



# Community-Supported Agriculture as an Alternative Way of Enhancing Local Economy<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** The article presents a rural development initiative, which in synergy with other similar programmes contributes to enhancing local economy. The study contains seven chapters. The introduction offers an image of the context of initiatives, and after that the article presents the significance of local small-scale farming at the level of the EU and Romania. In the next chapters, the definition of community-supported agriculture movements follows as well as their origins, international carrier, particularities, Romanian and local experiences from Odorheiu Secuiesc (Harghita County, Romania), difficulties, and finally future perspectives of the presented movements.

ASAT delivers community-supported agriculture initiatives, which consists of partnerships between producers and consumer groups. This project was founded with the aim of supporting local farmers and their farms, whilst practising sustainable forms of agriculture within a fair economy.

ASAT aims to ensure that consumers can buy quality food at a fair price, choosing to opt into purchasing food which has been produced in a certain way. Each ASAT partnership brings together a group of consumers and producers within proximity of one another, formalizing the partnership with a contract. Consumers commit themselves to buy the resulted products through an advanced payment made before the first distribution. The producer, in turn, is committed to deliver quality products grown in a socially responsible and environmentally friendly manner.

**Keywords:** community, agriculture, solidarity, partnership, local economy

## Introduction

Odorheiu Secuiesc (Harghita County, Romania) respectively Szeklerland can be partially characterized with a favourable situation from the point of view of rural development programmes which enhance local economy and local society.

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1 Several parts of this article were published in Hungarian language: *A közösség által támogatott mezőgazdaság, mint alternatíva. Magyar Kisebbség*, 2014/3–4 (appeared in 2016), pp. 76–102.

Several initiatives can be enumerated which serve in a synergy different groups of local producers and consumers. Although nowadays a wide publicity of these initiatives cannot be observed, imbibitions of them in collective knowledge is a long-term process and they can function as good examples for other regions, too. Of course, not all these initiatives have their origins in local cultural heritage, there are also some imported programmes, which proved to be viable in our circumstances. There are some programmes of non-governmental organizations, products of companies, trade-marks (of NGOs and local public administrations), and institutions (markets, cooperatives). The civic, business, and public sphere can be identified as initiator of these programmes as well, and there are some examples of partnerships between different institutions. Among the NGO programmes, we can mention the *Átalvető* programme of the Rural development Department of Caritas Alba Iulia, which tries to empower local producers and bring them together with consumers through a direct market system (this programme runs in the Odorhei region, and it was inspired by a similar one from Târgu Mureş, i.e. the *Webkanra* programme of Focus Eco Center). Fruit Manufacture from Lupeni, established by Civitas Foundation, is handled also by an NGO – the Szekler Fruit Association, which aims at improving, protecting, revitalizing, using, selling, and marketing local fruit types. Starting from these initiatives, fruit processing units were launched in other settlements from Szeklerland such as Zetea, Siculeni, etc. There are differences among these programmes in what concerns the legal status of initiators (NGO, Common Forrest Administration Body, local public administration, company, private person), the origins of the invested capital (projects, external and internal sources, etc.), respectively in rules of functioning, but all of them contribute to increasing the added value.

The community card functions also as an NGO programme – it was initiated in 2009 by the Community Foundation, which was adapted in other towns too (in Miercurea Ciuc, Târgu Mureş, Sfântu Gheorghe, etc.). Through a fidelity card cooperation among entrepreneurs, inhabitants, and NGOs, it enhances philanthropy, stimulates community participation, and users can decide about the common financial base (the Community Foundation offers project-based financing to local NGOs). Another NGO programme is the Transylvania Authentica brand, which has been functioning since 2007, initiated by the Partnership Foundation from Miercurea Ciuc. Traditional, good-quality, natural, and environmental-friendly products can receive this label, and so far producers from Szeklerland, Maramureş, and Saxon regions are among certified ones. Similar to the former one but initiated by the Public Administration of Harghita County is the brand of Szekler Product, which was started in 2010; there are evaluation committees in three counties of Szeklerland. So far, several food, handmade, industrial, and spiritual products have earned this certification. The monthly market of traditional local products is also an institution which belongs

to the public sphere; in Miercurea Ciuc, it is organized by the County Public Administration and in Odorheiu Secuiesc by the local public administration in partnership with the Rural Development Department of Caritas Alba Iulia. The objective of the institution is similarly the empowerment of local producers by organizing periodical meeting occasions for them with consumers.

The next example is Târnava Mare Agricultural Cooperative, which was supported by the county public administration. The cooperative was established in 2011, its members are cow keepers, associations, Common Forrest Administration Bodies, investors. Among its objectives, we can list the following: common marketing, selling, processing, organizing the production, professional assistance, and empowerment of local producers (in order to reach the markets). It affects directly a number of five hundred milk producer families.

The Góbé Product Family was launched by a business man in 2010, and it involves the entire territory of Szeklerland. The main criterion of assigning the Góbé brand to a product is the geographical origin of the products. By now, Góbé Products cover more than 60 producers and more than 330 products in nine categories. It facilitates identifying the products by the consumers and serves the empowerment of producers.

Finally, the voluntary movement of the Agora Association – Working Group for Sustainable Development aims to educate high-school students in order to consume consciously, and by enhancing sensitivity of the next generation toward environment. This programme contributes to the objectives of all enumerated programmes. During the programme, thematic, interactive classes serve as frames for workshops about the dimensions of waste, the origin of products, the ingredients of products, and local products. Of course, other environmental and youth organizations also have similar programmes.

## **Contextualization: the significance of small-scale agriculture. The concept of partially self-sufficient farms and their role in local development**

Reports referring to a continuous reform of the Common Agricultural Policy are concerned with the future perspectives of farming. Several reports lay down that the European agricultural sector is constrained to assume roles which complement each other: to produce qualitative foodstuff, to control food security, to preserve environment (soil, water), and to maintain and transmit local cultural traditions. According to these objectives, decision makers, researchers, and actors of the sector gave heed not only to the efficiency and competitiveness of food production (a slow and partial process was started) but also to aspects that refer to multifunctional

agriculture and its role played in sustainable development policy. This sounds comforting, but the redirection of attention, the shift of emphasis is slightly perceived in local society at the level of farmers. They can teach the use of agri-environmental payments, but the criteria are too generally applied, they ignore local climate and soil circumstances, cultural traditions, and regional differences.

Based on the results of the European Agricultural Census of 2010 and according to Eurostat<sup>2</sup> data, between 2003 and 2010, the number of farms in the European Union decreased with 20%. In Romania, the reduction of the number of small farms became stressful after the integration in the European Union.

From the “Report on the future for young farmers under the ongoing reform of the CAP (2008)”,<sup>3</sup> we can learn that “the percentage of farmers in the EU aged under 35 was then only 7% and falling, although in future food production will have to continue to increase” and the average age of farmers reached 55 years. These data were interpreted as crisis symptoms of European agriculture, and the elaboration of a conscious strategy and action plan is necessary in order to involve youth.<sup>4</sup>

One of the main objectives of community-supported agriculture is the maintaining/supporting of small-scale farms. In the presentation titled *A future for Europe’s small farms* (written by Dacian Cioloş), partially self-sufficient farms appear as significant economic and social service providers of rural areas. The author highlights that small-scale, partially self-sufficient farms assume three main roles in rural and agricultural development: they are puffer-zones against poverty, offer environmental advantages, and serve as a basis for diversification and multifunctional economies.<sup>5</sup>

2 [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics\\_explained/index.php/Agricultural\\_census\\_2010\\_-\\_provisional\\_results](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Agricultural_census_2010_-_provisional_results).

3 Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development (author of report: Donato Tommaso Veraldi) “Report on the future for young farmers under the ongoing reform of the CAP”, 13/5/2008, A-0182/2008.

4 From the main steps presented in the report mentioned in footnote no 2, the following are underlined:

Note No 7 highlights that the main factor in renewing the farming industry’s age profile is access to land, given its high cost;

Note No 8 takes the view that, in future, the CAP must seek to remove the barriers currently facing young people wishing to set up in farming, by making generational change one of its priorities;

Note No 12 calls on the Commission to support the Member States in creating a land bank on the basis of land freed up as a result of early retirement; it takes the view that support should be provided for the joint acquisition of expensive machinery and equipment which is used infrequently by each individual farmer;

Note No 15 recommends the introduction of instruments enabling priority in respect of agricultural land transfers to be given to young farmers setting up in business rather than to existing farmers wishing to increase the size of their holdings, including an early-retirement mechanism, deferred-purchase aid, phased setting-up arrangements, and rental of part of the land.

5 [http://ec.europa.eu/commission\\_2010-2014/ciolos/headlines/speeches/2010/10/20101014\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/commission_2010-2014/ciolos/headlines/speeches/2010/10/20101014_en.htm).

Taking into consideration the significant number of rural inhabitants in Romania, the protective role against poverty is obvious. In their cases, agricultural activity contributes widely to subsistence income for a large part of the population.<sup>6</sup> Households characterized by subsistence and semi-subsistence have an important role for those who live on the edge of poverty. Policies focused on increasing competitiveness and productivity – due to the industrialization of the agricultural sector and the concentration of property – contribute to a significant decrease of survival chances of small, semi-subsistence farms.

The mentioned farms have an important impact on protecting the environment: the majority of small-scale producers can be characterized by production models which take into consideration local biodiversity and particular cultural traditions, thus reducing negative environmental effects. Without idealizing traditional production practices, it can be easily justified that small rural household farms represent a complex agricultural unit – which produces cereals, vegetables, forage, maintains traditional orchards, and has a smaller impact on environment than a big unit specialized on monoculture. The farms belonging to the former type fit organically into local traditions and they direct more attention to elements of the ecosystem (CRIES 2012: 6).

In literature, the short food chain as potential alternative of agro-industrial food production has only a few years of history. The movement discussed in the present paper belongs to mainly strong food industry networks as – opposed to weak networks, which focus on products – cooperation organized around consumer groups concentrates on the process.

## **Definition of community-supported agriculture (CSA)**

Community-supported agriculture can be interpreted as an old and new initiative at the same time. It is old because the offer of rural food production met urban demand centuries ago, and this relation was based on autonomy, trust, and spontaneous organizations. On the other hand, the movement can be interpreted as new because it tries to introduce and enhance reciprocal relations between producers and consumers around values such as transparency, solidarity, voluntary work, and bilateral trust.

The fact that the movement is linked mainly with the orientation towards organic production “can be interpreted as a critique of productivity-focused plant production, and with the help of it another historical conflict can be also resolved. Here I think of the opposition of intensive or organic respectively

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6 According to preliminary data of the 2011 census, 44.7% of households are placed in rural areas, which means 9 million inhabitants (47.5% of population). Source: <http://www.recensamantromania.ro/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Comunicat-date-provizorii-rpl-2011.pdf>.

agro-ecological plant production, of conflict of interests between the farmers and environmentalists” (Hoggart & Paniagua 2001, López García 2007 – qtd by Binimelis & Descombes 2010: 11).

Common characteristics of CSA initiatives are the common assumption of responsibility during production of food and reaching the tables of consumers, respectively the direct and continuous relation between the producers’ and consumers’ groups.

CSA was developed in different forms at the international level, depending on social, historical, geopolitical, agricultural, and economic particularities. Despite the differences, at least four basic characteristics are common in these movements (Bashford et al. 2013: 6–7).

*Partnership*: CSA is based on a reciprocal commitment through which producers assume the obligation to offer a certain amount and diversity of vegetables, and consumers engage themselves to buy these boxes during a whole season.

*Proximity*: CSA prefers local transactions, stimulates relocalization of food economy, and facilitates investments in local economy. Besides, relocalization means a resocialization too, which contains a rapprochement of producer and consumer sphere; according to the cited authors, in this relation, maximum one transmitting player can be included. The model of CSA excludes intermediary actors.

*Solidarity*: the partnership is based on a community of producers and consumers. Solidarity among the actors is manifested in at least two aspects. In practice, this means that the risks, responsibilities, and rewards of the farm are shared between the group of consumers and the farmer. On the part of the producer, their plans respect the environmental, natural, and cultural heritage, and calculate with correct and transparent costs, while consumers offer payments in advance as a warranty for the producer, for preparing the soil and in order to have a financial safety in the everyday life.

*Balanced relationship between consumers and producers – tandem*: it is based on trust and personal interactions (without intermediary actors, hierarchy, relations, of subordination).

The initiatives can be classified as CSA movements only if the mentioned four principles are respected and implemented.

Motivations of consumers who participate in such networks are based on social, economic, and environmental values (according to our field experiences, the last ones are less stressed in practice among Romanian consumers). They choose to procure organic food from a local, well-known source, which comes from a sustainable production process. The active participation of consumers could be motivated by the following elements: good quality of food; interest, openness, and commitment toward healthy nutrition; interest in supporting local producers; preference of social values such as solidarity with small-scale farmers,

on the one hand, and with consumers interested in accessible healthy nutrition, on the other hand; interest in environmental protection; openness, commitment to reduce pollution caused by the industrialization of agriculture; interest in local seeds; priority of small-scale farmers' autonomy (CRIES 2012: 8).

As it was mentioned, CSA can appear under different forms, but for its running human, social, natural, physical, and financial capitals are needed in every case (Saltmarsh et al. 2011: 8, CRIES 2012: 8).

*Human capital* consists of people who work in the household as employees or as volunteers and have professional knowledge as well as commitment towards partners. Differences compared to other direct sale systems<sup>7</sup> are the following: members of the consumer group take part actively as volunteers in organizing the distribution of vegetables (preparing the boxes, collecting the monthly rate), in organizing common events, visiting the farmers, helping them during peak seasons, etc. So, the human capital of the initiative means not only the resources of the producer but also the voluntary work of the consumer group.

*Social capital* is formed by individual and collective contributions of partners during the cooperation. The group becomes a community through collective actions; besides vegetables and other foods, there are "produced" social interactions as well (change of experience, change of recipes, getting to know some of each other's problems), the relation between consumers and producers become stronger, the level of information and consciousness about global social problems increase (environmental crisis, responsible consumption, etc.), a network is progressively formed, and participants can rely on each other. The group – as it is mentioned frequently in literature and as we experience it – means more than the sum of the members. There are possibilities for assuming roles, civic culture is developed, and citizen activity can be practised, while these added values of CSA have fewer chances to come into existence in other alternative sale systems.

*Natural capital* consists in the land ready for partnership, influenced by former utilization method and by neighbours (i.e. intensive exploitation of agricultural land). In the majority of CSA partnerships, the field remains in the property of the producers, but the costs of utilization are shared between the members of the consumers' group. The aim of involving consumers is to support producers in order to utilize natural capital (the land and the natural resources: water, animal manure, biodiversity) in a sustainable way.

*Physical capital* plays a complementary role behind natural and human capital and it contains buildings, tools, and machinery. Social capital can be

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<sup>7</sup> In short-chain initiatives, human capital used in production includes the resources of the household, sale being organized by associations or volunteers. Active participation of consumers is not required as they usually order products on the Internet and they meet the producer when they receive their products. This lack of obligation does not mean that there are no active consumers since some of them visit their producers' farm. Some farmers offer services in agritainment.

converted into natural capital and physical capital (tools and machines can be borrowed through informal external networks of members or can be replaced by the voluntary work of consumers).

*Financial capital* is the source necessary to start the production. This can come from two main sources: primarily from the advance payments of consumers what they give in autumn when they sign the contract (this is similar to alternative social microcredit forms), and secondly from microcredit loans.

## **Origins of the movement and models widespread on the international level**

CSA is an alternative movement, a response to disintegration and to weakening the relation to land, which characterizes the industrial and post-industrial societies. CSA provides a bilateral relation for groups devoted to production and healthy food, it contributes to healthy families and a healthy Earth (Jill & Franzblau 2010: 9).

It appeared as a response to a crisis situation (disappearance of small-scale farmers and the advantages offered by them on the local market) and as a solidarity form which configures a win-win situation among producers and consumers. This – mainly informal – association leads to two results: notably, it supports the sustainability of very small farms in order to provide local, traditional, and organic products; secondly, it maintains a healthy life model among consumers who take an increased responsibility for their consumption and for the environmental heritage of the next generations (CRIES 2012: 9).

The movement spread in the last three decades on the international level. There are many versions of it and to date it consists of partnerships on the large scale between producers and consumers. Behind the similarities, all the contracted relations are personalized, suited to the local circumstances and cooperative partners. Its early forms evolved approximately fifty years ago. The first organizers of partnerships were Japanese mothers, who worried about the increasing vegetable import, losing arable land, and the migration of farmers to urban areas. These women established the new production and procurement system by building direct links with local producers. This type of partnership is named *Teikei* in Japanese, and the philosophical meaning of the term is to “personalize the producer, put personalized label on the product!” (Henderson & Van En 2007: 258).

The term found its way to Europe and the USA, where the CSA name became widespread. The term belongs to two initiators: Jan Vander Tuin and Robin Van En (CRIES 2012: 9).<sup>8</sup> In the first season of a partnership from the USA, which started

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8 According to some approaches, the system can be originated from theories of Rudolf Steiner about biodynamic and anthroposophist agriculture. CSA considers farm as a whole entity



in 1985, the system was labelled with the following slogan: “share the costs to share the results!” (CRIES 2012: 9, Ehmke and Press 2013: 1). They considered important to pinpoint that the terms of expression are reversible: community-supported agriculture – agriculture-supported community. In the USA, the name CSA is used, while at the national level several other initiatives, expressions are known as suitable for the model (AMAP in France, CSA in Anglo-Saxon territories, ASC in Quebec, Teikei in Japan, Reciproca in Portugal, GAS in Italy, Szivárvány gazdaság in Hungary, ASAT in Romania, etc.).

According to the data of URGENCI (an international network of rural–urban partnerships), at the global level, the number of partnerships is over 10,000, which means more than 17,000 producers and almost 900,000 consumers. According to agricultural statistics, the number of producers involved in the movement in the USA has also multiplied in the last decades ([www.urgenci.net](http://www.urgenci.net)).

**Table 1.** The evolution of the number of farms participating in CSA in the USA

Year	Number of farms participating in CSA partnerships in the USA
1986	2
1992	200
2001	761
2004	1,034
2005	1,144
2009	over 1,500

Sources: Saltmarsh et al. 2011: 12, CRIES 2012: 10

From the presented data, it can be observed that between 2001 and 2004 the number of partnerships increased with more than 25%. The number of consumers inside a partnership varies between 50 and 500 families. According to accessible data, in the USA, 270,000 households participate in one season in this type of cooperation, which means that approximately one third of consumers can be found on the North-American continent (Adam 2006: 4, Bruch & Ernst 2010: 1, Martinez 2011: iii).

In Europe, the most similar initiatives run in France and Italy. They appeared as a consequence of food crisis after a decrease in the local producers' activity and the spread of big-store networks. The model was inspired by producer cooperatives, associations and movements promoting responsible consumption. In France, the first AMAP initiatives were established from 2001; in the last period, the number of producers taking part in the programme increased to

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which integrates the clients, educating and involving them in necessary works so the client can contribute more to running and sustaining the farm, not only by supporting it financially.

3,000.<sup>9</sup> So, similarly to American CSAs, the phenomenon shows a fast growth in Europe. In England, based on data of the Soil Association,<sup>10</sup> at least 12,500 families procure their products from this segment (Saltmarsh et al. 2011: 12). The number of producers and consumers from the system continuously increases. But, due to the fact that the movement is relatively new, the level of information and consciousness among the wider public should be improved by mobilizing campaigns. In the eastern part of England, one third of vegetable consumers have heard about CSA and only 6% of them know of a specific initiative.

**Table 2.** Estimated number of CSAs and eaters in European CSAs in 2015

<b>Countries</b>	<b>Number of CSAs</b>	<b>Number of eaters</b>
France	2,000	32,000
Belgium	138	14,500
Italy	104	22,800
Germany	92	25,000
United Kingdom	80	10,000
Spain	75	7,500
Switzerland	60	26,000
Netherlands	47	25,500
Norway	35	6,000
Austria	26	1,500
Czech Republic	23	1,400
Croatia	20	4,000
Romania	15	1,000
Hungary	12	1,200
Sweden	12	1,000
Finland	10	2,000
Slovakia	10	1,300
Poland	8	800
Ireland	7	485
Serbia	2	70
<b>Totally</b>	<b>2,276</b>	<b>184,055</b>

Source: Weckenbrock et al. 2016: 9–10

On the international level, there can be found several models suitable for CSA. These partnerships differ in formulating the contract between producer and consumer and in the organic certification and distribution of products, but all

9 [www.urgenci.net](http://www.urgenci.net)

10 Soil Association was set up in 1946 by farmers, scientists, and nutrition experts, who discovered a direct link between farming practices and health indicators. Its status is charity organization.

of them include the advance payment of consumers. Four main types can be distinguished (Saltmarsh et al. 2011: 7, Bashford et al. 2013: 22).

(1) In the *CSA shareholder model*, firstly, the consumers organize themselves: some of them are initiators, others follow them, and they find a producer who they cooperate with, whom they offer their help to in work during the production. Within the consumers' group, there can be observed a nucleus, which proves to be more active in sales, farm visits, communication inside the group, and decision-making (i.e. in choosing the producer). These roles can be assumed by a non-governmental organization, too, if it has enough capacity to organize the cooperation.

(2) In *CSA, tenancy model* partnership is initiated by producers, and consumers can enrol/register in it. This model needs only a little help from consumers; the conditions, offers, and costs are fixed by producers, and they are not formed as consequence of a common bargain process. In England, a quarter of initiatives and in the USA the majority of them function in this form.<sup>11</sup>

(3) *Farmers' co-operative model*. In Japan and Germany, there can be found co-operatives of farmers who cooperate in order to increase the diversity of product scale. This model provides the chance of specializing in smaller farms.

(4) *Producers' and consumers' common cooperative model*. This type supposes production on a common field, which is the common property of producers and consumers. In England, half of CSA initiatives are run as joint property.

Behind the enumerated models, there continuously appear new cooperation forms, but we can find less information and data on these.

The conformation of the *Teikei* model in Japan underlines different forms of partnerships (JOAA 1993). Regarding the main versions, the author highlights the following: (a) a few producers associate in order to organize sale points, where more consumer groups can be served, (b) more consumers associate around a producer, (c) more consumers associate around more producers, etc.

## What are the characteristics of CSA and the differences as compared to other local direct sale networks?

In the last few years, there appeared many alternative product sale systems in Romania. Some of them facilitate the procurement of products from a single producer (some of them dispose of organic certification, but in the majority of cases this expensive certification is missing), whereas others promote a diverse product scale from more producers. The majority of these systems do not mean

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11 In the USA: 10% of partnerships are administrated by non-governmental organizations, 75% by the producer, who use it as a direct sale system, and 15% by active consumer groups, who find a producer for their network (Henderson and Van En 2007).

long-term commitment for consumers, but procurement is being realized via occasional orders. So, compared to them, CSA partnerships have some particular characteristics (CRIES 2012: 16, Briciu 2016: 83).

*The principle of solidarity between consumer and producer is an essential element of the partnership:* this principle is manifested in sharing the costs, risks, and results of production. If, due to pests or meteorological calamities (or other factors beyond the powers of the farmer), the yield of the farm is lower than expected, consumers pay the same amount even if the quantity of products delivered is smaller than expected/planned. If, on the other hand, the yield of the farm is larger than expected/planned, the farmer freely shares the surplus with the consumers.

*Advance payment* is also an essential element of cooperation. It happens at the moment of signing the contract and represents the consumers' contribution to the preparation of the work for the next season. From autumn to spring, the producer prepares the soil for the next season, procures or produces the seeds and plants. If these costs were to be supported by the producer, many of them would renounce the production because of lack of capital.

*Consumers' commitment for the whole agricultural season:* consumers assume to buy weekly boxes in a long-term and planned process. In different sale systems, the quantity and quality of products are fixed by the producer and the choice of consumers is restricted to require or not the offer – they can subscribe to or unsubscribe from the tenancy at any time.

*Application of fair and transparent price:* a cost-calculating process provides equity for both producers and consumers. It is important to take all production-related costs into consideration and the invested work should be honoured correctly; the producer and the family should avoid living in difficulties. Due to the voluntary work of consumers (i.e. organizing weekly distributions, promotion of partnership, identifying new consumers, etc.), costs can be kept at a relatively low level in order to make it accessible for a wider public. All the members of the partnership know the elements of tenancy price; this aspect can facilitate the understanding of what the costs of a chemical-free, diverse, human-scale production process are.

*The contents of the boxes are consensually negotiated by producers and consumers:* decision-making is a common process, all the partners take part in it. The planning of production is based on the number of consumer families and a common bargain process determines the weekly quantities. The organization of production is adapted to local particularities, climate, soil, economic resources and conditions, and to consumers' requirements.

In sale systems where the producer or producers' co-operative offer tenancy, diversity, list of vegetables, production, harvest, and distribution plan are all set.

CSA pulls on economic, social, and environmental impacts. The major economic effect is the financial security offered to the producer. The programme

provides financial sustainability to semi-subsistence farms, namely the producer receives a guarantee to sell the products by the contract signed for the whole season. It assures an equitable price for the producer, which covers the whole budget of production. It reduces the time spent on selling, distributions are organized once a week in a consensual period of a few hours, so the producer can focus on production, and they do not need to spend too much time on selling. The model's target group are especially indigent producers with semi-subsistence farms. CSA contributes to new jobs and it encourages the involvement of youth in the agricultural sector (CRIES 2012: 17). According to former Romanian experiences, besides the poorness of producers, it is important to take into consideration the producer's former experiences in financial management. It happened that social aspects were taken into consideration by organizers and the producer could not meet the conditions of the contract because he did not respect the budget lines responsively.

The social effects of the movement are more complex: they regard appreciation of farming, relation between producers and consumers, social capital, solidarity, and affinity toward environmental aspects. The programme facilitates the increasing appreciation of farmers and enhances their satisfaction with their everyday work. It favours interpersonal and intergenerational communication, information flow, apperception of several cultural, social, environmental values, and the marketing of local knowledge in the agricultural and gastronomical fields. It contributes to the enhancement of trust, social capital, and cohesion between rural and urban regions. It also contributes to increasing the level of information and consciousness concerning healthy products; it favours the information of children about agricultural production. It promotes social solidarity and responsible attitude; it contributes to the improvement of civic culture among citizens. Events organized at producers can endorse community development and the formation of new services (CRIES 2012: 17).

Beyond economic and social impacts, the programme influences the estate of environment too: exclusion of chemicals, short transportation distance, crop rotation, association of plants, utilization of local seeds, and the reducing of packaging materials have positive effects. It facilitates environmentally-friendly treatments (utilization of natural manure, lack of chemical herbicides and pesticides), the protection of local biodiversity, and the utilization of local, GMO-free seeds. It promotes the consumption of local products, which come from a short distance, and thus their ecological impact is smaller. It favours the responsible use of natural resources (soil, water) and a reduced use of packaging materials (CRIES 2012: 17).

In the medium term, CSA's impact on consumers can vary depending on consumption, purchase, and living customs. Consumers, due to this long-term experience, change their gastronomic habits by using more local, provincial,

seasonal, and healthier ingredients. Indirectly, it influences their general consumption habits.<sup>12</sup>

As it can be observed, the functioning of partnerships has impacts not only on the individual but also on the community level. Its shtick, information, education, mobilizing aims are complemented by its social-economic importance. Though currently CSA partnerships have their “price” for organizers, producers, and consumers (continuous communication, exclusion of chemicals, long-term commitment), their benefits are more numerous from the point of view of both the producers and the consumers (financial security, healthy food, etc.); by the complexity of changes started by them, they become more and more relevant and more and more people are interested in their functioning and implementing.

## Spreading of CSA partnerships in Romania and its variants

In Romania, the movement’s origins are connected to Mihaela Vețan,<sup>13</sup> who started the first initiative in Timișoara in 2007 by importing and adapting it from France. So, the initiative starts from the French AMAP model and in Romanian it earns the ASAT name (Asociația pentru Susținerea Agriculturii Țărănești). The activity of the last few years can be classified as a pioneering, experimenting stage as well as a spreading, transmissive one.

### Pioneering period of CSA

In order to test the model (between 2008 and 2010), the following activities were implemented:

The CRIES Association organized meetings, debates with farmers and representatives of academic fields, respectively the (Romanian and French) civil society in order to adapt the model and to analyse its implementation possibilities. They hold public presentations in order to inform different groups about solidarity partnerships: consumers, producers, or representatives of authorities.<sup>14</sup>

12 Based on an English survey, these changes are considered by consumers as natural and easy transitions. Active membership in a CSA means also positive relation to environment; these values play an important role in family socialization (Saltmarsh et al. 2011).

13 In 2007, Mihaela Vețan was the coordinator of a pilot project financed by the European Commission (Timișoara – as a field of common responsibility): she set up several initiatives belonging to social and solidarity economy supported by the European Council ([www.coe.int](http://www.coe.int)) and IRIS Platform ([www.iris-network.eu](http://www.iris-network.eu)). Nowadays, Mihaela Vețan is the President of CRIES Association ([www.cries.ro](http://www.cries.ro)).

14 Between 2007 and 2009, they organized meetings with representatives of agricultural, labour, and family ministries because this kind of initiative has an innovative character from the social point of view as well.

They identified an active nucleus interested in supporting and promoting in order to establish the initiative in Timișoara. The first producer was involved in a CSA partnership. They organized further public meetings, campaigns, promoting events in order to recruit consumers; their slogan was the following: *Consume healthily and support the local agriculture!*

In the pioneering period, they adapted the essential work tools for the functioning of the partnerships: i.e. the Charta, the contract model, tools for budget calculation, tools for production, and crop planning.

In the period between 2008 and 2010, they tested several aspects of implementation: ability of consumers to self-organize,<sup>15</sup> relation of the partners to one another, establishment of trustful relations, increasing the number of consumers, capacity of production, etc.

They selected the first producer in 2008 from Belinț, Timis County. Among the criteria of selection, they took into consideration the producer's developmental potential. The partnership started with twenty consumer families and in the first three years the initiating person as well as the organization supported them significantly in order to consolidate the consumer group and to develop the cooperation.<sup>16</sup>

During the first year, the farmer produced eighteen types of vegetables and he introduced an experimental price calculation method, which meant a fixed price for every type of vegetable, calculated on the basis of the average market prices. Being the first year, consumers accepted that prices were calculated differently<sup>17</sup> from the budget calculation method of the model (CRIES 2012). According to the model, the budget calculation starts from sources needed for production: "cost of production (ie. seeds, seedlings, tools, etc.); employee's costs; machinery depreciation; investments; advisory services; overheads" (Bashford et al. 2013: 34).

The growth phase of the pilot project was more and more visible until 2009 the number of consumer families increased to 100. In 2012, 160 families participated from Timișoara and Lugoj, and the distribution period of the vegetables covered a seven-month-long period (from May to November).

In this period, the farmer utilized 5–6 hectares for the production, he employed three permanent workers (himself, his wife, and a helper), while in the summer period further seasonal workers or day-labourers were hired (3–4 part-time employees) on the farm.

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15 In Romanian language, instead of consumer (consumator) the term of *consumactor* is used, which appeared as a combination of consumer and actor, and it underlines the activity through consumption.

16 The Urgenci Platform supported the costs of study visits of the two producers: to Aubagne, France (2008) and Japan (2010).

17 During a monitoring visit in 2012, it was observed that he applied the same method of calculating prices.

The presented pilot project cannot be seen as a representative one for CSA initiatives because it has developed into a business producing organic food. Compared to CSA partnerships, it shows the following main differences:

*Price calculating method:* fixed price per product, based on the average market prices; production costs and farmer's income are not transparent, so the fair price and transparent partnership relation are not accomplished.

*Lack of solidarity:* if a crop spoils independently from the farmer, so not as a consequence of his omission (natural calamity, critical meteorological conditions), the deficit is borne by the producer; if the yield of the farm is larger than expected/planned, the farmer does not share the surplus with the members of the group.

*Changing box price:* consumers pay a price per kilogram.

*Consumers do not help the producer* in organizing distributions, in communication within the group, or in organizing farm visits.

This business approach chosen by the farmer has led to the drop-out of some consumers, who thus behaved themselves as participants in an economic transaction, and not as members of a partnership.

In my opinion, the presented farmer can be placed halfway between direct sale systems and CSA solidarity partnerships. In the last few years, the mentioned farmer became independent, he obtained an organic producer certification and rented his own distribution place. But the initiative has its undeniable advantages compared to conventional market and it has a pioneering role in spreading the CSA concept in Romania (CRIES 2012).

### **Extension of the model, transmission of the sample**

In 2011, the CRIES Association supported the setting up of two further groups in Timișoara, around two vegetable growers from Arad County. These two groups respect the original principles.

One of them produces in Ghioroc village and cooperates with approximately twenty families from Timișoara and Arad, her farm covering 0.45 hectares with one permanent and one part-time employee working in the household.

The other produces in Șagu village: he signed a contract with fifty consumer families from Timișoara, the farm covering 1.6 hectares with two permanent and part-time employees working in the household.

In 2012, the CRIES Association supported the initiation of a pilot project in Cluj with the help of several local volunteers.

During the spreading period of the model, they targeted producers who have real difficulties in selling their products, and – speaking in social terms – they really need the programme. Partnerships are stimulated step-by-step by the increasing number of consumers. In this phase, they pay special attention to the sustainability



of partnerships by facilitating the involvement of consumers and developing the communication abilities of producers.

During 2012–2013, the CRIES Association set the aim of extending the number of partnerships at the national level in Arad, Bucharest, Cluj, Iași, Oradea, Sibiu, and Odorheiu Secuiesc. For this reason, they organized informing campaigns for potential consumers and farmers. During 2014, fourteen producers participated in the programme in different places of the country. Two of the farmers are Hungarians (one produces in Morăreni and the other in Otelec). For the next seasons, the circle of producers will probably extend because organizers have plans in several other towns such as Mediaș, Zalău, etc.

## **Experiences in Odorheiu Secuiesc**

The initiative reached Odorheiu Secuiesc as a lucky coincidence, as when I was a visiting professor in Timișoara the leaders of CRIES Association asked me about what a more suitable place would be for promoting the movement in the central Romanian region: Sibiu or Brașov. Thus, instead of the two cities, a small town became the target in the central region.

In Odorheiu Secuiesc, the pilot project started in 2013, and since then it has proved to be successful continuously. The initiative was started with the recommendation of four non-governmental organizations: the Community Foundation of Odorheiu Secuiesc, Civitas Foundation, Caritas Alba Iulia – Department of Rural Development, and Agora Association – Working Group for Sustainable Development. Of the mentioned organizations, the latter two are assuming an active role in the functioning of the partnership, Caritas providing an optimal place for vegetable distribution for free in its cellar in the town centre, while Agora working hard towards organizing and promoting the movement.

The initiative from Odorheiu Secuiesc shows some innovative aspects from several points of view. Firstly, out of the Romanian locations, this is the only small town in which the programme was tested, our original hypothesis being that in big cities consumer groups – who do not have their families, relatives in rural areas from where they can procure their vegetables – can be found easily, while, on the other hand, they appear on the demand side of organic vegetables. Secondly, soil and climate conditions differ in Szeklerland from a typical structure of a flat country, so testing the programme is a challenge also from this point of view. Another hypothesis was formulated, according to which the diversity of vegetables and the length of the season are influenced by local conditions. This hypothesis was also disproved. Thirdly, the initiative is unique also due to the fact that in this place utilization of the land is the most efficient. The latter factor is owing to Lehel Ferencz – a young but experienced and professional

horticulturist at the same time –, who realized a crop plan and associating plants plan, which help farmers to produce for one family a diversity of twenty-five types of vegetables on only 0.02 hectares.

In Odorheiu Secuiesc in 2013, a producer from Morăreni concluded an agreement with eighteen consumer families (according to our experience, from a 0.26–0.30-hectare land, this quantity can be produced, and vice versa: 18 families can provide financial security for one producer). This agreement was a very lucky one because both the producer and the consumers understood the programme's essential content. The best indicator of the programme's success is that we practically cannot speak of drop-outs, and consumer families have remained in the programme since its start and we have already finished the fourth successful season.

The current consumers' role is very significant in promoting the programme and transmitting their positive experiences. Consequently, in 2014, the programme was complemented by entering a new producer and 18 more families. The experiences of this new partnership were ambivalent. While the majority of the first group came from the local Rotary Club – so they have known each other, which is a huge advantage –, the families from the second partnership did not maintain such a close relationship with one another prior to the programme, and the attitude of the producer also differed in many aspects from the requirements of the programme.

The solidarity aspect was tested after a natural calamity (flood). We can report on a positive experience in this respect. But in the spring of 2015, one week before the abovementioned producer's first distribution would start, he cried off from the programme, which means that our indicators are similar to those in 2013. By this experience, we could observe that the contract, which contains the principles, values, rules, details, budget, monthly and weekly distribution plans, etc., protects mostly the producer.

In 2017, a new young producer from Polonița and his consumer group will start to cooperate with each other. According to our plans, we will facilitate the launch of the programme in other small towns from Szeklerland by offering the know-how to local organizers and producers, but for this it is necessary that external resources be involved as well.

The community development pillar of the programme consists in the fact that behind the weekly meetings, farm visits are organized, where there is occasion for longer, informal communication within the members of the group; furthermore, in 2013 and 2014, we participated as a team in the local festival's cooking competition, and its positive increments can be felt.

We try to empower further producers by offering complementary products without a contract, vegetable consumers can procure eggs, white meat, cheese at the same place, and in the future we plan to involve fruit growers as well.

Consumer families receive 25 types of vegetables (all of them have the same quantity, which can satisfy a four-member family's needs; of course, there are some families who consider this quantity too much or too less) throughout 31 weeks (from May until November) – the diversity of vegetables can change in different seasons. They spend a fair budget on it from production through transportation to packaging, respectively human capital costs, and since 2015 we have introduced travel costs to support exchange of experience. Payment takes place in eight instalments: in autumn, when the partners sign the contract, they pay the first one in advance (for preparation works of the land), while the other seven instalments are paid on the first meeting of every month. Voluntary work means approximately three hours per family per year (distribution of vegetables into equal parts, signing the papers of payment and of acceptance/reception), which is only a fraction of time spent in the market collecting vegetables of dubious origins; at the same time, although its feeling differs from the market, there are opportunities for direct communication between consumers and producer.

Finally, the author thinks that it is important to notice the role of volunteering in the programme, including organizing tasks, in the sense that participants help the consolidation of the project through their voluntary work. So, we hope that our help or assistance will not be necessary for a longer period and that instead the autonomous partnership we can focus our energy on establishing a new partnership.

## **National-level challenges in connection with the CSA movement**

### **Related to consumers**

*Low level of information, awareness about the importance of healthy and varied diet based on local products* (CRIES 2012: 14). In the socialist agricultural model, utilization of chemicals in food production became widespread mainly due to the heritage of the period. After the regime change, consumption goods appeared on the market in an ever-widening range, and thus the quantity, quality, origins, and diversity of food products started to change for the better. Due to the fact that the main criterion during procurement is price, the consumption of ecologically and socially irresponsibly produced goods became quite frequent.

*Non-participation in organizing duties (the active nucleus is hard to evolve)* (CRIES 2012: 14). In this respect, we should calculate upon cultural differences between Central-Eastern European societies and those where the movement came from. In the Romanian context where there is a weak tradition of civic self-organization, it is not easy to socialize consumers for voluntary work, but

according to local experiences from Odorheiu Secuiesc the majority of them change their attitudes toward volunteering over time: they are more passive for the first time, but later – when they earn their own experiences – they become more open-minded, willing to organize and realize distributions, farm visits, communication with producers – compared to the time spent on the market selecting, measuring, etc. of vegetables.

*There are relatively few initiatives similar to this project, which means a lack of networks that we can tap into* (CRIES 2012: 14). It is difficult to inform consumers, they have only little and piecemeal information about producers' challenges.

*Maintaining interest and participation is also a challenge – according to former experiences, half of the consumers renew their contract with the same producer* (CRIES 2012: 15). Probably those who do not continue their contracted relationship do not understand the essential characteristics of the initiative or they do not have realistic expectations from the partnership. Apart from the mentioned problems, other causes of exit could be the following: quantity of vegetables, consumer obligations, difficulties of changing the style of living (the majority of the consumers need to change their dietary and cooking habits because of the quantity and diversity of seasonal vegetables, which is attached to decreased meat consumption, to a completed diet, new recipes, etc.), financial difficulties, and lack of communication between producers and consumers. The first producer from Odorheiu Secuiesc can be described as a lucky situation because the number of those who drop out from the programme is negligible – the majority of the families have been members for several years. Of course, this lucky situation is not a ready-made gift as consumers remunerate with their fidelity the effort of the producer to accomplish more than planned with heart and hand.

*Other direct sale initiatives appear and they are associated with CSA in consumers' minds* (CRIES 2012: 15). In the last few years, several different initiatives were launched, which offer vegetable boxes through online ordering with delivery, etc. Some of them proved to be expensive and scam, while others contribute to the empowerment of local economy. Among the latter ones were mentioned the Átalvető programme from Odorheiu Secuiesc and Webkamra from Târgu-Mureş. Due to the fact that in Odorhei the Rural Development Department of Caritas is running the Átalvető programme, and the distribution place of CSA was also offered by Caritas, the population often considers CSA as part of Átalvető.

*Consumers are averse from long-term planning.* In CSA, the contract can be signed for a whole season. This means regular payments and vegetable consumption. Regarding these aspects, we can refer again to cultural differences among Eastern European societies and consolidated democracies. According to my opinion, increased uncertainty and a more difficult commitment are characteristics of this region.

*Some consumers consider the price of the tenancy too high.* The equitable price-calculating mechanism includes the costs of production, inputs, human capital, transportation, and packaging, so not the prices for kilograms of vegetables. A comparison of vegetable prices from the market or shop is irrelevant because the utilization of chemicals is completely forbidden/impossible in the programme. East–west differences are manifested also in relation to organic goods. While on the western part of the world, vegetables originated from organic farming are appreciated by consumers (high prices), in our societies, only a thin segment requires them despite that the prices are much lower than those of organic ones. During the recruit of consumers, we supposed that families with small children and the cultural elite would have an open attitude towards the initiative, and we sent our promotional materials to mothers', teachers', and actors' mailing lists in Odorheiu Secuiesc. We had no success with these groups, and one of the reasons of refusal was the price of tenancy.

### **Related to producers**

*Reticence of testing the model* for the following reasons: part of the producers are opened to producing several kinds of vegetables without using chemicals, but they are afraid of entering into contractual relationship with a number of steady consumers, are not open to making their budget and production method transparent.

*Lack of the knowledge and experience needed to get involved, to produce several kinds of vegetables in natural and planned manner* (CRIES 2012: 15): neither producers from the system disposed of prior knowledge and experience nor did the new ones who were interested in launching the programme.

*Difficulties in communication with customers* (CRIES 2012: 15): some producers are hindered by their communication abilities of staying in touch with consumers (the majority of them do not use a personal computer, Internet, or social media for this purpose).

*Lack of competencies in the field of budgets/financial planning* (CRIES 2012: 15): this is due to the fact that semi-subsistence households generally cannot be characterized by precise financial planning and organizing.

### **Conclusions, future perspectives**

This article tried to contextualize community-supported agriculture, which is conceptualized as an initiative that enhances local economy and constitutes a widespread model on the international level. The study focused on principles of the movement, its particularities compared to other direct sale systems, it

concentrated on its economic, social, environmental, and community impacts. In Romania, I took into consideration local experiences from Odorheiu Secuiesc as well as difficulties that emerged in the last few years.

Throughout the chapters, it was formulated several times that from the point of view of the movement cultural differences between the eastern part of Europe and consolidated democracies play a significant role (relation to voluntary work, long-term planning, appreciation of organic vegetables, etc.) in shaping CSA.

In western societies, this segment of agriculture can be characterized by continuous growth, which can be measured not only by the number of initiatives, producers, consumers, and involved lands but also by investments from the last period. Due to the flexibility of partnerships, the effects of global crisis had influenced them to a lesser degree.

The CSA movement in Romania goes through a pioneering phase. The successful implementation of the model results in certain important social changes<sup>18</sup> and it is conditioned by external and internal factors. Among external factors, the following can be enumerated: dominant consumption model in Romania centred around cheap products; purchasing power decreased in the last few years among the population (the main criterion of procurement being the price); penetration of big retail chains into the food market; high proportion of imported products; breaking with the socialist period of direct sale systems based on informal networks. As internal factors, the following can be counted: the method of organizing and developing partnerships and handling communication with producers and consumers (CRIES 2012: 19). Due to these factors, we assumed that the CSA model should not be imported but adapted to specific Romanian local particularities. But the experiences of the last few years convinced us that inclinations led to failure (the drop-out of consumers) and – similarly to other direct sale systems – to short-term planning. Another challenge is keeping the balance between the organization which promotes the initiative (if there is any) and the members of the partnership, who could easily cry off from duties and would not take a responsible stance towards running a partnership (there can be found examples in this regard in the last few years).

In propagating CSA in Romania, the strategy of CRIES Association was to develop an initiator network consisting of people and organizations that agree with the values and principles of the model and who are involved in the

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18 Indicators of these changes, behind the communities, number of producers and consumers, are the organizations, companies, and cooperatives which were set up in order to promote, extend the models, and also the materials, books, studies which appeared in the last two decades, the events, conferences, trainings which focus on CSA and the dissemination thereof. Among the web pages, online and offline materials, one can find not only information disseminated by non-governmental organizations but also that universities, authorities are preoccupied too with the topic and that they study it. These indicators together with the former ones justify a certain level of institutionalization of the movement (CRIES 2012: 19).

voluntary promotion of this alternative. In autumn 2014, the founders of CRIES Association established an organization, the ASAT Association, particularly for this aim, which in the next period, besides promotion, would assume the coordination of information and experience exchange of producers. In autumn 2015, the programme was launched to become a trade-mark.

At the same time, the success of CSA in Romania depends strongly on organization and communication competencies, and on the capacity of forming a trustworthy relationship between consumers and producers.

According to a survey realized in the USA, the most efficient communication of the model happens through personal interactions. These results confirm the experience of organizers not only in America but in post-socialist societies too.<sup>19</sup>

From this point of view, the accent in disseminating the partnership should be put on the consumer–producer tandem. When initiating new partnerships, it is important for active animators to receive voluntary help, assistance from experienced consumers and producers. At the same time, farm visits are important to be organized because potential consumers and producers can ascertain the functioning of the model.<sup>20</sup>

Organizations which partially or totally dedicate their activities for promoting CSA play also an important role. On the international level, Urgenci Network can be highlighted as a prominent actor. Between 2008 and 2011,<sup>21</sup> the network was a programme for the dissemination of partnerships in Eastern Europe.

In sum, the author does not think that this movement will or should become popular en masse, but according to former experiences it could play a significant role among initiatives, alternatives for enhancing local economy.

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19 According to research data, information materials do not play a significant role in the promotion of movements. This does not mean that written materials are not needed concerning the values, criteria, functioning, benefits, elements, important steps, etc. of the model but that the credibility of personal experiences seems to be more efficient than any other method. The author considers that written materials play a complementary role in spreading information about CSA, and they should be used responsibly, in electronic form.

20 The costs of these visits are not necessarily high and they can be financed by the interested participants (e.g. sending a consumer and a producer on a study visit). The travel and accommodation costs are more and more affordable because CSA is functioning in several regions of the country.

21 The activity expressed in quantitative indicators: 12 countries participated in the programme, 37 activities were implemented, 126 instances of experience exchange, 121 farm visits, 56 public meetings, approximately 1,500 consumers, and 450 producers participated. Behind this project between 2011 and 2013, a Grundtvig programme was realized (CSA4Europe) with the participation of 8 countries and 100 instances of experience exchange.

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