Community Supported Agriculture: A promising pathway for small family farms in Eastern Europe? A case study from Romania

Judith Moellers* and Brînduşa Bîrhală**

Abstract

In the search for viable rural innovations that serve both the health concerns of consumers and the economic needs of small-scale farms in Eastern Europe, this study deals with Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). In Romania, subsistence based small-scale farming is a persistent phenomenon that goes hand-in-hand with unfavourable income opportunities. Small farms face extreme difficulties in reaching formal market channels and therefore rely on subsistence and informal sales. From the consumers' point of view, this lack of market orientation leads to the need to rely on imports of food products. A market segment that is particularly underdeveloped is the market for organic products. In view of this, we are interested in factors that are important for the formation of a direct, trust-based market relationship in the form of CSA, and whether it leads to a win-win situation for farmers and consumers. The study is embedded theoretically in the concept of the solidarity economy. The analysis is based on three cases of farmers pioneering CSA in Romania by offering organic vegetables under contract to their local consumers in the Western part of the country. Our results reveal certain elements that support involvement in CSA. Consumers follow more value-based considerations; for example, they are convinced of the importance of a healthy diet and of the damaging effects of synthetic agricultural inputs. For farmers, the CSA partnership is attractive so long as it offers a price premium and market access. Both farmers and consumers compensate for market failures when participating in CSA partnerships.

Keywords: *Community Supported Agriculture, organic farming, Romania, solidarity economy, rural development*

Zusammenfassung

Solidarische Landwirtschaft: ein erfolgversprechender Ansatz für Kleinbetriebe in Osteuropa? Eine Fallstudie aus Rumänien

Der Ansatz der Solidarischen Landwirtschaft könnte im Kontext der kleinbetrieblichen Landwirtschaft in vielen osteuropäischen Ländern als mögliche tragfähige Innovation für den ländlichen Raum gesehen werden. In Rumänien ist die Subsistenzlandwirtschaft, die für die Kleinbauern mit sehr geringen Einkommensmöglichkeiten einhergeht, ein persistierendes Phänomen. Grund für den Verbleib in der Subsistenz sind die sehr eingeschränkten Möglichkeiten, formalen Marktzugang zu erlangen. Auch die Konsumenten sind betroffen, da sie auf importierte Nahrungsmittel zurückgreifen müssen. Das Marktsegment für ökologisch produzierte Lebensmittel ist hierbei besonders unterentwickelt. Vor diesem Hintergrund befasst sich dieser Beitrag mit Faktoren, die eine direkte Marktbeziehung in Form der Solidarischen Landwirtschaft begünstigen, und hinterfragt Kosten und Nutzen für die teilnehmenden Landwirte und Konsumenten. Die Analyse basiert auf drei Fällen, in denen in Westrumänien erstmals Solidarische Landwirtschaft umgesetzt wird, indem Landwirte ökologisch produziertes Gemüse direkt an ihre privaten Vertragspartner liefern. Die teilnehmenden Konsumenten zeichnen sich durch ihre wertebasierten Einstellungen aus. So sind sie beispielsweise von der Bedeutung einer gesunden Ernährung und von den schädlichen Effekten synthetischer Spritz- und Düngemittel überzeugt. Für die Landwirte spielen ökonomische Überlegungen eine größere Rolle: Solidarische Landwirtschaft bietet aus ihrer Sicht vor allem Zugang zum Markt per se sowie höhere Preise. Sowohl Landwirte als auch Konsumenten kompensieren durch die Partnerschaft Marktversagen.

Schlüsselwörter: *Solidarische Landwirtschaft, Ökolandbau, Rumänien, Solidarische Ökonomie, ländliche Entwicklung*

* Leibniz Institute of Agricultural Development in Transition Economies (IAMO), Department of External Environment for Agriculture and Policy Analysis, Theodor-Lieser-Str. 2, 06120, Halle (Saale), Germany
** Stanciova 56, Timiş, Romania

Contact: moellers@iamo.de

1 Introduction

Small-scale, subsistence based farms are highly vulnerable to the risk of poverty, and are frequently excluded from the modern global-scale trade in food products. Alongside this, consumers are increasingly alienated from the places and methods of their food production, finding themselves dependent on retail mass consumption. Issues such as the huge price volatility of agri-food products and the 'dying out' of small farms have led to significant efforts in terms of food sovereignty worldwide.

With this in mind, we present a case study on Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) as one of the many innovations that may serve bottom-up rural development in an increasingly globalised world. We concentrate on a region in which CSA is still new, Eastern Europe, and where, under certain conditions, such partnerships may offer an interesting alternative way of creating an innovative and economically viable connection between farmers and consumers. This study is motivated by the idea that CSA systems may help semi-subsistence farmers to escape from the trap of market failure and provide them with a fair income. In addition, through CSA, urban dwellers can access the healthy organic vegetables that they demand and at the same time show solidarity with the local rural population.

Our research is embedded in the theory of the solidarity economy. Empirically we base the analysis on three cases of farmers pioneering the CSA concept in Romania. The country has a large rural population with many small and subsistence based farms operating almost uncoupled from the markets. They produce in a traditional way, close to the standards for organic agriculture, but without being officially certified. At the same time, Romanian urban consumers who are interested in healthy and organic fresh food face difficulties in satisfying this demand. Such market failures may create the niche in which CSA can become an economically attractive option.

We aim at identifying factors that facilitate the formation and functioning of CSA partnerships in Romania, and ask whether such partnerships result in win-win situations. We are particularly interested in the specific characteristics of partners, as well as trust and solidarity as important facilitators of CSA. Furthermore, with the aim of assessing the attractiveness of CSA partnerships, we identify relevant costs and benefits for farmers and consumers. The research is based on the following hypotheses:

H1: CSA is attractive for a distinct group of consumers and farmers.

a The targeted consumer partners differ from average citizens in terms of their higher incomes, better educational levels, and particularly positive attitudes towards organic farm production and the rural environment in general. They have a high interest in health and nutrition-related issues.

b Farmers involved in CSA show a high willingness to adopt new knowledge and practices, and to adapt their livelihoods to serve the specific needs of their urban consumers.

H2: The motivations of consumers and producers differ in terms of their economic or value-based origin.

a For consumers, value based considerations and, in particular, the solidarity element in the partnership are the most important drivers for becoming a CSA member.

b The producers in CSA partnerships follow mainly economic considerations. Farmers involving in CSA aim at developing full-time farm employment for themselves and their families.

Overall, we expect that both the consumers and producers should be able to improve their situation in terms of their specific goals in win-win partnerships. Their economic viability and sustainability depends, however, on the persistence of market failures which currently facilitate this niche.

Our paper may be seen to be an explorative study in an under-researched area, in terms of both our geographical focus, Eastern Europe, and the in-depth information on both sides of the partnership. In particular, the producers' side was neglected in previous research (Park et al., 2014). Although it is not simple to generalise from our results, they provide a new, in-depth insight of CSA in the transitional environment of Eastern Europe, and point to important factors that influence the formation and success of CSA partnerships.

2 CSA: a brief introduction and key theoretical concepts

CSA is described in the literature as a partnership between a farmer and his/her consumers, based on a mutual commitment that consists of payments, product delivery and various ways of collaboration. In most cases, the consumers pay in advance so that the initial running costs of production are covered. Thus, the farmer will be supported for an entire season by a group of consumers to whom he/she will deliver fresh products on a weekly basis. In this manner, the risks and benefits of production are shared by both the CSA members and the farmer (Goland, 2002; Friends of the Earth, 2003; Henderson, 2007). CSA is oriented towards local production and consumption with an emphasis on the environment and organic practices (Pole and Gray, 2013). CSA originated in the 1970s in Japan and is now a global movement reaching an estimated number of more than one million consumers worldwide [1].

CSA is often presented as an attempt to resist globalised and industrial agriculture by 're-embedding' people in time and place. The link with a specific piece of land and producer allows for a feeling of community and trust that contrasts with the distant, anonymous production of food (Cone and Myhre, 2000; Bougherara et al., 2009). Henderson (2007) refers to certain values, such as cooperation and fairness, on which this particular alternative food system is based. He further points to the underlying relationship of CSA

[1] *Urgenci* is the international CSA network established in 2004 as a platform of citizens, producers and 'consom acteurs' (literally consumer-actors) engaged in local solidarity partnerships.

members with nature, and postulates that there should be "an intimate relation with our food and the land on which it is grown", "a sense of reverence for life", "appreciation for the beauty of the cultivated landscape" and "a fitting humility about the place of human beings in the scheme of nature" (Henderson, 2007). Hence it is not surprising that various forms of low-impact agriculture, together with consumers interested in organic and/or biodynamic food production, are central to the CSA concept. Furthermore, CSA implies a strong sense of the concept of 'civic agriculture' meaning "community-based agriculture and food production activities that not only meet consumer demands for fresh, safe and locally produced foods but create jobs, encourage entrepreneurship, and strengthen community identity" (Lyson, 2004).

We look at CSA as an example of the solidarity economy, where economic activity is aimed at expressing reciprocity and practical solidarity [2]. The solidarity economy is embedded in the concept of social economy which spans all levels of economic organisation from the neighbourhood to the global, and manifests itself in various forms of 'community economy' or 'self-help economy' (Pearce, 2003). It is defined as an economy based on new values and concepts that inspire forms of social innovation, self-management and alternative forms of exchange (Auinger, 2009). Social economy has been referred to as the 'third system', a system that strives for reciprocity, as opposed to the 'first system' (private and profit-oriented, aiming at efficiency) and to the 'second system' (public service-planned provision, aiming at equality) (Pearce, 2003; Restakis, 2006).

Unlike the long intellectual history of social economy which goes back to the end of the 18th century in the works of utopian socialists, solidarity economy is a relatively new concept inspired by the practice of local initiatives in Latin America in the mid-1980s (Miller, 2010). There is no easy clear-cut definition of the solidarity economy. It can be defined as a system in opposition to the dominant economic systems which are built only on the market and competition. It does not define itself as anti-market or anti-government, but is rather the result of mutual action among free people in an attempt to build new economic practices centred on human labour, knowledge and creativity, rather than capital (Fisher and Ponniah, 2003). The solidarity economy is based on the idea that human nature is more cooperative than competitive (Bowles and Gintis, 2011). A very important ingredient in the solidarity economy is the networking of initiatives and actors. The values that solidarity networks have in common are cooperation and mutuality (over competition), individual and collective well-being (over profits), economic and social equity (over social oppression), ecological responsibility, democracy and diversity (Miller, 2010).

Within the solidarity economy, CSA can be classified as a 'consumer cooperative' centred on the agricultural labour of farmers. The items of exchange are food products. The exchange between the two parties is direct and does no function according to the classical demand-supply curves, but according to a pre-established system of mutuality and trust. The demand for a certain type of product is combined with the social aim of preserving rural life and organic food production. Although not all aspects of CSA fit easily within the framework of conventional economics, we look at it as an economic arrangement in which certain values play an important role in the utility-maximising decisions of individuals. We see CSA arising as an innovative economic alternative that occupies space that was left empty by the profit oriented capitalist markets. However, our view is a critical one: we ask how far social aims, values and, in particular, the solidarity element contribute to the formation and functioning of CSA partnerships, and which other benefits and costs play a role in practice. We also raise the question of the extent to which CSA is a direct response to existing market failures.

3 Empirical evidence and conceptual framework

This section is based on a topical literature review and summarises the most important benefits and costs of CSA. These benefits and costs may be tangible or intangible, and they may be financial or linked to certain values such as solidarity, community or environment. Our conceptual framework, which is briefly introduced at the end of this section, is centred on the motivations and related benefits and costs arising for partners of CSA in Romania.

3.1 Benefits of CSA for consumers, producers and the society

Consumers are thought to combine the benefits of the desired product (a certain organic quality, health value, taste, freshness, price, etc.) with value related benefits that arise, for example, from their concerns about the environment, or from the wish to buy local or to reconnect to the rural environment (e.g. Perry and Franzblau, 2010). Benefits may arise from a (positive) change in their relationship with farmers, with land and with their communities (Flora and Bregendahl, 2012). Furthermore, health and knowledge are expected to increase (Carolan, 2011). For the US, where most of the available CSA studies were conducted, Cone and Myhre (2000) find that freshness and local and organic production are important attributes of the products that attract consumers; health is only of medium importance. Similarly to many other studies, they confirm that price plays a smaller role for consumers (see also Pole and Gray, 2013). Environmental concerns are of high importance for US consumers (Cone and Myhre, 2000) and the same is true for French CSA consumers (Bougherara et al., 2009). Other values sought by consumers may be community or solidarity (Feagan and Henderson, 2009). Empirical evidence shows that community is not always the top priority for consumers (e.g. Pole and Gray, 2013; Cone and Myhre, 2000). Personal benefits are to be expected from

[2] There are various other theoretical options for the analysis of CSA. The social capital perspective would have been appealing, but our empirical case does not include sufficient data since the researched CSA initiatives are too new. The methodological apparatus of the network-actor theory seemed too speculative in our case.

the possibility of visiting and working on the farm. Children especially get access to a valuable form of education about the origin of food, and for adults the most important benefit may arise from emotional values such as stress relief or life enrichment (e.g. Chen, 2013 for CSA members in China). Yet, volunteering on the farm and participating in farm events is mostly seen as a less important benefit (e.g. Pole and Gray, 2013; Feagan and Henderson, 2009). Nonetheless, the literature suggests that social capital is one of the factors that attracts and keeps members in CSA partnerships (Flora and Bregendahl, 2012).

In general, producers' behaviour regarding direct marketing strategies is under-researched (Park et al., 2014). By getting involved in CSA, farmers can expect a number of economic benefits including an upfront payment, market access, control over pricing, stable and fair incomes, low production risks and no market competition (Perry and Franzblau, 2010). The survival of the farm may be secured and organic farming comes with the promise of maintaining or improving the soil quality and thus the value of the farm. Social benefits may lie in networking activities and in the CSA solidarity community. Among the rare empirical evidence with regard to the benefits for farmers, a case study by Flora and Bregendahl (2012) finds that the most important motivation of farmers for joining CSA is the financial advantages. Expected benefits related to social capital are the second most important driver of joining CSA, followed by cultural/value conviction reasons, an expected increase in human capital, and – with little importance – environmental and political reasons.

Also, society as a whole benefits from CSA partnerships. Here the environmental effects of organic, local production are particularly relevant. Furthermore, CSA partnerships often support the local identity and rural development. Some CSA partnerships donate excess product to the poor or have measures aiming at social inclusion (Flora and Bregendahl, 2012; Henderson, 2007).

3.2 Costs of CSA for consumers and producers

Expected costs for the producers are mostly connected with adapting their farm activities to the needs of a CSA partnership. For example, initial investment costs relate to the start-up of organic farming, the need for drip irrigation etc. Organic farming practices usually require an intensification of farm work. On the management side, a need for thorough book keeping is a must. The direct marketing comes with extra efforts with regard to packaging and the weekly transportation of the produce to the pick-up point. This, together with the necessity of opening the farm for visitors and frequent customer contacts, might lead to a significant change in the personal life-style of the farm family.

Like all consumers, CSA members are not automatically pleased with what they obtain for their money. By making a commitment for a whole season, consumers not only risk investing in a crop failure, but also (partly) give up the convenience of the wide range of products that conventional food sales channels offer. The limited choice of products is clearly seen as a disadvantage of CSA (Cone and Myhre, 2000). Both the quality and quantity of vegetables is unpredictable to a certain degree, but, according to Flora and Bregendahl (2012), this is not among the main reasons why consumers stop their membership. Another disadvantage of CSA is inconvenience, in particular the inconvenience of picking up the share on a weekly basis at a certain time and place (Flora and Bregendahl, 2012). Less important but still an issue is the fact of being confronted with a box of vegetables each week, the contents of which are not selected by the consumers themselves. The box may contain unknown types of vegetables, and it may be seen as difficult to store, process and cook the products. Overall, CSA consumers are confronted with a substantial change in their routines (Cone and Myhre, 2000; Flora and Bregendahl, 2012). Almost all available studies confirm that consumers are comparatively well off. Despite this, it seems that financial costs are an important factor in the decision to stop membership (Flora and Bregendahl, 2012).

3.3 Study framework

The costs and benefits of CSA participation form the core of our interest. We link them to value-based motivations stemming from the solidarity economy concept introduced in Section 2. Our approach is a holistic, case study based and explorative one. This is explained by the novelty of the appearance of CSA in Eastern Europe. To the best of our knowledge, our case study CSAs are the first partnerships of this kind in Romania,

The data for our research stem from an empirical study conducted in and around the Romanian city of Timisoara in 2011. The subscription CSA initiatives that are the focus of our study have emerged in an area of Romania that is known to be comparatively well-developed and progressive [3]. The study looks at two distinct sets of actors: the producers and consumers of a CSA scheme. The data refer to three CSA groups founded in 2009 and 2010 with farms located in the villages of Cuvin, Fititeaz and Belint. The consumer partners are from the nearby city of Timisoara. The CSA members were interviewed in 2011. For about half of them, this was their first season, while the rest had joined in 2009 or 2010. The survey tools were designed specifically for the respective target groups. The consumers' survey tool 4 was applied to the

[3] The most common way of classifying CSA models is to look at who initiated the project. If farmers propose the partnership, CSA can be classified as 'subscription CSA' because the consumers are the ones responding to the offer and subscribe. If the partnership is sought by a group of consumers, then it falls into the 'shareholder CSA' category: consumers organise themselves, contract a farmer, and attract more members into the scheme. 'Multi-farm CSAs' have been developed to cater for consumers' demands while relieving a single farmer from having to produce a large a variety of crops. (Henderson ,2007).

[4] The questionnaires related to three topical areas:
1. the consumer household profile, including gender, age, education, occupation, income of the household members, and respondents' connection to the countryside;
2. the behaviour in respect of the purchase of foodstuffs; and
3. the CSA partnership, including issues like the motivation to enter the partnership, the level of satisfaction, and the degree of involvement in the partnership.

entire population of 163 CSA members, leading to 40 completed questionnaires (24.5 % of the consumers). Farmers' interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner. All interviews were conducted in Romanian and translated into English afterwards. We followed a mixed methods approach. In addition to the survey tools we relied on participatory observation and qualitative insights for example for assessing the interaction between farmers and consumers. In addition, three expert interviews were conducted with:

1. the officer responsible for organic production from the local agricultural administration;
2. the president of the local NGO who initiated the CSA activities, the Centre of Resources for Solidary and Ethical Initiatives (CRIES); and
3. one former consumer member who was much engaged in the early phase of CSA in the region. Data on vegetable prices in various local outlets were gathered.

In our analysis, we assess costs and benefits of CSA for farmers and consumers as null (0), medium (-/+) or large (--/++). Medium and large effects can be either positive (benefits) or negative (costs). Since this assessment is based on rankings, ratings and qualitative statements and observations, a fully harmonised approach is not possible. However, if a variable with a five-scale rating is the basis of assessment, large effects result from the highest category in the rating, medium effects from the second highest category etc. For rankings we used a weighting system in which a first rank receives a weight of ten, followed by second and third ranks both with weights of five. All other ranks are treated equally and are weighted with one. These weights are applied to the individual ranks for the subsequent calculation of aggregated ranks. In addition, qualitative statements are used to support or complement our assessments. Many of the cost and benefit assessments are derived from subjective perceptions of the farmers and consumers. This is justified by the fact that such 'psychological' factors that include personal expectations, experience and values are decisive. Farmers make entrepreneurial decisions that clearly rely on subjective and often biased perceptions (Arenius and Minniti, 2005). With regard to consumers we calculate, for example, price differences between CSA products and local market prices; yet, when consumers are not price sensitive (Pole and Gray, 2013) such 'hard' indicators become meaningless compared to the value system that influences the consumers' perceptions and economic decisions.

4 Romania's Farming Sector: A brief overview of facts related to CSA formation

The Romanian agricultural sector has a strong dualistic farm structure (Alexandri, 2007): in 2011, small farms operating on 1 to 10 hectares represented 93 % of total farms but only 32 % of the agricultural area, while large farms between 10 and 100 hectares represented less than 6 %, but operated around 16 % of the land. The largest part of the arable land (52 %) was used by farms over 100 ha, which represent just 1 % of the total number of farms (AE, 2011). The per capita incomes of the Romanian rural population are very low (3,900 Euros in 2009); they lie around 30 % below average urban incomes in Romania, according to Eurostat. The most important components of the income portfolio in rural areas are earnings from agriculture (21 %) and the value of products for self-consumption (48 %) (Martins and Spendlingwimmer, 2009).

The main categories of crops cultivated in Romania are cereals, oilseed plants, vegetables, potatoes, pulses, and sugar beet. Vegetable and fruit production, the typical products of CSA partnerships, uses about 5.1 % of the arable land (this percentage includes land used for producing potatoes) (Martins and Spendlingwimmer, 2009). Romania is one of the top vegetable producers in the EU [5].

The average yield per hectare of vegetables in Romania is presently only half of that in Western European states (Zahiu and Toma, 2010). There is a general severe lack of modern technological endowment and machinery (Gosa, 2008). Although synthetic inputs have become increasingly accessible to Romanian farmers over the past twenty years, traditional farming that uses natural fertiliser as a main input is still widespread and much of the production is close to organic standards (Simon and Borowski, 2007). Certified organic agriculture represents a relatively new and emerging chapter in Romanian farming. In 2010, 3,155 operators were registered as organic, of whom 2,533 were producers (the rest being processors). The size of arable land cultivated under a certified ecological agriculture regime is growing continuously, although it makes up only a small share (around 2 %) of the total land (Kilcher et al., 2011). Most of the certified Romanian organic farms are large (> 100 ha) and oriented towards export [6].

Small farmers, instead of obtaining official certification, often advertise their products in the local market as 'traditional' or 'natural'. This results from the costs of certification which prevent many Romanian farmers from becoming organic producers. Furthermore, small farmers often do not have the capacity and cannot comply with hygiene regulations (Sachse, 2011).

The typical small semi-subsistence farm in Romania is known to be severely constrained from entering markets due to their high transaction costs, their inability to meet certain standards, and their tendency to consume own-produced food instead of selling it (Davidova et al., 2010). 34 % produce

[5] Romania was the fifth largest vegetable producer in the EU in in 2007. Fruit and vegetables are the second most exported agricultural goods produced in Romania after animals (and animal products).

[6] Romania's exports to other EU member states and non-EU trade partners are consistently increasing. The value of exports of organic produce grew by 150 % in 2011, reaching 250 million Euros. The main export products, usually raw materials, are cereals, vegetables, wine, tea, honey and berries, with the demand from the trade partners higher than Romania can currently supply (Agra Europe, 2011).

mainly for own consumption, and 35 % produce mainly for direct sales (Martins and Spendlingwimmer, 2009). Small stands along the street or in local markets are often the only available marketing option aside from selling to middlemen at low prices. Cooperatives that would seem a reasonable alternative are not favoured by the majority of farmers and not widespread, even more than 20 years since the start of the transition.

Romanian consumers are among the most vulnerable in the EU-27 with a low level of confidence and knowledge as consumers, and feeling insufficiently protected by consumer law (TNS Opinion and Social, 2011). Food items make up the largest share of a household's expenditures (44 % in 2008, EC, 2010). Fruit and vegetables are relatively low priced (65 % of the EU-27 average in 2009), but the availability of organic vegetables is very low. Overall, the Romanian market for organic products represents less than 1 % of the market for consumption goods, and up to 70 to 80 % of the organic goods are imported. This high share of imports is explained by the fact that there is a high demand for organic raw material from processors abroad and thus it does not remain in the country (see Footnote 6). Therefore, the sale of organic products within the organic niche market of Romania relies on imports (and, partly, re-imports) of processed food. Fresh organic produce is hardly found on Romanian shelves (Sachse, 2011). Most organic products are sold in Romania in the general retail trade (80 %) or in the local marketplaces (Kilcher et al., 2011).

5 Results

Whether CSA can be a viable innovation for small farmers in Romania depends first and foremost on the costs and benefits of the partnership. While we assume that for farmers an increase in net incomes is the most important criterion by which to assess benefits, consumers might judge more along certain moral values. Based on our quantitative and qualitative results, i.e. mainly ratings derived from the questionnaires and additional statements of the respondents, we assess costs and benefits as null (0), medium (-/+) or large (--/++).

5.1 The CSA farmers

The three farmers operated in a partnership with urban dwellers (most of whom were from the city of Timisoara). They worked under the umbrella of the *Association for the Support of Traditional Agriculture* (ASAT) which was initiated in 2009 by CRIES, a local NGO with the main aim of promoting social economy in Romania. CRIES was the main promoter of the idea and also took over responsibility for attracting consumers. The ASAT charter formulates basic principles of the CSA according to which the farmers should maintain biodiversity and a healthy environment, guarantee nourishing and healthy products, take care of transparency regarding costs and price, involve no intermediaries, and regularly inform the consumers about the state of crop growing and the problems the farm is facing. The convenience of consumers is not an aim, but their genuine solidarity is sought. The partnership relies on mutual goodwill and trust and has no mechanisms of enforcement.

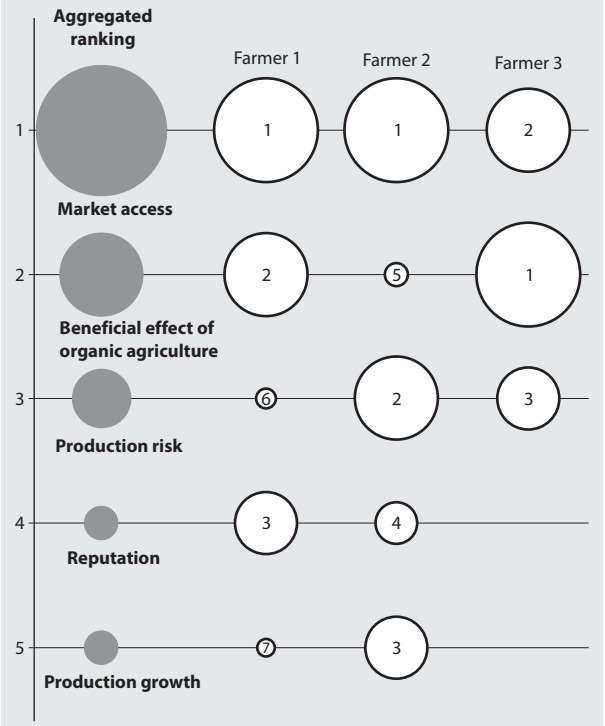
Prospective consumers have to contact CRIES and sign the ASAT contracts in winter on a first-come-first-served basis. The next step is the financial contribution the consumers make to the partnership in the form of an up-front payment. The annual cost for the entire season for a consumer-partner is calculated to support the costs that the farmer will have at the onset of the season, transport and packaging costs, a fair salary for the farm family, as well as health insurance contributions.

The three farmers, Farmer 1 (ASAT member since 2009, from Belint village), Farmer 2 (ASAT member since 2010, from Cuvin village) and Farmer 3 (ASAT member since 2010, from Firiteaz village) were all full-time vegetable farmers. No absolutely clear pattern of a 'typical ASAT farmer' could be identified. Of the three, two had very small farms of less than two hectares and one had a slightly bigger farm (Farmer 1 with almost six hectares); two were male and one female (Farmer 2); all were in their forties or fifties. Their farm experience was between six and 20 years. Only Farmer 1 had officially registered his farm and was in the process of organic certification. A few common features seem interesting: none of the three had a real rural background, but they came to farming through marriage or the decision to move to the countryside. They were all relatively well-educated with secondary or high school studies, and saw themselves as entrepreneurial farmers, with a desire to go beyond subsistence farming. They were very active in their communities, e.g. as a member of the church congregation, clubs, or even a local political party (but none of them was a member of a farmers' organisation) [7].

The assessment of farmers' benefits confirmed the importance of the economic advantages of CSA. The most important reason for becoming an ASAT producer was **access to a (stable) market (++)** (Figure 1). Small producers in Romania face considerable market barriers. Farmer 2 explained that *"going to the market with the type of vegetables I produce (they looked the same before) I did not have the same success which the merchants with perfect-looking vegetables had."* All three ASAT farmers appeared to be satisfied with the reported increase in incomes (even though they could not describe it in absolute numbers) and were confident to continue as ASAT farmers. Farmer 1 explained that "*this year ASAT brought me higher earnings. It is an issue of perspective and more certainty.*" The partnership helped to avoid farm income being subjected to price fluctuations because no middlemen were involved and a fair price was part of the CSA contract. **Lowering the risk of production (++)** was the third most important reason for becoming an ASAT partner (Figure 1). It was ranked as very important by Farmers 2 and 3, but as not so important

[7] Cone and Myhre (2000), who researched eight CSA farms in the US, found that none of the CSA farmers in their sample had farmed as adults before starting small scale-production of vegetables. Instead they were all college educated and had experience in non-farm occupations. Further, all farmers wanted the CSA farm to fully support their family's lives.

by Farmer 1. However, even Farmer 1 admitted that *"the market is full of risks, while here [in the partnership] I know from November on how to plan my growing season."* The wish to **increase the production (0)** may be seen in relation to the entrepreneurial spirit and full-time farming orientation of the farmers. It was fifth in the ranking of reasons (Figure 1). In terms of farm size, only Farmer 1 increased his farm by renting in five hectares. Farmer 3 reported having plans to buy in one hectare of land.



Source: Own data.

Note: Farmers ranked up to 12 prescribed reasons according to the importance they had for their decision to become ASAT farmers. The figure shows the most important ones. The left column of bubbles depicts the aggregated results for all three farmers. For the aggregation, we weighted the reasons ranked as first with a weight of ten, second and third ranks were weighted with five, and all other reasons with one. Individual rankings were simply weighted according to their (inverted) rank, whereby the smallest bubble was used for all ranks of five and higher: bubbles are labelled with the individual rank.

Figure 1
Ranking of important reasons of farmers for starting CSA activities

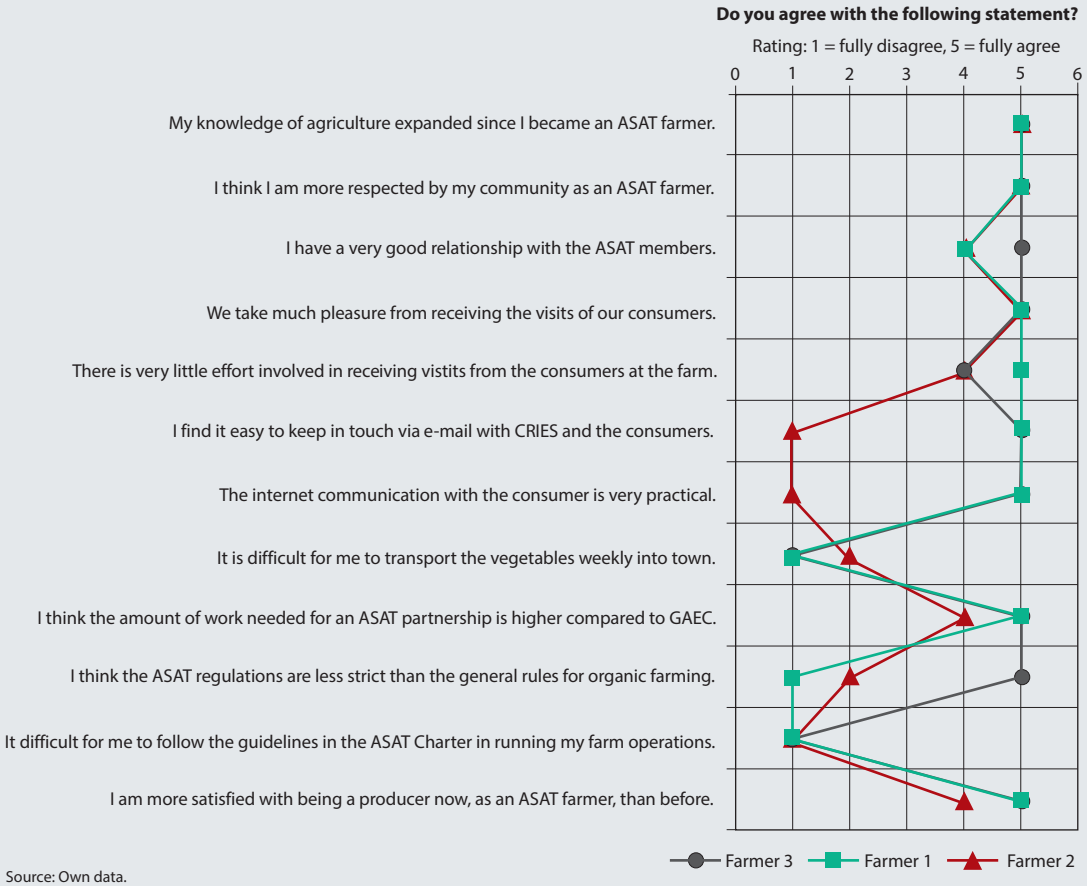
Another, more implicit economic advantage arising from CSA partnerships is that the farmers receive a price that includes a **premium for organic production**. For this **no costly formal organic certification (+)** is needed. This saves a significant amount of money (and bureaucratic efforts). Farmers ranked these benefits as not highly important in their decision to join ASAT, but Farmer 3 mentioned the avoidance of certification bureaucracy among his top five reasons. With regard to ASAT regulations compared to the general rules for organic farming, two farmers thought they were comparable and only Farmer 1 thought that ASAT rules were clearly less strict. Despite this, since the price premium was indeed significant (see Footnote 9) and the rules were at least formally less strict, we still assess this benefit's importance as medium.

Besides pure economic reasoning, the motivation to be part of a CSA partnership may also be value-related or linked to desired personal developments. All three ASAT farmers were clearly concerned about soil contamination through the excessive use of synthetic chemicals practised by conventional agriculture. Expected **positive effects of organic or traditional agriculture (++)** were the second most important reasons for becoming ASAT farmers (Figure 1). Only Farmer 2 was not very interested in this aspect.

The expectation of higher **reputation and trust (+)** in their communities was ranked as the fourth most important reason to take on the ASAT system. For Farmers 1 and 2 this reason was among the top five motivations (Figure 1). Although the **improvement of their farming skills (+)** was not a high priority for the ASAT farmers, all three fully agreed that their professional agricultural knowledge expanded, especially through organised visits to other CSA farms (Figure 2). There was no significant indication that the **business skills improved (0)** through the partnership. Farmer 1 admitted *"I cannot keep my own books."*

The benefits that have certainly materialised for the farmers have to be seen in relation to the costs of participating in the CSA partnership. **Investments related to the partnership (-)** were needed to prepare for the organic-type of production. However, two out of the three farmers reported having made no significant investments that were directly related to the partnership. All reported investments were financed with private money and the burden might be assessed as small (though not nil). Another typical change is the **intensification of farm work (--)**. The methods of production employed for complying with the ASAT charter are, in fact, the labour-intensive methods used in organic agriculture (Figure 2). *"The work became much more intensive, for example, we hoe now three to four times a year, and we used to do it just twice per year before."* and "*the workload is maybe 10 times bigger."* (Farmer 1). The **marketing efforts and time that is needed to deal with the consumers** were low (0). One reason was that farmers at that time did not need to invest in attracting ASAT consumers as CRIES was the active promoter of the concept. Overall, the time needed for marketing did not seem to be perceived as a significant burden (Figure 2). All three ASAT farmers declared that they appreciated receiving visits from ASAT consumers and considered the effort of this as insignificant (Figure 2).

In a nutshell, we find that the benefits of the three CSA full-time farmers are mainly rooted in the fact that CSA compensates for the lack of market access of semi-subsistence farms. This clearly supports our hypothesis H2b and also points to the fact that the direct partnership with consumers arises as a response to existing market failures. The benefits (that also include a lowered risk, positive effects on the land and environment, heightened personal reputation of the farmers, and the possibility of receiving a price premium for organic products without certification) outweigh the reported costs. The biggest cost for the farmer has to be seen in the higher input of family farm labour. Regarding the



Source: Own data.

Note: Farmers rated different statements related to their participation in the ASAT CSA. The Likert-like rating scale starts at 1 for "fully disagree" and ends at 5 for "fully agree".

GAEC = Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions

Figure 2
Important benefits and costs of CSA activities

postulated hypotheses H1b, our results confirm that new knowledge and organic production methods were adopted by the farmers, and that farm families were willing to increase the input of family labour to achieve this. Farmers had first-hand knowledge about urban lifestyles and seemed to be very open about welcoming urban visitors on their farm.

5.2 The CSA consumers

The consumer data refer to 40 ASAT partners and their 103 household members. About half of the CSA partners were only in their first season, while the other half were in their second or third season. The average age of the household members was 33 years, ranging between one and 78 years; compared to county averages, this showed a larger young and mature segment and a much lower percentage of population over 65 years (Institutul National de Statistica, 2011). This is also true for a comparison with the urban population of Timisoara (Nadolu et al., 2010). More than half of the households had children under fifteen years old. While at the county level the share of graduate and post-graduate level education is below 20 % (Institutul National de Statistica, 2011), more than 80 % of CSA household members had completed graduate or post-graduate studies. Most of the consumers (40 %) in employment were working in ser-vices, with another 25 % in management and academia, but only a very small segment of respondents (7 %) was employed in industry, which at 28 % was the second largest employment sector in Timis county. Not all of the employed respondents offered information about their income, but the average obtained was 532 Euros [8] per month, clearly above the county average of 365 Euros, but slightly below the 2007 average income in Timisoara (which was 558 Euros four years before our survey, according to Nadolu et al. (2010). Incomes varied substantially between households, with the lowest income being only 120 Euros and the highest 2,380 Euros.

Cone and Myhre (2000) present results that show that CSA consumers have a special connection to the rural environment: for example, they grew up on farms, visited often, or have a garden at home. Indeed, over a quarter of our respondents spent their childhood in the countryside. On average, they visit the countryside 4.2 times per year, the majority because they have relatives there (64 %).

Consumers' habits when purchasing food are another important aspect with regard to CSA membership. All

[8] 2,233 RON (Romanian New Leu) converted at the exchange rate of 4.2 RON per Euro, valid when the study was conducted.

consumers were clearly concerned about the origin of the food they purchased, and most of them to a high degree; they also checked the label and the ingredient content of processed food (Figure 3). Consumer behaviour changed after joining the partnership. The number of trips to the usual outlets (marketplaces and supermarkets) reduced. A small proportion of the consumers had never bought vegetables at the supermarket before becoming ASAT members; afterwards, 74 % of respondents said they did not buy vegetables there. There was also an overall decrease in the number of trips to the town market. Outlets specialising in ecological food were not available in Timisoara.

In addition, after joining ASAT the importance of criteria regarding which food was chosen changed. The rating of a number of criteria (from one to five) showed that freshness, health and the ingredients remained almost unchanged in their high (above four) importance. Seasonality, the origin and the organic nature of production received a higher (above four) rating in the 'after ASAT' situation. The importance of the price decreased from 3.24 to 2.97. Health was the most important criterion in both the before and after CSA situation, but its share increased significantly from 28 % to 43 %.

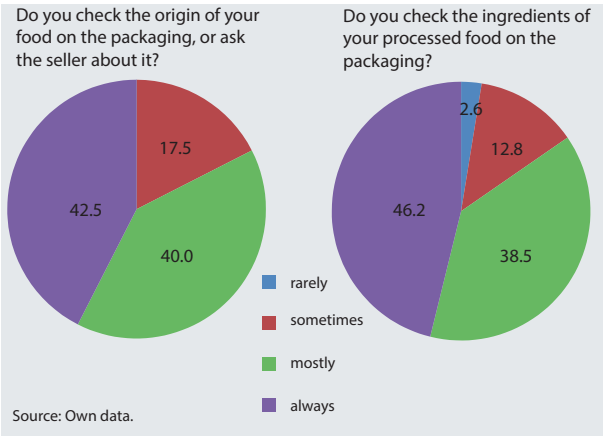
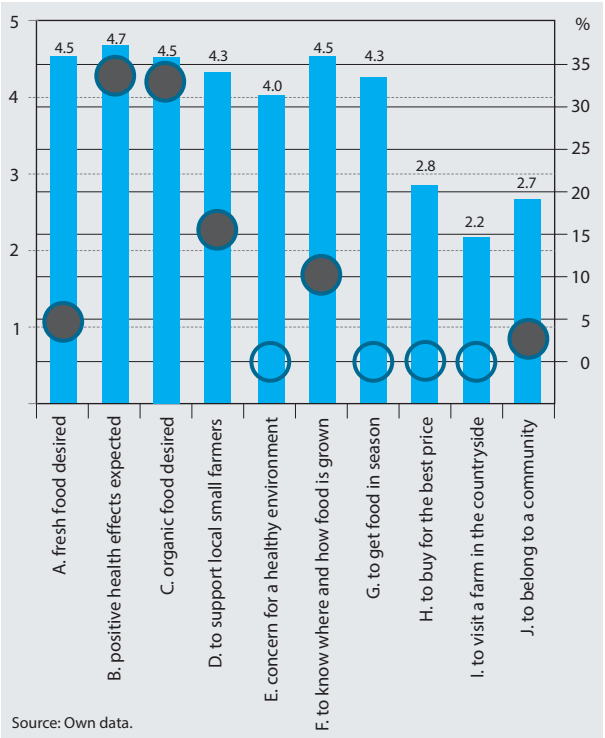


Figure 3
Food purchasing behaviour of CSA consumers (answers in %)

Some of the benefits for the consumers may be economic ones, such as a price that is lower than that for certified organic products but, more than that, CSA is expected to serve certain values that the consumers follow. Among them are a healthy diet, solidarity with the rural people, environmental issues, etc.

Having **access to organic products at a reasonable price** (+) constituted the core economic benefit that consumers could expect. Since the only alternative choices were conventional products, the ASAT price was, however comparatively high. [9] Hence, the majority of consumers did not see ASAT membership as an opportunity to save money, some even saw the prices as critical: "*The idea of the partnership is a good one, but (…) for us the contract was not advantageous, we paid too much for what we received.*" Yet, overall the importance of price for food purchases was low in the group of consumers and even decreased after they joined ASAT: while 10 % mentioned price as their most important criterion for food purchases before they entered the partnership, not a single consumer chose price as the most important criterion after becoming a member (Figure 4). Therefore, it might be argued that the benefit for the consumer arose simply from the access to organic vegetables and less from the price. Consumers also benefitted from the fact that the price was fixed throughout the year and price risk was lowered.



Note:The figure shows columns for averages of Likert-scale ratings. Each reason was rated alongside its relevance for the consumers where 5 reflects high relevance and 1 no relevance. In addition, consumers stated their most important reason from the prescribed list of reasons. Circles show the percentage share of consumers who rated the reason as most important.

Figure 4
Reasons for CSA consumers to join ASAT

The **concern for healthy and organic produce** (++) was top on the list for consumers giving reasons for joining ASAT. One third of the respondents pointed out that their first reason for joining ASAT was to get healthy products, while another third wanted organic products (Figure 4). Most of the consumers were happy with the quality of products that they received. One consumer commented: "*Now that I ate these products and remembered the taste of my childhood, my body refuses chemically nurtured food ...*" More than 70 % believed that their family's health had improved since they became ASAT members. A change towards a more **healthy diet** (+)

[9] A price comparison with conventional products showed that the differences were significant. Single products of Farmer 1, for example, are 100 % more expensive than in the market for conventional vegetables. However, if we looked at the price of the overall shares, meaning the mixed product baskets, consumers paid a maximum 53 % more than conventional market prices.

cannot be easily judged. Still, a positive effect could be expected, even if only 11.5 % of respondents agreed that they had improved their knowledge about nutrition.

The environmental advantages of organic agriculture and the smaller **environmental footprint (+)** was an issue for a number of consumers. However, although this factor is assessed as only marginally positive, it does not appear to be that relevant since, for example, it was never rated as the most important (Figure 4). This differs from results for Western environments (see Section 3). More important is the fact that through the ASAT partnership a **direct link to the farmer, the farm, and rural areas (+)** was established. Half of the respondents agreed that their relationship with the producer was a personal one. This is important if solidarity and community are important aims, but also if consumers have a strong interest in the origin of their food. Knowing the origin of their food was the most important reason for joining ASAT for 10 % of consumers (Figure 4).

The wish to make a positive impact **on regional development by supporting a local farmer (++)** was of greater importance than might be expected. Seventy-six percent of the respondents thought that they were making a difference by supporting a local small farmer through their consumption. The desire to support small producers was the third most important reason why respondents joined ASAT (Figure 4). Despite this, involvement with the farm was low and direct benefits seemed rather small; nonetheless, a minimum level of involvement was important to keep the system working through the necessary trust-based relationship.

Networking with other CSA members (0) was at a very low level. Within the ASAT group, consumers did not socialise much. Therefore, the benefit from networking was only a theoretical one at this stage. This result is in line with Hayden and Buck (2012) findings in their recent US case study where even after seven years a committed core group was not realised. This also corresponds to the rather low rating given to the benefit of belonging to a community as a reason for joining the CSA in Figure 4.

The initial financial contribution (0) did not present a large cost for the consumers, [10] a fact that is also reflected in the relatively low relevance of price on food purchase habits. The **time invested (0)** in participating in meetings, picking up boxes, and volunteering was also not considered a big cost of the partnership. The majority of consumers (59 %) did not find it inconvenient to pick up their share. However, 80 % of the respondents were not happy about the obligation to pick up a share on a certain day.

The consumers who get involved in CSA face considerable costs and risks. First they are not completely sure about what they receive for their money, either in terms of diversity, quantity or quality. We find that the **limited choice of produce (0)** was not a significant issue for most consumers: 87 % declared themselves satisfied or very satisfied with the variety of products in their weekly share. Farmers reported receiving only occasional and minor complaints. Consumers also seemed to **accept non-standard products (0)** without many complaints, although single complaints (e.g. about the size of spring carrots and potatoes) were reported.

Summing up, in line with many other studies (e.g. Cone and Myhre, 2000; Chen, 2013; Pole and Gray, 2013), Romanian CSA consumers were educated to a relatively high level; their income was above the county average, but close to the average urban income of Timisoara. However, they were not price sensitive with regard to their food purchases and clearly showed a high interest in health issues and organic production. Thus our postulated H1a was confirmed. The benefits from CSA seem to arise more from the sheer access to products of the desired quality, and much less from the price.

5.3 Trust and solidarity in the CSA partnership

Solidarity was shown to be a relevant element in the relationship. Not only did consumers believe that their support of a local farmer indeed made a difference, but 15 % of the respondents claimed that this was their most important reason for joining ASAT (Figure 4). One consumer explicitly commented about getting involved: "*first of all out of social solidarity. By contributing with my money I wanted the farmer to have a decent salary and social security; we share the risk in the case of calamity.*" But as a former core-group member explained "*The social aspect held a lower level of importance for the majority.*" For the farmers, solidarity was an important element as they needed to rely on the consumers to regularly pick up and pay for their shares. Farmer 3 stated that "*the people who are always late, or forget about picking up their produce, maybe we shouldn't renew the partnership with them. If the share always remains there for a few days, that means they have no respect for my work.*"

The issue of trust is crucial in a solidarity economy partnership where much relies on goodwill and there are no strong enforcement mechanisms. Consumers start with investing in an idea that is new to them. Indeed, some of the benefits that consumers get out of the CSA partnership are to a high degree trust based (e.g. the health value or organic quality of food). A former core-group member explained that: *"it is rather difficult to check on the producer. One has to rely on trust. Of course we could always make an unexpected visit, but I don't think it ever happened."* Ninety percent of the respondents trusted the farmers they are partners with, and 69 % trusted the umbrella organisation CRIES. Sixty percent admitted that their level of trust in the partnership was higher because CRIES was a well-known organisation. In their turn, the farmers had to trust that, after their initial financial contribution, the consumers would continue to pick up the vegetables and pay the agreed sum per share. In the field, we observed that, during the deliveries of vegetables, farmers had to call consumers who had not appeared to find out the reasons for their absence, but overall reliability was high.

The degree of collaboration, trust and solidarity is a core feature of CSA. It is also used to classify CSA partnerships (Pole and Gray, 2013; Feagan and Henderson, 2009). At one end of the spectrum, the 'ideal', collaborative model involves a spirit of community and solidarity between the partners. At

[10] 400 RON (93 Euros) per consumer per season for Farmers 2 and 3; 100 RON (23 Euros) for Farmer 1.

the other end, we find economy driven, instrumental models with no community elements and less trust enabling the transactions. Our assessment of the Romanian partnerships shows a partnership that started with high ideals promoted by CRIES, but in reality the actual engagement of consumers remained at a very low level (notwithstanding the fact that solidarity motivated their membership) and the partnerships are 'subscription CSAs' that depend on economic success for the farmer. We conclude that solidarity with rural people and the local CSA farmer is an important aspect in the considerations of consumers; however, it is not the most important one as stated by H2a.

6 Conclusions

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) may be seen to be a viable rural innovation for Eastern Europe especially in settings in which it addresses situations of persistent market failures. In Romania, there are two essential push factors that pave the way for successful CSA initiatives. First, very low income prospects and missing social safety nets keep up to a million small farms in Romania at the subsistence level. These farms are widely excluded from the markets since large retailers such as supermarket chains rely solely on large producers. Second, the market for organic products (especially fresh organic products) is severely underdeveloped in Romania. The limited organic products on offer are mostly imported and concentrated in large retailers. Organic agriculture in Romania becomes a conundrum of demand and supply: there is not enough demand to encourage local supply and the Romanian production of organic agricultural products is exported directly to foreign consumers who are willing to pay many times its costs of production. In general, Romania exports organic raw materials and imports processed foodstuffs for the few Romanian consumers interested in this niche market.

In ASAT, producers and consumers collaborate in an alternative (i.e. solidarity) economic model. For the farmers, the opportunity of accessing a secure market in which prices are directly linked with their production costs and a fair payment for their labour is very appealing. For consumers, this type of partnership opens the door to fulfilling their demand for healthy, organically produced products. Thus for both, market failures are the main drivers of CSA participation. For the farmers, the CSA allows the restricted market access, which is typical for small farms all over Eastern Europe, to be overcome. Consumers seek to get access to products that they cannot get in the market: healthy and fresh food of organic quality. Our case study shows that such partnerships can represent a win-win situation under given conditions.

The success of CSA partnerships depends on a certain type of consumer selected from the middle and higher income, educated urban population which does not consider price as the main criterion for food purchase. There are also consumers convinced of the value of a healthy diet and of the damaging effects of synthetic agricultural inputs, and who are willing to sacrifice the convenience of supermarkets in order to get fresh food directly from the farm. Clearly, the absolute number of these consumers in a region limits the number of possible partnerships. For small farmers, the CSA partnership is attractive so long as it offers a favourable price and risk reduction compared to other market alternatives. 'Traditional agriculture' practised by many subsistence farms does not allow farmers to access the price premium of the organic products market. The ASAT partnerships, however, reward this type of agriculture without formal certification. Yet, in accordance with the limited number of consumer-partners, CSA is an option for only a few farms. Our case study pointed to certain features that seem to support farmers becoming involved: their entrepreneurial personality; a background which offers insights into the urban environment; and a high degree of commitment and social interaction. The farm size plus the famer's age and gender, or other farm and household related variables, seemed less decisive.

We analysed CSA as one form of the solidarity economy. We could confirm that solidarity is a relevant element of the motivation on the consumers' side. Despite this, the interest in and willingness for personal engagement on the farm is rather low. While the organisation that initiated the partnerships intended to inspire consumers to organise themselves and form 'shareholder CSAs', each around a local farmer, the result was 'subscription CSAs' with a very low involvement of consumers.

Concerning policy recommendations, we see CSA as an interesting solution applicable to other Eastern European regions in which small farms are faced with restricted market access. However, it is only a solution for a few. For the majority of farmers, it is of high importance to find other ways to cooperate in order to overcome market failures and access regular markets.

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Community Supported Agriculture: A promising pathway for small family farms in Eastern Europe? A case study from Romania. Article. Full-text available.Â This study aimed to examine the level of knowledge about community-supported agriculture (CSA) (a form of direct marketing of produce) and perceived benefits and barriers among farmers and consumers. Twenty consumers and 12 farmers in Victoria, Australia, were interviewed. Knowledge of CSA was limited. Why are small family farms important for the environment and sustainable future? Thanks to the management focused on the highest efficiency, family farms often achieve...Â Over 500 million family farms in the world currently supply more than 56 percent of food, feed and fiber [1]. And they are as diverse as they are numerous. Family farmers range from smallholders and medium scale farmers, to peasants, indigenous peoples, traditional communities, pastoralists and many other groups.Â 6. Respect for ecosystems and support of biodiversity. 7. Connection of rural communities with their natural resources. 8. Preservation of traditional knowledge. 9. Decrease of greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture and climate change mitigation. Common Agriculture Policy of the European Union Central and Eastern Europe Commonwealth of Independent States European Bank for Reconstruction and Development Europe and Central Asia Ease of Doing Business Index European Union Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations Foreign direct investment Gross Domestic Product International Corporation International Labor Organization International Monetary Fund Minsk Tractor Works (Belarus) Organization for Economic Co-operation.Â Small and medium-scale private farms have replaced large-scale collective farms as theÂ There is reasonable evidence that policy reform inuences investment in farm machinery. Legions of seasonal workers from Eastern Europe who harvest crops from Spain to Sweden canâ€™t get in, forcing a rapid rethink of how to secure food at Europeâ€™s farms. Romanian workers on an asparagus farm in Brandenburg, Germany.Credit...Gordon Welters for The New York Times. Supported by. Continue reading the main story.Â PARIS â€” When Europe tightened its borders to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, Franceâ€™s biggest farmers sounded an alarm: The workers they rely on from other countries to harvest much of the nationâ€™s food could no longer make the trip. The concern is widespread. In Britain, farmers are struggling to find people to pick raspberries and potatoes. Part of Germanyâ€™s prized white asparagus crop risks rotting in the ground.