

CSA's cropping up around the globe

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“The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines a small farm as one with an income of less than \$250,000 a year. This describes over ninety percent of the farms in the United States. These small farms contribute to the local economy and are also part of the social fabric of rural America. The USDA confirms that small farms are important because they contribute to biodiversity of plants, animals, culture, and traditions; encourage more responsible use of farmland; promote self-empowerment and community responsibility; provide places for families to pass on values of hard work and responsibility; and provide a human connection to food and the earth” (McLaughlin and Merrett 2002: 3).

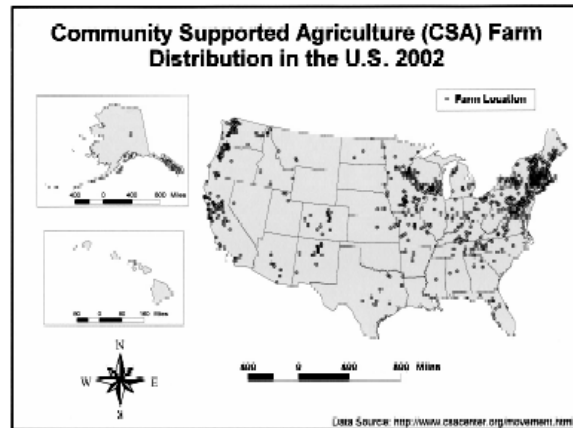
Rural America is disappearing as massive agro-businesses are increasingly controlling farming. Small farms are being bought out and abandoned and the communities in which these people lived are slowly vanishing. In the early 1900s, over one third of the population in America lived on farms. Agricultural supports, favoring industrial farms, have driven that figure down to less than two percent in fewer than one hundred years (Henderson and Van En 1999: 12).

Consequently, people in rural areas are beginning to feel a disconnect with farming and food production. Faced with this situation, small farmers are attempting to find a way to survive. This has given rise to a movement described as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). Small groups of farmers and consumers have begun coming together in Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) groups to try to combat the industrialization of their food, the degradation of their environment, and the decline of their communities. Increasing in popularity through the northern hemisphere, CSAs have been keeping money in the local economy and in some cases increasing community connectedness. This movement has its roots in an initiative taken in Japan in the mid 1960s. A group of women in Japan in 1965 started a movement called *teikei*, meaning partnership or cooperation, to address their concerns about the way in which food was being grown, the increasing disconnect with farmers, and the decreasing farm population (Henderson and Van En 1999: xvi). These women worked with farmers to reach an agreement to connect a farmer

directly with his consumers in order to access fresher foods and promote sustainable agriculture in their community.

In the 1980s two groups in New England emerged with similar objectives. In 1985, the first Community Supported Agriculture groups, were started in the United States. Indian Line Farm CSA in Massachusetts and the Temple-Wilton Community Farm in New Hampshire started working to connect farmers and consumers (Henderson and Van En 1999: 7). Since the emergence of these two farms almost twenty years ago, it is estimated that over 1000 CSA's are in operation cropping up across the US and the idea is spreading internationally to Canada and Mexico (Wilkinson 2001). "Each CSA is designed to meet the needs of producers and community members. Some CSAs have one producer, other have several. In CSAs across the United States the number of members ranges from fewer than 20 to more than 700" (Gradwell et al 1999). CSAs are increasingly being identified as sustainable community development institutions which have the potential to foster community development as well as local economic benefits through their social practices.

Figure 1. Community-Supported Agriculture Farm Distribution in the U.S., 2002



CSAs: the Why and How

The name Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is credited to Robyn Van En, one of the founders of the Indian Line Farm. She explains, "We

didn't take any steps of this process lightly. We discussed and debated long into the nights the necessary policies and procedures, besides the possible names for the project that would convey its full intent and purpose" (Henderson and Van En 1999: xiv). Agriculture Supported Communities, the reverse of Community Supported Agriculture, also helps to explain the CSA mission. There are a variety of ways in which CSAs can be organized; however, the general premise remains the same. Consumers pay farmers directly, typically at the beginning of the season for a 'share,' (portion), of the farmer's harvest. CSA members 'share the risk' of farming and are rewarded with fresh produce at lower than market cost.

Variance occurs in the design of the CSA and the farmers' flexibility. Some CSAs require that members assist with related work, from planting, weeding, or harvesting, to delivery, records keeping, or out-reach. Other CSAs operate on a 'subscription' basis, where members pay for their shares and are not expected to assist on the farm in any capacity. There are also CSAs which exist between these two extremes offering discounted rates on shares if members assist with the CSA. Some CSAs also appear to have adopted a micro-credit approach to sharing costs, offering a pay-as-you-go option for members who are unable to make the typically upfront payments. The Future Farm in New York collaborated with the New York Hunger Network and the Solidarity Food Network, "to grow and market organically grown food specifically for the working poor" (Young 2003: 31). Future Farm used the dispersed payments to improve or maintain farm facilities, such as fences and green, houses to increase production separate from the early season expenses. This allowed those who are unable to make the large initial payment to pay throughout the season.

"Future Farm replaced the single 'up-front' payment required by most CSAs with a monthly charge of \$30. Thirty dollars a month is achievable for the budgets of most working families whereas the single \$274 to \$400 charge is more capital than the majority of the working poor can muster at one time" (Young 2003: 32).

CSA farms can be maintained by one farmer on one acre or exist in a cooperative nature with farmers combining their harvests to produce a more varied share. It is not uncommon for shares to include items such as

wildflowers, honey, organic eggs, and meat in addition to regional fruits and vegetables.

CSAs are flexible institutions with the potential to thrive in a wide variety of environments, geographic and socio-economic. One further distinction about CSAs is the fact that some subscription CSAs exist in peri-urban areas providing fresh organic food to urban dwellers. These CSAs typically have less member contact. Although they do retain money within the state or regional economy, they do not provide the same sense of community that is found in local membership CSAs. Likewise, many of these farmers are seeking profit rather than the 'community' aspect typical of more rural or community centered CSAs.

In this paper, I will be examining the more locally driven CSAs existing in rural areas. CSAs provide an example of asset based community development. The farms and farmers typically already exist in regions where CSAs emerge. These farms and farmers are working with the resources they have available to promote economic stability for themselves while providing a much needed commodity to area residents.

The relationship between farmer and consumer is symbiotic. The farmer is allowed to pursue his passion for agriculture with reduced stress of yield and loans. Consumers are able to receive high quality food 'with a face on it' while also promoting connections with the farmer as well as other like-minded community members. The money farmers receive from share sales assist in breaking the 'loan cycle' that is so challenging for farmers. Modern farmers are forced to leave their land for a variety of reasons: urban sprawl, retirement, or buy-outs. Economic challenges often top the list. Upfront payments from purchased shares assist farmers who are often trapped in backward loan cycles. Typical agriculture loans distribute funds in the spring and require payments throughout the season while the farmer is not able to pay back until fall harvest. If the harvest is less than required, the farmer is faced with unmanageable debt. CSA members share the risk of the growing season, minimizing the worry of farmers of a bad season and inability to pay off loans. "In CSA the risks of production are shared by consumers. In a poor season, a \$30 loss for 100 families is more manageable than a \$3000 loss for one farmer" (Gradwell et al 1999).

Keeping Profits Local

The economic benefits of CSAs extend beyond the farm. If one considers that money that was once being filtered through retailers, distributors, and wholesalers is making its way directly to the farmer and remaining within the local economy, he can see the benefit that CSAs have on local economies. Food in the United States comes from an average of over 1300 miles away (UMass Extension 2000). Most of the states importing their food are more than capable of producing a portion of their commodities from within their state. It is estimated that Massachusetts is capable of producing over thirty-five percent of its food supply, yielding retention of over one billion dollars to the state (UMass Extension 2000). The state of Maine estimates that if its residents were to spend ten dollars a week on local agriculture, the state would retain over one hundred million dollars for the local economy (Associated Press 2004). As states and farmers are struggling to survive in an ever increasing global market, these statistics displaying the community benefits of local food can be quite convincing. These numbers are not isolated to the Northeast. Studies have been conducted recently suggesting similar profit in Midwestern and Western states (Wells, Gradwell and Yoder 1999: 39). Any money that remains within local areas fosters or sustains businesses and the economy within the region. As was mentioned before, many rural communities are disappearing with increasing urbanization and globalization. CSAs cannot 'save' a town but awareness of the benefits of buying local and the prospect of sustainable development can foster increased commitment to 'invest' in one's local community.

Farmers are making pennies on the dollar of what is sold in the supermarkets. As retailers steadily raise prices, the returns to producers have steadily declined. Farmers struggle to purchase the tools and equipment they need to function. President John F Kennedy joked that farmers were the only business people to "buy everything at retail, sell everything at wholesale, and pay the shipping costs both ways" (Egerstrom 2001: 82). This statement is humorous but all too true. Farmers are being charged repeatedly while receiving minimal returns. Consumers are seeing the decline in accountability as farmers are become distanced from their harvests. Some consumers are demanding higher quality food or an increase

sense of awareness regarding the safety and quality of their food. CSAs provide a resource for both farmers and consumers. The variety of CSA design, economic benefits to farmers and states, as well as the peace of mind individuals can receive from 'buying local' provide testament to the feasibility of Community Supported Agriculture. As rural populations are declining and farmers are seeking a way to sustain their way of life while also improving their own health, the number of CSAs has increased. Individuals are rallying around these groups. The small scale nature of CSA cannot save a dying town, but the sense of community that can arise when a person has a 'steak' in their local system can foster a sense of stewardship.

CSAs fostering Community Development

CSAs are typically organic or low impact farms, creating or preserving clean green spaces in towns and communities. The history and ideology of CSA fits within the idea of Community Driven Development and Community Based Organizations.¹ Community members are stakeholders in their community. The act of buying a share and making a financial commitment creates a sense of investment in the success of the farm and promotes communication and networking, at a minimum, between the farmer and consumer. These connections can extend if members work on the farm or volunteer in other capacities. In an age where a handful of companies are providing the food for the entire country and even the world, locally focused agricultural groups are reclaiming control of agriculture and their resources. The World Bank continues by saying that CDD potential is greatest for small-scale local goods and services, again demonstrating the potential for CSAs as community development organizations (World Bank 2004). The local focus and relationship ideals behind CSAs are similar with those of Community Based Organizations (CBOs): "membership organizations made up of a group of individuals in a self-defined community who have joined together to further common interests" (Dongier et al n.d. 305). CSAs are a common form through which residents can unite to fulfill their dietary, environmental, and community based

¹ The World Bank defines Community Driven Development (CDD) as "giving control of decisions and resources to community groups" (World Bank 2004).

interests. To reiterate, successful or larger scale CSAs can also be effective in keeping resident's money local and reinvested in the community rather than spending it at a grocery store chain that will take its profits out of the community.

Van En and others have warned that not all members join CSAs for the community aspect. The subscription style CSAs obviously foster the least member interaction, however, many CSAs have fostered social capital among their members. Especially in small communities or communities that have become fragmented by industrial growth or urbanization, CSAs can reconnect residents to one another and farmers to consumers. CSAs can also create networks or be created among preexisting networks. The Rural Research Report indicated that

“Variations on the CSA include ‘congregationally supported agriculture’ wherein a church congregation subscribes with a local farmer, ‘institutionally supported agriculture’ wherein schools and other government agencies contract directly with farms, ‘restaurant supported agriculture’ wherein chefs provision their kitchens with locally grown produce, and even ‘union supported agriculture’ wherein CSA subscribers all come from a particular labor union.” (McLaughlin and Merrett 2002: 4)

Laura DeLind, critical of CSAs, believes that people join CSAs for “three major reasons: to obtain fresh vegetables; to protect the environment; and the support a farmer.” She continues “there is, curiously, little interest on the part of most members to use the farm or local food production as a venue or a catalyst to build community” (DeLind 2003: 198). This criticism can be true. A number of CSAs have failed because of declining membership retention and an absence of the desired connectedness or sense of community. Thomas Lyson, however, disagrees with DeLind's argument. He asserts that the number of community focused groups have increased across the country (Lyson 2004: 98). The benefits of CSAs are undoubtedly focused on the individual membership gains of high-quality food and the farmer's security of income; however, CSAs have the potential to go far beyond those directly related to the system. A number of CSAs have addressed issues of low-income hunger in their community. Van En provides a number of examples of CSAs that offer reduced cost shares

or flexible payment options for low-income residents. Along with CSA membership, farmers have also chosen to donate weekly surplus or unclaimed shares to area soup kitchens. Likewise, the land and environmental protection that can result in suburban CSA formation can preserve agricultural lands for future generations. The case studies that follow will address the potential for CSAs from a farmer's independence to member's satisfaction, while also highlighting the potential for overall community benefit.

Case Studies

The Genesee Valley Organic CSA (GVOCSA) of New York and the Sunflower Fields CSA of Iowa provide two examples of successful CSAs existing in different parts of the country, with diverse requirements, members, and levels of community involvement, while still pursuing similar goals of community agriculture connectedness.

Genesee Valley Organic CSA

Located in suburban Rochester and Newark, New York (the west-central portion of the state), and founded in 1989, the Genesee Valley Organic CSA (GVOCSA) is run by Elizabeth Henderson, one of the leading names among CSA groups. In explaining the mission of GVOCSA, and her mission Henderson discusses the ever increasing disconnect between farmers and consumers. "Fresh' and 'local' in the language of supermarket produce buyers means accessible within 24 hours by air freight. A promising alternative to this state of affairs is Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)" (GVOCSA 2002). Its website lists a variety of goals and aspirations for GVOCSA, its members and the community. "Our primary purpose at GVOCSA is to create and distribute high quality, certified organically grown vegetables, fruit and other local farm products to serve the needs of our members. We support local organic growers, and by extension the local economy" (GVOCSA 2002). GVOCSA is an example of CSA that has a member work requirement for all of its 200 shareholders.

GVSCSA is proud of its low share prices and the sense of community that arises from its work requirement. Share prices are

determined on a sliding scale, adjusted for the season, with only a twelve-dollar membership fee due up-front. GVOCSA works hard to satisfy the desires of its members. Through a series of annual surveys, the same reasons that members report for joining and sticking with GVOCSA come up as complaints. For example, one respondent stated that she did not like the work requirement, while another expressed the sense of satisfaction she received from working in the field (Henderson and Van En 1999: 114). Henderson emphasizes the importance GVOCSA places on the member participation. She turns people away who seek to pay extra and avoid the work component and directs them to a subscription CSA across town. Henderson believes in the importance of community building and has designed a CSA to reflect this desire. Prices are kept low and accessible to almost anyone willing to put in the time. GVOCSA, which has been successfully operating for fifteen years, provides one example of a typical labor sharing CSA. Henderson is proud of GVOCSA's work. It "has demonstrated to the larger farming community that a small-scale organic farm – with cooperation and support from its neighbors – can succeed" (Holtzman n.d. 67). Although she warns of the over-reliance on community building, GVOCSA seems to be one example of CSA that has been able to foster a sense of community among its members. This social capital does not extend far beyond the farm, with communication and 'community' ties extending only to GVOCSA members.² However, long time members do cite their appreciation for bonds that have been made between members.

Sunflower Fields CSA

Across the country in Postville Iowa, (the northeastern corner of the state) Solveig Hanson and Michael Nash came together in 1997 and formed the Sunflower Fields CSA (Meter 2001: 6). Sunflower Fields is an example of a

² "The most narrow concept of social capital is associated with Putnam (Putnam 1993). He views it as a set of 'horizontal associations' between people; social capital consists of social networks ('networks of civic engagement') and associated norms that have an effect on the productivity of the community. ... The key feature of social capital in this definition is that it facilitates coordination and cooperation for the mutual benefit of the members of the association (Putnam 1993)" (Grootaert 1998: 2).

‘multi-producer group’ with ten family farms working together to create shares for 225 rural Harmony Valley residents (Nash 2003). Nash acknowledges the unique situation of Sunflower Fields with such a rural population. “To answer the three favorite questions we are constantly asked: yes, there are enough folks to support us; yes, they have enough money if we are also aware of their unique economic situation; and no, they do not all have gardens” (Nash 2003). Ten farms and families come together to generate the shares of local crops, meats, baked goods, and more, and personally deliver these shares to members further fostering the sense of connection between producer and consumer (LocalHarvest 2004).

Sunflower Fields has also reached out into the community donating shares to persons with disabilities living at or associated with the Martin Luther Home (Waukon Standard n.d.). Although Sunflower Fields does not have an assistance requirement like that of GVOCSA, residents from the Martin Luther Home can work on the farm and acquire agriculture training and skills. Nash and Mary ReVoir, Martin Luther Homes Director, are excited about how this partnership the benefits for the disabled as well as community members. “We will not limit their exposure and they will be encouraged to participate at any level they choose, maybe even helping to distribute to others where they will get to know more people” (Waukon Standard n.d.). Sunflower Fields has extended beyond local agriculture to support small farmers and businesses. It is working within the community to foster connections. The Sunflower Fields CSA has been so successful that founder Michael Nash says: “We are not farmers in need of support. We prefer to call ourselves a Community-Sustaining Agriculture farm. We don’t grow vegetables as much as we grow our soil. We develop relationships with our neighbors that we might call a market, but which are actually close personal bonds” (Meter 2001: 5).

The success of Sunflower Fields has extended beyond individual CSA shares. It has also fostered GROWN, a local cooperative which provides products to local institutions such as hospitals, nursing homes, restaurants, and schools (Nash 2003). Sunflower Fields is an example of a CSA which has branched beyond the needs and desires of individual residents and families and is sharing its products with local institutions, further fostering regional economic growth. Sunflower Fields is clearly an exceptional case, but can be viewed as an exemplary model for CSAs and

community involvement. Its actions and outreach programs are admirable and enviable. The local commitment of its founders and the work of the farmers have clearly combined to create a highly successful CSA that has produced benefits far beyond the 'core group' of members and farmers.

Applications

Residents of southeastern Minnesota have watched the success of Sunflower Fields realizing that similar success in their seven county area could generate more than \$78,000 in local revenue from one CSA with 200 members. The addition of meat and poultry could add an additional \$107,000 to the local economy (Meter 2001:8). This area of Minnesota is like that of many other agriculture regions. In 1997, the seven county area of southeastern Minnesota sold over \$866 million in crops and livestock, receiving \$80 million less than what was spent to harvest and maintain these products (Meter 2001: 2). It is estimated that if residents increased their consumption of local food by a small fifteen percent, \$45 million dollars would be kept within the local economy (Meter 2001:8). This area is ripe for a CSA. All it needs is a motivated farmer, or group of farmers, to work to create a sustainable system. The numbers can hardly be denied. Area farmers are keenly aware of the losses they are suffering. Sunflower Fields is clearly an example of a CSA that is providing financial assets to its community. Research indicates its results could be replicated.

It is evident that CSAs exist for a variety of reasons. GVOCSA is geared directly at small-scale agriculture based on one farm and the work of its 200 share members. Sunflower Fields was designed to connect farmers and producers and has evolved into so much more. It is a self-sufficient organization that is able to extend its services to all residents through outreach with the Martin Luther Home or indirectly through its GROWN coop supplying food to area institutions. As was mentioned earlier, CSAs exist in a variety of different shapes and sizes. Subscription CSAs can be little more than a grocery delivery service for members who are able to afford up-front payment, or CSAs can be close-knit groups of individuals working together in the field to preserve their environment both agriculturally and socially. Regardless of the motivation of members or farmers, CSAs are slowly reshaping agriculture across the country.

“Here's the good news. A whole new food system, one that uses dollars but is not ruled by them, is growing so fast that no one can keep track of it. You won't find its produce at your big-chain supermarket. You'll find it at your local farmers market, consumer coop, or CSA farm. Here a new economics is being practiced, economics, as if, as E.F. Schumacher once said, people mattered. As if the land mattered. As if food were more than a commodity” (Sustainability Institute).

Challenges of CSAs

CSAs are not all smiles and success stories. The realities of CSA require back-breaking labor and continuous community outreach. Lack of membership retention is the number one reason of CSA collapse, followed by pursuit of a higher paying job (Henderson and Van En 1999: 225). Failed attempts at generating a sense of community can often be frustrating to farmers who see CSAs as so much more than sustainable agriculture. “The sustainable agriculture movement represents an attempt to embed the economics of agricultural production within an environmental, community, and household context” (Lyson 2004: 28). When members do not consider these aspects and instead merely seek ‘high quality food,’ the ideological imbalance can be frustrating. Nevertheless, if producers are able to balance ideology or work with members to create a system that is acceptable for interested members through work requirements, ‘hands off’ style subscriptions, or the variations in between, CSAs still have the potential to support communities. The level of social capital generated will vary from system to system, however the economics cannot be denied. Millions of dollars remain in local systems when people eliminate the ‘middle man’ by purchasing local foods.

International Relevance and Conclusion

CSAs have made their way around the globe from Japan through Europe and now the Americas. The beliefs and motivations clearly transcend cultures and climates. Community Supported Agriculture has the potential to assist struggling farmers and communities in developing nations. CSAs

are not intended to be just for established markets or struggling farms. Although there appear to be minimal examples of CSAs existing in the global south, vague references have been made indicating that 'CSA style agriculture is cropping up in Latin America.' The Robyn VanEn Center for CSA Resources also alludes to emerging international CSAs and specifically lists active CSAs in Ghana and Hungary (VanEn Center n.d.). The concepts are not foreign to struggling farmers. In areas where food security is of primary importance, associations of members agreeing to pay a portion in advance and possibly assist with farm work may provide an answer for farmers who cannot manage the up-front seasonal costs. Likewise, related multi-farm CSAs or coops could provide a more formal system for families that formerly traded their goods ad hoc. Granted the less structured way of trading may provide exactly what is needed at a certain time, 'shares' of produce, meat, eggs or dairy could be traded among farmers as well as being sold to nonagricultural workers. CSAs exist in both rural and urban areas, with the greatest success coming from suburban groups marketing to urban residents. Although this rural to urban style of CSA typically fosters the least social capital benefit, the economic stability provided to farmers could promote a sense of security and a feeling of interconnectedness.

The issues of disappearing markets and rural populations are not isolated to developed nations. Rural populations are being displaced around the globe. "In China, for example, the modernization of agriculture has already led to the uprooting of more than half the rural population in the last two decades" (Gorelick 2000). Farmers and herders in western Africa have been forced out of business by "cheap meat imports from Europe." Mexican farmers struggle to compete with US beef producers (Gorelick 2000).

The International Society for Ecology and Culture (ISEC), a British group, has written a number of articles laying out the potential benefits of CSA in 'southern' countries. The primary focus of the ISEC is agriculture and its increasing conflict with globalization; however, their research and writings indicate that locally grown foods are more sustainable and beneficial in poorer, developing countries. Addressing what is sometimes seen as an elitist issue, fresh and local foods, the ISEC writes "Local food is good for the South too. Despite what multinational corporations would like us to believe, we are not helping people in less industrialized parts of the

world if we encourage them to grow food for export rather than for themselves” (International Society for Ecology and Culture n.d.).

Helena Norberg-Hodge, founder of the ISEC, and Steven Gorelick, US Programs Director, emphasize that poorer or developing nations would benefit from increased food security by providing for its residents before attempting to provide for the international market. “Even food security would increase if people depended more on local foods.” She continues, “And, if countries in the South were encouraged to use their labour and their best agricultural land for local needs rather than growing luxury crops for Northern markets, the rate of endemic hunger would diminish as well” (Norberg-Hodge and Gorelick 2002). Gorelick emphasizes that the ISEC does not seek to stop international food trade. He emphasizes, however, that locally produced and consumed food would help “revitalize rural economies decimated by the global economy” (Gorelick 2000). These benefits would permeate the local economies, environments, and communities.

Obviously, CSAs cannot solve the agriculture problems of the world,³ developed or underdeveloped. However, evidence suggests that CSA has the potential to allow individuals to act in a sustainable way for personal and/or regional benefit. CSAs are increasingly being considered one system which can promote food security.⁴ The economics of successful CSAs cannot be denied. Hundreds of thousands of dollars remain in local systems when people buy local food directly from farmers. Social capital is fickle; members lose enthusiasm, at times, as quickly as they gain it. Financial capital, however, if maintained, can provide farmers with much needed economic support while benefiting members, the environment, and possibly the wider community. Forty years ago a group of women in Japan sought to re-connect farmers and consumers. Less than twenty years ago, two groups started with a dream of providing good food and protecting the environment in New England. Now over one thousand like-minded

³ Agricultural problems such as famine and droughts or insufficient area supply will clearly not be averted by the existence of CSAs.

⁴ Food Security is an important term for developing countries, and all countries. Food security is “the ability to provide sufficient foods so that all people can obtain a culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through non-emergency sources at all times” (Stagl 2002: 4).

organizations exist in the US, with at least one CSA in every state. The land and resources exist; CSA success is just a matter of awareness and support. CSAs have traveled around the world. Their potential is limited by the creativity and energy of founders and members. Social capital is often immeasurable, but economic security can clearly benefit farmers and communities. CSAs are a model of sustainable community development and community driven development that can enhance rural and urban areas.

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