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# **Community Supported Agriculture in Romania: Solidarity partnerships as viable innovations for small farms?**

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## Abstract

Searching for viable rural innovations that serve the health concerns of consumers and the economic needs of small-scale farms in Eastern Europe, this study deals with Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). We are interested in the costs and benefits for both sides involved, the farmers and consumers, when entering into a direct, trust-based market relationship in the form of CSA. The study is theoretically embedded in the concept of solidarity economy. The analysis is based on three cases of farmers pioneering CSA in Romania by offering organic vegetables to their local contracted consumers in the Western part of the country. Our results reveal certain elements that are supportive for the involvement in CSA. Consumers follow more value-based considerations, they are for example convinced of the importance of a healthy diet and of the damaging effects of synthetic agricultural inputs. For farmers the CSA partnership is attractive as long as it offers a price premium and market access. Both, farmers and consumers compensate for market failures when involving in CSA partnerships.

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JEL: Q13, P13, O18, P32

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

# 1 Introduction

Small-scale, subsistence based farms are the most vulnerable in terms of poverty, and often widely excluded players in modern global-scale trade of food products. On the other side of the chain, 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 a more and more globalised world. We concentrate on a region to which CSA is still new, Eastern Europe, and where, under certain conditions, such partnerships may offer an interesting alternative way to create 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 the trap of market failure and provide them with a fair income. Urban dwellers through CSA 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 into the theory of 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 to satisfy this demand. Such market failures may create the niche in which CSA becomes an economically attractive option.

## 2 CSA: a brief introduction and key theoretical concepts

In the literature CSA is described as a partnership between a farmer and his or her consumers, based on a mutual commitment that consists in payments, product delivery and various ways of collaboration. In most cases the consumers pay in advance so that 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 or she will deliver fresh products on a weekly basis. In this manner, the risks and benefits of production are shared by the CSA members along with the farmer (Goland 2002, Hawkins et al. 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 by now a global movement reaching more than one million consumers worldwide.<sup>1</sup>

CSA is often presented as an attempt to resist the globalised and industrial agriculture by which people can be ‘re-embedded’ in time and place. The link with a specific piece of land and producer allows a feeling of community and trust that stands in opposite to 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 at the underlying relation of CSA members with nature and postulates that there should be “an intimate relation with our food and the land on which it is

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<sup>1</sup> *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.

grown”, “a sense of reverence for life”, and “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: 24). It is hence not surprising that various forms of low-impact agriculture, and 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” (Lynson 2004: 2).

We look at CSA as an example of solidarity economy, where economic activity is aimed at expressing reciprocity and practical solidarity.<sup>2</sup> Solidarity economy is embedded in the concept of social economy which spans all levels of economic organization from the neighbourhood to the global, and manifests itself in various forms of ‘community economy’ or ‘self-help economy’ (Figure 1). 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, in opposition 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).

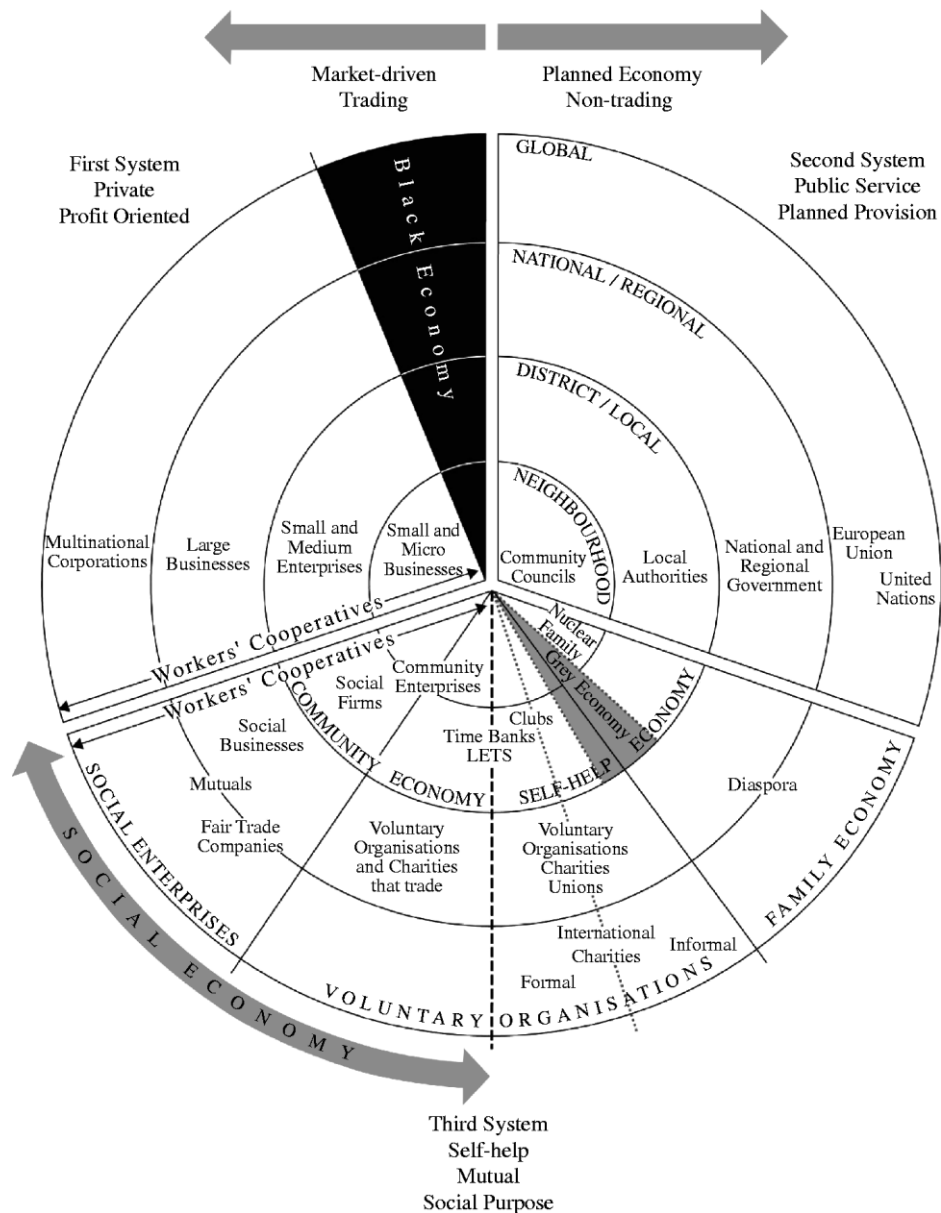
Unlike the long intellectual history of social economy which goes back to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the works of utopian socialists, solidarity economy is a relatively new concept inspired by the practice of local initiatives in Latin America in the mid-1980s (Miller 2010). Solidarity economy does not offer itself easily to a clear-cut definition; it can be defined as a system in opposition with 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 it 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). Solidarity economy bases on the idea that human nature is more cooperative than competitive (Bowles and Gintis 2011). A very important ingredient in 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 solidarity economy CSA can be classified as ‘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 functions not 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 with the framework of conventional economics, we look at it as an economic arrangement in which certain values play an important role. In that sense we see it as an innovative economic alternative that occupies space that was left empty by the capitalist markets. However, our view is a critical one: we ask in how far the solidarity element contributes to the formation and functioning of CSA partnerships and which other benefits and cost play a role in practice.

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<sup>2</sup> There is certainly more than one option through which theoretical lens CSA can be analysed. The social capital perspective would have been appealing, but our empirical case does not include sufficient data as the researched CSA initiatives are too new. For the network-actor theory, its methodological apparatus seemed too speculative for the case in view.

**Figure 1. Three economic systems**



Source: Pearce 2003: 56

In Box 1 we summarise the most important benefits and cost which CSA offers based on a topical literature review. These benefits and cost may be tangible or intangible, and they may be financial or linked to certain values such as solidarity, community or environment.

## **Box 1. A brief summary of the topical literature on costs and benefits of CSA**

### **Benefits of CSA**

**Consumers** are thought to combine the benefits of the desired product (of 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 (e.g. Perry and Franzblau 2010). Benefits may arise from a (positive) change of their relationship with farmers, with land and with their communities (Flora and Bregendahl 2012). Furthermore, health and knowledge are expected to increase (Carolan 2011). Cone and Myhre (2000) find for the US that freshness as well as local and organic production are important attributes of the products that attract consumers; health has only medium importance. Like many other studies they confirm that price plays a smaller role for consumers (see also Pole and Grey 2013). Environmental concerns have a high importance for US consumers (Cone and Myhre 2000); 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 at the top priority of consumers (e.g. Pole and Grey 2013, Cone and Myhre 2000). Personal benefits are to be expected from the possibility to visit and work on the farm. Especially children will 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 Chinese CSA members). Volunteering on the farm and participating in farm events is mostly seen as less important benefit (e.g. Pole and Grey 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).

**Producers** 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. Empirical evidence with regard to the benefits for farmers is scarcer as most authors concentrate on CSA consumers. According to a case study by Flora and Bregendahl (2012), the most important motivation of farmers to join CSA are 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 very low importance - environmental and political reasons.

Also the **society** as a whole should benefit from CSA partnerships. Here the environmental benefits of organic, local production are important. Furthermore, CSA 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).

### **Costs of CSA**

Expected costs for the **producers** are mostly connected with adapting their farm activities to the needs of a CSA partnership. Initial investment costs relate for example to the start of organic farming, the need for drip irrigation etc. Organic farming practices come along with 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 shares to the pick-up point. This together with the necessity to open 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 do not only risk investing in a crop failure, but also (partly) give up the convenience of a 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 in the shares is unpredictable to a certain degree, but, according to Flora and Bregendahl (2012), not 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 were not selected by the consumers themselves. The share 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 studies available confirm that consumers are comparatively well off. Despite this, it seems that financial costs are an important factor for the decision to stop membership (Flora and Bregendahl 2012).

## **3 Objectives and research design**

Our study seeks to analyse the formation and functioning of CSA partnerships in Romania. Based on the cases of three pioneering Romanian CSA groups, we are particularly interested in describing the specific characteristics of partners. Issues of interest are the cost and benefits of

the partnership and in particular trust and solidarity as important drivers and success factors of CSA. The research is based on the following hypotheses:

**H1:** The targeted consumer partners are a distinct group that differs from average urban 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.

**H2:** The solidarity element in the partnership is an important driver of becoming a member for the majority of consumers.

**H3:** The producers in CSA partnerships follow mainly economic considerations.

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

The data for this research stems from an empirical study conducted in and around the Romanian city of Timisoara in 2011. The subscription CSA initiatives that are in the focus of our study have emerged in a part of Romania that is known as being comparatively well-developed and progressive.<sup>3</sup> The study looks at two distinct sets of actors, the producers and consumers of a CSA scheme. The data refers to three CSA groups with farms located in the villages of Cuvin, Fititeaz and Belint. The consumer partners are from the nearby city of Timisoara. The survey tools were designed specifically for the respective target groups. The consumers' survey tool<sup>4</sup> was applied among the entire population of 163 CSA members, leading to 40 filled-in questionnaires (24.5% of the consumers). Farmers' interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner. We followed a mixed methods approach: for assessing the interaction between farmers and consumers we relied on participatory observation and qualitative insights. In addition, expert interviews were conducted and data on vegetable prices in various local outlets was gathered.

The novelty and recency of the appearance of CSA in Eastern Europe explains the explorative and case study based character of the research. Understanding the phenomenon and exploring what the main benefits and cost are, and how the partnerships are functioning is the main objective of this paper. Although our results are certainly not generalizable without much caution, they provide valuable holistic and in-depth insights about CSA in the specific setting of the case study.

## **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 ha represented 93% of total farms but operated only 32% of the agricultural area, while large farms between 10 and 100 ha represented less than 6%, but

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<sup>3</sup> The most common way to classify 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 organize 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 the large a variety of crops. (Henderson 2007).

<sup>4</sup> 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 to 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.



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 € in 2009). They lie around 30% below urban average 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%) (EC 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, is done on about 5.1% of the arable land (including potatoes) (EC 2009). Romania is one of the top vegetable producers in the EU.<sup>5</sup>

The average yield per hectare of vegetables in Romania is presently only half of that in Western European states (Zahiu 2010). There is a general stringent lack of modern technological endowment and machinery (Gosa 2008). Although synthetic inputs have become increasingly accessible to Romanian farmers in the past twenty years, traditional farming that uses natural fertilizer as 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 Romania. In 2010, 3,155 operators were registered as organic, out of which 2,533 were producers (the rest being processors). The size of arable land cultivated under a certified ecological agriculture regime is in continuous growth, 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.<sup>6</sup> Small farmers, instead of obtaining official certification, often advertise their products on the local market as 'traditional' or 'natural'. The reason is that the costs of certification impose a high threshold for the majority of Romanian farmers to become organic producers. Furthermore, often small farmers do not have the capacity and cannot comply with hygiene regulations (Sachse 2011).

Romanian consumers are among the most vulnerable in the EU-27 with a low level of confidence and knowledge as consumers, and not feeling sufficiently protected by consumer law (Eurobarometer 2011). Food items make up the largest share of a household's expenditures (44% in 2008, EC 2010). Fruit and vegetables are comparatively 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 70-80% of the organic goods are imported. Most organic products are sold in Romania in the general retail trade (80%) or on the local marketplaces (Kilcher et al. 2011).

## 5 Results

If CSA can be a viable innovation for small farmers in Romania depends first and foremost on the cost and benefits of the partnership. While we assume that for farmers an increase in net incomes is the most important criterion 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 (--/++). Before we conclude, we focus once more on the elements of trust and solidarity

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<sup>5</sup> Romania was the fifth biggest vegetable producer in the EU in 2007. Fruits and vegetables are the most exported agricultural goods produced in Romania after animals (and animal products).

<sup>6</sup> Romania's exports to other EU member states and non-EU trade partners are consistently increasing. The value of exports of organic produce grew with 150% in 2011, reaching 250 million Euro. The main export products, usually raw material, are cereals, vegetables, wine, tea, honey and berries, with a demand from the trade partners higher than what Romania can presently supply (Agra Europe 2011).

## 5.1 The CSA farmers

Three farmers operate in a partnership with urban dwellers (most of which from the city of Timisoara). They work under the umbrella of the *Association for the Support of Traditional Agriculture* (ASAT) which was initiated in 2009 by the Centre of Resources for Solidary and Ethical Initiatives (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 the interest of 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 constantly 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-serve basis. The next step is the financial contribution the consumers make to the partnership in form of an up-front payment. The annual cost for the entire season for a consumer-partner is calculated as 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, numbered according to the chronology of their CSA initiation in 2009 and 2010 as Farmer 1 (from Belint village), Farmer 2 (from Cuvin village) and Farmer 3 (from Firiteaz village) are all full-time occupied with vegetable farming. No absolutely clear pattern of a 'typical ASAT farmer' could be identified. There are two very small farms of less than two hectares and one slightly bigger (Farmer 3 with almost 6 hectares); there are two male and one female farmer (Farmer 2), all in their forties or fifties. Their farm experience is between 6 and 20 years. Only Farmer 3 has officially registered his farm and is in the process for organic certification. A few common features seem interesting: none of the three has a real rural background, but they came to farming through marriage or the decision to move to the countryside. They are all relatively well-educated with secondary or high school studies, and see themselves as entrepreneurial farmers, with a desire to go beyond subsistence-farming. They are very active in their communities, e.g. as a member of church congregation, clubs, or even a local political party (but none of them is member of a farmers' organization).<sup>7</sup>

The assessment of farmers' benefits confirmed the importance of economic advantages of CSA. The most important reason to become ASAT producer is **access to a (stable) market** (++) . Small producers in Romania face considerable markets barriers. Farmer 2 explains 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 are confident to continue as ASAT farmers. When asked to compare ASAT with other production and marketing alternatives, Farmer 1 explains that *"this year ASAT brought me higher earnings. It is an issue of perspective and more certainty."* The partnership also helps to avoid that the farm income is subject to price fluctuations because no middlemen are involved and a fair price is part of the CSA contract. **Lowering the risk of production** (+) was ranked as very important by Farmer 2 and Farmer 3,

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<sup>7</sup> Already Cone and Myhre (2000), who researched eight CSA farms in the US, found that none of the CSA farmers in their sample has 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 aspired the CSA farm to fully support their family's lives.

but as not so important by Farmer 1. However, also Farmer 1 admits that *“the market is full of risks, while here [in the partnership] I know from November on how to plan my growing season.”* The **marketing efforts are low (+)** because farmers currently do not need to invest in attracting ASAT consumers as CRIES is the active promoter of the concept.

All three ASAT farmers were very concerned about soil contamination through excessive use of synthetic chemicals practiced by conventional agriculture. Expected **positive effects of organic or traditional agriculture (++)** are the second most important reason for becoming ASAT farmers. **No formal organic certification (++)** is needed for ASAT farmers. This saves a significant amount of money (and bureaucratic efforts) while at the same time the farmers, within the partnership, still receive a price that includes a premium for organic production.

The expectation of higher **reputation and trust (++)** in their communities was the third most important reason to take on the ASAT system. Although the **improvement of their farming skills (+)** was not a high priority for the ASAT farmers, all three totally agree that their professional agricultural knowledge expanded especially through organised visits at other CSA farms. 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 cost of participating in the CSA partnership. All farmers reported to have made considerable **investments related to the partnership (-)** on their farms; these were needed to prepare for the organic-type of production. All investments could and were shouldered with private money. 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. *“The work became much more intensive, for example, we hoe now 3-4 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 **time that is needed to deal with the consumers (0)** may be perceived as a cost. However, all three ASAT farmers declared that they appreciate to receive visits from ASAT consumers and consider it very little effort. Overall, the time needed for marketing seems not to be perceived as significantly larger compared to other marketing alternatives.

In a nutshell, we find that the benefits of farmers are mainly rooted in the fact that CSA compensates for the lack of market access of semi-subsistence farms. Together with other benefits that mainly include positive effects on the land and environment, an increased personal reputation of the farmers, and the possibility to market organic products without certification, outweigh the reported costs. The biggest cost for the farmer has to be seen in a higher input of family farm labour. In terms of self-selection of CSA participants we find it particularly interesting that all farmers had a link to the urban environment, were well-educated and active community members.

## **5.2 The CSA consumers**

The data on consumers refers to 40 ASAT partners and their 103 household members. The average age of the household members is 33 years ranging between 1 and 78 years; compared to county averages there is a larger young and mature segment and a much lower percentage of population over 65 years; more than half of the households had children up to fourteen years old. While at the county level the share of graduate and post-graduate level education is below 20%, more than 80% of CSA household members had completed graduate or post-graduate studies. Most of the consumers (40%) in employment were working in services, and another 25% in management and academic, but only a very small segment of respondents (7%) was employed in industry, which is with 28% the second largest employment sector in Timis county.

Not all of the employed respondents offered information about their income, but the average obtained was 2,233 RON (532 Euros<sup>8</sup>) per month, clearly above the county average of 1,533 RON. Incomes varied substantially between households with the lowest income being only 500 RON and the highest income 10,000 RON.

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%). Another aspect that may contribute to explaining consumers' propensity to join a solidarity economy project is social capital, measured here as membership in organizations. One third of the consumers were members in at least one organization such as sports clubs, the Red Cross, political parties, or CRIES.

Consumers' habits when purchasing food are another important aspect with regard to a CSA membership. All consumers were clearly concerned with the origin of the food they purchase, and most of them to high degrees; they also check the label and the ingredient content of processed food (Figure 2). The consumer behaviour changed after joining the partnership. The number of trips to the usual outlets (marketplaces and supermarkets) reduced. A small part of the consumers never bought vegetables at the supermarket before becoming ASAT members; afterwards, 74% of respondents disagreed that they still buy vegetables there. There is also an overall decrease in the number of trips to the town market. Outlets specialized in ecological food were not available in Timisoara.

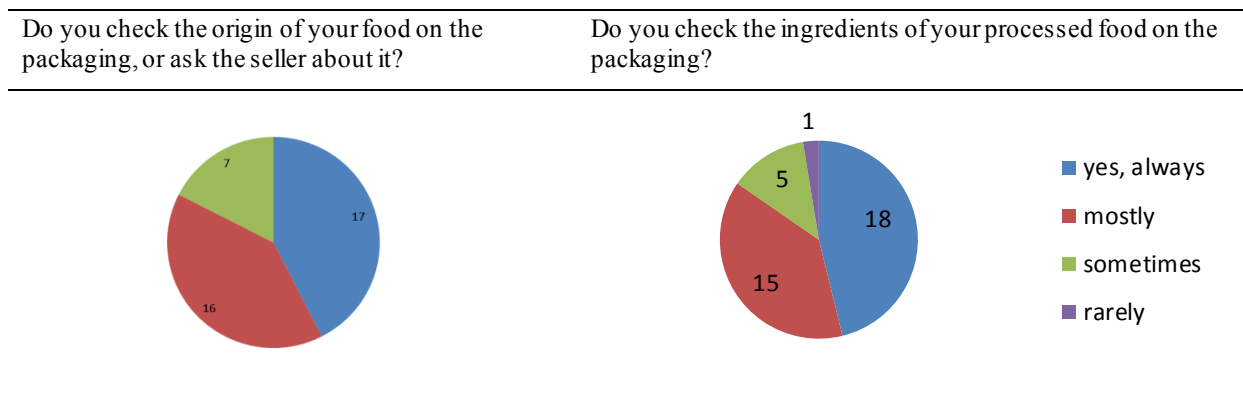
After joining ASAT also the importance of criteria according to which food is chosen changed. The rating of a number of criteria (from 1 to 5) showed that freshness, health and the ingredients remained almost unchanged in their high (above 4) importance. Seasonality, the origin and the organic nature of production received a higher (above 4) 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 the before and after CSA situation, but its share increased significantly from 28% to 43%.

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 serves certain values that the consumers follow. Among them are a healthy diet, solidarity with the rural people, environmental issues, etc. Indeed, the **concern for healthy and fresh produce (++)** is on the top of the list of consumers for reasons to join ASAT. One third of the respondents point out that their first reason of joining ASAT was to get healthy products, while another third desire for organic products. 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% believe that their family's health improved since they are ASAT members. A change towards a more **healthy diet (+)** cannot be easily judged. Still, a positive effect can be expected, even if only 11.5% of respondents agreed that they have improved their knowledge about nutrition.

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<sup>8</sup> At the exchange rate of 4.2 RON per Euro, valid when the study was conducted.

**Figure 2. Food purchasing behaviour of CSA consumers**



Source: Own data.

Having **access to organic products at a low price (+)** is another potential benefit. Since the alternative choice are conventional products, the ASAT price is, however, comparatively high.<sup>9</sup> Hence, the majority of consumers do not see the ASAT membership as an opportunity to save money, some even see the prices 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.”*. Therefore it might be argued that the benefit for the consumer currently arises from the sheer access to organic vegetables and less from the price.<sup>10</sup> Consumers also benefit from the fact that the price is fixed throughout the year and price risk is lowered. Yet, overall the importance of price for food purchases is low in the group of consumers and it even decreased after joining ASAT: while 10% mentioned the price as their most important criterion for food purchases before they entered the partnership, not a single consumer chose price as most important criterion after becoming member.

The environmental advantages of organic agriculture and the smaller **environmental footprint (0)** is felt by single consumers, but seem rather irrelevant at aggregate level. More important is the fact that through the ASAT partnership a **direct link to the farmer, the farm, and rural areas (+)** is established. Half of the respondents agree that their relation to the producer is a personal one. This is important if solidarity and community are important aims, but also if the consumers have a strong interest in the origin of their food. Knowing the origin of their food was the most important reason for 10% to become ASAT members. Despite this, the involvement with the farm is at a low level and direct benefits seem rather little; nonetheless, a minimum level of involvement is important to keep the system working through the necessary trust-based relationship. **Networking with other CSA members (0)** has an insignificant importance as a reason to join the CSA. Within the ASAT group consumers have not socialized much with one another. Therefore the benefit from networking is only a theoretical one at this stage.

The wish to make a positive impact **on regional development by supporting a local farmers (++)** has a bigger importance than might be expected. 76% of the respondents think that they are making a difference by supporting a local small farmer through their consumption. The desire to support small producers was the second most important reason for respondents to

<sup>9</sup> A price comparison with conventional products shows that the differences are significant. Some of the products of Farmer 1, for example, are 100% more expensive than on the market for conventional vegetables. However, if we look at the price of the overall shares, consumers pay maximum 53% more compared to conventional market prices.

<sup>10</sup> The price, which was the most important criterion of food purchase of 10% of the respondents in the pre-CSA situation, no longer appeared in the current situation.

join the ASAT partnership.

The consumers who get involved in CSA face considerable costs and risks. First of all they are not fully sure about what they receive for their money, neither in terms of diversity, quantity nor quality. We find that the **limited choice of produce (0)** is not a significant issue for most consumers: 87% declare themselves satisfied and very satisfied with the variety of products in their weekly share. Farmers reported to receive only occasional and minor complaints. Consumers also seem to **accept non-standard products (0)** without much complaints; single complaints such as about the size of spring carrots and potatoes were reported.

The **initial financial contribution (0)** does not constitute a large cost for the consumers<sup>11</sup>, a fact that is also reflected in the relatively low relevance of price on food purchase habits. The **time invested (0)** to participate in meetings, to pick up baskets, and to volunteer is neither considered a big cost of the partnership. The majority of consumers (59%) do not find it inconvenient to pick up their vegetable share. However, 80% of the respondents are not happy about the obligation to pick up the shares on a certain day.

Summing up, in line with what many other studies find (e.g. Cone and Myhre 2000, Chen 2013, Pole and Grey 2013), Romanian CSA consumers have a relatively high level of education and income. They also clearly show a high interest in health issues and organic production. The benefits from CSA therefore seem to arise more from the sheer access to products of the desired quality, and much less from the price. Solidarity with rural people and the CSA farmer is an important aspect in the considerations of consumers.

### **5.3 Trust and solidarity in the CSA partnership**

Solidarity has shown to be a relevant element in the relationship. Not only do consumers believe that their support of a local farmer indeed makes a difference (see above), but 15% of the respondents claimed that this was their most important reason for joining ASAT. 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 explains *“The social aspect held a lower level of importance for the majority.”* For the farmers solidarity is an important element as they need 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 mechanisms of enforcement. 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 explains 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.”* 90% of the respondents trust the farmers they are partners with, and 69% trust the umbrella organization CRIES. 60% admit that their level of trust in the partnership is higher because with CRIES a known organization is involved. In their turn, the farmers must trust that after their initial financial contribution, the consumers will continue picking up the vegetables and pay the agreed sum per share. In the field we observed that during the vegetables deliveries the farmers had to call consumers, who did not appear, to find out reasons for their absence, but overall reliability was high.

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<sup>11</sup> 400 RON (93 Euro) for Farmer 2 and 3, 100 RON (23 Euro) for Farmer 1.

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 the one end of the spectrum, the 'ideal', collaborative model involves a spirit of community and solidarity between the partners. At 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 unfolds a partnership that started with high ideals promoted by CRIES, but in reality the actual engagement of consumers stayed at a very low level (notwithstanding that solidarity motivated their membership) and the partnerships are 'subscription CSAs' that depend on the economic success for the farmer.

## 6 Conclusions

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) may be seen as a viable rural innovation for Eastern Europe especially in settings in which it addresses situations of persistent market failures. There are two essential push factors that pave the way for successful CSA initiatives in Romania:

First, very low income prospects and missing social safety nets keep up to a million of small farms in Romania at subsistence level. These farms are widely excluded from the markets as large retailers like supermarket chains rely solely on large producers. Second, the market for organic products and especially fresh organic products is severely underdeveloped in Romania. The limited offer of organic products is 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 directly exported to foreign consumers who are willing to pay many times its costs of production. Romania exports mostly organic raw material 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. solidary -economic model. For the farmers the opportunity to access 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 a door to fulfilling their demand for fresh, organically produced products. Our case study shows that such partnerships can represent a win-win situation.

Our analysis points at some important aspects, which may be decisive for the success or failure of such CSA partnerships.

The success of the partnership depends on a certain type of consumer selected from the higher income, educated urban population who does not hold the price as the main criterion for food purchase. This is also a type of consumer convinced of the value of a healthy diet and of the damaging effects of synthetic agricultural inputs and who is willing to sacrifice the convenience of supermarkets for getting fresh food directly from the farm. Clearly, the absolute number of this type of consumer in a region limits the number of possible partnerships.

For small farmers the CSA partnership is attractive as long as it offers a price premium. 'Traditional agriculture' practiced 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 only for a few farms. Our case pointed at certain features that seem to be supportive for farmers to become 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, age, gender or other farm and household related variables

seemed less decisive.

We analysed CSA as one form of solidarity economy. We could confirm that solidarity is an important 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 NGO that initiated the partnerships intended to inspire consumers to organize themselves and form 'shareholder CSAs', each around a local farmer, the result was 'subscription CSAs' with a very low involvement of consumers.

With view to policy recommendations, we see CSA as an interesting solution for only a few. For the majority of farmers, it would be of high importance to find ways to cooperate to be able to access the regular markets. Also CSA could be further developed by encouraging producers to cooperate in the form of 'multi-farm CSAs' and supplement each other's supply which could be directed at a larger group of consumers.

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