



Food justice in community supported agriculture – differentiating charitable and emancipatory social support actions

Jocelyn Parot¹ · Stefan Wahlen² · Judith Schryro³ · Philipp Weckenbrock¹

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Abstract

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) seeks to address injustices in the food system by supporting small-scale farmers applying agroecological practices through a long-term partnership: a community of members covers the cost of production and receives a share of the harvest throughout the season in return. Despite an orientation towards a more just and inclusive food system, the existing literature points towards a rather homogeneous membership in CSA. A majority of CSAs tends to involve (upper) middle-class consumers with above average education and income levels. Low income is still a major obstacle in joining a CSA. Membership diversification through social support actions is one possible way. Our main objective is to systematize and appraise social support actions of the CSA movement. Taking the CSA principles as a starting point, our main research question is: How do social support actions in CSAs operate in terms of social inclusion and what obstacles and challenges are associated with them? The theory of strategic action fields assists in describing how the CSA movement is positioning itself as an actor in and across neighboring strategic action fields. The CSA movement is clearly positioned in the Food Sovereignty field. By shifting the focus from justice to farmers to justice for members, the CSA movement is now also exploring the Food Justice field. Indeed, the CSAs' contribution to the food justice movement is still largely uncharted. In our results, we identify both social support actions that are already implemented in the CSA movement in different countries, and the challenges that are associated with these actions. We pinpoint a classification of social support actions implemented by CSA organizers to increase access to their initiatives. We make a distinction between the emancipatory actions that empower beneficiaries and contribute to a systemic change, and punctual, charitable interventions that neither affect the structure of a CSA nor the food system.

Keywords Community-supported agriculture · Food Justice · Food Sovereignty · Strategic Action Fields · Social support actions · Bidding Round

Abbreviations

AMAP *Association pour le maintien d'une agriculture paysanne* Association for maintaining small-scale family farming a French version of CSA
CSA Community-Supported Agriculture
GASAP *Groupe d'achat solidaire de l'agriculture*

paysanne, Solidarity -purchase group for small-scale family farming, a Belgian version of CSA
LSPA Local and Solidarity -based Partnerships for Agroecology
SAF Strategic Action Fields
Solawi *Solidarische Landwirtschaft*, Solidarity -based Agriculture, a German version of CSA
SSA Social Support Actions

✉ Stefan Wahlen
stefan.wahlen@uni-giessen.de

- ¹ Chair of Organic Farming, Justus Liebig University Giessen, Karl-Glöckner-Str. 21 C, Gießen 35394, Germany
- ² Chair of Food Sociology, Justus Liebig University Giessen, Senckenbergstrasse 3, Giessen 35390, Germany
- ³ Consumer Rights Agency Berlin, Ordensmeisterstr. 15-16, Berlin 12099, Germany

Introduction

Community supported Agriculture (CSA) is an agricultural model that reflects growing concerns with the conditions of food production, especially the increasing market pressure on producers and their lack of autonomy to opt

for climate and environment friendly practices (Birtalan et al. 2021; Zoll et al. 2018). In North America, Europe and Japan, where many studies have been conducted, CSA has been described as direct, local and long-term partnerships between producers and consumers. CSA is often depicted as a community-based organization of members who share the entire costs of a farm. Varying between different CSA groups, a share of the harvest can be prepaid for several months, a farming season or a whole year (Forbes and Harmon 2008; Urgenci 2019). CSA is thus a risk-sharing model in which producers benefit from advance payments as well as commitment of members (Birtalan et al. 2021). The main motivations for consumers to participate in CSA include their wish to support local farmers, knowing where food comes from, addressing environmental concerns and access to a wide range of fresh and often organically produced food (Farmer et al. 2014; Forbes and Harmon 2008; Haney et al. 2015; Galt et al. 2017). Concerning the transformation of food systems through agroecology, Gliessman (2016) stresses the importance to, “*re-establish a more direct connection between those who grow our food and those who consume it*”. CSA has thus been identified as a way to support agroecology, defined as a science, a set of agricultural practices and a social movement, supporting the emergence of a more holistic vision of the food system (Wezel et al. 2018; Francis et al. 2003).

CSA has mostly been directed towards just income for farmers. This is encapsulated in the names used to describe CSA as an agricultural model. For example, in Germany, CSA is called solidarity-based agriculture. In Belgium, the chosen term is Solidarity Purchase Groups for Peasant Agriculture (GASAP). In France, they are Associations for Maintaining Peasant Agriculture (AMAP). More recently, the issue of accessibility from the consumers’ perspective has gained more prominence. For instance, the third principle of the French AMAP charter states that “*each AMAP seeks to broaden the accessibility of such food to all*” (MIRAMAP 2014). Similarly, the British CSA network sets as its 3rd pillar fairness, solidarity and reciprocity: “*CSA farming [...] see[s] healthy food as a right and work[s] towards equity and sovereignty in our food systems*” (CSA Network 2021a). In the United States, the CSA Innovation Network emphasizes equity: “*we must first recognize and address the systems of injustice that weaken it*” (CSA Innovation Network 2020).

Even though justice plays a role, currently, most CSA members in the Global North belong to a homogenous group with above-average education and income (Galt et al. 2017; Maticena 2016; Renting et al. 2012). Only a small fraction comes from low-income backgrounds (Hanson et al. 2019; Vasquez et al. 2017). Low income has been identified as a major barrier to participation in CSA (Farmer et al. 2014;

Forbes and Harmon 2008; Galt et al. 2017; Urgenci 2019). Therefore, CSA has been criticized for not adequately addressing inequalities in the food system (Maticena 2016; Mert-Cakal and Miele 2020; Renting et al. 2012). Few CSA programs have been designed to include lower-income members (Quandt et al. 2013). As low-income consumers have limited access to local food (Sbicca 2012), some CSA groups provide opportunities for them, for example, by offering unclaimed shares or selling discounted shares (Urgenci 2021). The literature identified reasons why low-income households are less likely to become CSA members (Farmer et al. 2014; Forbes and Harmon 2008; Galt et al. 2017) and outline time, transportation, as well as food habits and preferences as potential obstacles to direct producer-to-consumers relationships (McGuirt et al. 2019, 2020; Garner et al. 2021). Cotter et al. (2017) also identified discomfort of having to pay in advance without knowing the content of the box, as well as a lack of knowledge about the way CSA functions as barriers. For low-income families, these uncertainties are difficult to bear as they are constantly on a tight budget and may not be able to afford a backup option (Cotter et al. 2017).

In the United States of America, low-income households joining CSA through government-supported programs reported improved diets, increased vegetable consumption, a reduction in time spent shopping, and less money spent on food. For example, Basu et al. (2020) suggest that “[...] *CSA-based interventions may be cost-effective for improving diets among low-income persons*”. Moreover, low-income households “*place a slightly higher monetary value on their share [...] despite their lower incomes, and they are just as interested in food-related activities (...)*” (Galt et al. 2017). Thus, the inclusion of low-income households in CSAs can also be of advantage for farmers. Pole and Grey (2013) demonstrated that low-income households could be more prone to share the risks with the producers.

Even though social support actions in CSA have received some attention recently, their limits and potentials have rarely been documented. Moreover, a consolidated typology is missing to assist CSA groups in their efforts to diversify their membership. This research is a contribution towards filling these gaps. Our main objective is to systematize and appraise social support actions of the CSA movement. Taking the CSA principles as a starting point, our main research question asks: How do social support actions in CSAs operate in terms of social inclusion and what obstacles and challenges are associated with them? The article is structured as follows: first we outline the theoretical background of strategic action fields. We describe CSA as moving from the strategic action field of food sovereignty, to the broader field of food justice, both concepts will be defined in our theoretical section. We then describe our methods and data:

building on an initial list of support actions, we interviewed seven initiatives spearheading social support actions to come up with a classified typology of support actions. Our results systematize the strategies to diversify membership in CSA to address social inclusion and food justice. We also discuss the challenges encountered while implementing these strategies. In our discussion, we reflect upon the shift in strategic action fields. To conclude, we offer pathways for future research and action.

Theoretical background: strategic action fields of CSA

Strategic action fields are “*the fundamental units of collective action*” (Fligstein and McAdam 2012). SAFs offer an analytic frame to investigate how collective actors in social movements try to gain strategic advantage in and through interactions with other groups. According to Fligstein and MacAdam (2012), social life is structured by a complex web of embedded strategic action fields. Each social actor is framing her / his action in a field where everyone follows common rules (Suckert 2017). Depending on the field and where actors position themselves, they might be incumbents, holding a dominant position, or challengers, opposing power holders and carrying an alternative vision of how the field should be organized. There are also governance units, “*charged with overseeing compliance with field rules and, in general, facilitating the overall smooth functioning of the system*” (Fligstein and McAdam 2011).

In social movements, it is typical for SAFs to develop around specific issues or concerns. SAFs are dynamic and the order of the field might change with regard to how collective action is organized or embedded. Fligstein and McAdam (2012) identify four characteristics of SAFs: first, an understanding of the issue at stake (i.e. viewpoints on social inclusion in the transition towards sustainable food systems); second, a variety of actors involved with different degrees of power (e.g. farmers, consumers or other stakeholders); third, the actors involved have a joint understanding how the field operates, the rules of the game (i.e. how CSAs operate); fourth and last, there is an overarching interpretive frame, which might be contested from the various actors involved.

The analytic approach of SAFs has recently been applied for the first time to the German CSA movement in terms of the culture of cooperation (Degens & Lapschies 2023). We build on this work and focus on the consequences for SAFs when CSAs shift their focus from just income for farmers to include a more diverse range of members. CSA had until recently been framed by CSA networks as part of the food sovereignty movement (Réseau des Gasap 2011; Miramap

2014). The Declaration from the Food Sovereignty Forum held in 2007 in Mali defines food sovereignty as “*the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems*” (La Via Campesina 2007). Food sovereignty is used to reclaim the right for small-holders to self-determine the conditions for food production, distribution and consumption. According to Holt-Gimenez (2010; 2011), food movements can be placed along a spectrum stretching all the way from a neoliberal to a radical vision of food systems. The SAF of food sovereignty focuses on a radical systemic change. In this field, farmers are incumbents that are praised in a narrative with agrarian undertones. The contribution of CSA to the SAF of food sovereignty is clear: CSAs are offering community support to family farmers applying ecological practices and are aiming at restoring the autonomy of small-scale farmers in the food system. Food sovereignty tends to operate with mechanisms and policies that empower various actors in the food system. In CSA, the particular focus lies on supporting farmers.

In contrast to food sovereignty, the contribution of the CSA movement to the more encompassing SAF of food justice is still largely uncharted. Yet, there are some developments in the CSA movement, which aim to broaden the focus of CSA not only towards farmers, but also towards low-income consumers. Food justice advocates perceive the food system as characterized by transnational corporations dominating food production and distribution. They are interested in economic pressures and power imbalances in the food system and aim at creating access to appropriate food irrespective of the consumer class, race or gender (Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Romer 2014; Sadiku et al. 2018). Yet, the interpretative frame of the field of food justice as well as the interpretation how it operates is different: for Gottlieb and Joshi (2010), food justice is an intersectoral normative and egalitarian model aiming at removing all kinds of injustice, as for example racial or class injustice. Food justice aims to ensure “*that the benefits and risks of where, what and how food is grown and produced, transported and distributed, and accessed and eaten are shared fairly*” (Gottlieb & Joshi 2010:6). The food justice movement also acknowledges the underlying power structures that are perpetuating oppression and food inequalities and tries to address them. Here it is where both, low-income households and marginalized producers come into play. For example, food justice advances the opportunity for the most marginalized in the food systems to make choices about their food by establishing fair relationships with local producers, or by growing their own food (Sadiku 2018). Thus, the analytical approach of SAFs assists in scrutinizing the opening of the CSA movement towards the broader issues of food justice

in term of issues at stake, power imbalances, acknowledging how the food system operates as well as offering an interpretive frame, which seeks to address exploitative and unequal issues in the industrial food system.

Materials and methods

In order to systematize and appraise the social support actions implemented in the strategic action fields of the CSA movement, we build upon an initial list of social support actions. This list was established in the frame of a report about the response of CSA and other local solidarity-based partnerships during the Covid-19 pandemic (URGENCEI 2021). This initial list is based on an online survey with 328 replies and an additional 40 interviews conducted with CSA network coordinators mainly in Europe, North America, Japan, China and Brazil. Seven social support actions were identified:

- 1) Logistical support to marginalized and vulnerable people (e.g. home deliveries);
- 2) Food donations to marginalized and people in need;
- 3) Food donations to soup kitchens, pantries, charities;
- 4) Integration of migrants, asylum seekers in the group;
- 5) Discount shares in poor neighborhoods;
- 6) Home deliveries to vulnerable and disabled people; and.
- 7) Cooperation with social projects and social organizations: e.g. join ad hoc solidarity group.

For this paper, we first identified CSA groups implementing some of these solidarity mechanisms and contacted them via email. Seven initiatives located in North- and South America as well as in central Europe agreed to participate: six CSAs and one local CSA network. Although the sample size is limited, it comes with a certain scope, both geographically and in terms of the experience and roles taken by respondents in their respective groups. Hence, it

provides important insights regarding the dialectics between the obstacles to social support actions and the solutions found to overcome these obstacles in the respective SAFs. We included a variety of initiatives: ones with a long and well-recognized experience in social inclusion, like Rock Steady Farm in the US; as well as other initiatives which are less vocal about this topic, but who stated in their replies to the Covid-19 survey that they had been implementing social support actions since their creation, like the German Solawi and the French Saint-Denis based AMAP. We also included voices from the Global South by talking to CSA Demétria in Brazil. One interview was conducted with a CSA network, *Paniers marseillais* (PAMA), with a unique experience of organic solidarity shares. This additional network was identified as a particularly advanced initiative, a governance unit according to the theory of SAFs and used to validate some of the results of the previous interviews.

Approach

A case study approach has been adopted (Yin 2018) to build a typology of social support actions. The case we focus on is the implementation of social support actions in CSA, opening up towards a more just food system. Seven semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted (Misoch 2019, see overview in Table 1). Each interview consisted of guiding questions (see below) on the social support actions implemented by the CSA, on the barriers that prevent from becoming members and on the reasons that prevent members from making use of the social support actions. The case study approach helps us, on the one hand, to classify the support actions, but also assists in reflecting upon how the CSA movement is moving from the SAF of food sovereignty towards the SAF of food justice. It enables us to synthesize, for each of the four characteristics of the theorization of SAF, the main limits faced by the CSA movement, and to study how the change in the interpretative frame

Table 1 General information about the initiatives interviewed

Name of initiative	Cited as	Location	Year of foundation	Reach	Role of the interviewee
CSA Agromandala	Interview 1	Fredonia, Colombia	2020	~ 30 members	farmer
CSA Demétria	Interview 2	Botucatu, Brazil	2011	~ 250 members ≅ ~ 300 harvest shares	staff member, coordinator
CSA Rock Steady Farm	Interview 3	Millerton, US	2016	425 members	farmer
CSA Bel Aire	Interview 4	Paris, France	2016	273 members	member
CSA Trier	Interview 5	Trier, Germany	2017	200–250 members ≅ 60 harvest shares	farmer
CSA Ortenau	Interview 6	Offenburg, Germany	2016	162 members ≅ 180 harvest shares	staff member
Paniers marseillais	Interview 7	Marseilles, France	2007	35 CSA groups, about 50 producers, around 5,000 members	staff member

towards food justice has consequences regarding how these limits can be addressed.

Protocol

A consent form was signed by all interviewees. The interviews were carried out in April and May 2021. Each interview was held via video call and recorded. The length of the interviews varied between 28 and 156 min. The semi-structured interviews were fully transcribed, and the qualitative data analysis was supported by the MAXQDA© software. A content structuring analysis grid was designed in order to generate the codes by a combination of deductive and inductive approaches (Kuckartz & Rädiker 2023).

The obstacles to join a CSA and the social support actions offered by the CSA were all predefined, whereas the typologies of obstacles and social support actions and challenges have been derived based on the interviews. Below are the guiding questions that were asked during the interviews.

- What mechanisms and social support actions do you implement in your initiative? Are there factors that are crucial for the successful implementation of social support actions?
- What barriers still exist that might prevent people from becoming members of your initiative and members from making use of social support actions?

We analyzed the interviews through coding along the main categories (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2023). We complemented the interview data with a variety of sources ranging from individual CSAs to CSA networks’ websites and recordings of a series of webinars on the topic. In addition, one of the authors has been involved in the CSA movement for more

than a decade at the international level and has experience and knowledge on the topic based on numerous projects and exchanges during field visits.

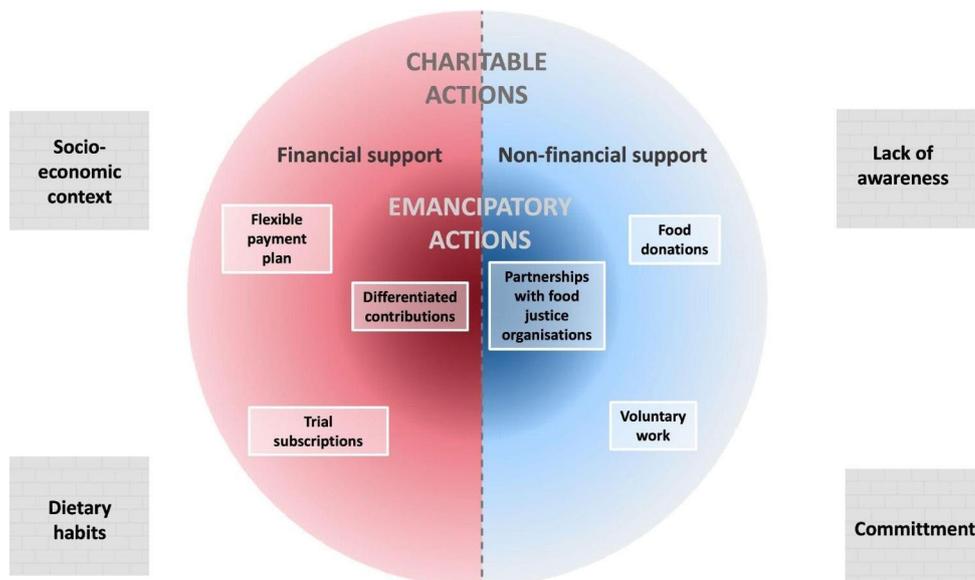
Results: towards socially more inclusive CSA

The analysis of the qualitative interviews resulted in the identification of two focal areas that could assist the strategic action field in which CSAs operate to become more socially inclusive. First, we appraise social support actions (SSA) differentiating between emancipatory social actions and those that are rather motivated by charity. Second, we outline challenges faced while implementing these actions.

Typology of social support actions

Based on the interviews, we classified the earlier identified social support actions (URGENCI 2021) into two categories: the ‘emancipatory support actions’ (see Fig. 1 below, more towards the center) empower low-income households and lead into reconsidering some of the fundamental rules of CSA. The other category, ‘charity support actions’ (see below, towards the outside) support actions that provide short-term relief that might not affect the way CSA functions. Emancipation is understood as the process through which (groups of) individuals gain agency by being freed from someone else’s control, whereas Charity is understood as the voluntary assistance of those in need. We further distinguish between support actions which are either of financial or of non-financial nature (see Fig. 1). By financial support, we mean that an action is affecting the contribution paid by the members, should it be the amount paid or the calendar of payment. By non-financial support, we mean

Fig. 1 Typology of social support actions and obstacles to join a CSA



that an action is not affecting the contribution paid by the members, but instead results in in-kind social support. The distinction between *charity* and *emancipatory* social support actions is of analytic nature. Social support actions might move between these poles, depending on the CSA and how they have implemented the support action. Through the lens of SAFs, CSA actors who strive for emancipatory actions are embedding the CSA movement into the larger strategic action field of food justice.

Charitable financial support actions

Several social support actions do not address the emancipatory ambition of the CSA movement, but provide direct and fast help without necessarily implementing pathways towards a more just food system. One key principle of CSA is upfront payments. However, the payment frequency varies: members might pay on a monthly basis, a whole season, several months or even a year in advance. The aim is to ensure a sufficient budget for the whole growing season and simple accounting for the producer. Sometimes, however, members can be late on their payment plans. The interviewee from CSA Ortenau emphasizes that financial difficulties should not be a reason to leave:

“I also had an individual case once, (...) that someone signed off during the course of the year and said: ‘I’ve lost my job and can no longer afford to do this’. And then I agreed with that person to continue and to pay a lower rate now, and when that person has a job again, to pay more. That was accepted and worked out well.” (Interview 6, pos. 20).

Members of Rock Steady Farm CSA have the possibility to sign up for a flexible payment plan. Members are asked to pay a 20% deposit at the beginning of the season and to pay the rest one or two months later (Rock Steady Farm 2021a). In general, members are encouraged to get in touch with the CSA, if they are unable to pay upfront. All respondents stressed that suitable solutions can be found.

Several CSA groups offer trial memberships to lift the obstacle of signing up for CSA membership. This targets individuals who are interested in joining, but would like to get familiar with the system first. After a couple of weeks or months, they can decide whether to stay or quit. CSA Bel Aire even increased accessibility by offering a discount for new members. A similar approach is provided by CSA Agromandala, in which members who are under contract for at least three months receive a discount. This is a way to ensure a stable income for the farmers without forcing subscribers into long contracts. Moreover, some CSA groups allow members to decide each month if they would like to

stay in the CSA or not in order to reduce obstacles for joining CSA. The purpose of trial memberships is more general than the sole integration of low-income households. It can be used as a strategy to increase membership, without taking into account their social background. Nevertheless, our case study stresses flexible payment plans as an efficient tool, whereby potential members, regardless their social background, can learn “how to do CSA”.

Furthermore, the respondents from Colombia, Brazil and France remark that food from a CSA is not necessarily cheaper than food from the supermarkets, but it is cheaper than organic food from other markets. The respondent from CSA Demétria emphasizes:

“If you buy conventional food here, you have a price and if you want to buy organic, the difference is too big. It’s not just big like in Germany, because you have that difference as well. But it is incredibly big [...] So only the elite, only the rich can actually buy organic here in Brazil.” (Interview 2, pos. 26).

The respondent from CSA Agromandala stresses the specificity of CSA in setting up prices over the whole year, thus providing an exceptional stability both to producers and consumers. This allows members to plan their expenses.

Charitable non-financial support actions

CSA principles consider an uncollected share as unclaimed and lost. In some CSA, these unclaimed shares are given to a nearby charity, rather than being given to another member. Another option for members is to leave some food from their shares in a basket at the distribution site. This allows members to swap food they do not like or food that is exceeding their consumption capacities. There are also other forms of donations. CSA Bel Aire connects members via an Email-list, where they can share clothes or furniture, but also apartments or language courses. Similarly, CSA Agromandala initiated a chat to share recipes for unfamiliar food.

The respondents indicate that food donations are not only accessible for members of the CSA, but also for individuals from the neighborhoods or farm workers. The farmers are able to donate surplus food instead of selling it on other markets, because the CSA offers them financial security. Another non-systemic support action is voluntary work on the farm, mentioned by the respondents from the two German CSA groups. Even if assisting on the fields is a requirement, members decide on their own when, how often and how long they would like to work. There is no connection between the amount of the financial contribution and the number of voluntary working hours. In many CSA groups, the financial contribution is anonymous anyway, so that no

one is keeping track of working hours committed by each member. The respondent from CSA Trier said:

“(…) We also explicitly do not want a lower contribution to the bidding round to be linked to working on the field, because not everyone is able to do that. And solidarity, as we see it, means that everyone contributes according to their possibilities. This also means that if you do not have money and time, because you are in a precarious employment situation or are a single parent, you still have the opportunity to participate.” (Interview 5, pos. 36).

Voluntary work by CSA members can be considered as a social support action in an indirect way, because if many individuals work voluntarily, the labor costs and thus the membership fees can be reduced. Thus, members who are physically able to work in the fields, and who have the time and resources to do so, relieve the burden of those who don't have the same opportunity. By so doing, volunteers structurally support the CSA initiative and its increased openness. The respondent from CSA Trier adds:

“So, people who do not want to be part of the garden community, but who only want to get the vegetables, are also allowed to participate.” (Interview 5, pos. 52).

Food donations and voluntary work are support actions that, although not emancipatory, can facilitate access to CSA membership at an operational level.

Emancipatory financial support actions

Besides stable prices, the possibility to choose between differentiated contributions is another strategy towards financial support for CSA members. Several social support actions fall in the category of differentiated contributions, e.g. sliding scales, solidarity shares, bidding rounds and self-assessment, which we describe in the following. *Sliding scales* are strategies to mitigate economic barriers. Shares are priced lower for lower-income households and higher for higher-income households. For example, at CSA Rock

Steady Farm, every member chooses the payment level based on their income and wealth. Guidelines are available on the CSA's homepage to help members make their choice. These guidelines take property, occupation, health status and social and financial security into account. Members can choose between four different payment levels. The low-income level includes a 20% discount. The middle price, called “market price point” is the break-even price, at which all costs of the farm are covered. The upper level requires an additional 20% increase and the contributor level 40%. Table 2 illustrates the breakdown of contribution levels of CSA Rock Steady Farm in 2020.

CSA Rock Steady Farm members also have the option to receive a smaller share at a lower price. If the average contribution ranges below the price necessary to cover the costs, the farm has to make up for the gap by using food access funds or by appealing for donations.

If the CSA ends up with more money than is necessary to cover all the costs, they add the surplus to their reserve to be able to finance the following seasons. Thanks to the sliding scale, about 57% of the production was shared with low-income households in 2020. This proportion was reached through a mix of sliding scale, solidarity shares and wholesale produce for food pantries. The farm had about 310 paying members in 2020. Additional 130 households received solidarity shares, subsidized by 40–100%. These are meant for individuals who cannot afford to pay the lower sliding scale level. The farm finances such solidarity shares via individual tax-deductible donations, grants and sponsorships (Rock Steady Farm 2021). The farm collaborates with a Health Center serving HIV/AIDS patients with additional health conditions and LGBTQIA+ communities. The members facing high medical costs can register for solidarity shares. As for the sliding scale, the solidarity share classification is also based on trust. No proof of income is required. The CSA provides information to assign oneself to one of the payment levels, but the members decide on their own which level they feel they belong to. CSA Demétrie offers a single solidarity share for a person who is facing an insecure situation. In order to provide the person with a harvest share, all members have agreed to pay a slightly higher contribution.

Another differentiated contribution model is the bidding round (also called pledging round). The respondent from CSA Trier describes the procedure of the bidding rounds as follows: At the beginning of the season, the annual expenses of the farm are calculated and a general meeting is organized. Based on the calculated costs and the number of members, an average monthly contribution is announced to provide guidance. In the first round, members anonymously place their bid: they state how much they would like to pay. If the costs of the season are not covered, a second, even

Table 2 Sliding scales - Breakdown of CSA Rock Steady Farm in 2020 (CSA Network 2021b; Rock Steady Farm 2021)

Payment level	Low income (-20%)	Middle (Market price point)	Upper (+20%)	% Contributor (+40%)
Contribution fee (22-week full share)	\$615	\$770	\$925	\$1075
Amount of members in %	34%	40%	18%	8%

in some cases a third, bidding round might be necessary. A majority of members pay more than the average and others pay significantly below the average price. This model is illustrated in Fig. 2 (below). In 2018, an additional table was collectively created to provide guidelines on how to self-assess one's contribution. The table displayed monthly recommended contributions based on the net income of a single household. For example, for a person with an income of 1,524 Euros, the guiding value contribution of 95 Euros corresponds to 6.23% of the net income. For somebody earning a minimum wage, the CSA contribution would then be only 73.80 Euros. Thus, the table also has the important function of showing members that it is acceptable to contribute less due to low financial resources.

The bidding round does not require a minimum bid value: the only rule is that all the farm's financial needs must be covered before the farming operation can start. The interviewee from CSA Trier reflects on the principle of the bidding round:

“It is exciting and thrilling every time, but everyone has the same interest. So, everyone wants it to continue. So yes, everyone pulls together and adds another two Euros. And if more people with lower incomes would join them that would probably also work out somehow.” (Interview 5, pos. 46).

Transparency is crucial for a successful implementation. The respondent of CSA Trier notices:

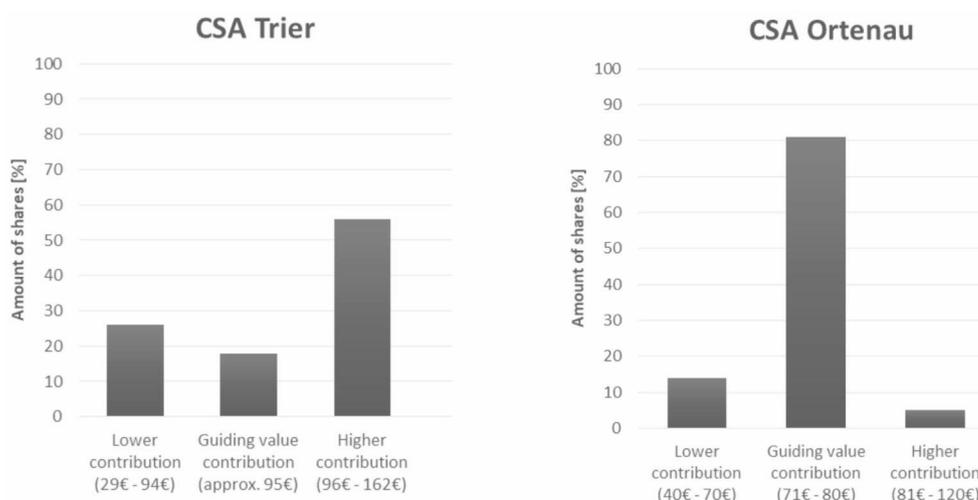
“We have to stop not talking about money’, because I find it very difficult how a society is supposed to change towards more solidarity with bidding rounds, when you don't know at all how much I earn and whether the contribution is a lot or it is a small amount.” (Interview 5, pos. 62).

Transparency in a bidding round is the basis for mutual trust. Talking about income also helps middle class members to appreciate their financial privileges. CSA Ortenau follows a slightly different principle in their bidding round: a “non-binding guiding value” is determined to assist the members in their decision on how much to contribute. The aim is to reach the annual budget without further bids. However, in some cases, the costs of production are not fully covered. The members are then asked to slightly increase their contributions. Neither lower limit nor proof of income are required. The respondent from CSA Ortenau states that often members with fewer resources are also quite willing to pay more. Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of the financial contributions of CSA Trier and CSA Ortenau in 2021.

Emancipatory non-financial support action

Emancipatory non-financial support actions include collaborations with other organizations to achieve greater reach. Our interviews and findings of other studies show that collaboration with other organizations, such as social services, health centers or food pantries, helps to reach populations that otherwise would not know about CSA (Urgenci 2019). Especially collaboration with governmental aid programs have proven to be helpful: this is a way for CSA to delegate to professionals the high responsibility to ensure that those who need the CSA shares the most eventually receive them. CSA Rock Steady Farm also supports the project “CSA is a SNAP” in order to make CSA shares more accessible to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program -beneficiaries. Finally, it is important to emphasize webinars and trainings organized by CSA networks on the topic. Rock Steady Farm and *Paniers marseillais* have both been playing an active role in learning from experienced food poverty organizations, sharing their experience and linking with food aid beneficiaries through webinar series (Rock Steady Farm

Fig. 2 Distribution of monthly membership contributions of CSA Trier and CSA Ortenau in 2021



2021; CSA Network 2021b; Miramap 2020). Solawi Trier also conducted a seminar about income and payment levels in CSA. During this seminar, the table showing the levels of differentiated contributions based on the income was presented and discussed collectively.

Challenges for CSA to implement social support actions

Our analysis reveals key challenges and limitations of social support actions. The socio-economic backgrounds of members of the CSA groups participating in this study are quite heterogeneous. They range from wealthy areas with middle-class members up to one of the poorest suburbs of Paris, even though this latter CSA also predominantly consists of individuals with an academic background and a high social status. In this latter case, low-income households from the neighborhood do not join the CSA, although it is close to their homes. In other CSAs the financial status of the members is mixed, but low-income members are hardly represented.

A set of factors mentioned by our respondents are eating habits, consumption patterns and expectations of size, shape and immaculacy of food. Even if these are general barriers, affecting everyone potentially becoming a member, they might be particularly challenging for low-income households. The lack of choice was mentioned as a major obstacle. In most of the CSAs, although diverse fruits and vegetables are offered, the content of the share is the same for all. This can come as a surprise for consumers who would prefer to choose food following their personal tastes:

“I think sometimes it can be a little bit overwhelming if someone doesn’t actually eat that many vegetables. So, we have two different sizes, but it’s amazing some people say that even the smaller sizes are too much.”
(Interview 3, pos. 37).

Expectations about preferred foods in CSA shares can be both culturally influenced and dependent on the educational background. This cultural or educational gap makes it challenging to meet expectations. Beneficiaries would like to have a choice; they don’t like to have the composition of the share “imposed”. The farmer who initiated the Agromandala project in Colombia pointed out that members often do not know how to use and prepare food from the CSA because they lack the knowledge to do so. This leads to sharing advice with members on how to add unfamiliar vegetables or salads to their daily diet or other cooking methods that go beyond frying. She emphasized that individuals with low incomes not only lack the money for healthy food but, above all, the knowledge about it. The result of such a

clash of food cultures is that some of the solidarity shares’ beneficiaries are actually dropping out, as in the case of Agromandala:

“[Members] don’t get what they want, what they think they want in their heads. They don’t understand that’s what we grow and that’s what nature gives to you and it is not enough to explain to them that it’s not avocados all year [...]”. (Interview 1, pos. 88)

The respondent from Brazil points to the wider context:

“[...] For the people here, it is status, for example, to drink Coca Cola. We have hundreds of varieties of fruits. Wonderful juices and so on [...]. But you can’t get to anybody in the house that’s gonna offer you lime juice, you know? Cause that’s like “hey what’s the matter, you don’t have money to buy a Coke?” [...] You have to have these things to gain status, to show that you have some kind of status”. (Interview 2, pos. 44)

The respondents underline that some new members are not willing to adapt their eating and cooking patterns to what they get from the CSA. In addition, the share also provides members with vegetables that they are not used to eat. CSA is a strategic action field with rules that are hard to understand for newcomers. Interviewees see this as a major hindering factor for low-income households.

Another barrier is reaching the pick-up stations. It requires time and additional transportation to pick-up shares of the harvest. The respondent from CSA Rock Steady Farm explains:

“We have fruits, eggs, you know, we have a diverse box, but it’s always when someone really is strafed on time, then they just got to go to the grocery store once they get everything they need as cheap as possible.”
(Interview 3, pos. 12).

Lastly, our respondents also mention a lack of public awareness as an obstacle:

“One barrier is that many people still don’t know us. During the first few years after we founded the CSA, we did a lot of information sessions and events, but of course you never reach all sections of the society”.
(Interview 6, pos. 50)

Often, however, there is no effort on communication as CSA groups are not able to accommodate more members. The example from CSA Ortenau is interesting: in its early

years, it focused a lot on advertisement in the region, particularly in the countryside. Even if this CSA is still offering guided farm tours and educational work in cooperation with schools, shares are already booked so that they do less publicity. This results in less opportunities to know about the existence of the CSA for individuals outside of the small circle already participating.

The respondent from the US even considered the ethnic origin as a core cultural element explaining the difficulty for social support actions to be fully endorsed by potential beneficiaries. About the CSA concept she commented:

“[...] it’s the States, European, it’s not like global in a way. So, people might just be like: ‘whatever that’s just not my thing’ you know ‘not my culture, not my background I am not interested’.” (Interview 3, pos. 37).

Another challenge is that the introduction of social support actions requires additional effort. Members of CSA groups appreciate guidance to choose the level of their contributions, as they still struggle to assess their financial privileges. Coming up with such classifications to guide members in their contributions requires an important effort from the core CSA group. Moreover, in order to reach individuals of concern, easy access to informative content deems to be important. Prospective members need to know which payment options are available. Low-income individuals will not see CSA as beneficial if they do not know about the flexible payment options.

In order to work efficiently, including the organization of polls to know what was appreciated and what was not, and in order to prepare a regular newsletter, the respondent from the US estimates that 25% of the work on the farm is used for communication purposes. CSA Bel Aire core group members decided not to work with governmental programs to avoid becoming dependent and overloaded with administrative work. The length of the contract term and the requirement to collect the shares from the pick-up may be perceived as temporal and spatial barriers. Adding to this, many newcomers feel unfamiliar with the responsibilities that go along with a CSA membership:

“We had people who wanted to buy something here and when they found out that you have to be a member, it scared them off. [...] By the way, I had the same problem at the beginning. I also found it a bit strange. One is then suspicious: ‘what kind of cult is that?’ (...) Here you have to be active. And active means being a member and paying membership fees. And that’s the first step from passivity to activity.” (Interview 4, pos. 86).

Thus, the simple fact that being a member is a requirement can be a limit preventing the generalization of social support actions.

Another aspect that limits the use of social support actions is dignity. For a lot of potential beneficiaries, there is a high risk of being exposed, stigmatized as a person in need of assistance. The respondent from Brazil reports a case in which a person was supported by a solidarity share. The person was uncomfortable with the support offered and was even upset that they talked about the financial situation. An interviewee from Germany puts this challenge as follows:

“[The beneficiaries had] the feeling of not being an equal member of the community or exploiting us as gardeners in case they pay less”. (Interview 5, pos. 28)

This quote shows that members would often find it difficult to pay less than the recommended amount of contribution, and thus often prefer to drop out instead of being a perceived “second class member”.

Discussion

The objective of this paper was to categorize and appraise social support actions implemented in the CSA movement. The results of our analysis emphasize two types of social support actions in the current CSA movement. First, support actions which seem to have the same limitations as other food donations: the beneficiaries are put in a passive position, they have neither the right nor the power to define the content of their shares. These donations perpetuate altruism on the one hand and indignity on the other hand and may lead to dependency of the receivers (Allahyari 1999; Rock Steady Farm 2021). The second type of social support actions consists of emancipatory actions, which can result in revisiting the underlying principles of CSA in order to associate more closely the beneficiaries and ensure their active participation in the partnership. We also identified numerous challenges for the social support actions implemented by CSA. In this discussion, we contemplate how moving from the field of food sovereignty to the field of food justice can increase the potential for emancipatory support actions. The four characteristics of SAFs assist in this reflection.

The first characteristic of any SAF is the shared understanding of what is at stake. The challenge in CSA is that social support actions assisting low-income households does not necessarily resonate with supporting smallholder farmers. The hindering factors of social support actions are in line with previous research about limitations of access to CSA: the income and the social background are

discriminatory elements (see Cotter et al. 2017; Forbes and Harmon 2008; White et al. 2018). As McGuirt et al. (2020) demonstrate, the sociodemographic context impacts the participation in CSA programs. This is also confirmed with research previously conducted among CSA farmers: “A well-functioning CSA requires members who are aware of the responsibilities that go along with membership. This applies equally to people of all income levels” (Sitaker et al. 2020, 105). Our interviews emphasize the openness of CSA members and producers to embark on a new strategic action field: they want to learn what is at stake from actors already positioned in the field. They are gaining literacy about food poverty. A series of online webinars and training sessions were organized on the topic in the US, in France as well as in Germany. They provide interesting examples: CSA group coordinators and CSA network coordinators are willing to be trained in order to learn and to improve their understanding of what is at stake in another field. This observation seems to be supporting previous descriptions of CSA as a social knowledge-sharing space (Piccoli et al. 2020) or a self-managed research and grassroots innovation movement participating in the co-construction of knowledge (Anderson et al. 2021).

The second characteristic of SAFs considers the *variety of actors* with differentiated power. Our results demonstrate contention in the field of food sovereignty, with, on the one hand active CSA members (incumbents), and, on the other hand low-income households. Some social support actions can come indeed across with a whiff of paternalism. Low-income households’ consumption patterns are understood by respondents as self-determined, which can be summed up as: they get what they believe they need to get, and they thus choose unhealthy diets although CSA tries to educate them. This seems to ignore the fact that low-income households are tight on money and time. Even if they are interested in joining a CSA, they simply cannot afford to risk a meager or even empty share. In contrast, middle-class members can afford to get an empty share every once in a while, and make up for it with additional food shopping. Thus, it seems CSA cannot really welcome low-income households as empowered actors in the strategic action field of food sovereignty. There is a need to move to a different field, where the actors are different and include low-income households as key protagonists.

As a response to this challenge is the recognition of the need to build equal partnerships with organizations who have a long experience in the field. For example, within the French CSA network’s accessibility working group, the collective analysis underscores that food justice has been used by a constellation of local initiatives, and even by state institutions. However, the current system is still failing to restore food precarious citizens’ dignity and agency

(Miramap 2020; Paturel and Ndiaye 2020). Their flagship policy proposal is the creation of a social security for food. The French CSA movement seems to be passing an alliance with challengers in the field of food justice.

The third characteristic of SAFs relates to the rules of the game. We witness a lack of recognition of the “rules of the game” by low-income households. Committing on a permanent, long-term contract with a CSA appears challenging and somewhat risky for consumers who do not have a stable income. The membership fee is a frequently mentioned reason why persons with a low income are excluded from CSA, as the long-term commitment of the membership exceeds their planning horizon. Moreover, the mere requirement to become a member in order to be eligible for a share seems to be repelling many, as it is interpreted as a sign of a closed community.

Within the new SAF of food justice, the CSA movement is encouraged to revise the agreed rules of the game and to revisit how CSAs are functioning, in order to enhance the participation of low-income households. Our results show interesting examples such as the bidding round system developed in German CSAs, or the sliding scales where “higher priced shares subsidize the lower priced shares” (Forbes and Harmon 2008, 2017) in Rock Steady Farm, as well as the integration of CSA in governmental food justice programs. These actions are all transforming the structural functioning of CSA. Shifting from food sovereignty to food justice implies revisiting some of the ways of doing CSA, in particular by involving other organizations, getting public support, involving food justice organizations in the recruitment of members, or asking all members to self-assess their wealth in order to opt for the right income scale.

The fourth and last characteristic of SAFs is the overarching interpretive frame. Confronted with the limits of their social support actions, CSA coordinators and organizers have been embedding the CSA movement into the broader SAF of food justice. This can be interpreted as a major change regarding the overarching interpretive frame. Indeed, within the interpretive frame of food justice, not only the support to producers is at stake, but a more inclusive vision of the community in CSA and the overall food system. The Table 3, summarizes our discussion. It shows the difficulty, identified by our respondents, for low-income households to recognize what is at stake in a CSA, to find their place as challengers among the incumbents (CSA organizers and farmers), and to align with the “rules of the game”.

Can CSAs do better, or at least different, than food donations? By moving to the field of food justice, CSAs are activated as a learning environment: the stories told are not only about doing the right thing, but also about gaining experiences and skills. The theory of SAFs underlines

Table 3 Exploring a new field: towards food justice and more emancipatory social support actions from a Strategic Action Field perspective, considering the 4 main characteristics of SAFs. to social support actions and the consequences of embed

	Shared understanding of what is at stake	Variety of actors with differentiated power	Agreed rules of the game	Overarching interpretative frame
Challenges to social support actions	Lack of understanding of what is at stake in a CSA (“Supporting smallholders”) among low-income households	Contention between active CSA members (incumbents), on the one hand, and low-income households, on the other hand	Lack of recognition of the “rules of the game” by low-income households	Food sovereignty
Consequences of embedding the CSA movement into the SAF of food justice	Revising what is at stake: not only support to producers, but a more inclusive vision of the community	Building equal partnerships with, and learning from, organizations who have a long experience in the field of food justice	Revisiting how CSAs are functioning to enhance the participation of low-income households	Food justice

that developing emancipatory support actions for food justice requires a capacity to orient oneself in a new field. CSA farmers and members willing to address the issue of access to healthy organic local food are learning by doing. CSA groups are answering a “living lab”, “do it yourself” logic, rather than basing their actions on well-cut methodologies (MIRAMAP 2020). As shown in the interviews, the approach of CSA groups is often spontaneous and might be lacking preparation. CSA members initially think they can easily open up to new populations by offering discounted or even free shares, but they then realize that a process of acculturation, of learning about the actors, the issues and the common rules is necessary.

The use of the theory of SAFs sheds a new light on the CSA movement. It offers a promising avenue that could be used in future research. Up to 16 different “propositions” (Fligstein & MacAdam 2012) are presented to describe different dynamics across SAFs. One of the propositions states that “SAFs are generally destabilized by external shock originating from other SAFs, invasion by other groups of organizations or large-scale crises.” Further research would be needed to be able to distinguish between the role of the Covid-19 crisis, which was the initial context of the first typology of social support actions (Urgenci 2021) implemented by CSA partnerships. The role of food justice actors who started challenging the traditional definition of food sovereignty is worth further investigation to restore the position of small-holders in the food system.

A further limitation of this study is that we did not interview low-income households involved in CSAs. Such interviews would be needed to complete the picture. The perspective of low-income households that have been involved in the past, that are currently involved or that intend to become involved might draw up a more differentiated picture. Yet, the advantage of our approach is that it illuminates settings from very different angles providing in-depth and personal insights into the work and responsibilities within CSAs. The field of access to CSA is unstable and subject to major changes. There is a lot of space for further

research. One way forward would be to study the reaction of beneficiaries instead of the CSA coordinators: how do they relate to the social support actions? Another, more ambitious, project would be to compare the social composition of a variety of CSA groups, those with social support actions and those without, to see if those implementing social support actions are more diversified than others. This would require designing objective criteria of diversification and gathering a large sample of initiatives both with and without social support actions.

Conclusion

Our main research question asked how social support actions in CSAs operate in terms of social inclusion and what obstacles and challenges are associated with them? We suggest distinguishing between *charitable* and *emancipatory* actions within the responses to the issue of access to CSA developed by the groups we studied.

We categorize the mechanisms with differentiated contributions, including sliding scales, as *emancipatory* type of action, since they closely involve all members and beneficiaries in the design of their contribution, often based on a self-assessment of their wealth, which includes many different parameters. This is similar to equal partnerships with community leaders and organizations representing low-income households. In contrast, food donations, flexible payment plans, trial subscriptions and stable prices are unilateral support actions that do not seem to contribute to restoring low-income households’ agency. Voluntary work on the farm could be considered as *emancipatory* in some cases, but we have no evidence that this social support action has been used for individuals who otherwise would not be able to be part of a CSA.

The broader implications of our findings for practitioners are mostly articulated around the necessity of an increased recognition of the needs of low-income households. A thorough assessment of the potential participants’ demand

should be conducted. Each member should be recognized as a partner of the farm in an equitable relationship. Research and action should thus emphasize the emancipatory aspect of CSA, which lies in a strong relationship between producers and consumers. Moreover, in any move they make for social integration, CSA groups should not work in isolation: they should rather build strong alliances and be part of political coalitions asking for systemic change. Ideally, the initiative for social support actions should come from low-income households themselves rather than being a process driven by the CSA groups to try to attract low-income consumers.

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Jocelyn Parot is the General Secretary of URGENCI, the international network for Community-Supported Agriculture, since 2008. He currently also is a PhD researcher at the Justus Liebig University Gießen, Germany.

Stefan Wahlen is professor of Food Sociology and member of the Centre for Sustainable Food Systems at the Justus Liebig University Gießen, Germany. His current research and teaching focuss on food culture and eating in the sense of doing food, as well as organizational and socio-political dimensions of food.

Judith Schryro holds a Master's degree in Nutritional Sciences and Home Economics. She has been working at the chair of Food Sociology at Justus Liebig University Giessen University, Germany. Currently she works as a consultant for food and consumer education at the Consumer Rights Agency in Berlin.

Philipp Weckenbrock is a researcher at the professorship for organic agriculture at the Justus Liebig University Giessen, Germany. There, and with the research organization "*Die Agronauten*", he has worked on agroecological production and sustainable food systems.