A Glimpse into CSA Cresco: Cultivating Food for Broader Transformative Change in Mountain Territories

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1   Cresco is a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) project in Varaita Valley, a mountain area in the South-Western part of Piedmont (Italy). The project started in 2021, in the midst of the Corona pandemic and it was born from the collaboration between Lorenzo and Pietro. Neither of them had much farming experience before. Initially, Lorenzo worked as a web designer in Turin to only later change to work as a chef and then as a farmer in 2017. Pietro, in the meantime, was studying Environmental Studies at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences where he first got to know about CSA as a model. In 2020, after obtaining his master's degree, Pietro moved to Valley Varaita in search of an occupation. There, he met Lorenzo. From the encounter of these two seemingly different life stories, the first CSA of Varaita Valley was soon to be born. Despite its relative young age, the CSA has already found its own place within the socio-economic life of the valley. In 2021, Cresco had 75 members who, a year later, grew up to 84. By members, they refer to "private individuals, families as well as local restaurants and bars" who decided to be part and purchase a "share."

2   The CSA is a socio-economic model that aims at creating a direct relationship between food producers and consumers, ruling out intermediaries and shortening the supply chain. It started in the USA in the second half of the 1980s and then spread across the world. Whilst there is no standard format, CSAs usually consist of an agreement between local producers and local consumers for the production and distribution of food in a certain area. At the core of CSAs, and this is true for Cresco, too, is the idea of connecting a community of people living in a territory with local farmers. As the name suggests, the community supports the agricultural activities by covering the costs of production and providing an income to the workers. In the case of Cresco—but it is true

more generally—, this happens through a financing system where, at the beginning of the year, members purchase a "share" of anticipated yield at an agreed price to cover the forecasted costs of production. Lorenzo and Pietro suggest a price-per-share to cover all the costs but people can offer to pay more or less than that, depending on their financial capabilities. "This way" they tell me in one of our interviews, "we keep healthy and local food accessible to everyone who wants to take part in the project." The anticipated purchases allow Pietro and Lorenzo to have some liquidity to cover up the initial costs to set up the productive activities. Every week and for the entire production season, CSA members get a box of vegetables of varying size depending on the share they purchased. The community further supports the two farmers by accepting to share risks (as well as benefits) of production. In an age of climate and ecological crisis, this practice is of great help to ensure economic sustainability of small-scale enterprises in mountain territories (and not only). As put it by Pietro in one of our interviews:

> Say, we have hailed destroying our yield, we (the farmers) are not alone in shouldering the costs of such an event. The risk is shared by every member of the CSA. In case of yield loss, the cost is not divided by only the two of us, but by 80 members. Trust me, this makes a big deal of a difference. At the same time, if we produce more than expected, the surplus is equally shared among the members without any extra cost.

3   Ensuring the economic sustainability of a project like that of Cresco is not an easy feat, also considering that governmental subsidies can hardly apply to small mountain farming enterprises like that of Lorenzo and Pietro (farming over less than 1 hectare). To be sure, making enough money to make ends meet at the end of the month is one of their biggest challenges. Practices such as pre-financing, shared risk responsibility and flexible shares' costs can surely help with this but, at least in the case of Cresco, still provide too-thin margins to make this initiative economically solid.

4   While making ends meet is clearly important, Lorenzo and Pietro are pushing for a different economic model where "economic solidity" doesn't necessarily mean to generate increasing profit margins. Pietro explained that what they work towards is:

> An alternative economic model, based on different principles from traditional market economies wherein I simply produce a commodity, I sell it to you and I take your money. We are attempting to show that a different way of doing economy exists. This project has a transformative potential when it comes to re-imagining the economy.

5   The transformative potential lies in the possibility to imagine practices of food production, distribution and consumption that resonate more broadly with other fundamental values such as solidarity, good quality of life, care for people and community, care for the soil, the mountain.

6   When it comes to production techniques, Cresco is inspired by principles of agroecology and, to less extent, permaculture. Pietro and Lorenzo strive to maintain a healthy and biodiversity-rich ecosystem, to create little-to-zero food waste and they don't use any chemical input. Their general idea of what agriculture should be is quite neatly captured in the way Lorenzo described to me the way they care for the soil:

> I care for the soil and for this land to always have it fertile and to allow those who will come after us to still work and make use of it. Surely, we could get higher yields from this land. However, the most important thing is not to destroy the land. Firstly, for the future. Secondly, if we destroy it, what can we possibly farm? We would die, too. We know what we don't want to use chemical inputs in our

agriculture and so we rather work the land a bit less to make it resilient in the years. If you know how to manage the reproduction of the ecosystem and to keep the environment "alive", production will come almost naturally.

7   Cresco's agriculture could then be described as a set of practices geared not only to the production of food but also to the care and the maintenance of land. In fact, working the land and growing veggies are one way for Pietro and Lorenzo to revitalize the mountain territory.

8   Care is not only directed to nature but also to the people. Creating a community is an essential goal for Cresco. As mentioned above, community is essential for Cresco's economic sustainability. However, its value is much deeper than that, as Lorenzo explained to me:

for two years, before starting the CSA, I was farming alone. It's tough. I suffered of loneliness and I was almost burned out. If it's two of you, you share responsibilities and when one feels down, one can support the other. However, I realize that when I am in the field with whoever wants to come and work, learn, understand, for even five minutes ... to me, this gives a meaning to my actions. [...]. People give meaning to my work and to myself, too. Happiness is true only when shared.

9   Working and being together with people is a way to get to happiness for Lorenzo. It is also a way to construct solidarity and connectedness among and between people living in a valley that is increasingly abandoned and that struggles to offer fundamental services (schooling and hospitals are two widely-discussed topics in the valley) to the population. As I was told by two CSA members during the last assembly (October 2022):

I initially joined the CSA to access ethically-sound and healthy food. Soon, however, I realized that the CSA created spaces and chances of meeting people who share different values.
[Answering the question: what does the CSA do for the territory and community?]
The CSA creates a solidarity network, community, culture, it cares for the territory, it protects it and it makes it a livable place.

10   Thanks to the help of active CSA members, social events are thus organized year-round, ranging from movies screening to collective lunches, days of collective work at the farm, yoga lessons, educational activities for local schools and so forth. Collective decisions are also taken on food production, distribution and consumption within Cresco. Every year, Pietro and Lorenzo organize two CSA assemblies where members are asked to comment on the food they received in their boxes (or would like to receive): if they liked it or not, if they would like more of that vegetable or less of that one and so forth. At the last assembly in October, people asked Pietro and Lorenzo how they farm, if they could grow other types of salads, if last summer heat wave impacted production, how to best conserve their veggies, and other questions of this type. Assemblies are moments of knowledge exchange and curiosity where food-related topics become part of broader discussions on the way we treat our planet and ourselves. To be sure, most people are still reluctant to take an active role in such decisions and, in Pietro and Lorenzo's words, much work has to still be done in this sense.

11   A final important point that I want to make is that Cresco is not doing all of this by itself. Its strength is to be found also in the way it is embedded in the buzzing network of local enterprises that, more or less, share the common goal of revitalizing the valley, caring for the community and for the mountain. With several other local enterprises (ranging from wine producers, shepherds, bars, restaurants and other farmers), Cresco

is developing a network of actors who are willing to share labour, resources and spaces to achieve the common goal of creating a socio-economic space for them and others to survive and thrive. A result of this collaboration is that Cresco is sharing some fields with another local enterprise to collectively produce rye and potatoes. Another example is that Cresco bought a seed-planting machine sharing the costs with several other enterprises. Mutual support, resources and labour sharing, trust and friendships between actors in the valley are essential in supporting these initiatives, particularly at a time of rising energy and material costs. Most of these enterprises have been struggling to make ends meet after two years of COVID pandemic and an ongoing climatic, ecological and energetic crisis. Clearly, more structural interventions in the way fundings work and mountain territories are governed seem to be needed to ensure their sustainability through time. At the same time, however, knowing that a broader support network among enterprises and a community exist seems to be of great help to all of them. To borrow the name of one of these enterprises (Antagonisti), I like to think of this network as a group of "antagonists", that is those people who actively made a choice to live in the mountain, to not abandon the territory, to care for it and for the people who inhabit it.

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