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Community Supported Agriculture (CSA): Building Community Among Farmers and Non-Farmers

Jeff Sharp

The Ohio State University, sharp.123@osu.edu

Eric Imerman

Ohio State University Extension, merman.1@osu.edu

Greg Peters

James Madison University, peterga@jmu.edu



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Community Supported Agriculture (CSA): Building Community Among Farmers and Non-Farmers

Abstract

Conflict at the rural-urban interface may often be due to a lack of social connections or communication between farmers and non-farmers. Extension educators may be at a loss as to how to bring these two groups together. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), or a variation of CSA, may be one avenue for developing connections. Findings from a qualitative study of a Midwestern CSA reveal a number of ways CSA met the goals of participants while also building community among farmers and non-farmers. Extension personnel might promote CSA at the rural-urban interface to build community and support for local agriculture.

Jeff Sharp

Assistant Professor, Rural Sociology Program
Department of Human and Community Resource Development
The Ohio State University
Columbus, Ohio
Internet Address: sharp.123@osu.edu

Eric Imerman

Extension Agent
Ohio State University Extension
London, Ohio
Internet Address: imerman.1@osu.edu

Greg Peters

Assistant Professor
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
James Madison University
Harrisonburg, Virginia
Internet Address: peterga@jmu.edu

The century-long decline in the number of farmers in the United States has reached the point where the number of persons living on farms comprises less than 10% of the nation's rural population (Hart, 1995). In urban counties and counties adjacent to urban areas, the farm population is an even smaller proportion of the rural population due to the increased movement of non-farm residents from the city into the countryside. As a result, there is growing concern about the future of farming at the rural-urban interface.

The increased competition and price of farmland and the difficulties of farming in a densely populated rural neighborhood have led many to conclude that the prospects for agriculture at the rural-urban interface are not good (Berry, 1978). There is evidence, though, that agriculture is much more resilient in the face of these urban pressures (James R., James, B., & Blaine, 2000; Johnston & Bryant, 1987).

Farmers at the rural-urban interface have adapted through a variety of means, such as direct marketing to consumers or the addition of off-farm employment in the nearby urban areas. These strategies have allowed farmers to remain economically viable even in the face of strong development pressures. In fact, one Ohio county case study found farms at the rural-urban interface to be financially better off than the more traditional farms further away from the urban area (James R., James, B., & Blaine, 2000). Despite these various adaptations, farming in densely populated rural areas remains challenging (James, R., James, B., & Blaine, 2000; Leer, 2000).

Some of the problems at the rural-urban interface may be associated with a general disconnect among consumers, food production, and farmers. Many non-farmers moving to the rural-urban interface do not understand contemporary agricultural practices, and, for a variety of reasons, these non-farm consumers are increasingly sensitive to issues related to agricultural industrialization, environmental quality, and food safety and quality (Welsh, 1996). Concerns about agricultural odors, dust, and chemicals at the interface may, in part, be exacerbated by both limited knowledge and heightened safety and quality concerns. As a result, consumer confidence in local farmers as well as the food system in general may contribute to conflict at the rural-urban interface.

In response to some of the problems arising at the rural-urban interface, many agricultural professionals are suggesting there is a need for improved neighboring among farmers and non-farmers to build trust and understanding so as to mitigate possible conflict (James, B., 1999; Abdalla & Kelsey, 1996). Similarly, there are others who advocate reconnecting farmers and non-farmers of a community through local food production (Welsh, 1997; Groh & McFadden), to improve understanding among food system stakeholders. In the following discussion, we report on a special type of agricultural enterprise that might serve a dual purpose at the rural-urban interface, the generation of new revenue for local farmers and improved social relations and awareness among farm and non-farm residents living in the community.

Community Supported Agriculture

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is one type of community-oriented agricultural enterprise that has grown rapidly in the U.S. during the last 15 years. In 1986, there were two known North American CSAs. By 2000, there were over 1,000 in existence (Greer, 1999).

There are a couple variations of CSA, but all share a number of fundamental principles (Greer, 1999; Gradwell, 1997). A CSA requires one or more producers and a group of consumers. A CSA producer(s) agrees to provide produce (vegetables, fruit, meat, flowers, fiber, etc.) to the consumers who have purchased a share in the CSA. The cost of a share is a portion of the farmer's cost of production plus a living wage. If the cost of production is estimated at \$12,000 and the living wage is estimated to be \$18,000, then a share in a CSA with 100 members would be \$300. In return, each CSA member receives 1/100 of the year's production.

A unique feature of this financial arrangement is a sharing of risk among farmers and consumers. In lean or disaster years, consumers may receive limited produce while the farmer still manages a livable wage; in good years, the consumers share the bounty.

In addition to the marketing feature of a CSA, there is an important community-building dimension of this arrangement. Inherent in the direct economic relation between the farmer and consumer is an increased familiarity between the two, who are often anonymous to one another in the dominant food system.

In a CSA, consumers have direct knowledge of who produces the food, where it is produced, how it is grown, and may have the opportunity to provide input into farm decisions such as varieties and quantities of food produced. In some cases, consumers may even be able to assist the producer on the farm, perhaps lowering the cost of production and the cost of share in the CSA.

In the ideal CSA, consumers develop a connection to the farmer, his/her family, and the farmland through direct interaction, while producers acquire a greater social awareness of the local community and its concerns. It is the community building and increased social awareness among CSA participants that are especially relevant to regions at the rural-urban interface.

Methodology

A case study of Sweet Peas CSA was conducted in the fall of 1995 and winter of 1996 to understand why people participated in a CSA as well as the community building that occurred during the first year of its existence. Sweet Peas CSA included producers and consumers living in and around a Midwestern college town with a population just less than 50,000 residents. Data come from 25 1-hour face-to-face interviews with individuals involved in the CSA as well as observational data of organizational meetings and a field day. CSA documents, such as newsletters and announcements, were also reviewed.

The basic organization of Sweet Peas CSA is consistent with the CSA model, with a central vegetable producer and 27 consumer shareholders. Sweet Peas also involved several producers of specialty products who direct marketed their products to consumer members. This variation of CSA has been described as a type of farmer cooperative, which can provide a larger variety of products to meet consumer needs and allows producer specialization (Greer, 1999).

Results

A primary focus of the analysis was to determine who participated in the CSA and why they choose to be involved. The central vegetable producer and the associated niche producers were identified and recruited to participate through the networks of a core group of consumers, producers, and local supporters interested in seeing a CSA started in the local area. None of the producers knew

each other prior to the CSA's formation, although several were known supporters of alternative agriculture and a local food system. The personal biographies of the producers were diverse. Three were relative newcomers to agriculture, while two had long histories in agriculture, operating diversified operations with some specialty production as well as traditional Cornbelt commodity production.

Consumers purchased a share of the central vegetable producer's production, while the other four producer participants direct marketed specialty items upon consumer request. Two of these producers provided specialty meat products, such as organic beef, pork, range fed chickens and eggs, and the other two producers provide honey and woven fiber products. These four producers provided their products at retail market prices.

This hybrid strategy of CSA and direct marketing was adopted, in part, due to the unfamiliarity of producers with CSA as well as the preference of producers. One specialty producer, a relative newcomer to farming, was nervous about the CSA model: "I would not be comfortable selling under that system of [up-front consumer payments]. What if I couldn't meet my obligation?"

CSA consumer participants were recruited to the CSA through various networks, through personal contact with organizers, word-of-mouth, or information circulated at gathering places of individuals potentially interested in alternative food systems. There were 27 full and half shareholders in the first season. Many of the shareholders were families. Most of the consumer households interviewed could be characterized as middle to upper-middle class with one or both spouses holding a college degree.

Consumer participants reported two reasons for joining the CSA: to support the local food system and to acquire a quality product. One shareholder explained, "I wanted to support the initiative, local producers, the local economy and organically grown food." Other consumers wanted the quality product available through the CSA. For example, one member indicated he wanted fresh organically grown vegetables as well as to be exposed to vegetables he would not normally purchase. A strict vegetarian participant used CSA produce to supplement his other sources of vegetables (his own garden, the local food coop, and a food club). With a few exceptions, most consumers were pleased with the produce received during the first year.

Two underlying motivations for producer participation were a commitment to building stronger community and environment through local food production and a desire for a larger market for their respective production. Three of the producers of niche products expressed a concern with the current methods of food production and distribution, and their consequences on family farmers and the local community. For these producers, their involvement provided an opportunity to increase awareness of local food production among local consumers and the neighboring commodity producers. The central vegetable producer specifically noted the opportunity to increase urban consumers' awareness of agricultural issues through CSA:

This is a farming state, that's what we do. I think a lot of people, because they don't have the interest in agriculture, an interest in the food chain, and because they're so removed from it, don't think about what goes into what they pick up off that pre-packaged shelf. What little bit a farmer gets, how far it's traveled, how much has gone into making that. I guess part of what I see a CSA doing is maybe making that more in the front of people's minds.

In addition to the goal of increasing awareness of the food system, producers clearly indicated there was a financial interest to involvement. This interest was mitigated to some extent by the fact that none of the producers relied solely on the CSA for their sustenance. In fact, the CSA was a residual outlet for three of the five producers. But even so, each producer understood the potential market the CSA provided their products.

Experiences varied from producer to producer as to how that potential was realized. One very small-scale producer was happy to direct market all of her honey through the organization. Another producer, who gardened as a hobby, expressed an interest in one day being able to work full time growing organic herbs and vegetables, and she thought a CSA structure might help her realize that goal. The CSA provided one of the more conventional producers an additional outlet for direct marketing meat products at retail prices instead of the normal commodity or wholesale prices he received.

Role for Extension

Many of the motivations and outcomes of CSA participation identified are consistent with those identified by Abel Thomson, and Maretzki (1999) in their discussion of the potential benefits of farmer's markets to farmers and consumers. These findings also support several of their recommendations concerning educational opportunities for Extension educators. Negative evaluations of a couple of CSA consumer participants about the quantity and type of produce received confirm a need for education aimed at increasing familiarity with local foods and how to cook and preserve the produce.

Engaging a diversity of producers resulted in a greater variety of products in Sweet Peas' CSA, and Extension educators may also have a role in helping diverse producers recognize the possibilities of their participating in a cooperative-style CSA. There is also a need to simply educate producers

and consumers about alternatives such as CSA as several of Sweet Peas' CSA producers were not completely comfortable due to unfamiliarity with the CSA philosophy.

This case study of Sweet Peas CSA also reveals a number of ways CSA might serve a valuable community-building function that could be promoted by Extension, particularly at the rural-urban interface. CSA may be an excellent model for Extension agents to promote as a means of building bridges between farmers and non-farmers who might not otherwise interact. We identify three ways community building might occur.

Increased Interaction

First, in the Sweet Peas CSA case study, several consumers with no historic connection to agriculture participated because of a desire to learn more about local food production and agriculture. In many agricultural settings, opportunities for direct links to local farming are limited, especially for newcomers to the area.

In a survey of residents in an eight-township area located near a large Ohio urban area, 87% of newcomers strongly agreed or agreed that agriculture positively contributed to their local quality of life. At the same time 26% report not knowing any local farmers, and 20% reported not knowing the farmer operating the land adjoining their residence (Sharp & Bean, 2001). CSA might be a practical means of tapping the goodwill of newcomers and other non-farm rural residents to generate interaction with farmers to mitigate some of the possible conflicts and misunderstandings that might emerge in rural-urban interface settings.

New Markets

A second benefit of the CSA model at the rural-urban interface areas is the potential to create new markets for products and intensify on-farm production. With land being the scarcest requirement of production in rural-urban interface settings, intensification of production on the existing land-base may be necessary because land is too expensive or unavailable to expand the operation's size.

CSA might also increase profitability due to the bypassing of the middlemen of the existing farm-to-market system. Of course, not all farmers are involved in the type of production relevant to CSA, but the opportunity to diversify production may interest some producers. For example, those farmers who enjoy working with livestock may find participation in a CSA arrangement effective for supporting small-scale production, because large-scale production systems are increasingly found to be incompatible in some densely populated rural neighborhoods.

Social Capital

The third possible benefit of developing CSA in rural-urban interface areas concerns how relationships created through the CSA might create social capital, a type of social resource associated with trust and networks, useful for purposes beyond the CSA. In the Sweet Peas study we identified examples of cooperative networks among producers developing as a result of participation in the CSA. In Sweet Peas CSA, the producer participants discovered several ways to cooperate for mutual benefit beyond the CSA. Karen, one of the CSA leaders, explained:

Something we didn't anticipate was the cooperation between producers. I guess we just sort of assumed they knew each other. And none of them knew each other, even though there were three producers in our group that lived within three miles of each other, they didn't know each other. And so it was interesting how [producer #1] did some kind of trade with [producer #2] to get a building moved out to [producer #3] so that livestock could be moved to that farm. So it was a three-way sharing of resources and cooperating while six months before they didn't really know each other, they'd heard of each other, but never cooperated on a project.

One of the producer participants went so far as to report that "now I have a neighbor!" He came to know a producer a couple miles from his farm through the CSA, with these new "neighbors" even helping by baby-sitting his son on occasion. In rural-urban interface regions, the lack of awareness between farmers and non-farmers may be obvious, but the diversity of farm enterprises capable of existing in these regions may create opportunities for network building among local farmers. A CSA that engages several cooperators, as does Sweet Peas, might be a great way of generating interaction and awareness among greenhouse growers, livestock producers, and orchardists. This in turn might benefit producers individually, through increased sales, or collectively, such as through increased capacity to generally promote the importance of local agriculture in the community.

Similarly, increased interaction among producers and non-farm consumers in a CSA might translate into local support for farmland preservation as well as support for other agricultural developments in the community. The agricultural sector's political clout in rural-urban interface regions may wane because of the movement of more non-farmers into the countryside. CSA can contribute to building a coalition of support for agriculture that otherwise might not exist due to the absence of familiarity and empathy among farmers and non-farmers.

For Extension educators working on agricultural and community issues in rural-urban settings, many challenges and opportunities might exist. Our research on CSAs suggest that creative

enterprises such as a CSA can bring people together through food production and contribute to the emergence of stronger communities. CSA is not for every producer or consumer, but agriculture in general is likely to realize a collective benefit as a result of even a modest increase in the linkages among a few producers and consumers in rural-urban interface areas. By helping to facilitate these linkages, Extension personnel can contribute to vibrant rural places that better meet the needs of farmers and non-farmers.

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