

Solidarity Economy Briefs: COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE (CSA)

The U.S. Solidarity Economy Network stands in solidarity with the Occupy Wall St. movement. As a network of groups, activists and solidarity economy practitioners, we seek to transform our economic system into one that *puts people and planet front and center – an economy for the 99%*. *Another World* is not only possible, it already exists, in many, many forms. The solidarity economy, grounded in principles of solidarity, participatory democracy, sustainability, equity in all dimensions, and pluralism (not a one-size-fits-all model) is a fast growing global movement. We offer these Solidarity Economy briefs to provide a glimpse into some of the aspects of the solidarity economy that exist all around us.

WHAT DO CSAs OFFER?

Modern agriculture has become increasingly concentrated in the hands of agribusiness and large corporate-run farms. In the U.S., the overall number of farms has declined by 60% since 1950 while the influence of the largest farms has increased dramatically. The USDA estimates that 75% of agricultural production in 2007 was produced by only 5.7% of U.S. farms.¹ Most of these large farms produce a relatively small number of crops on a massive scale with intensive chemical inputs. Most are also heavily subsidized by the U.S. government, a benefit that many smaller-scale farms, which are particularly vulnerable to market fluctuations, are not eligible for.

This has had a variety of negative social, environmental, political, and economic consequences. The industrial agriculture system consumes fossil fuel, water, and topsoil at unsustainable rates. It contributes to numerous forms of environmental degradation, including air and water pollution, soil depletion, diminishing biodiversity, and fish die-offs. The immense scale of farming, along with the limited crop variety, has also meant that farm products are shipped across ever greater distance before ending up in the grocery stores where most people purchase their food. This has altered the relationship farmers have to the land, as well as the relationship consumers have to their food and to the farmers who produce it.

CSAs offer an alternative agricultural system that reconnects consumers with local farms and growers that produce their food. CSAs enhance the economic stability of local farms by providing investment and a guaranteed outlet for produce in advance of the growing season. Consumers benefit by receiving local, ultra-fresh, and often organic produce at a good price. Many also provide a means for delivering healthful, reasonably priced food to urban areas and low-income communities.

Indian Line Farm

Indian Line Farm is a 17 acre organic farm located in South Egremont, Massachusetts. First established as a CSA farm in 1985 (making it one of the first in the country), It grows over 60 varieties of vegetables, fruits, and herbs as well as a variety of cutting flowers, fresh eggs, and beef for CSA members. The site of one of the first CSA farms in the U.S., Indian Line Farm was purchased through a unique partnership model involving the farmers, The Nature Conservancy, and a community land trust in the Southern Berkshires. During the growing season, crops are distributed within 24 hours of picking, and members come to the farm, where they can wander the fields, once per week to pick-up their shares. The farm also provides U-Pick items and asks that members work on the farm 2 hours per season. <http://www.indianlinefarm.com/>

¹ http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2007/Online_Highlights/Fact_Sheets/farm_numbers.pdf

HOW DO THEY WORK?

A CSA consists of a community of individuals who pledge support to a farming operation at the beginning of the growing season in exchange for a weekly supply of food during the season. Members purchase a seasonal or yearly subscription, which entitles them to a share of whatever is produced. The farmer agrees to raise a diversity of agricultural products in an environmentally sound and transparent manner and to share the products with members, usually in the form of a “basket” of fresh produce selected by the growers each week.

By investing in the farming operation before the season begins, members provide important capital to sustain the farming operation. In addition, members agree to share some of the risk associated with farming. If there is a bumper crop, everyone shares in the bounty. If there is a bad harvest, then everyone likewise shares the burden. The farmer-member relationship is not only an economic one. It also relies upon mutual awareness and trust. This is further supported by opportunities for members to visit and work on the farm. Some CSAs, in fact, require some form of member participation. Considerable variation exists among CSAs. Some provide only standard boxes of produce prepared by the farm. Others allow options to mix and match or swap produce according to individual preferences. Some CSAs involve single farms. Others involve cooperatives of farms. Some are run by nonprofits, others by private farms. Some CSAs are located on private land, others on community land trusts.

Lancaster Farm Fresh Cooperative

Lancaster Farm Fresh Cooperative (LFFC) is a nonprofit organic farmers cooperative of over 75 family farms in Lancaster County Pennsylvania. Through its Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, LFFC delivers fresh, certified organic fruits, vegetables, flowers, and other produce to pick up locations in Pennsylvania, Delaware, New York, Maryland, Virginia, and Washington, DC. CSA Members purchase their share of the harvest in the winter and early spring. This enables the farmers to purchase supplies in the winter and start their crops in early spring. They repay members with approximately 25 weeks of fresh, organic, seasonal produce. All CSA shareholders also become members of a buying club. The CSA runs a regular newsletter and organizes member potlucks at LFFC farms.
<http://www.lancasterfarmfresh.com/>

SUCCESSSES

First developed in Japan and Europe, the CSA model has grown very rapidly in the U.S. In 1990, there were only 60 CSAs in the U.S. In 2011, there are nearly 4,000.

FURTHER RESOURCES

- Local Harvest website: <http://www.localharvest.org/csa/>
- GreenPeople.org listing of CSAs :<http://www.greenpeople.org/Community-Supported-Agriculture.html>
- Steve McFadden, “The History of Community Supported Agriculture: Parts I & II.”
<http://newfarm.rodaleinstitute.org/features/0104/csa-history/part1.shtml>
- Robyn Van En Center: <http://www.wilson.edu/about-wilson-college/fulton/robyn-van-en-center/index.aspx>
- *The Real Dirt On Farmer John* (2005 Documentary) <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0439774/>
- <http://www.biodynamics.com/csa.html>

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