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Alternative Development on the Organic Sector Horizon Community Supported Agriculture in Hungary

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Abstract

In this paper we first introduce Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) as an emerging international movement and special form of direct marketing. We then describe the major characteristics of the farm enterprises following CSA practices in Hungary, define two different emerging models, and provide qualitative and quantitative analysis using descriptive statistics. In the 'Share' model, members pay in advance, commit for several months or the entire season and payment is not for the actual produce but considered as membership fee. In the 'Vegetable box' model where there is no signed commitment between producer and consumer, or any verbally agreed on membership. Using interviews, participant observation and data from stakeholder meetings, the paper evaluates Hungarian CSA farms as successful, small-scale mixed horticultural enterprises following organic production practices with innovative communication channels. The CSA segment is very new in the country. Time is needed for the ongoing enterprises to develop routines and for new CSA farms to emerge in order to conduct further investigation providing a more robust country description.

Introduction

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) gained increasing attention and experienced rapid growth in the US and Western Europe over the past 25 years as a special form of direct marketing where producers and consumers form a connection based on mutual trust, openness, shared risk and shared rewards. This arrangement can be good for the producers as they develop a direct and long-term relationship with their consumers, and can possibly concentrate their efforts on growing high-quality produce. CSA can be good for consumers who may become members of the farm as they can be sure of where their food is coming from and can get to know more about how it has been produced. CSA can also be good for the environment, because when producers and consumers of food get together they realize that food security is assured when farming methods are environmentally sound (Vadovics and Hayes 2010).

Material and methods

Literature review, analysis of secondary data and policy documents provided the foundation for the research. The field component of the study employed participant observations and in-depth interviews with all the farmers managing farmer-led Hungarian CSA farms in the year we collected our data. In 2012 we found 10 CSA operations in Hungary, so our study extended to all stakeholders of the segment. Because of the very small sample size we did not use statistical methods for our analyses.

Results and Discussion

Basic characteristics of CSA farms

All of the Hungarian operations are new in terms of their CSA trade. The "oldest," started in 2010 and three farms just began in 2013, so all have started in the last few years. These CSAs have been operating for 2.5 years on average. Three of the ten operations started using CSA practices from inception. Two experienced organic farmers had long-term experience in "CSA-like" programs prior to the start of their current enterprises. Each studied farm employs ecological production practices and seven of the ten (70%) are organically certified. The area of cropland under production for the farms ranges from 0.2 ha at the smallest to 10 ha for the largest. In the share-model systems where production is only distributed to shareholders, most of the farmland is used for vegetable production. The average current membership/number of box deliveries was 38 (N=10) as of March 2013 and ranges from five to 80. For all of the initiatives having at least

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one year of history, most of members/frequent customers have continued and most operations show an increase in membership.

Typology

From the CSAs in Table 1. five are producer-led (50%), there are three producer-community partnerships (30%) and two are managed by non-governmental organizations (an association and a non-profit company). In these latter cases neither the growers nor the members play an active role in the design, implementation and management of the scheme, the major duties are done by the management of the organization. Five of the ten (50%) initiatives described follow the 'Share model', three (30%) follow the 'Vegetable box scheme model' and two initiatives are too new to provide data on marketing practices. The five initiatives in the first category obtain their farm income either solely or primarily from CSA.

In the Hungarian implementation of the '*Share model*', members pay in advance (prior months, half season or season), payment is not for the produce but considered as membership fee, there is mutually signed contract, which presumes a season or half-season long commitment. For the '*Share model*' farms, CSA is the only product outlet and the weekly boxes are standardized with no or minimal option to fulfil individual desires through customization. In the '*Vegetable box model*', there is no signed commitment between producer and consumer, nor any ratified or verbally agreed on membership. The boxes may or may not be standardized, individual orders may be met and the operation has other market outlets (farmers' market, home delivery service, etc.)

Operation/ Initiative Name	Start Year	Type	Initiator & Management	Crop- land (ha)	Pick Up Points Location	Trans- portation distance of shares (km)	share no.
Évkerék Ökotanya	2011	Share Model	Producer	7	Szeged, Budapest deliveries discontinue d	38	50
Biokert	2011	Share Model	Producer	5	Göd, Pomáz, Budapest	19	60
Szeles Kert	2011	Box scheme	community- producer partnership	7	Miskolc	47	26
Három Kaptár	2011	Share Model	Producer	1,5	Vác, Szentendre Budapest	16	80
Naspolya Farm	2012	Box scheme	community- producer partnership	4	Budapest	53	25-30
Öko-társulás	2010	Share Model	Non-profit	10	Budapest	100	60
Privát Leccsó	2012	Share Model	Non-profit	1,5	Budapest	75	25-35
Organikus Ökosziget	2013	?	Producer	1,25	Budapest	40	20
Czina-Payr Farm	2013	?	Producer	0,2	Mosonma- gyaróvár	12	5
Birs Közösség	2013	Box scheme	community- producer partnership	3	Budapest	116	23

Table 1. Basic data on CSA operations identified as of Spring 2013

Distinctive characteristics of CSA farmers

We compared and analysed the management practices of Hungarian CSAs based on typical success factors following literature on small farm success (Gilbert et al. 2003; Oberholtzer 2004). According to our analysis, CSA practices in Hungary include a number of strategies that create small farm success. All Hungarian CSAs produce mainly or solely a high diversity of high value specialty crops which they market entirely at the local or regional level. They all adapted to local conditions in terms of their marketing and engagement approach to their customer. The farmers have an open and inclusive attitude and tend to be enthusiastic and active in experimentation and building relationships with other stakeholders of their local or regional food web. All of them are committed to farming and consider it a lifestyle they highly appreciate. Hungarian CSA farmers are innovative when implementing CSA models in the country, use novel communication channels and develop communication methods which were not used before among Hungarian producers to reach out to their consumer base.

Conclusions

The demand for locally grown organic produce in urban areas reveals concerns for local, small scale organic agriculture, farmland preservation, and open space (Jarosz 2000), and can fuel the already started transformation of the food system in Hungary. All studied CSA operations have increasing numbers of customers or members, and since the demand for locally produced food is new and anticipated to increase as more sustainable consumption routines emerge, expansion of the CSA sector seems likely in the country. Although the Hungarian CSA sector is small in size, it proves to be a notable agency to popularize alternative food networks. The result of the study confirmed that CSA can be identified as a successful rural business strategy for innovative organic farmers and has transformative potential for food-system localization, providing decent livelihood, good care of natural resources and strengthening, and social cohesion within the rural-urban interfaces.

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