'What we'd like is a CSA in every town.' Scaling community supported agriculture across the UK

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	As the Covid-19 pandemic exposes the vulnerabilities of our globalised agri-food system, local sustainable food alternatives, such as community-supported agriculture (CSA), are on the rise. In CSA local farmers and households co-produce food sustainably and independently of the market. CSA's benefits and shortcomings are well-understood but we know little about how larger CSA networks can expand and consolidate the practice at scale. This paper investigates the UK CSA network, showing its ability to upscale, outscale and downscale CSA through institutionalisation, replication and politicization, before discussing the network's strategic limitations and dependencies.

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought the vulnerabilities of global supply chains into sharp focus, including in our agriculture and food (agri-food) system. In the UK, the dual impact of the pandemic and Brexit disrupted international food trade and resulted in retail shortages and growing food insecurity among the population (Food Foundation, 2021). In front of this backdrop, we witnessed a spike in demand for vegetable box schemes, as well as increasing engagement in alternative food initiatives such as community-supported agriculture (CSA) (Wheeler, 2020).

In CSA farmers and local consumers share the costs and output of agriculture, allowing them to collectively plan their food production and consumption in relative independence of markets (Hinrichs, 2000). CSA has often been characterized as part of a transformative movement for a decommodified, sustainable and democratic food system, due to its subversion of traditional producer-consumer relations in favour of community participation (Goodman and DuPuis, 2002). As such, CSA may offer prefigurative insights into what an alternative to our crisis-ridden agri-food system may look like. However, to what extent CSA lives up to such an ambition is contested, as the practice has been shown to suffer from a lack of social accessibility (Trauger and

Passidomo, 2012) and its overall economic impact remains relatively marginal (Little and Giles, 2020). While individual CSAs may well meet their social and ecological ambitions, this does not guarantee their diffusion across larger scales (Mert-Cakal and Miele, 2020). Consequently, there is a need to investigate the dynamics and effectiveness of larger CSA networks, which have formed over the past years in many countries, to assess how they contribute to expanding CSA across territories and sectors. Such networks have received surprisingly little scholarly attention, especially compared to the wealth of literature about transnational networks of food sovereignty movements or policy initiatives (Candel, 2020; Dunford, 2020; Shawki, 2015).

This article therefore investigates the characteristics, strategies and encountered challenges of CSA networks, drawing on the theoretical concept of the social and solidarity economy and literature on social movement networks. It examines the case of the 'Community Supported Agriculture' network in the UK, using a qualitative document analysis and semi-structured expert interviews with network members. The article argues that the CSA network provides crucial support in expanding and consolidating CSA in the UK through up-scaling (institutionalisation), out-scaling (replication, alliance-building) and deep-scaling (politicization), which has become further amplified in the wake of the Covid-pandemic. However, the network's material resources and political capacities remain very limited, making it highly dependent on external allies and societal trends.

The next section introduces CSA and the concepts of the solidarity economy and network building, followed by a section explaining the methodology. Afterwards, the case study is presented and analysed,

before drawing some final conclusions.

2. Conceptualising community-supported agriculture networks

The production and distribution of food are part of a foundational economy of reliance systems, which also include sectors such as health, care, housing or transport, that are instrumental for the functioning of society. Their existential importance creates certain normative implications, raising the question of how our agri-food system can guarantee the quality, social accessibility and ecological sustainability of food, while also giving citizens a degree of democratic control over it (Bentham et al., 2013). At present, our agri-food system is characterised by uneven relations of wealth and power across global supply chains, which operate in favour of large multinational retailers, industrial producers and patent holders at the expense of small farming enterprises, exploited agricultural workers and consumers at risk of food poverty (McMichael, 2009). These conditions exemplify the adverse effects of the agri-food system's liberalisation and financialisation under neoliberalism and result in a deterioration of food security and rural livelihoods. The inherent contradictions between market dynamics and the provision of foundational needs a display here have been key drivers of social struggles, making our food system an inherently contested terrain of opposing politico-economic interests and social movements.

Civil society projects that seek to challenge the dominant agri-food system by embedding the production, distribution or governance of food within more social and ecological conditions are referred to as 'alternative food networks' or 'alternative food initiatives'. These range from transactional spaces such as farmers markets to institutionalised bodies involved in urban food policy (Michel-Villarreal et al., 2019). Since the overwhelming volume and competitiveness of our agri-food system prevent small alternative food producers from mounting a major challenge, they operate mainly in economic niches, experimenting with local supply chains, organic farming and community participation (Barbera and Dagnes, 2016). Although they all contest the neoliberal food system in their own ways, only some aim to contribute to its fundamental transformation by organising food production and distribution outside the sphere of market competition and under ecologically sustainable conditions (Holloway et al., 2007). Many authors therefore argue against referring to such initiatives as uniformly 'alternative' (Renting et al., 2012). Instead, they seek to highlight particularly transformative projects that can contribute to the development of a food movement based on non-commercial, democratic and sustainable principles (Anderson et al., 2014).

2.1. Community-supported agriculture

A highly transformative type of food initiative is the practice of community-supported agriculture (CSA). CSA represents a form of collective food production and distribution in which farmers and consumers establish a local non-commercial partnership to share the costs and output of agricultural production (Hinrichs, 2000). This is intended to offer financial security to farmers by covering their investments and sharing the risks of uncertain harvests, while consumers gain access to local food from trusted sources and are often directly involved in the production process (Ostrom, 2008). By co-financing agricultural production and directly fitting food supply to consumer demand, CSA aims to remove dynamics of competition and profit-seeking from the food system, thereby offering farmers and consumers a level of independence from the market (Hinrichs, 2000). At the same time, the inherently short supply chains are considered more ecologically sustainable (Forssell and Lankoski, 2014).

CSA practices and organisational models can be rather varied. In general, consumers become long-term members of a CSA by paying a subscription fee to a farmer and in return receive weekly shares of their produce. In most cases, prices are adjustable to household size and food shares are picked up at the farm or a central collection point (Goland, 2002). Many CSAs also encourage their members to participate in the production process by volunteering on the farm (Hayden and Buck, 2012). Some types of CSA are initiated by individual farmers seeking to establish a secure consumer base, while others are run or owned by consumers themselves who then invite local farmers into their initiative (Gorman, 2018). Besides growing and distributing food, many CSAs also organize educational programmes and cultural events such as farm festivals for the purpose of engaging their communities and raising awareness of local sustainable agriculture (Hinrichs, 2000).

The literature on CSA paints a relatively consistent picture of its achievements and shortcomings, although there is some disagreement about its transformative potential. CSA is often praised for its subversion of traditional producer-consumer relations, which can enhance community self-reliance, as well as politicize people into adopting more transformative economic practices (Owen et al., 2018). By giving consumers access to healthy food and insights into its creation, CSA has been shown to improve people's diet (Allen et al., 2016) and to enhance their agricultural knowledge and environmental commitment (Hayden and Buck, 2012). Moreover, involving people in a prefigurative non-alienated labour process offers them tangible insights into possible alternatives to the capitalist market economy (Watson, 2020). CSA has also been shown to offer some financial security to small-scale and artisanal producers by shielding them against market competition (Flora and Bregendahl, 2012). However, most CSA farmers still operate on a shoe-string budget (Mert-Cakal and Miele, 2020) and many rely on additional commercial income from retail sales besides their CSAs, calling into question the practice's feasibility as a systemic alternative (Trauger and Passidomo, 2012). Indeed, despite its prefigurative nature CSA is often criticized for reproducing social hierarchies and exclusions, as members are predominantly white and well-educated members of the middle-class who possess above average economic and cultural capital (Farmer et al., 2014). Some authors therefore argue that CSA represents a lifestyle choice rather than a commitment to transformative change (Cone and Myhre, 2000), yet others point to the practice's ability to politicize and empower communities as 'bearing the seeds of a political struggle' towards greater social transformation (Goodman and DuPuis, 2002, p. 17).

Despite its shortcomings, many scholars and activists consider CSA to be a social movement capable of framing the contours of a radical alternative agri-food system (Goodman and DuPuis, 2002; Watson, 2020; Zhang and Barr, 2019). Instead of creating 'alternative markets' the practice is perceived as offering a genuinely non-commercial 'alternative *to* markets' (DiVito Wilson, 2013). However, even authors who recognize CSA's transformative potential point out that the practice struggles to reach a significant scale (Mert-Cakal and Miele, 2020). While it is not unusual for transformative food initiatives to be strongly rooted in the local scale (DiVito Wilson, 2013) their transformative potential is limited so long as they adopt a narrow and defensive stance of 'unreflexive localism' and avoid addressing their own social exclusivity (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005). Due to the foundational nature of food provision, alternative food practices need to become scalable to offer any real opportunity for transforming the food system. This is not to say that only large-scale activities are effective, but rather that a transformative strategy needs to combine the relative strengths of different activities across multiple scales (Morgan, 2010, 2020).

It is therefore crucial to investigate how larger networks can expand CSA across scales and sectors, a question that has received curiously little scholarly attention thus far. Important work on this has been done by Levkoe (2014) who characterises the close integration between CSAs and other food networks in Canada, Espelt (2020) who maps the use of online networking tools and promotion of prosumer models by CSAs around Barcelona, and Rommel et al. (2021) who explain how German CSAs share resources and capacities with each other while also drawing on third party support. Yet, these contributions primarily regard CSA networks through a lens of business models and social innovations, which does not capture their social movement nature and political

agency. By contrast, studies of many other food-related networks, such as 'La Via Campesina' (Shawki, 2015) or the 'Milan Urban Food Policy Pact' (Candel, 2020), emphasize their embeddedness in social movements, thus highlighting their capacity to diffuse transformative political discourses and develop decentralised strategies for systemic change (Mooney, 2021; Patel, 2009). Similarly, CSA networks can be regarded not only in terms of their economic exchange, but also their social activism and political advocacy, which suggests conceptualising them as part of the 'social and solidarity economy'.[1]

2.2. The social and solidarity economy and movement networks

The social and solidarity economy[2] (SSE) represents a loosely defined alternative economic model to neoliberal capitalism that seeks to democratize and socially re-embed the economy. It is based on principles of social utility and redistribution, democratic participation and collective ownership, horizontal labour relations, as well as ecological sustainability (Rossi et al., 2021), and 'values the priority of work over capital' (RIPESS, 2008, p. 4). Whereas the traditional 'social economy' consists of commercial enterprises, associations, and foundations that merely prioritise ethical purposes over profit-making, such as in the case of fair-trade businesses or charities, the SSE challenges the profit orientation of markets and the centralised authority of the state entirely by building community-based alternatives based on non-commercial economic production, distribution, and social reproduction. It also relies on mutual reciprocity and empowerment, as opposed to charity, and cultivates horizontal labour relations, democratic participation, and common ownership (Nardi, 2016). The SSE includes such practices as mutual aid networks, alternative currencies, social cooperatives, open source networks and community sharing platforms, many of which grow out of crisis contexts in an effort to secure social cohesion and build empowering alternatives (Arampatzi, 2017). Nevertheless, specific definitions and categorisations of the SSE vary between sources, as some authors place it within the third sector while others emphasize its transcendence beyond sectoral divisions (Nardi, 2016; Rossi et al., 2021).

Ever-present economic imperatives still pressure most SSE projects to generate some monetary income to pay for rent, wages and resources, which can create competitive pressures that stifle their transformative qualities (Valentinov, 2004). Whereas more incremental forms of social innovation may simply spread beyond their niche over time, concerted social and political efforts are therefore necessary to consolidate the SSE at scale (Avelino et al., 2019). SSE initiatives thus combine a socioeconomic with a political dimension (Laville, 2010) by adopting prefigurative forms of participatory democracy and engagement in social activism (Rossi et al., 2021). This enables them to not only establish place-based social innovations but also challenge societal power relations by 'opening new spaces for contestation' that serve as a material infrastructure for social movement struggles (Arampatzi, 2018, p. 730).

As various recent studies demonstrate, social movement networks play a major role in consolidating such an infrastructure, as well as in developing a collective identity and strategy for political engagement (Arampatzi, 2018; Broumas, 2018; Roussos, 2019). 'Networks', in this context, represent wider organisational frameworks with shared socio-political ambitions and a degree of collective decision-making, whose members are grassroots initiatives rather than individuals[3] (Levkoe, 2014). In contrast to hierarchical organisations or

single-purpose coalitions these networks are based on long-term horizontal and translocal collaboration, meaning they facilitate continuous mutual exchange, resource sharing and practical coordination across scales, while still responding to the specific context conditions and needs of local members, thus strengthening each within their own struggle. This applies especially to SSE networks, as they seek to replicate relations of reciprocal solidarity at the translocal level (Lahusen et al., 2018).

Not coincidentally, many SSE initiatives and networks revolve around reliance systems within the foundational economy, such as food, health, care or housing (Dash, 2016), since the existential nature of those systems is at odds with principles of profit-maximation and market competition (Bentham et al., 2013). They therefore attract a lot of activist engagement and offer a crucial political opportunity for advocating in favour of socialising and democratising economic production and distribution. Indeed, SSE-inspired food initiatives, such as food policy councils, have been noted for their remarkable ability to transcend local limitations and work towards multi-scalar transformation by developing 'a dimension of trans-local movement [and] place-based manifestations of a shared political project of societal change' (Rossi et al., 2021, p. 548). CSA evidently falls within this scope of SSE food movements due to its nature as a non-commercial and participatory alternative to both market-based food provision and food charity (Espelt, 2020).

2.3. Investigating CSA networks through an SSE-movement lens

To investigate the characteristics and achievements of CSA networks from an SSE- and social movement perspective this article incorporates a variety of elements.

As many authors demonstrate, one crucial dimension is the embeddedness of SSE movements within their *political-economic context* (Arampatzi, 2018; Ribera-Almandoz and Clua-Losada, 2020). This entails characterising the overarching conditions of the neoliberal market economy the SSE seeks to challenge while also highlighting systemic contradictions and conjunctural ruptures that can provide SSE initiatives with opportunities to raise their momentum and affect change. The article thus contextualises CSA in relation to the dominant agri-food system by comparing their respective economic performances and describing the institutional conditions affecting CSA.

A second dimension concerns the ability of SSE movements to mobilize *resources*, including finances, organisational capacities and skills (Edwards and McCarthy, 2011). Besides capturing their material volume it is necessary to characterise the mechanisms by which resources are allocated, such as network structures and decision-making processes (Miralles et al., 2017). Closely related is the need to characterise the *political claims and identities* that are also articulated and mediated through these mechanisms (Krinsky and Crossley, 2014). This encompasses the transformative ideals and values SSE movement and networks express on the basis of their members' collective discourse, which requires the reconciliation of often divergent interests and tactical proclivities (Daphi et al., 2019). Importantly, 'identity' does not imply homogeneity, nor is the latter a precondition for maintaining transformative ambitions. Indeed pluralistic movements can function quite well not just despite but *because* of their more loose identity and polycentric division of labour (Bonfert, 2021; MacFarlane, 2009). The article therefore also identifies the resources, claims and identities of CSA networks to characterise their overarching strategies.

Finally, conceptualising the *praxis* of SSE movements requires characterising their action repertoires (Tarrow and Tilly, 2015, p. 154) in terms of how they contribute to scaling the SSE beyond its niche status in order to eventually impact the dominant economic system (Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012; Signori and Forno, 2019). By 'scaling up' vertically, it can develop institutional ties to change government policy, as well as secure long-term support (Moore et al., 2015). This can improve the context conditions for SSE initiatives but also carries a risk of political

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[1] Espelt (2020) applies an SSE concept as well but focuses on CSA's embeddedness in short food supply chain systems rather than any political dimension.

[2] Sometimes only referred to as the 'solidarity economy'.

[3] Some social movement scholars have referred to such networks as 'federations' (Tarrow, 2005), while critical geographers speak of 'translocal assemblages' (MacFarlane, 2009).

co-optation, which requires SSE networks to carefully balance institutional engagement with their prefigurative ambitions (Dinerstein, 2017). The SSE can also 'scale out' horizontally by replicating its practices across territories or sectors to increase the number of people involved (Moore et al., 2015). This can involve building alliances with other organisations to further expand the SSE's political scope, action repertoires and capacities, which may, however, create relations of dependency (Laville, 2010; Nicol, 2020). Lastly, the SSE can 'scale deep' (or 'down') by forging stronger cultural and interpersonal bonds with local communities through politicization and grassroots learning (Moore et al., 2015; Ribera-Almandoz and Clua-Losada, 2020) thereby contributing to a shift in public conscious and creating lasting 'infrastructures of dissent' (Sears, 2014). The article therefore investigates how the various activities of CSA networks contribute to CSA scaling.

3. Methods

This investigation is based on a qualitative case study of the aptly named *Community* Supported *Agriculture* network in the UK, which represents the only country-wide organisation 'working solely to promote CSA' (CSA Network, 2022a). The network is generally equated with the UK CSA movement at large, which sets it apart from other agroecological networks and organisations that only partially engage with CSA, such as Social Farms and Gardens (SF&G) (Little and Giles, 2020).

The network was investigated using a combination of qualitative document analysis (Westle and Krumm, 2009), semi-structured expert interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009) and participant observation (Emerson, 1995). A total of 98 documents authored by the network were analysed using qualitative open coding, including online blog posts, published magazines and handbooks, event reports, studies and press interviews. Coding revealed the network's defining characteristics and practices and allowed their crystallization into the above analytical categories, including network composition and scope, organisational structures, claims, tactical repertoires, external collaboration, covid response and encountered challenges. Additional legal documents and official statistics by the UK and devolved governments were consulted to capture the volume and governance of the UK agri-food system. Informed by the document analysis, 5 semi-structured expert interviews were conducted with leading CSA network members and allies. These were selected to represent the various functions within the network, including the board, coordination staff, and advisors, as well as an allied policy officer from the Landworkers Alliance who also runs a CSA (Table 1).

Interviews took place between May and June 2021 and lasted around an hour on average. Questions revolved around the foundation and organisation of the network, its conception of CSA, composition and member engagement, experiences during the pandemic, as well as the interviewees' subjective assessments of the achievements and challenges related to network cooperation and expansion. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, followed by a qualitative open coding analysis along the same pattern as the document analysis, which ultimately produced a more comprehensive understanding of the network's scaling processes, identity and strategy. Finally, participant observation was conducted by visiting a meeting of CSA initiatives, hosted by SF&G in Wales in July 2021, during which field notes were produced that

Table 1
List of Interviews.

#	Respondent function	Date
R1	CSA network advisor and former board member	May 05, 2021
R2	CSA network board member and grower	May 18, 2021
R3	CSA network board member and grower	June 03, 2021
R4	Landworkers Alliance policy officer and CSA grower	June 11, 2021
R5	CSA network coordinator	June 24, 2021

captured observations about the mutual relations and discursive engagement among network members and potential newcomers.

4. Findings: community supported agriculture (UK)

The CSA network operates to expand and consolidate CSA across the UK. Launched in 2013 by the Soil Association and running independently since 2015, the network's declared objectives are to promote and support the practice of CSA in the UK by sharing resources, advice and mutual connections, raising public awareness and representing CSA interests to policy makers (CSA Network, 2018b).

4.1. CSA within the UK agri-food system

The economic volume of CSA has steadily grown since the network's formation but remains marginal in comparison to the wider UK agri-food system (Table 2).

There are an estimated 220 active CSA enterprises in the UK as of April 2021 (CSA Network, 2021b), whose geographical distribution roughly mirrors that of the wider agricultural system (CSA Network, 2022b; DEFRA, 2020). In total, CSA farms in the UK feed more than 55,000 people in 19,000 households and employ around 350 FTE worth of staff and 90 FTE of volunteers (1.6 and 0.4 per farm respectively) (CSA Network, 2021b). They hold around 550 ha of land (2.5 per CSA) and generate an estimated annual turnover of £6.7mio (£30.5k per CSA), or £8.25mio if additional income from non-CSA activities is included[4] (R5). By contrast, the UK agriculture sector (in 2019) encompasses 219,000 farms on 17.7 million hectares of agricultural land, employs 476,000 people, generates £5.3bn in total annual income and £27.3bn in gross output (DEFRA, 2020, pp. 10, 22).

This steep asymmetry is characteristic of the UK agricultural system in general. Farm holdings under 20 ha make up half of all farms but only hold 4% of agricultural land (DEFRA, 2020, p. 20). Data on agricultural output in Wales shows that the 3% largest and most affluent farms generate almost exactly as much economic output as the lower 50% (Welsh Government, 2021, p. 10). This concentration of land and economic volume has been reproduced through the EU's direct payment system, which awards subsidies according to land size, resulting in farms with the highest regular income also receiving the highest payments. Moreover, agricultural holdings under 5 ha are entirely ineligible for direct payments in the UK (DEFRA, 2018). Most small organic farms therefore never receive any such institutional support, which includes around 95% of CSAs (CSA Network, 2021b).

However, while the volume of CSA is marginal, its effectiveness and economic contribution relative to land size greatly outperforms the general agricultural system. Based on the above data, the UK agricultural sector employs only 0.03 people per hectare of land, whereas CSAs employ 0.64. The same applies to productivity, as the agricultural system generates around £300 of income and £1500 of output per hectare,

Table 2
CSA and UK agrifood system.

	CSA	UK Agrifood system
Enterprises	220 CSAs	219,000 farms
Land use	550 Ha	17.7 million Ha
Employment	350 FTE	476,000 FTE
Turnover	£6.7 million	£5.3 billion
Performance per Ha	0.6 employees, 12,200£ income	0.03 employees, £300 income

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[4] The average UK CSA thus generates 81.3% of its income from member subscriptions and the rest from commercial off-farm sales, although individual rates vary considerably.

while CSA generates £12,200 in member contributions alone.

CSA's high productivity, combined with its guaranteed consumer demand and reliance on volunteer labour, makes it extraordinarily crisis-resilient. This became evident over the course of 2020 when the UK's agri-food system turned increasingly volatile, while CSA and other alternative food initiatives experienced a significant surge in demand. The impact of the pandemic on international supply chains reduced annual food and drink exports from the UK by 9.7% (FDEA, 2021), followed by another sudden fall in food trade with the EU in early 2021 due to Brexit (ONS, 2021). During lockdown, retail shortages and income losses led to a drastic increase in food insecurity, especially among low-income households (Food Foundation, 2021).

At the same time, subscriptions for food box schemes doubled, while CSAs developed long waiting lists for new members. Due to CSA's inflexible production cycle this only resulted in a 14% increase of production output in the first few months of the pandemic (Wheeler, 2020), yet there was considerable demand for setting up new CSA initiatives and transforming traditional farming operations into CSAs. As a network coordinator explains:

> Some [CSAs] did increase supply by buying in from local other growers who were supplying the restaurant market, which collapsed, and then they repurposed that into additional CSA shares. And some CSAs started a season earlier than they had been planning to, or started with 50 shares, not 20, because there was such a massive demand. (R5)

Another network board member and grower constitutes that the pandemic represented a major boost to CSA:

> It was a big bonus. I mean we've had a huge amount of interest. We've already had a waiting list, but our waiting list went really big. We were just in the process of supporting one of our trainees to set up another CSA just a few miles down the road from us and she had huge interest and has now got her own waiting list. So demand has gone up massively. (R2)

Since most CSAs are not interested in growing beyond a certain size, this spike in demand resulted in a rapid horizontal replication of CSA as an economic practice. This is reflected by the size of the national CSA network, which grew from 89 local member initiatives in March 2020 to over 150 a year later, greatly accelerating its previous growth rate (Fig. 1).

The dual impact of the pandemic and Brexit therefore created an important opportunity for CSA to expand as a movement, rather than merely raising the income of already existing initiatives. In this context, the CSA network played a key role in providing new starters with advice and support, as is explained in the following sections.

4.2. The CSA network – structure and resources

After being a relatively informal alliance that was created and run by the Soil Association in 2013, the CSA network eventually became a more independent organisation with a paid coordinator in 2015 (CSA Network, 2018b). Its structural consolidation was further amplified during the pandemic, as the network increased its coordinating staff from one person to three (R5). Fig. 2 illustrates the network's

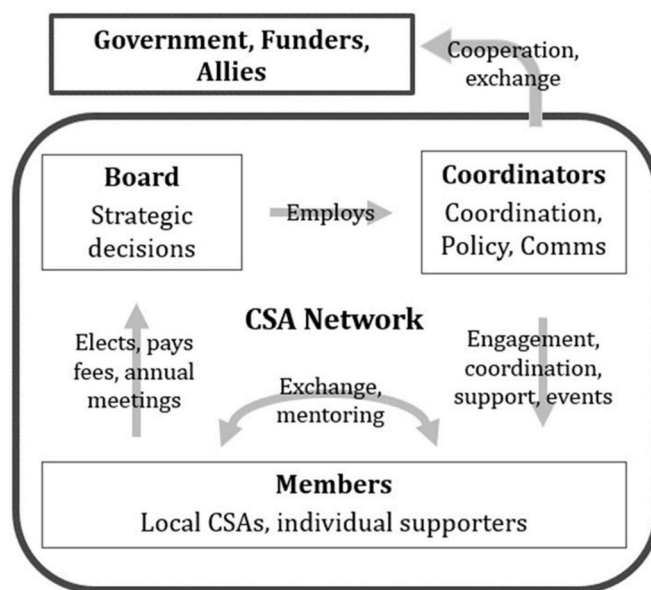**Fig. 1.** Growth of the CSA network (CSA Network, 2021b).

Fig. 2. CSA network organisational structure.

organisational structure.

Coordinators run the network's day-to-day operations, from organising networking events, to coordinating mentoring activities, overseeing the promotion of CSA in the media, facilitating network communication and budget management, as well as maintaining the membership database and recruiting new volunteers (R5). Strategic decisions are made by an elected board, which also produces much of the network's written output. Most of the ten board members are or were CSA growers themselves and many are also active in other agroecological organisations, thereby creating opportunities for external collaboration (CSA Network, 2021d).

Nevertheless, the CSA network is still a relatively small operation with lower material resources than other agroecological organisations. It is financed primarily through external grant funding and, to a lesser extent, membership fees (CSA Network, 2017b). As in the case of many civil society organisations, this makes the network's financial stability inherently insecure by forcing it to constantly apply for new funding. This situation ultimately limits the network's range of practical activities, as it prevents the hiring of additional staff, commissioning of research and engagement in more policy work, which in turn discourages it from raising its membership fees to a level necessary for self-reliance (R1). The result is a catch-22 situation in which the network's limited range of activities and ability to attract financial support mutually reinforce each other:

> It's kind of tricky, because the CSA network could do a lot more if there were more resources available particularly to hire more members of staff. Then you could do that kind of more policy work and justify maybe charging a higher price, but how do you get there in the first place? (R1)

Due to the very time- and labour-intensive work on CSA farms the network also cannot easily draw on the voluntary engagement of local members:

> I think generally we haven't had much success I think because a lot of our members are also volunteers and probably volunteering on the board of their CSA. Most of them probably then don't have additional time to get involved in the network too. It's always a challenge. (R3)

Hence, despite the participatory nature of the network's meetings and activities, bottom-up engagement by grassroots members is quite low, which underlines its need for paid employees. Members generally

prefer engaging in close collaboration on a more decentralised basis, which the network helps facilitate by organising regional networking events in areas like Scotland or North-England to encourage participants to build lasting mutual relationships (R1). To that end, the network also provides a national map and contact details of all local CSA initiatives on its website (CSA Network, 2022b), which members often cite as one of its most valuable resources (R1). Welsh members have taken the idea of regional organising the furthest and established an official sub-network in 2015, drafting their own statutes and holding regular meetings. At the time of this writing, however, the Wales CSA network has been dormant for a while and efforts are in progress to reinitiate it with the help of SF&G (R2).

Above all, the network's relative lack of material resources highlights its dependence on beneficial external conditions, such as public attention and the support of external allies. In that sense, the spike in CSA demand during the pandemic has been crucial for strengthening the network's symbolic position and structural capacities. While this momentum has already started to subside (R4), there is reason to assume that CSA will continue to expand and consolidate across the UK, albeit at a slower pace. On an individual level, the longer-term commitment of CSAs compared to commercial box schemes protects them against quickly losing new supporters. More fundamentally, interest in CSA was already growing prior to Covid and despite the gradual return to pre-pandemic normality there are still ongoing disruptions to the retail system (Topham, 2021), which keep the volatility of global supply chains fresh in people's minds.

Members of the CSA network expect the ongoing climate crisis to further intensify these conditions of food insecurity and social instability, which in turn also makes the need for a more sustainable and crisis-resilient food system more pressing. In this context, the network is considered crucial for providing people with the necessary guidance to transition towards CSA (R3). Thus, despite its limitations, members consider the CSA network a successful operation, whose continued existence is seen as an important achievement in itself and whose function as a central collective space, knowledge repository and political representative is indispensable for supporting the otherwise highly localised and short-lived CSA initiatives (R1).

4.3. A cohesive vision for CSA?

The CSA network operates on an inclusive definition of CSA that is intended to accommodate the full range of organisational types and ownership models operating in the UK. In its charter the network defines CSA as 'any food, fuel or fibre producing initiative where the community shares the responsibilities, risks and rewards of production in a spirit of mutual trust and openness. This may be through ownership, investment, sharing the costs of production, or provision of labour' (CSA Network, 2020b). Network members represent a wide range of CSA types that can be roughly grouped into producer-run operations, where farmers offer a share of their production to subscribers, and community-run initiatives, in which members collectively manage (and sometimes co-own) the whole production site. Two thirds of network members identify as the former, one third as the latter (R5). Formally, most CSAs are run as either community interest companies or cooperatives, while a small number are registered as charities, limited companies or sole traders (CSA Network, 2018a). The vast majority of members produce horticulture while upwards of 30% also offer meat or other animal products and a handful of members produce timber, flowers or wool instead of food (R1).

Instead of promoting any specific production or ownership model the network actively embraces and reproduces this plurality. It does not evaluate members based on their social or ecological ambitions but treats them as equally valid parts of a collective movement that is itself considered transformative. As one member explains:

We took a very broad approach and said if people identified with CSA then that's fine. We're not going to police that term. If people want to identify as a CSA, if that model is useful to them for doing what they want to do then that's great. […] It's whatever works in your local community, that's the whole point. (R1)

From a strictly non-commercial SSE perspective (Nardi, 2016), this pluralism may be accused of obfuscating the level of decommodification and sustainability CSA is able to achieve, thereby running the risk of diluting its socially transformative qualities. Indeed, some network members are 'merely' commercial farms that also run CSA schemes on the side (R4). However, considering that less than a fifth of all members' income comes from non-CSA sales, despite a large majority of them being producer-run operations (R5), co-optation by commercial operations does not seem to be a major concern at this stage. The network's approach is also far from being apolitical, as notions of community self-determination and autonomy are consistent with the more left-libertarian values of CSA:

For me the whole basis of CSA is about building relationships, building community around the food, the field where you are, the community around that. Fundamentally it's about building all those networks and making them all really strong and connecting a really strong local food community. And then once that is kind of well-established, then there's also building on these wider links nationally. (R2)

Hence, the network consciously forgoes developing a more convergent political identity in favour of being accessible to new entrants. Instead of formulating a grand strategy or detailed political statutes it expresses a general commitment towards agriculture that provides a fair and steady income to producers, uses ecological farming to enhance biodiversity and shares healthy, local and sustainable produce among communities (CSA Network, 2020b). Many network members are dedicated to more far-reaching socially redistributive ambitions, such as the notion of food sovereignty, but they consider these themes too abstract and difficult to communicate to be used in CSAs' public engagement (R4). According to various network representatives and internal surveys, CSA participants in the UK also tend to be motivated by ecological ideals rather than socio-economic or redistributive considerations (Bossano, 2018; Little and Giles, 2020; R1), which underlines the tactical utility of framing CSA around questions of environmental sustainability. Over the course of the pandemic, however, the network has become more explicit and proactive in its political discourse and activities, which is discussed in the following sections.

4.4. A CSA in every town – scaling out and scaling deep

The CSA network aims to expand and consolidate CSA as a viable economic practice by providing advice, mentoring and guidance for the purpose of building local capacity. At the same time, it also raises political awareness and provides education about the food system and climate issues among existing and potential supporters within the community. This represents a combination of scaling out and scaling deep that is characteristic of the dual socio-economic and socio-political nature of the SSE. It is also an inherently horizontal and translocal approach, as there is a shared understanding among the network that CSA is inherently embedded in local social relations and should be replicated across society rather than inflated or professionalised through individual business expansion. As one member explains:

It's about being non-competitive and just saying: 'We're just going to get to a scale where we're secure and we generate an income and beyond that we won't produce any more, but we'll just support other people to set up.' (R2)

This position highlights the network's ability to move beyond unreflexive localism and towards integrating the local nature of CSA

within a trans-scalar long-term strategy. While it does not articulate the specifics of this strategy, it expresses the overarching aim to diffuse CSA across society. The ambition is not to replace the dominant agri-food system entirely, but to at least make the benefits of CSA accessible to everyone:

> What we'd like is a CSA in every town or in every place so effectively everyone who's interested in being a member of a CSA can find one near enough for them. That's where we'd like to go. If we can continue the existing growth we might get there. (R3)

> We don't imagine that CSA will feed everyone all the time of course, but as part of a food ecosystem that is all sustainable and agroecological CSA definitely has a really important role in bridging the kind of farmer-citizen space. (R5).

The network helps facilitate the expansion and consolidation of CSA by supporting existing and prospective initiatives and promoting the model in public. It runs two mentoring programmes through which members can either receive individual advice from more experienced CSAs or meet in larger self-supporting groups (R3). It also published an extensive 'A-Z' handbook for starting a CSA, which offers advice on a wide range of activities and potential difficulties, from gaining access to funding to planning out annual production cycles and keeping members engaged. Some of the network's more well-established members offer their own on-site traineeships to teach young farmers the skills to run their own CSA (CSA Network, 2018a), effectively providing self-organised vocational training in the absence of sufficient public education. In that sense, the network contributes to CSA's translocal empowerment, which helps members cope with their limited individual growth rates and inflexible production cycles.

The network also organises public events for CSA members and interested outsiders, inviting them to farm visits to listen to experts and share knowledge. This gives members the opportunity to enter into mutual exchange and discuss good practices, while also raising awareness of the benefits of CSA among non-members (CSA Network, 2016). Further information is shared on the network's website, most notably calls for funding applications and opportunities to acquire land (CSA Network, 2015, 2020c). Thus, for the most part, the network's advice is strictly business-oriented, addressing practical rather than political questions.

> Network is really a nice way of describing it because that's what it was, it was networking these very hyperlocal organisations together in a way that allowed that kind of flow and movement of knowledge and experiences. (R1)

In addition to these praxis-oriented activities the network organises cultural events, such as open-farm days, during which CSA farms across the UK invite their local communities to visit and engage in social activities, cook and eat together and learn about CSA and agroecology (CSA Network, 2017a). These events enable CSAs to build stronger ties to their communities and potentially gain additional participants, while also educating people politically. Many of these activities are done in collaboration with external partners such as the LWA, Soil Association and Organic Growers Alliance, which co-organize events and publications (CSA Network, 2017b) and help secure land for small-scale farmers, including CSAs (R4). Other organisations like the Food Foundation or Kindling Trust provide research and funding opportunities that the CSAnetwork and its members regularly draw on (Little and Giles, 2020; Wheeler, 2020). In Wales the network also collaborates closely with SF&G, which shares some of its funding with CSAs (R2).

During the pandemic the CSA network intensified many of its activities and partnerships. It connected members to various Covid-relief and funding resources, shared advice on food hygiene and work safety precautions, and encouraged members to make their food more accessible for low-income or at-risk households, or else donate any surplus to food banks (CSA Network, 2020a). Since the closure of hospitality venues during lockdown cut off important income streams for many small-scale producers, the network aided those producers in converting

their operations to CSAs (R3). It also spent the lockdown period engaging more extensively in online networking and hosting numerous events in collaboration with old and new allies:

> As far as networking goes, in some sense for the network it's also been really good, because so much has moved online. So actually, we're having a lot more networking meetings nationally and internationally. (R2)

This has also resulted in a notable intensification of the network's efforts to politicize, as its many new web seminars now tackled themes of food poverty, cooperative economic models, and struggles against racism in farming. It also invited prominent food sovereignty activists like Vandana Shiva to speak about the need for radical systemic change (CSA Network, 2020a), thereby focusing explicitly on the potentially anti-capitalist nature of CSA.

At the same time, the CSA network's external collaboration has remained tied to other agroecological organisations and there has been little cross-sectoral engagement as seen among SSE networks in other countries (Arampatzi, 2018). Only some individual members engage in more multifaceted SSE projects, such as Cae Tan in Wales, which collaborates with local schools on agricultural education, or Stroud Community Agriculture which has been involved in the Transition Towns movement (R1). Given the CSA network's occasional collaboration with SF&G, which combines agricultural and care practices (Social Farms and Gardens, 2021), there are evidently some untapped opportunities to scale out CSA across a wider range of sectors, especially in the foundational economy, which members themselves are aware of:

> We haven't really had the capacity to properly explore that. But there's got to be links with that. And I think as people become disillusioned with corporate ownership and all of that I think these things will start to become more attractive (R3)

Indeed, many members are in favour of more collaboration with external partners, both at the national level where they hope to share the cause of CSA among a wider range of organisations (R2) and transnationally, where CSA coalitions like Urgenci offer opportunities for engaging in mutual exchange and developing new ideas (R1).

4.5. Policy as a goal – scaling up

An area where collaboration has been instrumental for the CSA network is that of institutional upscaling through policy advocacy. Until very recently, the network did not have the capacity to engage in policy consultations on its own and had to rely on collaboration partners, such as the LWA, to incorporate CSA in their own work (R3). Yet, starting in 2021 the CSA network has demonstrated a strategic shift towards more independent policy work by appointing a policy coordinator who advised members to contact their local councillors and directly question them on their support for CSA during council elections (CSA Network, 2021c). This has partly been in response to the ongoing overhaul of UK agriculture policy in the wake of Brexit, in which the network has recognized an opportunity to finally bring CSA on the agenda of policy makers:

> We always had policy as a goal. […] And I guess the agricultural transition is just calling out for as much input as possible. (R5)

> We're hoping that with the current interest we'll be able to get more funding to expand that area of work. But there's no question that there's a lack of understanding at most levels of government as to the opportunities and potential for CSA. […] There's lots of opportunities where a holistic approach of CSA can benefit communities and society. (R3)

To make this case, the network addressed a policy briefing to the UK's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, urging it to recognize CSA's numerous social, environmental and health benefits and ensure CSA initiatives would have access to all available loans, grants and support schemes by removing the 5 ha minimum barrier for

subsidies (CSA Network, 2021a). Although it is too early to speculate on any tangible policy impacts, network members consider it an important milestone to have at least raised awareness of CSA among policy makers and other stakeholders, who had not heard of the practice before (R3). The network's articulation of common national policy demands is also a significant move towards bridging the decentralisation and diversity among CSAs in a more explicitly political fashion, which may strengthen their collective identity. Importantly, the network does not necessarily want CSA to become heavily subsidized for its own sake, but rather as a way to overcome the practice's limited social accessibility:

> It would be nice to have some recognition and opportunities for funding but in a way one of the beauties of the CSA model is it is sustainable. I think the challenge is where it's still quite difficult for people on low income to access CSA. […] So that might be an area where support from government would be really helpful to allow people from lower incomes to access the benefits of CSA. (R3)

The network also recognizes that subsidies alone would not constitute a real solution, since the limited accessibility of CSA is not only a result of higher pricing but of structural inequalities and a general lack of nutritional knowledge within society, all of which require more far-reaching political interventions:

> I think that the challenge is actually a lot deeper than just the cost of the produce. It's about even access to fresh food, cooking skills, knowing that it exists, people being embarrassed about asking for a free share when they can't afford it. […] So I think in a way there's some bigger challenges around access to good local food, which is almost certainly beyond what we can tackle as a network. Although we can highlight the issues. (R3)

At this stage, it remains ambiguous how and to what extent the CSA network may contribute to these wider structural changes its members hope to see. Somewhat surprisingly, while some individual CSAs are engaged in pilot projects around dynamic public procurement, the network board does not consider this a significant opportunity for CSA at large, arguing that most local initiatives are not interested in supplying larger operations (R3). While this assessment may well be accurate, it raises the question of how CSA can explore new opportunities for accelerating its own expansion beyond awareness raising, lest it remain entirely subject to external societal trends. As the movement and network continue to grow and acquire further capacities, this question will most likely become increasingly relevant as well.

5. Conclusions

CSA is unlikely to outgrow its niche position in the UK agri-food system any time soon, especially if the recent surge in demand subsides again. However, while pandemic-related disruptions to food provision have passed, grain shortages and price spikes due to the war in Ukraine continue exacerbating the food system's volatility. In combination with people's growing concerns over climate change, these conditions may well push CSA towards becoming a much more widely recognized practice across civil society over the coming years.

While demand in CSA is highly conjunctural, its practical expansion and consolidation during the pandemic have been significantly influenced by the efforts of the CSA network. By organising activities around mutual exchange, mentoring, awareness raising and policy advocacy, the network contributes to CSA up-scaling, out-scaling and deep-scaling across society. It displays the dual socio-economic and socio-political qualities characteristic of an SSE movement by simultaneously building alternative economic infrastructures and creating spaces for social activism. The network thus empowers its members not only by strengthening them individually but also by working to secure institutional support for CSA to make the practice more socially accessible.

At the same time, due to CSA's still marginal economic position and the low levels of bottom-up engagement in the network, it remains highly dependent on external allies and societal trends. This incentivizes the network to frame CSA in inclusive and non-challenging terms and refrain from promoting any specific business models. From an SSE perspective, this holds the risk of diluting CSA's non-commercial and ecological ambitions, yet it also pragmatically reflects the pluralism and decentralised local autonomy of actors across the CSA movement. As the network develops into a more consolidated civil society actor, it will have to be seen whether its members eventually require more definitive guidance in regard to what scale, business practices and socio-ecological ambitions are required to identify as CSA.

Finally, through collaboration with external allies the CSA network contributes to integrating CSA within a wider social movement around food system transformation. This integration is crucial because CSA actors do not have the capacities to mount an autonomous challenge against the dominant agri-food system. While CSA can serve as a pre-figurative vision for how relations between producers and consumers can be reorganised, CSA networks are unlikely to facilitate that reorganisation on their own – nor do they aspire to do so. Instead, they are better placed to join larger coalitions that include institutional actors, environmental and labour movements, as well as other SSE networks to mobilize a more holistic transformation of the agrifood system and perhaps foundational economy at large. Indeed, looking at countries such as France or Italy we can see practices similar to CSA that managed to spawn thousands of local initiatives over relatively short periods because they had the advantage of being embedded within more prominent and dynamic SSE movements (Urgenci et al., 2013; Forno et al., 2015). The UK CSA network appears willing to replicate such strategies, yet practical efforts in that regard are still only experimental.

Investigating the CSA network through an SSE movement lens has proven highly advantageous for characterising and discussing its context conditions, structure, politics and scalar praxis. Further research can thus continue along this trajectory to reveal and contrast other CSA and SSE strategies and hopefully yield new insights into how alternative economic practices can be expanded and consolidated to facilitate more far-reaching socio-ecological transformations.

Credit author statement

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