformative qualities, it too only focuses on the socially innovative practices of individual food initiatives.

By contrast, Sbicca et al. [8] introduce the concept of 'food movement networks', which captures not only the economic dimension of food initiatives but also their 'political engagements and social commitments' [8] (p. 18) in the form of community- and policy-oriented activities, horizontal democracy, and solidarity practices. This conceptual innovation is immensely valuable to gain a more holistic understanding of how initiatives such as CSA aim to transform the food system through a variety of tactics. It can be advanced even further by enabling us to move entirely beyond a narrow focus on individual initiatives. Since CSAs and similar projects frequently work together, this collaboration represents a key component of the political engagements and social commitments that define food movement networks. Thus, unlike the earlier conception of an alternative food network, which could refer to a single CSA, a food movement network encompasses a group of multiple CSAs and other food initiatives working together to more effectively pursue their transformative goals.

2.2.1. Scaling Practices

Focusing on the collaborative practices within food movement networks raises the question of scale. By involving a multitude of organisations and diverse activities that potentially stretch across territorial and sectoral boundaries, food movement networks can engage in practices of scaling up, scaling out, or scaling deep.

Scaling up involves a movement towards 'vertical' organisational consolidation and institutional representation [33]. By founding official organisational frameworks, food movement networks can enable their members to gain a degree of public recognition they would not be able to achieve on their own. Establishing common representative bodies can help them act as a more unified collective, as well as engage more easily with third party actors. Networks can also select or found their own intermediary organisations to take care of this work for them [34]. However, scaling up can be a source of contention for food movement networks due to inherent risks of political co-optation by the state or assimilation into market competition [35], which can pressure networks to become more streamlined and centralised. Solidarity-based activities can also be instrumentalised by governments as a way to outsource social relief while implementing fiscal austerity [36]. Many networks refuse to engage with public institutions on those grounds, instead trying to affect change within civil society directly [37]. On the other hand, building community-based economic infrastructures is unlikely to succeed without certain social protections and supportive public policies in place [34]. Thus, to facilitate at least some degree of cooperation between networks and the state, the former need to find ways to 'translate' their prefigurative practices for institutional actors [38].

By contrast, scaling out involves the 'horizontal' diffusion of place-based initiatives across geographic territories and economic sectors [39]. The creation of new initiatives is a relatively autonomous grassroots process, but food movement networks can support, expedite, and consolidate this dynamic through 'intentional organizing' [40] (p. 558). They can create the necessary organisational basis to enable a variety of local actors to participate in mutual exchange and collaboration [41], thus inviting new entrants into the movement and helping them develop their own projects. Since alternative economic practices like CSA cannot be drastically scaled up without encountering the aforementioned risks of co-optation and marketisation, processes of scaling out are essential for helping them build larger socio-economic infrastructures while retaining their grassroots nature. Moreover, by enhancing and diversifying their membership, food movement networks also enhance

the level of support members can lend to each other, raising all participants' capacity and sustainability in the process [33].

Finally, processes of scaling deep (or 'down') enable food movement networks to build stronger social relations and affect cultural changes within their communities [42]. By engaging in social and cultural activities, food movement networks are able to raise public awareness of their goals and contributions, attract new participants, and develop more cohesive collective identities [39]. This can involve collaboration with external supporters, such as researchers, whose expertise can help lend legitimacy to the networks' proclaimed benefits [41]. Networks can also show solidarity with marginalised members of their communities by lending support or enhancing their own accessibility [43].

In practice, food movement networks tend to apply a combination of all three scaling dynamics, which can enable them to more successfully pursue far-reaching systemic change [9]. Their success also depends on their understanding of which practices can be scaled and how, and their capacity to attract external support without losing influence over their movement's development [44].

2.2.2. Challenges

Food movement networks face a range of challenges that routinely hamper civil society collaboration in general. These can be due to external conditions that constrain the functionality or performance of the whole network, or internal factors that inhibit members' ability or willingness to rely on each other [45].

Due to the inherent diversity of social identities, aims, and organisational cultures within food movement networks, they need to find ways to reconcile these differences by developing inclusive narratives and strategies. Networks also need to address the structural inequalities between their members, especially differences in power and resources [46]. Members need to engage in reciprocal exchange or make uneven concessions to each other to reach political compromises and mitigate differences [8]. Oftentimes, different forms of resources and competences can be pooled, as network members develop complementary divisions of labour and responsibilities according to their respective strengths [47].

Since some food movement actors possess greater material and organisational capacities, or better connections within and beyond their network, they can exert higher levels of influence. This can create dynamics of network centralisation and informal leadership, potentially leading to conflict [48]. Third-party collaborators can cause such dynamics as well, such as NGOs or funding organisations on whom networks rely on for money and influence [8].

Lastly, depending on the scale at which food movement networks operate, they may have to address differences in their members' political and economic contexts. Legislation, public infrastructures, funding opportunities, economic competitors, and the composition of populations can differ between municipalities. Thus, any collaboration beyond the local scale needs to take this diversity into account when developing common strategies [49]. Conversely, the separation of certain network ties does not necessarily imply a breakdown of collaboration but can indicate a diversification or scale shift that enables network members to pursue a more focused approach towards how and with whom they collaborate [47].

3. Materials and Methods

This article investigates qualitative case studies of local CSA collaboration in the UK and Germany. Both countries have recently experienced a rapid expansion of CSA activity, especially during the pandemic. Furthermore, in both countries, CSAs are connected by large nation-wide networks, which facilitate mutual exchange, provide professional support, and engage in public awareness raising and political advocacy. The German 'Netzwerk Solidarische Landwirtschaft' (Network of Solidarity-based Agriculture, NSL) was founded in 2011, and at the time of writing encompasses almost 400 individual CSAs [50]. The UK's 'Community Supported Agriculture' network was founded in 2013 and has grown to over 150 member initiatives [51]. The two networks also established

regional sub-networks to facilitate collaboration within the UK's devolved nations [52] and Germany's federated states [53]. Due to these strong parallels, CSA collaboration is examined in both countries to reveal important commonalities and differences.

In the UK, the investigation focuses on the devolved nation of Wales, which has witnessed the most far-reaching consolidation of CSA collaboration at regional level. In Germany, it focuses on the country's central and eastern-central regions, where several local CSA networks have developed and become increasingly consolidated and institutionally embedded. Both cases represent the most advanced levels of sub-national CSA collaboration in their respective countries, whose national CSA networks often cite them as best-practice examples to emulate. As such, they offer insights into how multi-CSA collaboration can develop in other regions as well, as the movement continues to grow and new CSAs increasingly emerge in close proximity to one another.

The investigation is based on a combination of qualitative analytical methods, including semi-structured interviews [54], participant observation [55], and documentary analysis [56].

14 interviews were conducted with local CSA members and their collaborators between May 2021 and April 2022 (Table 1). Interviews lasted around an hour on average and questions revolved around the CSAs' own economic scope and activities, their experiences engaging in collaboration with other CSAs and third-party organisations, perceived benefits and challenges of collaboration, and the participants' own motivations and future expectations tied to CSA. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, followed by a qualitative open coding that crystalised the gathered data into several analytical categories, including the composition of CSA networks, the range of collaborative practices, organisational structures, political aims, encountered challenges and mitigation tactics, and future expectations.

Table 1. Interview respondents.

#	Organisation	Function	Date
R1	CSA Network (UK)	Former board member	5 May 2021
R2	Cae Tan (UK)	CSA Grower	18 May 2021
R3	Landworkers Alliance Wales (UK)	Policy Coordinator	11 June 2021
R4	Kleine Beete e.V. (DE)	CSA member	18 November 2021
R5	Rote Beete (DE)	CSA member	3 December 2021
R6	Coed Organic (UK)	CSA grower	25 February 2022
R7	Orchard Acre Market Garden (UK)	CSA growers	3 March 2022
R8	Gemueseinsel (DE)	CSA growers	21 March 2022
R9	Streuobstwiese (DE)	CSA grower	22 March 2022
R10	Solawi Marburg (DE)	CSA administrator	23 March 2022
R11	Solawi Kassel (DE)	CSA grower	25 March 2022
R12	Solawiese (DE)	CSA grower	29 March 2022
R13	Gemuesebau Heckenbeck (DE)	CSA administrator	30 March 2022
R14	Solawi PeterSilie (DE)	CSA grower	6 April 2022

While in-person participant observation was largely impossible due to pandemic-related constraints, one visit was undertaken to the first meeting of the Welsh CSA cluster group in July 2021, during which field notes were produced to capture observations about the mutual relations and discursive engagement among network members. Although no interviews were recorded, long conversations with organisers and members offered in-depth insights into the cluster's operations and development. Finally, documents authored by CSAs and their networks were analysed using the above open coding system, including online posts, published handbooks, reports, studies, and press interviews.

4. Results

In both the UK and Germany, CSA collaboration began at national level and became increasingly decentralised over time. In 2014, three years after its foundation, the German

NSL created 12 regional sub-networks to enable its individual members to collaborate more closely and at shorter distances [57]. These 'Regiogruppen' ('regional groups') roughly mirrored Germany's federated states, with some groups bridging multiple states to account for instances of high CSA concentration around state borders [53]. Regional groups organised bi-annual meetings, primarily for mutual exchange, and set up mailing lists, newsletters, and social media channels for regular communication.

Around the same time, the UK's CSA network also began organising regional networking events to encourage more in-depth mutual exchange, particularly in the areas of Northern England, Scotland and Wales [58–60]. Although Wales was not the area with most CSAs, it was the only region to develop its own formal CSA sub-network in 2015, supported by the 'Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens' (now 'Social Farms & Gardens', SFG) [59]. Similar to the German regional groups, the Welsh CSA network acted as a smaller geographical hub for individual members to facilitate exchange, support, and public engagement, yet it also had its own written constitution and decision-making mechanisms [61].

In both countries, engagement in these regional CSA structures decreased within only a few years. The German regional groups largely grew dormant due to dwindling interest in new ideas and advice among the increasingly experienced CSAs, on top of which the pandemic eventually prevented face-to-face meetings. In Wales, SFG's project funding ran out in 2018, whereupon it lost the ability to help maintain the regional network. Nevertheless, as the overall number of CSAs continued to grow in response to the pandemic, so did their concentration within certain regions. At the time of writing, the regional group 'Mittendrin' in central Germany includes around 20 CSAs [62] while Wales is home to 11 [63], in addition to which several initiatives are in the process of setting up.

4.1. Local CSA Networks

While regional level exchange has waned, CSAs in both countries primarily collaborate with their close neighbours, including non-CSA actors, signifying a relative scale shift of networking to the local level. This shift is not absolute, since they continue participating in some regional and national level exchange to receive advice, contacts, and legal support, but the more regular and practical activities take place at local scale. As one respondent summarises:

> *People that we have actually collaborated with in a practical day-to-day way have been the farms that started here locally.* (R7)

In Germany, local CSA networks have emerged around several cities. The largest and most consolidated of these exists around the central-eastern city of Leipzig (see map in Figure 1), consisting of seven initiatives, many of which grew out of the city's first CSA 'Rote Beete'.

While most of them supply up to 200 households, the large CSA cooperative, 'KoLa', includes over 1500 users and works 35 hectares of land. After receiving EU project funding, KoLa also founded the association, 'Allmende Taucha', whose part-time employees began facilitating collaboration between Leipzig's CSAs, organising monthly meetings and hosting community events. This generated important capacities for the CSAs who previously had to maintain their network informally through voluntary engagement (I5). Other notable CSA networks emerged around the cities of Göttingen (5 CSAs), Marburg (4 CSAs), and Kassel (3 CSAs). All three are part of the central-German Mittendrin group, but only sporadically engage with each other at a regional level, instead acting primarily within their respective local contexts.
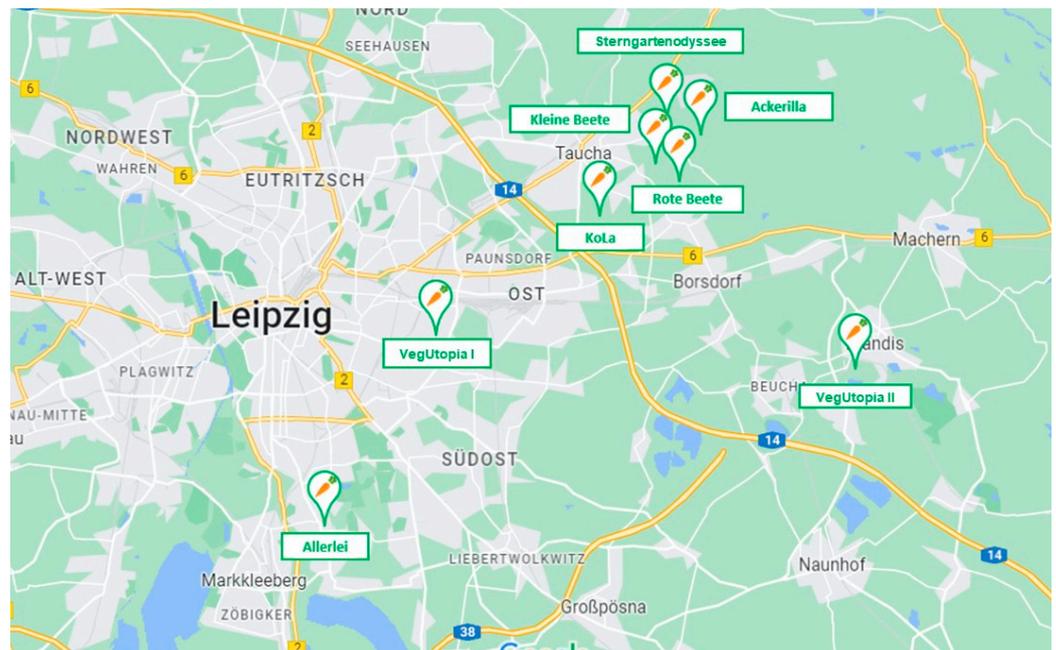
Figure 1. CSAs around Leipzig (mapped by the author).

In Wales, three CSAs on the Gower peninsula near Swansea engage in enhanced local collaboration as well (see Figure 2). The already well-established 'Cae Tân' is particularly active in training and supporting other Welsh CSAs [33], even helping some of its own growers start their own initiatives close by. The cooperative 'Coed Organic' also received some support from Cae Tan when starting up, but due to being located 50 km outside the Gower, its regular collaboration partners are other nearby farms and food platforms. Similarly, in the absence of any nearby CSAs, 'Orchard Acre Market Garden' in Abergavenny works primarily with nearby organic farms and associations working on sustainability. They also take part in the local 'Our Food' network, a project similar to Allmende Taucha in Leipzig, which supports local sustainable food production and consumption.
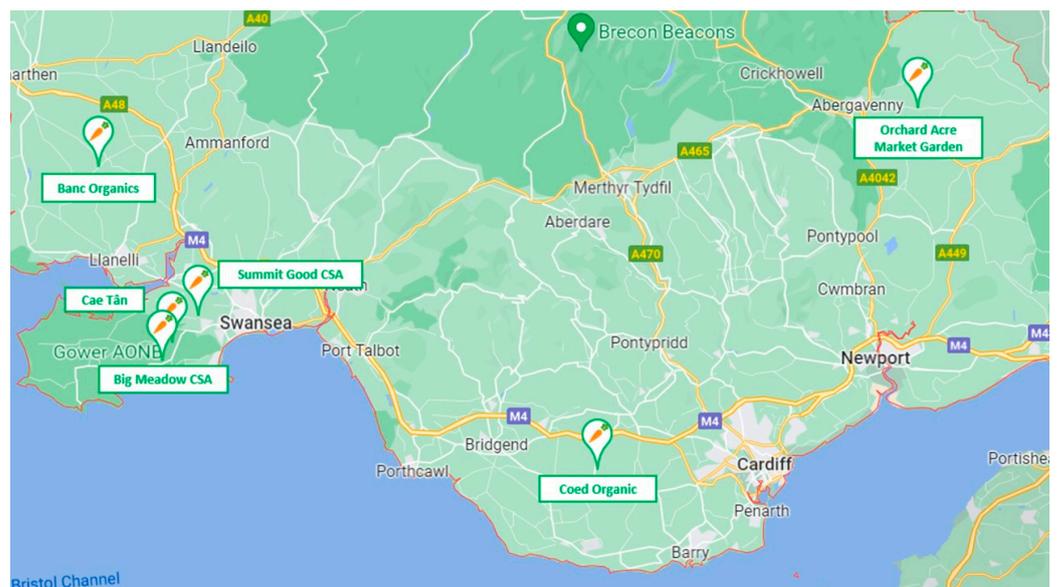

Figure 2. CSAs in South Wales (mapped by the author).

The main appeal of local collaboration obviously lies in the ability to interact with one another directly and flexibly. CSAs engage in a wide range of collaborative practices

with their neighbours, from lending occasional advice and support to consistently sharing resources and tasks. Many CSAs rely on their local communities to get started in the first place, borrowing equipment, drawing on crowdfunding and volunteers, or using people's driveways as food distribution points. Local collaboration can also involve other businesses and institutional bodies, potentially giving CSAs a wider variety of potential partners than they have within their larger networks.

Nevertheless, in Wales there have been efforts to shift collaboration back to the regional level in the form of a 'Welsh CSA Cluster' launched in 2021. This is again largely driven by SFG, in collaboration with the 'Tyfu Cymru' project, which received new funding through the Welsh Rural Development Programme to provide mentoring and other support to community-driven horticulture projects [64]. In contrast to the previous Welsh network, the CSA Cluster does not involve experienced CSAs, nor does it try to engage in political organisation and decision making. Instead, it serves as a platform for mutual exchange and inspiration for new CSA starters, offering specialist advice on financial questions, planning, farm work, and community outreach. While much of the cluster's support is provided via webinars and other online resources, members also meet in-person every few months to learn about each other's work on location (see Figure 3). The cluster thus tailors its activities around the precise needs of CSAs most likely to seek support at regional level.

Figure 3. Welsh CSA Cluster gathering and on-site exploration at 'Ash & Elm Horticulture' (personal photo).

Some respondents theorise that this development expresses an organic division of labour across the movement, in which local networks now act as multipliers of ideas initially shared at national level. While this may be true in some cases, most CSAs do not closely follow national level debates, and new starters in particular never experienced in-person exchange and community building at regional or national network gatherings due to COVID. It would thus be more accurate to speak of a multi-scalar diversification of collaboration, in which consistent, material, and practical activities are conducted locally, whereas regional groups and national networks are reserved for more occasional inspiration and targeted advice.

4.2. Shared Supply Chains, Community Engagement, and Institutional Consolidation: Scaling Out, Scaling Deep, Scaling Up

As CSAs engage in local collaboration with each other and third-party organisations, they ultimately contribute to the out-, deep- and upscaling of their alternative food provision models.

4.2.1. Scaling Out

Through regular exchange and the sharing of resources and labour tasks, CSAs and their local collaboration partners can interconnect their systems of food production and distribution. The result is an expansion and diversification of supply chains, effectively scaling out CSA within their local area.

German CSAs, for instance, often share tools and machinery, co-organise food deliveries and purchases, perform difficult farming operations for each other, and trade seeds, fertiliser, or food. A CSA member recounts:

> *We profit from the fact that there are multiple larger CSAs in the area so we can join their deliveries. Now we can always do our own deliveries with them and every few weeks we do the driving. That's the deal at the moment.* (R4, translation by author)

While much of this takes place bilaterally and ad-hoc, CSAs with similar levels of resources in Leipzig are considering systematising their collaboration into a clear division of labour. This already takes place around Marburg, where the CSA 'PeterSilie' specialises in producing plant seedlings for the local network. Marburg's CSAs also plan to create a community-supported bakery together in the near future.

Such forms of material collaboration also involve more conventional actors, especially in areas where CSAs are relatively scarce. As they often specialise in horticulture, CSAs sometimes supply additional products from nearby organic farmers, such as potatoes, dairy, eggs, honey, or meat. Rote Beete also work with a local shepherd whose flock grazes on their farmland. Other forms of collaboration are about gaining access to land and certain spaces, as in the case of KoLa, who received land from a large agricultural cooperative and set up a food pickup station in a local organic supermarket.

Similar dynamics are observable among CSAs in Wales. Orchard Acre Market Garden buy additional vegetables from neighbouring sustainable farms as often as every week. They also rely on their local Our Food network to purchase resources such as seeds, equipment, and compost collectively. Coed Organic also source their seeds from a sustainable company, sell some of their produce to a solidarity-based 'pay-as-you-can' café in Cardiff, and donate any surplus food boxes they have to food solidarity platforms. These cases demonstrate that CSAs still choose partners with similar social and ecological principles when collaborating with non-CSA entities. As one grower explains:

> *We try to be very socially minded and we're always looking to collaborate if we could with other socially minded businesses.* (R6)

CSAs thus contribute to the formation of more socially embedded and ecologically sustainable short food supply chain systems. As mentioned above, they are also involved in local food associations and networks with the express purpose of developing such systems in certain areas, which in turn directly support the local out-scaling of CSA. The Allmende Taucha association, for instance, helped set up food pickup stations in villages around Leipzig and regularly undertakes surveys among the rural population to assess the demand for direct food provision. Similarly, the Our Food network in Wales collaborates with Monmouthshire city council to support public procurement from local sustainable food producers, as well as scale out food provision to the point of functioning as 'a possible breadbasket for Wales' (R7).

4.2.2. Scaling Deep

Besides extending the socio-economic reach of sustainable food supply chains, CSA collaboration also serves as a way for engaging in community exchange and political

awareness raising, thus deep-scaling a community-based food system transformation. Many CSAs, both in Germany and Wales, engage in educational activities of various kinds. They often collaborate directly with schools by welcoming pupils on their farms and educating them about sustainable food production and healthy nutrition. Petersilie in Germany runs a special growing project for pupils:

> *There is the 'Farm as Classroom' project, which two of our members are running, where every week a school class is visiting and doing their own little project. [. . .] They have their own patch and learn a bit about growing. And whenever they can squeeze it in, they also do things about environmental protection and land conservation.* (R14, translation by author)

A member of Cae Tan in Wales explains that this educational work is not only valuable in its own right, but also aims to promote sustainable agriculture as an attractive and viable career path:

> *We have got someone employed two days a week who just goes into local schools talking about CSA and local food and inspiring children so when they come out of school, they might think about training up.* (R2)

A different form of collaboration takes place between CSAs and universities for the purpose of alternative knowledge production. CSAs often let students conduct participatory research on their farms and some growers themselves contribute to agricultural research projects by experimenting with different seeds or fertilisers. 'Caerhys Organic Community Agriculture' and 'Torth y tir' in Wales, for instance, are involved in the European Innovation Partnership, 'Organic Ancient Cereal Supply-chain', to test the resilience of ancient seed varieties [65].

CSAs also collaborate with other social movements to raise awareness around critical issues and engage in direct actions. This openly activist engagement is much more prevalent among local CSA networks in Germany, whereas similar activities in the UK tend to be organised by the national CSA network instead [66]. Collaboration involves inviting external speakers to provide talks about the dangers of climate change and the need for ecological sustainability. What is also particular to Germany is the collaboration with antifascist and antiracist organisations to inform communities about the risks of far-right influence within the permaculture movement. In Leipzig, CSAs even helped launch a local climate activist coalition (also involving Extinction Rebellion) to organise an entire week of activities around the theme of sustainable food systems, including farm visits, exhibitions, workshops, films, and bike tours [67]. Similarly, Marburg's CSAs joined a protest coalition with Greenpeace and Fridays for Future to hold a demonstration during the city's anniversary festivities.

These community activities complement the CSAs' construction of local food supply chains by trying to influence people's perception of the food system, and ultimately contributing to a wider shift towards more ecologically sustainable cultural norms and economic practices. They target both the CSAs' own members, potentially consolidating their commitment and participation, and the wider community at large, thereby encouraging more people to join CSAs or begin a career in sustainable agriculture themselves.

4.2.3. Scaling Up

To consolidate their efforts, some local CSA networks embed their collaboration in institutional politics, thus aiming to scale up alternative food provision systems. This form of engagement is less widespread than the others, underlining the more grassroots nature of CSA and the inherent scepticism towards institutional politics. The CSA networks around Leipzig and Marburg are perhaps the most institutionally engaged, having co-founded their cities' food councils, which started working on building short supply chains, supporting food research, engaging in public outreach, and facilitating public procurement. CSAs in Leipzig formed their own institutional working group and formulated a list of shared principles, allowing them to promote their network on the council's website. Being able

to present themselves as a collective entity enabled them to engage in consultations with Saxony's Ministry of Agriculture, resulting in new connections to public funders. This experience underlined how the formal consolidation of a local CSA network was crucial for 'translating' its aims and practices in ways that could attract institutional support:

> *This success with the Saxon Ministry clearly shows that. I mean none of this would have happened if it had been a single CSA doing it. They are not allowed to just support a single CSA anyhow; it has to be all of them. And so, it was beneficial for them too that we could engage as a whole network.* (R4, translation by author)

The CSA networks in Göttingen and Kassel have remained more informal, but at times also engaged in bilateral collaboration with institutional officials, such as local climate protection delegates, for the purpose of promoting regenerative agriculture.

In Wales, CSAs have remained less involved in municipal food policy. Orchard Acre Market Garden is indirectly involved in the Our Food network's plans for facilitating public procurement, but it is not actively engaged in institutional consultations. The CSA instead relies on the agroecological farmers union, Landworkers Alliance, to represent them institutionally at regional level, since food policy 'still feels a bit nebulous, even in a small country like Wales where the government feels relatively a lot closer and more accessible than in England' (R7). Consequently, the Landworkers Alliance in Wales engages in policy consultations and formulates recommendations also on behalf of Welsh CSAs, often referring to them as good practice case studies:

> *We use CSAs as a good example of how you can bring environmental and social benefits to food production and get more of the value for the farm because of the shorter supply chains.* (R4)

At the 2022 Oxford Real Farming Conference, Welsh sustainable farmers and CSAs also collectively called for the creation of central food hubs to help store and distribute their food across longer distances. Several Welsh CSAs also actively participated in a pilot scheme around small edible horticulture grants, run by SFG, whose concluding report implored the government to introduce more public funding options accessible for small-scale food producers [68].

Ultimately, both German and Welsh CSAs use institutional engagement primarily for acquiring infrastructural capacities. Yet, lacking the same degree of local network consolidation as their German counterparts, Welsh CSAs are less likely to build those capacities themselves, relying mainly on third-party organisations instead.

4.3. Challenges

In their efforts to collaborate more closely within local networks, CSAs meet a variety of challenges. The most striking and unexpected challenge is direct competition between neighbouring initiatives over members, public attention, and access to funding. While the risk of competition between alternative enterprises, such as cooperatives, is a well-established phenomenon [69], this appears to be entirely novel in the case of CSA. Due to the practice's non-commercial nature, a prevailing assumption among scholars has thus far been that CSAs do not compete with one another. This assumption is now proving to be false, after the pandemic-induced surge in new initiatives has created a hitherto unknown density of CSAs in certain areas, thereby testing the limits and sustainability of demand. One grower explains:

> *Our waiting list has obviously become drastically shorter now that there are many other enterprises. Which is good of course, since we do not live to have long waiting lists. But I think it is obvious we do not attract wildly different clienteles to avoid overlap in potential members.* (R5, translation by author)

Especially around Leipzig the comparatively massive growth of the new KoLa CSA was made possible in part by attracting members and growers from other CSAs and running professional advertising campaigns that centred public attention around it. As

a member of Rote Beete explains, this dynamic was the result of KoLa's dependency on grants and loans, which fuelled its more expansionary business model at the expense of other CSAs:

> *Partly there are structural reasons for this that have nothing to do with what the people may want but with how their businesses are conceived. If, according to its business plan, KoLa has to gain 3000 new members in two years, then they simply have to advertise more aggressively than how others can afford to.* (R5, translation by author)

However, even CSAs of similar scale experience competition. One CSA near Marburg encountered serious difficulties attracting members at the height of the pandemic, when the city's student population had largely left, decreasing the pool of potential members. While there is no indication of economic competition among Welsh CSAs, there are concerns that the CSAs most active on social media receive greater attention and thereby disproportionately influence debates around good CSA practices. Even CSAs who are unfamiliar with this problem themselves still take precautionary measures against it, such as by contacting existing CSAs before setting up new operations in their vicinity.

Due to the structural causes of competition, CSAs struggle to find ways to overcome it. A widely preferred solution is to further diversify CSAs' marketing strategies to attract a wider range of clienteles, especially beyond traditional left-leaning ecological subcultures. This has not been very successful thus far, but CSAs hope that by organising more collective events and raising popular awareness they can better familiarise the public with the wide selection of CSA practices. Many CSAs also anticipate that collective online spaces, such as food council websites or dynamic procurement systems, can help promote their different initiatives and allocate potential members more evenly [70]. Moreover, concerns about competition for funding can be alleviated by recalling the CSAs' demonstrable ability to share the outcomes. KoLa's own project funding helped launch the Allmende Taucha association, whose work benefits all CSAs around Leipzig, setting an example of how best to engage with competitive advantages.

Besides fuelling competition, the plurality of CSA business models can also cause political tensions. Which practices can be defined as CSA is an ongoing debate, as is the question of how expansive the model should be [70]. Collaboration requires facilitating these debates and reconciling different opinions. National CSA networks apply highly inclusive perspectives to minimise arguments, but individual CSAs can feel alienated by what they consider loose compromises. The question of whether to use animals, for instance, constitutes a major point of contention for some CSAs, who refuse to join network meetings at certain farms:

> *I'm not saying the whole world needs to be vegan, but there seems to be a common understanding that the whole world needs to eat less meat. So, from my understanding of this situation, we need to be finding ways to keep land fertile without animal inputs. [Therefore] the last place I want to go and spend my weekend is at a dairy farm.* (R6)

On an everyday level, collaboration is hampered by the inherent lack of time and resources CSA actors can invest. Since growers work long hours, collaborative activities often fall to other members who can volunteer their free time. This presents another problem for many CSAs whose members are relatively passive and uninterested in activities outside their own initiative:

> *The utility [of collaboration] is not always immediately apparent for people. And when there are limited capacities, which is normal for such a small project, this is not what people spend their time on.* (R4)

This problem was exacerbated during the pandemic, as CSA members became fatigued with online meetings and events. As a result, certain individuals carry multiple different responsibilities, which inadvertently contributes to a centralisation of local CSA networks, making them more vulnerable to burnout or interpersonal conflicts. These challenges

underline the need for community organisations, such as Allmende Taucha and Our Food, to facilitate certain collaborative practices from the outside.

However, launching new organisations is dependent on the successful acquisition of project funding, as is the creation of shared infrastructure such as community storage and fridges. Especially in the UK, where most agricultural subsidies exclude small-scale farms, CSAs often cannot access this necessary support. SFG's pilot project on small horticulture grants in Wales explicitly aimed to alleviate this problem [68], highlighting another way CSA collaboration can tackle systemic obstacles.

4.4. Outlook

Despite this array of challenges, CSAs are highly in favour of continuing and expanding their local collaboration due to the wide range of benefits it provides. Mutual exchange and practical support are deemed crucial for integrating different forms of knowledge, skills, and capacities, reducing labour time, resource consumption, and carbon emissions, diversifying the food supply, and attracting new members.

Many CSAs consider collaboration (including with conventional actors) an important basis for bringing their practice out of its economic niche and building alternative food supply chain systems, which they hope to contribute to achieving food sovereignty in the long-term. CSAs ultimately view their movement as more than the sum of its parts and consider their ability to develop collective agency as an important condition for successfully achieving systemic change:

> *None of this would have made sense to do alone as a single CSA. This coming together is very important, also to develop a certain political force in the long run.* (R4, translation by author)

On a personal level, collaboration is seen as a value in itself, as it helps forge close ties and friendships among likeminded actors, whose work otherwise does not allow for an active social life. A member of Coed Organics explains:

> *I would welcome collaboration just from the solidarity point of view. It's quite a lonely job that involves a lot of stress and a lot of hard work and long hours. So, to just feel like there are other people in the same position, that means a lot.* (R6)

Creating these social ties based on mutual affinity and solidarity also helps strengthen the collective identity of CSA as a social movement. Some CSAs therefore hope to facilitate a wider culture of collaboration not just between the initiatives but also among their individual members and across all areas of every-day life.

As the number of CSAs continues to grow, we can expect them to intensify their local partnerships and pursue more ambitious collective projects, such as building common procurement and processing infrastructures, or founding new food councils. A respondent from Marburg surmises:

> *I hope we will collaborate even closer. All sides agree on this. We just have to make sure to not lose sight of it because it tends to be an extra add-on during our day-to-day business. So, we need to keep reminding ourselves how valuable it is. And if we manage to launch our two larger projects, the bakery and the website, our cooperation will necessarily grow closer since we will see each other more frequently. And I think that is an exciting and great outlook for the future.* (R10, translation by author)

However, given the inherent difficulties of collaboration, CSAs maintain that more institutional support would be highly beneficial. This includes offering better access to grants and subsidies for small ecological farmers, as well as legal clarity and advice tailored to their business models. It also involves raising public awareness of the benefits of local sustainable food, and making concerted efforts to promote agriculture as a more visible and attractive economic and cultural sector. These claims deliberately reach beyond the CSA model itself to affect the wider agriculture and food system. Most CSA actors have no illusions that their practice could ever replace large-scale agriculture, but they hope

to contribute to a more diversified food system that is based to a larger extent on local, ecologically sustainable production and distribution.

Ultimately, while collaboration can significantly enhance the effectiveness and reach of CSA, the practice should not be expected to outgrow its economic niche any time soon, nor should this be considered its most urgent priority. Comprehensive policy action is needed to create the kind of transformative environment in which a multitude of local, community-driven, ecologically sustainable food system alternatives can flourish, which would benefit not only CSA but food movement networks in general.

5. Conclusions

The article demonstrates that local collaboration between CSAs can offer considerable benefits in their efforts to expand and consolidate food system alternatives. By sharing expertise, labour, and resources with nearby initiatives and other likeminded organisations, CSAs can diversify and integrate their local supply chains, engage their communities in educational and cultural activities, and potentially influence municipal food policy. At larger scales, collaboration is best suited for offering guidance and sharing experiences and contacts, especially to new initiatives. The ability of CSAs to shift between these scales demonstrates a growing level of flexibility within the movement.

However, collaboration also entails challenges. In particular, the hitherto unknown risk of inter-CSA competition represents a significant finding, which points to new and unforeseen constraints on the practice's scalability. The reliance on third-party organisations and funding also indicates a need for more comprehensive support. Thus, as CSAs continue to grow in number and diversity, they may have to coordinate their practices and rely on institutional partners more extensively than before, as well as potentially invest in common infrastructures for food storage and dynamic procurement to extend their reach.

As the literature on collaboration within food movement networks is just starting to gain traction, this article's conceptual approach and empirical insights hopefully offer some guidance for further scholarship. Conceptualising CSA collaboration through a social movement lens has proven highly advantageous for capturing its underlying strategic agency, thus overcoming the limitations of more static perspectives. Future research would benefit from applying this perspective to study network collaboration across other scales and sectors, or combining it with an economic analysis of the financial and material dimensions of connecting multiple community-based enterprises.

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