

Community-supported agriculture as collaborative practice: interdisciplinary analysis

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Abstract. A community-supported agriculture (CSA) was introduced into Croatia in 2009, immediately after the 2008 economic crisis. This grassroots movement falls within the wide range of activities belonging to yet another global initiative - solidarity economy. CSA in Croatia developed in two distinct directions - one in Istria and other in Zagreb and its surroundings. Initially, in Croatia the initiative became familiar under the name of Groups of Solidary Exchange (Grupe solidarne razmjene, (GSR)), but since the end of 2014, the initiative in Istria took the name of Solidarity Ecological Groups (Solidarne ekološke grupe, (SEG)). The main difference between the two “forms” of CSA in Croatia is related to a legal framework. In Istria the development of the CSA was linked with the Istrian Ecological Producers (IEP) NGO, resulting in more formal regulation regarding the certification processes and selling products on public areas. This was not the case in other parts of Croatia, where CSA was organized in more alternative way..

1. Introduction

The community-supported agriculture can be perceived either as a type of Alternative Food Network (AFN) (e.g. Grasseni 2013) or as a type of “direct marketing” (Roque et al. 2008) depending mostly on a disciplinary point of departure. The CSA can be both at the same time, but it all started as a grassroots movement based on the mutual collaboration, partnership and solidarity between consumers and (in most cases ecological) food producers. Their mutual collaboration is manifested (in different variations across the globe) in continuous “collective provisioning on the basis of solidarity principle” (Grasseni 2013:5).



The basic feature of the CSA usual routine can be described as follows: a group of individuals interested in healthy food, environmental issues, support for small family farms and local economy decides to jointly organize their food provisioning by ordering regularly a basket of seasonally available products from a farmer(s) living in proximity. The delivery is organized on a weekly basis and without the middlemen. There are differences across CSA movements in different countries and even from one group to another, but the above mentioned routine could be perceived as the most basic feature by which these groups, that can be perceived as communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991), function. The movement started in Japan and a little bit later in Switzerland, independently. From Switzerland it was transferred, independently by two farmers, into the USA, where it was named the CSA. Today the CSA exists in numerous countries under different names (see European CSA Research Group, 2016 for overview of the CSA in Europe, e.g.). It has been recognized as one of the most prominent examples of a global justice activism (Grasseni 2013:3) oriented toward an alterglobalisation movement (Šimleša 2006) and relocalization - toward boosting local autonomy in order to create resistance to the dominant system (Starr and Adams 2003). This boosting of local autonomy that is extremely important within the food sovereignty movement and the CSA seems to be a showcase for achieving it (ibid). CSA is also an important building block of solidarity economy. The solidarity economy refers to a set of very disparate initiatives and movements focused on creating and practicing “alternative ways of living, producing and consuming” (Bauhard 2014). This includes practices such as communal living, community kitchens, Open Source initiatives, workers' cooperatives, urban gardening, community-supported agriculture, ecovillages, ethical financing, alternative currencies, LETS (Local Exchange Trading Systems), fair trade initiatives and numerous others.

The basic goal of such economies and the initiatives they encompass is the attainment of the common good and their advocating for “It is a set of practices that emphasizes environmental sustainability, cooperation, equity, and community well-being over profit” (van der Beck- Clark & Pyles 2012: 6). A key feature of such practices is that they have a socially innovative character, striving to redefine the existing economic space shaped by the negative consequences of the dominant capitalist system, such as growing economic and social inequalities, destruction of the environment and of natural resources.

The turning point for the proliferation of solidarity economy practices occurred after the start of the economic crisis in 2008 when a majority of people felt the cold insensitivity of the dominant economic system with full force (Ferguson and Gupta 2002, Kawano et al, 2009, Laville 2010, Simonič 2019). There are frequent deliberations over models that could lead to the creation of an alternative, or at least, a corrective to capitalism. In this way Wright (2015a) suggests a combination of the two approaches as the best strategy. On the one hand, he commits to “taming capitalism” via political campaigns directed at the actions of the institutions of power (“from above”). On the other hand, he suggests “corroding of capitalism,” i.e. developing emancipatory, participative and egalitarian forms of economic activity (“from below”), which stimulate the development of social solidarity and collaboration. Hahnel and Wright also elaborate on such efforts to achieve transformations of the existing system as a combination of interstitial and symbiotic strategies (Hahnel and Wright 2014: 87-88). The 2008 crisis enabled a somewhat more intensive encounter between theoretical reflections and practices concerned with the necessity for change.

Having the above mentioned in mind, the questions this paper wants to answer are based on the observed negative consequences of capitalism and the strong orientation of the movement toward redefining the existing economic situation:

1. How actors associated with the various forms of CSA in Croatia conceptualize solidarity and collaboration?
2. Does CSA, as a form of solidarity economy result in the creation of new communities of practice and new ways of imagining communities?
3. Could CSA in Croatia be perceived as a way of creating a corrective to neoliberal practices or is it just a type of elite consumerism?
4. To what extent will this movement become “mainstream” and how (what kind of legal framework it uses, if so)?

This paper is a result of the jointly analysis done on the ethnographic research performed from 2013 till today in Zagreb and Istria by one of the authors. The methodologies used were the qualitative ones, including participant observation, ethnographic observation and semi-structured in depth interviews (n: 20) together

with data received by informal conversation, i.e. with individuals who preferred not to be engaged in the interviewing process. (n: 6). The analysis of macroeconomic situation in Croatia that facilitated the appearance of CSA in Croatia is included as well, together with the analysis of the legal framework related to process of certification of ecological products and the new Public Procurement Act that, in case of agricultural products, is favorable towards the short supply chains, such as CSA.

2. Two “types” of CSA in Croatia (Zagreb vs. Istria)

The idea to create the CSA in Croatia appeared in 2009 when one of the initiators of the movement in Croatia, Hrvoje¹, met, during a permaculture course, Leo, a member of Italian GAS², a guy from Croatia (Pula) living in Italy. Leo tried to describe to Hrvoje what GAS was, but unsuccessfully. Finally, upon returning to Italy, Leo organized a benefit dinner with members of “his” GAS group and they collected money and invited people from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina to visit their GAS in order to get introduced with the concept. After that, Hrvoje decided to help spreading the movement in Croatia with the help of ZMAG (Zelena mreža aktivističkih grupa – Green network of activist groups). Future organizers, or admins, formed a “core group” and started to elaborate principles of the CSA in Croatia, and spent a lot of time discussing it. 10 Principles of teikei were formulated in 1971 by JOAA (Minamida 1995) and Croatian CSA groups, as well as many other worldwide groups, relied basically on these principles (see Medić and al 2013). However the Croatian CSA emphasized 3 more general values to be followed as well: Transparency, Trust and Solidarity (ibid). After a while one producer from the vicinity of Zagreb, Zdenka, with previous experience in ecological production, presented to the group of interested consumers her small farm and finally in the 2012 the first group in Zagreb was founded and regular orders started to be taken. Almost at the same time the CSA in Istria was initiated, under the influence of Neven, one of the first certified ecological producers in Istria, who was also the founder and the president of the NGO Istrian Eco Product – NGO that gathers certified ecological producers in Istria. This fact strongly influenced the development of the Istrian CSA and caused the divergence of the

¹Pseudonym, as well as all other first names in the text.

²GAS stands for Italian Gruppo d’acquisto solidale, meaning Group for solidary purchase that were organized in Italy from 1994 and did not base their purchasing activity solely on agricultural products.

movement in Croatia, related specifically toward the attitudes about the certification process³.

Unlike in Istria, CSA groups in Zagreb and surroundings actually did not trust the certification process at all. Since the majority of organizers had little or no trust in the state institutions, they assumed the process of certification is somehow corrupted. Also, they did mention that actually personal ties between consumers and producers can boost trust and solidarity, if the relationship was transparent. Therefore, majority of them did not want their farmer to get eco-certificate at all. Visits to farms from organizers and consumers were considered to be enough. Then in Zagreb numerous CSA groups by city districts were organized and they have been operating until today. The only exception is the first one, GSRrijeda, which fell apart during 2013, when one of the authors decided to join.

However, some members of the group continued to support this particular producer, the first one that came and offered her products to the potential buyers. Some of the members consider the potential transfer to another producer to be non-solidary. The producer in question claims that in the beginning, there were only 10 buyers (i.e. families) that ordered regularly from her, while today (2019) there are approximately 40 families that make more or less regular order of her products. Since she and her husband lost their jobs, this support became important for them to survive in economic sense. This support was shown also on the occasion when they needed to buy a freezer and a greenhouse, so the members of the group gathered some money and borrowed it to the farmer. This kind of solidarity and collaboration is not any exception, since members of other CSA groups claim that they also pre-finance, e.g. the sowing for their farmer(s), so that s/he does not have to take loans from credit banks. This type of activity is considered almost as a conspiracy by some of the actors of the CSA, since it is aimed “against” the banks and capitalist systems in general. This conceptualization of the activity as a conspiracy leads us to the question of motivation of various actors. While this activist and advocacy element is quite

³The certification of the ecological agricultural products in Croatia is regulated by numerous acts. Act on the Implementation of Council Regulation (EC) 834/2007 on ecological production and labelling of ecological products (OJ 80/13, 14/2014), Ordinance on ecological production (Official Gazette 86/2013), Ordinance on ecological production of plants and animals (Official Gazette, 1/2013), Ordinance on ecological agricultural production (Official Gazette, No 19/2016). According to the law a farmer has to be registered as a trader to obtain a possibility to apply for the certification or to apply with any formal request.

visible among the initiators and organizers, majority of them are quite aware that among majority of the buyers it is not like that.

In Istria, on the other hand, since their main organizer was already eco-certified producer and since he strongly believed that this was the only valid way to protect both, consumers and producers, this was the way groups were organized. In the end, they even changed the name in order to be able to distinguish themselves from non-certified groups. In 2015 they changed their name into the *Solidarne ekološke grupe* (Solidary ecological group(s) or SEG.).

The Ministry of Agriculture is in charge for a certification process in the Republic of Croatia and ecological farmers from Istria followed that rules and procedures. Only certified producers (or the ones during the period of monitoring, i.e. a process of transition from conventional to ecological production) were allowed to be a part of the Istrian CSA groups. This also applied to farmers from other parts of the Croatia that occasionally used to sell their products to Istrian CSA groups (mainly producers of fruits – e.g. a producer of apples from Osijek, and mandarins from Neretva area, because, according to words of one of the Istria CSA organizers - “we in Istria do not have a lot of fruits”). This “quest” for certified producers of fruits resulted in transfer of some conventional farmers to ecological production both, in Istria and in other parts of Croatia. For example, the certified producer of apples from Slavonija with whom Istrian groups collaborated persuaded two more farmers to get a certificate, because there was a market for this kind of production, and the same happened with a producer from the Neretva area. Therefore, the Istrian CSA groups had a significant impact on transition to ecological farmers in general, especially since Neven persuaded the administrative bodies of the city of Pula and Istrian County to subsidize this “transfer” by paying to producers in the transitional period (3 years) part of expenses needed for a monitoring process. This is in line with the framework of the Rural Development Program of the Republic of Croatia for the Period 2014-2020 where there are some measures that ease the certification process. These measures include the possibility of co-financing of the procedure of certification of organic agricultural products. Through Measure 3 “Quality Schemes for agricultural products and foodstuffs”, grants for new producers involved in the ecological agriculture system as well as for those already participating in the ecological agriculture system up to 5 years are provided. This measure and the help of local administrative bodies meant a huge financial incentive for new farmers.

Besides, the members of the Istrian CSA groups also pay a yearly donation (instead of membership fee) that can be used according to the needs and desires of groups. They can also donate it to some producers, as they did to Vera, a younger producer, who, after a burnout on the regular job, decided to turn back to the family farm and to get an eco-certificate. Today she is regular supplier of the Istrian CSA groups, and she claims that the importance of the CSA groups as regular consumers is huge.

3. Elite consumerism or survival strategy?

According to the research and the Croatian CSA actors the structure of buyers is represented mainly by younger families with small kids. They usually have a higher education and are environmentally aware at least to the certain level (Sarjanović 2014). For most of them the trigger to join the CSA group was the care for the health of the new-born baby that later on spreads to the other family members. This is in accordance with the previous research carried out among the CSA groups, but one has to take into account also the fact that, according to some researchers this “care” can be perceived as quite self-oriented (or even selfish) (Brunori et al 2010). The desire for organic healthy food at affordable prices (we must not forget that consumption of ecological products is on the rise both, globally and in Croatia (Petljak 2010)). According to the CBA data, in the period between 2007 and 2016 there was an upward trend considering agricultural farms with organic farming. Namely, in 2016 the number of agricultural farms with organic farming was 1392 (representing in comparison to 2007 the growth of 97%).

The ecological food is much more expensive than the conventional, and therefore this type of consumption is considered to be a kind of elite consumerism. Most researches of the CSA showed that it is also a highly gendered activity (Hatano 2008), and connected it with the “caring consumption” of so called eco-mums (caring for health of the family and environment (Cone and Kakaliouras 1995, Abel et al 1999, Cairns et al, 2014). Other members, not only organizers, perceive the CSA as an important way of a struggle to achieve food sovereignty and to create some kind of alternative to the dominant neoliberal capitalist system.

However, it is also true that the CSA made significant economic impact enabling farmers to continue their work after the last economic crisis in 2008. The Great Recession of 2008 had an adverse effect on Croatian economy which ended up in a six years long recession that has broadened further the income gap with

respect to Old Member States as well as to the New Member States of the European Union (NMS) (Čeh Časni et al (2019)). The crisis significantly influenced the purchasing power of major part of Croatian citizens.

The agricultural production in Croatia is on the decline since the end of World War II, due to intensive industrialization that happened during socialism. However, after the 1990s and the War of Independence (after which the political and economic systems changed), the neoliberal approach to market caused further difficulties, especially for small, or private family farmers. Croatia has 1.3 million hectares of agricultural land and about 2.2 million hectares of forests. The country is self-sufficient in the production of wheat, corn, poultry, eggs, and wine, while still having promising circumstances for the production of many other agricultural products. However, imports of agricultural and food products continue to grow. Although agriculture only contributes approximately 4 percent to GDP, the importance of agricultural production is higher than its GDP share indicates. As far as Gross Value Added (GVA) contributions per component in OMS, NMS and Croatia are concerned, the contribution of agriculture to GVA growth in Croatia is negative, while in NMS and OMS it is positive. In addition, the primary sector (agriculture, forestry and fishing) accounted for only 1.5 percent of GVA in 2015. (Čeh Časni et al 2019)⁴.

The number of private family farms⁵ in Croatia was largest in 2010 reaching 233.280, whereas in 2016 that number dropped for almost 58% , i.e. to 134.459 private family farms. However, anticipating the small average farm size and the fractured nature of the farms, restructuring policies in Croatia are of a particular importance. At present, Croatian agriculture struggles with land ownership, the size of farms (which are small due to family inheritance laws), and outdated land registry books.

The abovementioned economic reality, related to decline in the overall agricultural production and lower purchasing power of the citizens, in our opinion, significantly fueled the popularity of the CSA movement in Croatia. The movement enabled buyers from the disappearing strata (at least in Croatia) of

⁴ The economic divergence of Croatian economy has a long history that exist before the downfall of socialism and transition to free market system. Croatian GDP per capita had been converging in absolute terms from 1952 to the beginning of 1980s concerning GDP per capita of Old Member States of European Union (OMS). In early 1980s the divergence of Croatian GDP per capita from that of the OMS has started and by the end of the decade it had become obvious. After Croatia declared independence in 1990, the income divergence continued, encouraged by deep transition recession. After a successful stabilization program in late 1993, Croatian GDP per capita had started to grow again until the financial crisis of 2008.

⁵ Private family farm, according to definition of CBA, is an economic unit of a household that is engaged in agricultural production, irrespective of its purpose. That is, irrespective of whether it produces for sale on the market or for its own consumption. The concept "private family farm" has been introduced into the statistical system of agricultural statistics in 1998. Until that year the concepts "private farmstead" and "private producer" were used.

middle-income families to be able to purchase organic food and that would otherwise remain unaffordable to them, Therefore, researchers such as Grasseni (2013, 2014) and Rakopoulos (2016) are right claiming that these networks are not alternative anymore and that AFNs in Greece represent a material bridge for helping many citizens after the collapse of the state institutions that followed the crisis. Some interlocutors in Croatia also claim that it is a way of achieving self-autonomy, since the state institutions are no longer perceived as the ones that will take care of their citizens (regarding health etc.).

The importance of collaboration i.e. solidarity within the CSA was considered to be more easily perceived from producers.

Yes, it was very important at the beginning. At the beginning it was GSR and a lot – meaning, it was very important, before we put the milk vending machine we started to bring milk her in GSR, where the market was, where this mountain society, we had a venue here and on Tuesdays we had exchange here, so, for me it meant a lot. (milk and cheese producer from Istria)

The same meat producer noticed the difference toward the farmers and their dignity between “regular” and the CSA buyers:

You can see the difference between GSR buyers or buyers that are more aware about the food and buyers that consider a farmer to be some poor guy that works for them and has to be (grateful for doing so) (meat producer from Zagreb surroundings)

Some of the buyers did raise the question how the producers are actually solidary with buyers (because usually the solidarity with farmers is more emphasized). This is explained on several levels. The first one, and most important is in the ecological production itself – the producer has to produce ecologically and fairly and this is the most important feature, i.e. prerequisite. However, prices are also solidary – since the consumers are devoted to this particular producer he has to keep his prices affordable – after all, the middleman are cut in this chain and the producer receives enough money (even more that via regular channels). Also, since he does not have to take care (or at least major part of the time) about marketing and distribution channels - he has more time to devote to production.

In the end, some Istrian SEG offer a possibility for buyers to earn their weekly basket, by working at the farm and helping the farmer, in cases when the buyer loses his financial abilities. In this way, both sides are solidary and their collaboration continues.

4. Concluding remarks

After the 2008 economic crisis, collaborative practice between producers and consumers within the CSA meant survival for some producers, and also quite eased to the families to obtain ecological food at reasonable prices.

If we take all the above mentioned in the account, we can conclude that in Croatia, the CSA is far from being the mode of elite consumerism. This form of economy for producers, and especially small ones is the only way to survive in the hostile global economy and it is no surprise that the idea was accepted after the 2008 crisis, when a significant number of producers and consumers lost their jobs (or had to close production, in case of farmers). The consumer groups will pay less than for the same product in the specialized stores, and the producer will get paid immediately on the delivery and s/he will get far more than s/he would otherwise get for the same product, i.e. both sides will get fair price. The producer can predict income and improve cash flow and has a regular and steady distribution channel. Within the CSA group there is no need for the producer to deal with marketing and food distribution since the CSA is a very reliable customer. Certainly, a farmer or some other producer will be assisting in the establishment or work of the GSR initially, but in time, when they get to know each other, the GSR will be organized in a way to less disturb the agricultural work. Nonexistence of the formal organization leads to different legal problems regarding the certification of the products and potential activities of selling products to organizations like hospitals or kindergartens. However, this is also to be improved since the new Public Procurement Act (Official Gazette No. 120/2016, in effect since 1st July 2017) in Article 284 offers a possibility to favor short supply chains in the area of the agricultural production. This relates to the agricultural production in general, not to ecological production exclusively). This represents a significant step forward in national legislation, but it is not still implemented fully. The main problems relates to small size of family farms and the small quantities they can produce. Therefore, Croatian farmers have to join forces and to act jointly if they want to get profit from this legal change. The Rural Development Program also offers some opportunities related to co-financing the collaboration of farmers that would enable them to take opportunity from this Public Procurement Act, but this initiative has just recently started and has not yet been implemented. It is yet to be seen if the CSA farmers will consider this to be an opportunity for them, or will they remain exclusively in the short supply chain they have already been at.

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