



Photo: Henk Kloen

The June 2007 "strawberry celebration", encouraging children to get closer to nature.

# Community Supported Agriculture: An alternative local food system

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In a situation of growing globalisation of food systems, questions are increasingly being raised about the integrity of our food supply, the impact of its production on the environment and animal welfare, and the fairness of trade between consumers and workers along the food chain. These consumer concerns have led to a growing international market for fairly traded and organic products, and also to local initiatives where consumers buy directly from producers. Around the world, small-scale farmers are diversifying their production and income as a response to the changes in the world's food systems. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a marketing approach that encourages local, environmentally sustainable food production.

The CSA concept originated in the 1960s in Switzerland and Japan, where consumers interested in "safe" food joined up with farmers who were seeking stable markets for their crops. In Japan, CSA is called *teikei* which translates as "putting the farmer's face on food". CSA is a partnership of mutual commitment between a farm (producer) and a community of supporters (consumers). The partnership provides a direct economic and social link between the production and consumption of food. CSA can take many forms, but the essence is that CSA members make a commitment to the producer to support the farm throughout the growing season, by purchasing a share of the season's harvest – up front. The farm provides, to the best of its ability, a supply of seasonal fresh produce throughout the growing season. In return, the farm is guaranteed a reliable market for a diverse selection of crops,

and the farmer receives a guaranteed yearly income. One of the key differences between CSA and the industrial food system is that the risks of production are shared equally between the people who benefit. A growing number of CSAs have developed in Europe and North America, particularly since the early 1990s.

## The experience of *De Nieuwe Ronde*

In the Netherlands, there are over 100 CSA initiatives, about 80 percent of which are organic farms. *De Nieuwe Ronde* (meaning "The New Circle") is a CSA farm located in Wageningen, in the centre of the Netherlands. This initiative started in 1998 and has grown to a farm serving 150 households (approximately 220 adults) on 1.5 hectares of land. The CSA business model consists of a producer and an association of members (consumers). The basic aim of *De Nieuwe Ronde* is to use the farmland in a socially, environmentally and economically sustainable manner (also known as the "3Ps" – people, planet and profit).

## Social farming

Members have different motives for joining *De Nieuwe Ronde*, ranging from product quality (organic, fresh, good taste), not having time or energy to garden themselves, desiring a nice and inspiring environment, wanting a closer link with food production, or simply because they want to support a more sustainable food system. Although the farmland belongs to the producer, the members perceive it as "their land". It is a place where members can harvest, meet, relax and sometimes assist with farming activities. A website and a monthly digital newsletter informs members about social (e.g.

harvest celebration, flower arranging or cooking workshops) and farming activities, including availability of vegetables to be harvested. Members can also assist with various jobs on the farm, such as weeding and jam preparation. In general, members appreciate the initiative and about one third is actively involved in the association (see Box).

#### *Environmental farming*

The farm is organically certified according to the standards of the Dutch certification company, SKAL. Members, however, wanted to go beyond the SKAL standards and *De Nieuwe Ronde* uses a wider crop rotation to prevent crop diseases. Also, certain landscape elements such as hedges and border strips of shrubs have been placed in order to increase its environmental value and biodiversity, a system that has also been described in an earlier article in the *LEISA Magazine* (Vol. 22 No.4, December 2006). The farmland also offers a place for members' children to discover and learn about the crops.

#### *Economic farming*

Members pay a fixed annual membership fee that covers all farming costs as well as the producer's salary. In return for this fee, members can harvest a pre-defined share of vegetables, fruit, potatoes and flowers during the growing season. If there is surplus harvest, it is processed by the association and sold to third parties for income generation. The members of the association share the risks of crop failure equally: if production of a certain crop is lower than expected, each person harvests less. On the other hand, they also benefit if there is more to harvest when production is higher than expected. Every year an annual report is prepared that reports about the "3Ps", and the producer shares his financial report with members at their annual meeting. In this meeting the producer and members also jointly agree on the cropping plan and level of the membership fee for the next year.

#### **Main lessons learnt**

*De Nieuwe Ronde* is a successful example of a CSA marketing relationship. One of its important characteristics is that the producer (along with a group of supporters) started the farm without any external financial support. They were simply motivated people who managed to realise their ambitions independently, though the producer took the financial risk for the initial investments. Ideally, this risk should be shared with the association, but the bond of trust needed time to grow first. Values such as integrity, trust, responsibility, collaboration and openness have been crucial to its success. Besides time, intensive

communication (formal and informal) between the producer and consumers is needed, to develop trust and shared values. Once established, the bond proved to be strong enough for sustainable co-operation between producer and members, but also amongst the members themselves. Experience shows that, over time, a clear and shared vision has evolved. As the association has become a network of people with very different assets, their knowledge, thinking power and financial means can be mobilised to overcome new challenges. For instance, the association convinced local authorities to offer additional farmland, and members themselves proposed to increase the membership fee to enable the producer to get a reasonable income.

Besides the positive contribution of consumer involvement, a CSA set-up creates new demands on producers. They must invest much more time into communicating with consumers and must also give up some control and autonomy. They must accept people coming to their farm at various times, and doing things differently from themselves. These issues reflect a considerable psychological barrier for many farmers. The farmer is, nevertheless, always free to express some limits, for instance by closing off part of the farm, or for part of the day, or to restrict the types of jobs undertaken by members.

*De Nieuwe Ronde* is just one example of a CSA initiative that developed in a particular situation. Community Supported Agriculture exists in many different forms, and variations on this theme are developing around the world. For example, consumers can receive a weekly bag of food products rather than harvesting themselves; farmers can serve one group of consumers together to offer an even wider range of food products; consumers can pay farm investments in return for several years' harvest; or consumers can "adopt" a fruit tree (getting fruit in return) or a cow (and visit the farm at times).

#### **Relevance for small-scale agriculture in middle and low-income countries**

Locally-based food markets are also developing in middle and low income countries, in response to changes in society. Smallholders, on the one hand, are increasingly confronted with a rapid spread of dynamic modern retailers, wholesalers and food processors in their countries. This imposes serious challenges on them, because they are required to produce consistent, high quality supplies in required volumes, while complying with new safety, environmental and social standards. On the other hand, many developing countries also have

### **Division of tasks and responsibilities between producer and association**

<b>Producer</b>	<b>Association</b>	<b>Joint responsibility</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General farm management and cultivation of vegetables, fruit, herbs and flowers.</li> <li>• Striving for a slight overproduction to compensate for failing harvests and for greater environmental value</li> <li>• Informing association members about harvestable crops</li> <li>• Providing sufficient labour for management of farmland</li> <li>• Providing and maintaining suitable farm equipment</li> <li>• Purchasing sustainable production inputs</li> <li>• Farm administration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Harvesting crops that are indicated as harvestable by the producer, using appropriate harvesting methods</li> <li>• Helping with farming activities if necessary (e.g. weeding, processing)</li> <li>• Monitoring farm use when producer is absent</li> <li>• Activities such as production of newsletter, website management, organisation of social activities, processing of surplus harvest</li> <li>• Ensuring that all members of the association pay their membership fee</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing cultivation plan, once the producer makes a proposal and determines the "boundary conditions"</li> <li>• Fixing the level of the membership fee; the board of the association makes a first proposal</li> <li>• Determining the short term and long term farm strategy</li> <li>• External communications (field days, seminars, workshops and publications)</li> </ul>

emerging middle classes in the bigger cities that have become concerned about the quality of their food. This can offer opportunities for small scale agricultural producers, especially those close to urban centres. In Vietnam for instance, there is a growing group of concerned urban consumers that is willing to pay a higher price for “safe” (pesticide-free) vegetables.

While rural people are more likely to be able to grow a small patch of vegetables for their own consumption, this option is often not available for many urban consumers. CSA has the potential to play a role in spatial planning. It may help to keep green areas close to or even within urban centres, offering a counterweight against expanding cities.

New initiatives have appeared globally in various forms, in which farmers and consumers have jointly developed food systems that are tailored to the local possibilities and needs of both sides. In Mexico, the “Circle of Responsible Production” brings together organic farmers and consumers in Jalisco state. The Circle was formed during the mid-nineties and brings together producers, consumers and promoters that share common goals about achieving food security, environmental justice and the provision of healthy food. In this initiative, promoters organise meetings to bring producers and consumers together to learn more about each others’ experiences and concerns. Environmental educators also support the Circle by organising radio programmes, presentations and workshops that discuss the negative effects of agro-chemicals on human health and the environments. In Brazil, at the Serra Grande plateau in the state of Ceará, another CSA initiative started in 1997. A growing number of organic farmers in the area wanted to create market outlets for their produce while there was an interest by consumers to access organically produced food. Meetings were held to discuss the costs of producing food, and the availability of vegetables throughout the season. As a result, consumers pay an agreed monthly membership fee and can either access a “free choice” or a weekly box with ten different varieties of organic vegetables. In 2002, the project fed 450 consumers with produce supplied by four vegetable and fruit smallholders and three poultry and milk producers. The initiative has given the consumers access to organically produced food at lower prices than available through conventional retailers, while also enabling producers to receive a guaranteed income double that of the regional average.



Photo: Marianne van der Peijl

**Farmer Klaas Nijhof taking care of his crops at De Nieuwe Ronde.**

In conclusion, CSA experiences show how rising concerns of urban consumers can lead to co-operation with farmers, restoring the balance between rural areas and urban areas, between global and local food chains, and intensive and small scale food production.

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# Call for articles

**Empowerment and social inclusion  
September 2008, Vol. 24.3**

In all societies inequalities exist, due to gender, age, religion, cultural or caste affiliation, low education or income, unemployment, diseases, disabilities, migration, or geographic location, to name a few. Stigmas and social limitations result in social exclusion; that is, marginalisation and powerlessness within the wider society. This status not only keeps excluded people poor and powerless, but it also affects feelings of self-respect and confidence.

While some developments in conventional agriculture may exacerbate inequalities, low external input sustainable agriculture provides opportunities to lessen these differences. This issue of the *LEISA Magazine* is seeking examples in which socially excluded people have overcome such barriers. For example when a marginalised group acts to improve their life; when a group of farmers join hands and gain access to land, water, or a market; or when

a stigmatised cultural group finds its way to a better status through agrotourism or marketing of handicrafts or food.

Social inclusion efforts open previously closed doors. They come from government, NGOs, businesses or community leaders. For example, in programmes in which orphans, widows, or ethnic groups increase their skills in agricultural activities, thereby improving their livelihoods and status in a community. Or, the government may change rules to provide particular groups of people access to markets, land or education.

We are looking for stories that highlight local initiatives as well as externally driven mechanisms. What opportunities are there in small-scale agriculture, and how can marginalised groups realise them? What difficulties are faced, and what lessons have been drawn from experiences so far?

*Deadline for submission of articles is 1 June 2008.*