

LEADERLESS, MUTUALISTIC, AND ORGANIC AGRICULTURAL CO-PRODUCTION AS A SOCIALLY-ECOLOGICALLY SUSTAINABLE RURAL-URBAN PRACTICE.

A local Italian experience, an international perspective to rethink the territory and the city

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Abstract

In an expanding world demanding more and more resources and causing interconnected crisis, the systemic nature of tragic social and ecological incidents is not (yet) widely acknowledged. The social and ecological limits of the current industry-based economic paradigm let us forerun the onset of possible emergencies to be possibly tackled through preventive design and positive transformation, where the rethinking of the territory, the city, and their supporting environments is necessarily involved. In this perspective, nurturing initiatives to ensure distributed food provision seems a good start in such a transformation, at least as a socio-economic sustainability tool and as a satisfier of basic human needs. We present an example of communal self-management for organic agricultural production, inspired to the model of Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA). This project was started in the urban sprawl of massively industrialised North-Eastern Italy by committed individuals and grassroot groups, already active in discourses on ecological sustainability, social equity, social and solidarity economy, transition and post-growth. From individual-to-collective self-determination and bottom-up initiative potentials through food plans and other tools to be participatorily defined with all the actors of a given area, a CSA can represent the trigger of a virtuous paradigmatic shift in more or less institutional policies for the maintenance, regeneration, and strengthening of territory and urban environments.

In un mondo in espansione, che richiede sempre più risorse e causa crisi interconnesse, la natura sistemica dei fallimenti ecologici e sociali non è (ancora) ampiamente riconosciuta. I limiti sociali ed ecologici dell'attuale paradigma delle economie a base industriale lasciano presagire l'insorgere di possibili emergenze, affrontabili attraverso una pianificazione preventiva e trasformazioni positive che includano un ripensamento delle città, dei territori e degli ambienti che li supportano. In questa prospettiva, curare iniziative che garantiscano l'approvvigionamento distribuito del cibo sembra costituire un buon punto di partenza, almeno come strumento di sostenibilità socio-economica e come garanzia del soddisfacimento di un bisogno umano primario. Viene qui presentato un esempio di autogestione comunitaria per la produzione di ortaggi biologici, ispirato al modello delle Comunità che Sostengono l'Agricoltura (CSA). Tale progetto è stato fondato nello *sprawl* industrializzato del Nord-Est italiano da individui e gruppi già impegnati nei campi della sostenibilità ecologica, dell'equità sociale, dell'economia sociale e solidale, della transizione e del post-crescita. Dal livello individuale a quello collettivo, con la sua potenzialità di iniziative di autodeterminazione dal basso tramite piani del cibo e altri strumenti definibili in maniera partecipata, una CSA può innescare virtuosi cambi di paradigma in pratiche e politiche più o meno istituzionali per la preservazione, la rigenerazione e il rafforzamento del territorio e degli ambienti urbani.

Keywords

Sustainable Planning and Practices, Community-Supported Agriculture, Urban Food Policy, Local Food Plans, Food Geographies, Political Ecology and Economy

Introduction: food in a tough world scenario

Reports say cities keep expanding, consuming fertile land and enlarging transport infrastructures to allow for their increasing affluence to be satisfied by external resources and goods. However, if tragic social and ecological incidents regrettably start emerging¹, their systemic nature is not (yet) widely acknowledged. As a matter of fact, the social and ecological limits of the current industrial economic paradigm on this planet let us glimpse an upcoming exhaustion of key resources to be possibly tackled through a positive transformation, e.g. preventive design, planning, and practices.

If the quest for an improved efficiency of the same paradigm seems not much more than a diversionary, we propose the demand should be targeted instead, and the rethinking of the territory, the city, and their supporting environments is necessarily involved. In this perspective, food seems to possibly play an important role in such a transformation, for its ability to shape the territory both for its production and for its delivery, while representing one of the basic human needs.

Within such discourses, in this paper we present an example of communal self-management for organic agricultural production, inspired to model of Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA). Since 2018, this experience has been studied from different points of view, and some publications have followed: in Auriemma *et al.* (2020), the cooperative enterprise is presented and addressed with a focus on its implications in pursuing social equity and food autonomy; in Cristiano *et al.* (2020a), through action research the attention is mostly oriented to frame it and discuss it into the international debates toward possibly sustainable and desirable societies and economies in a challenging century and in likely post-growth scenarios; in Cristiano (forthcoming), this CSA example is investigated as a case study through a transdisciplinary tool such as systems thinking and an emerging comprehensive geobiophysically-based environmental accounting tool such as the Emergy Assessment method.

The encounter between academic and activist-producer perspectives has generated and fostered so far a fruitful exchange of knowledge and approaches; on the one hand, the everyday practice has inspired possible concrete paths to be matched with old and new theoretical arguments; on the other hand, the role of the university side has been contributing to the construction of models, to support experimental and optimisation scenarios, and to progressively assess the performances. It clearly is beyond the purposes of this paper to conduct or report a full literature review of the context and to replicate the research materials and methods, all offered anyway in the three above cited publications.

¹ This work was submitted in late 2019. During its revision, the COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected the whole planet, and the discourses about ensuring the provision of food and other livelihood have abruptly become more clear and compelling, as we discussed e.g. in Cristiano (2020) and Cristiano & Gonella (2020).

Instead, the main aims of the present work are (a) to originally formalise the logic diagram of a given CSA project and (b) to start to systemically detect its potentials (and limits) for socially and ecologically sustainable transformation in urban and rural context and related design and planning tools, with territorial and geographical foci, oriented toward practical replication and implementation.

The CSA Veneto project among practice, education, and socio-ecological transformation

This project was started in the urban sprawl of massively industrialised North-Eastern Italian region *Veneto* by committed individuals and grassroots groups, already active in discourses on ecological sustainability, social equity, transition, and post-growth. The *CSA Veneto* project is integrated in a Social and Solidarity Economy district (*Oltreconfìn*) consociating several organic farms in the urban-rural sprawl between Venice and Treviso, and itself framed in a wider network also including the aforementioned groups as well as other local ones (Figure 1): the producers from the district operate in the sectors of cereals, greens, eggs, cheese, herbs, and seeds; among the networking organisations, some national ones are present such as the roundtable for solidarity economy, the two main national associations for degrowth, the national network of ecovillages, and other groups from the agro-ecological movement; among the local ones, we can find ethical purchasing groups, ethical micro-finance agencies, fair trade shops, and a cultural association helping keeping Old Town Venice alive.

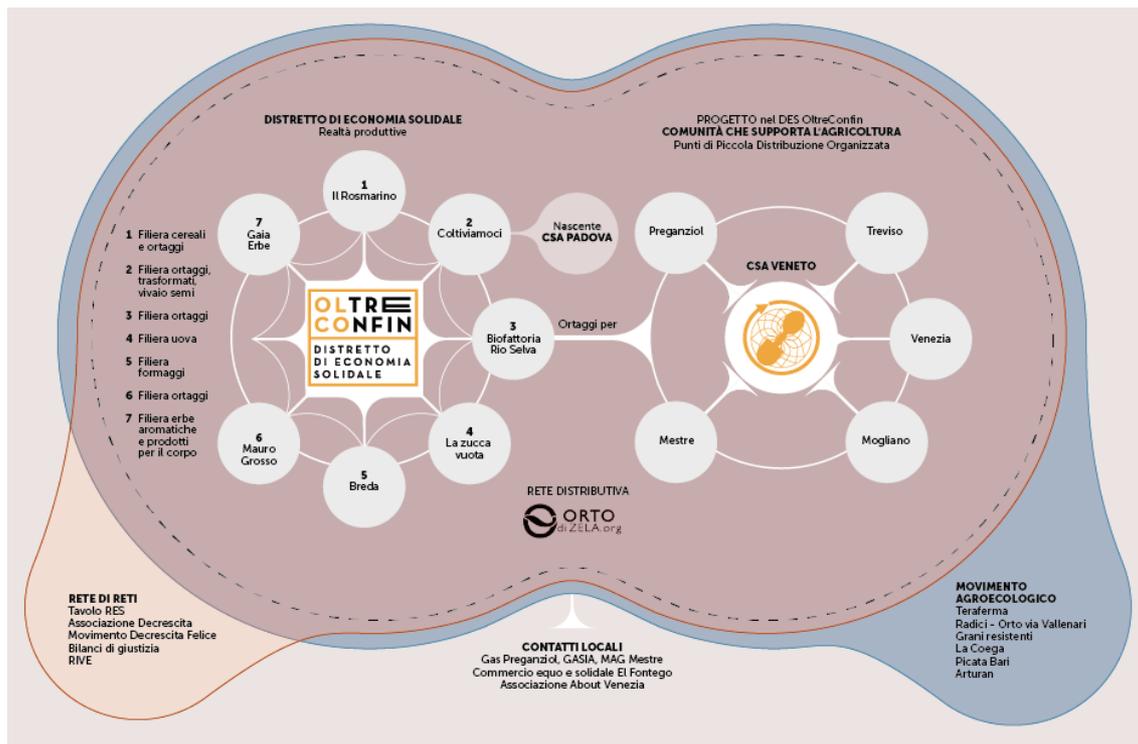


Figure 1. The CSA project framed in a wider social solidal network of local producers, associations, and movements

The members, the activities, and the food distribution are all deployed in a local yet quite differentiated rural-urban spectrum.

The project started in early 2018 based in the historic organic farm *Biofattoria Rio Selva* (Figure 2) in Preganziol, next to Treviso. The food provision planning system overlaps with the planning of the cropping semester, formulated by an agro-technical working group and approved by a plenary assembly (Figure 3): the variety and quantity of the vegetables that the community actually needs are discussed and defined, so as to correctly plan production according to the real requirements of the final consumers. The most appropriate seeds to plant are evaluated, based on the type of local soil that can be used in a given year. This is important within a wider effort to minimise to use of fertilisers, even those theoretically allowed in organic farming, thus going towards a more radical, natural agriculture. The costs to run the project are born by the very producers-consumers (~50 shares) based on their expenditure possibilities.



Figure 2. A view of the farm hosting the project



Figure 3. Winter Assembly of the CSA Veneto, January 2019

Savings from the prevention of food waste and of packaging are clear, and the production expenses and methods are totally transparent; this way, and since food is not sold, there is no need for a third party (i.e. one of the existing organisations to be called and paid to obtain a certification) to make release approvals about the food being organic. Besides being *de facto* self-certified by the producer-consumer community, organic food is here de-commodified in a mutualist system — an explicit alternative to the mainstream, currently dominant, agri-food model (Cristiano *et al.*, 2020a).

Among the founding principles of the co-production project at issue are:

- mutuality, since members can put the amount of money and time they can offer, regardless of the share to which they are eventually entitled;
- planned crop production;
- produce acceptance;
- transparency and fair budgeting;
- relationship and self-management building, encouraged through active involvement in distribution and other tasks, proximity, and short duration of collection time slots;
- democratic management, through open meetings, no structured board, and no leaders;
- learning across groups;
- appropriate group dimension (i.e. if the group grows too much, gemmation will be preferred);
- progressive cooperation and development.

Some pillars can be also found in the overall vision guiding the project: local food; food autonomy or *sovereignty*, with the latter version proposed by the international peasant movement Via Campesina (Rosset, 2003; La Via Campesina, 2019); Social Solidarity Economy (Mance, 2007, Fonteneau *et al.*, 2010, 2011; UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy, 2018); agroecology (cf. Francis *et al.*, 2003; Altieri, 2009, 2018); permaculture (cf. Mollison and Holmgren, 1978; Mollison, 1988); and resilience. A logic scheme of the concepts and functioning of the CSA Veneto project are illustrated in Figure 4.

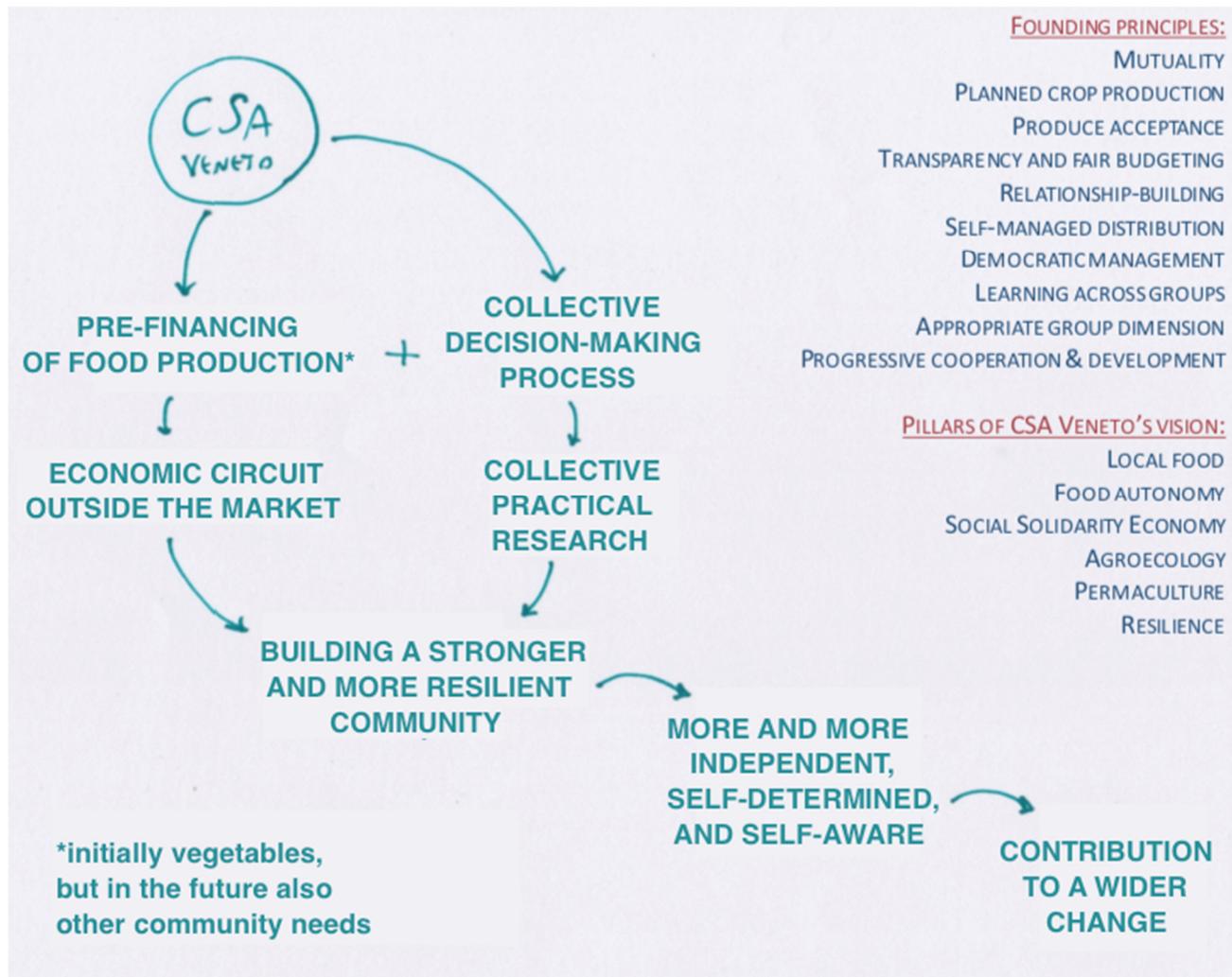


Figure 4. CSA Veneto's logic diagram and key concepts

This experience is meant as part of a conscious action within a wider idea of experimenting a socio-economic transformation of agro-ecological reorganisation, ecosystems regeneration, and urban food ecology, and involves genuine and intentional processes of self-organised inhabitants-and-producers: not a set-piece, nor a niche marketing operation, but rather the genuine outcome of real processes pursuing the self-determination of aware and self-organised inhabitants-producers (*ibid.*). The whole experience can be framed in what Chodorkoff (2019) widely defines as education for groundbreaking transformation, especially when

you learn how to act with others in a democratic fashion, when you begin to reshape your understanding and relationships between yourself and others and the environment in which you live”, and – indeed – “when you organise a cooperative [...] (Chodorkoff, 2019)

All of this seems to have something to deal with a quote from Murray Bookchin, as reported by the same Chodorkoff (*ibid.*), maintaining that “every revolutionary project is an educational project”. When education and ideas are involved, we might say one is targeting what systems thinking

defines as mental models, placing them at the bottom tip of its metaphorical iceberg (Meadows, 2008), i.e. where the leverage potential for sustainable systemic change is higher (Meadows, 1999). In such a perspective, context-based tools and policies are being explored. In this direction, CSA Veneto has recently organised events to start a dialogue with local public administrations for concrete action plans and facilitation tools. A CSA already represents an evolution from the passive individual choices of a single consumer to an active collective engagement in bottom-up initiatives. Through urban food plans, policies (Calori *et al.*, 2017), and other tools to be defined in participatory ways with all the actors of a given area, a CSA can represent the trigger of a virtuous paradigmatic shift in more or less institutional policies for the maintenance, regeneration, and strengthening of territory and urban environments.

At a local social, environmental, and economic level, the production model proposed by CSA Veneto exhibits benefits such as: local, healthy, sustainable organic food fairly accessible to an increased number of households; community-building and increased resilience; soil protection; awareness raising and material and immaterial re-thinking of the relations between and across the city and the countryside.

At a larger level, the CSA Veneto model implicitly poses epochal societal challenges such as the ideal shape of a city in a given context, the relation between a city and its surrounding countryside and support areas, strategically sustainable urban metabolisms and truly circular patterns (Cristiano *et al.*, 2020b), the needed transport infrastructures as well as the preservation of land, water bodies, and local resilience and quality of life in general.

All challenges that seem hardly addressable by current business as usual scenarios, i.e., just “greening” some specific processes in a *de facto* still unsustainable and unjust social and economic paradigm unavoidably producing unquestioned ever expanding cities globally, which – in a frightening paradox – increasingly consume the fertile soil theoretically required to feed their increasing populations. In such a complex scenario, a CSA seems to offer some lessons to learn.

However, some limits can be detected, partially suggested here but deserving future developments. We propose that acting in a problematic paradigm, yet envisioning its overcoming, might set some policy and behavioural barriers. Besides the risk of ending up not really getting to question the paradigm from the inside, among such barriers we might find: unclear bureaucratic framing and following lack of legitimation²; company- and profit-oriented economic incentives and financial subsidies from public administrations at all levels; scarce protection from pollution, nearby use of pesticides, land consumption, and inadequate light transport infrastructures; land rental or

² The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has followed the conclusion of this work, might suggest some hints e.g. in terms of the possibility for the farming activities, the voluntary work, and the deliveries to be authorised in curfew and/or lockdown periods.

purchasing prices in a competitive market economy; working yet poor people not having time to dedicate to (or even to get to know) even mutualist cooperative initiatives like this, and so on. Given the mostly experimental and voluntary nature of an aware project like a CSA, some internal limits might also play a role, e.g.: group dynamics and decline in active participation, with overloads on few people deciding for everyone (and consequent power issues); declining available time and/or motivation; participants getting fed up with not being able to grocery shop based on their daily desires; changing parallel activities (e.g. abrupt lack good salaries for personal jobs in times of economic crises) to contribute to the project in a solidarity perspective; inadequate time spent on internal relations and external outreach; possible exhaustion of aware and interested people in the society, leaving the approach to marginality. As premised, future punctual works may adequately address these issues.

Conclusion

The main features of an innovative co-production system for food production is illustrated in this paper. In addition to radical organic farming, self-education exercises include being horizontal, leaderless, and mutualistic. This Community-Supported Agriculture project addresses the challenges of socio-ecological transformation by – literally and metaphorically – seeding within the current industrial economic paradigm to be overcome. Proposed and practiced as a local experience, the project acknowledges and aims at locally (and necessarily partially) addressing global issues; refusing closed localisms, it has an international perspective of dialogue and networking. It can be seen as a practice to rethink the territory and the city, by reconnecting the urban contexts to the rural environments that ultimately and unavoidably support them. Such reconnection is physical and immaterial, with exchange of products, notions, and resources within a short supply chain.

Another immaterial goal is represented by the very concept of community, reinforcing the resilience of a territory by enhancing collective relations and mutual aid: collaboration rather than competition, pursuing higher degrees of autonomy and independence in a perspective of long-lasting, genuine sustainability. Starting on food, the same approach can be enlarged to other key sectors of human societies, and provide valuable information to support the appropriate rethinking, planning, and design of the whole urban-rural world, including local choices within cities, to be possibly implemented through spontaneous initiative and – if need be – integration into participatory and bottom-up built urban food policies and plans.

The role of systemic interconnections both in ecology and in human societies is crucial, and the collective bottom-up approaches driving this project, together with their goal of self-determination,

allow participatory processes to be put into practice and experimented. An innovative project like this can represent one of the triggers of a virtuous paradigmatic shift directly acting on the founding principles driving the rethinking, maintenance, regeneration, and strengthening of both rural territories and cities. Systemically speaking, a fair leverage potential for change is detected, together with crucial issues to be possibly recognised and addressed both internally and in future studies.

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