The role of collaborative community supported agriculture: Lessons from Iowa

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The role of collaborative community supported agriculture: Lessons from Iowa

Abstract
The project surveyed a variety of CSA collaborators and participants to determine whether CSAs could serve as business incubators for small-scale, rural enterprise in Iowa.

Keywords
North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, Community-based food systems, Models and assessment tools

Disciplines
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The role of collaborative community supported agriculture: Lessons from Iowa

Abstract: The project surveyed a variety of CSA collaborators and participants to determine whether CSAs could serve as business incubators for small-scale, rural enterprise in Iowa.

Question & Answer
Q: What do producers gain from participating in collaborative marketing arrangements like cCSA?

A: This project demonstrates that collaboration helps producers start new farm-related enterprises or expand existing ones. Collaboration also allows producers to reduce their risks by providing instant access to markets, create stronger relationships with consumers, increase practical farming knowledge, improve marketing skills, and ultimately help producers decide if direct marketing (collaborative or otherwise) is right for their operation.

Background

Community supported agriculture (CSA) is one type of alternative food enterprise that helps consumers see food production in local terms. CSA members pay for a “share” of the harvest prior to start of the growing season. In return, they receive a box of fresh, often organic, produce regularly throughout the growing season. Membership often produces increased health benefits; improved knowledge about food production, and stronger community relationships.

There are various kinds of CSA arrangements and many different types of expected impacts a CSA can have on a community and its members. While most for-profit CSAs are owned and operated by a single proprietor or family farm, a few are comprised of a well-defined coalition of small, collaborating producers. In 2003, there were nearly 50 CSAs in Iowa, with four formally organized as collaborative CSAs.

The study objectives were to:
1. Define the role of collaborative CSA (cCSA) in Iowa as a business incubator for single family/individually-owned CSA,
2. Define other roles that collaborative CSA plays in informing the business decisions and actions of local agricultural entrepreneurs,
3. Identify the characteristics of collaborative and single family-owned CSA models that appeal to their respective members and determine how those characteristics meet or do not meet member needs,
4. Determine participation of current and former CSA members in local food systems such as farmers’ markets, and
5. Determine whether high membership turnover in collaborative CSAs creates high demand for/participation in more single family-owned CSAs.

Approach and methods

To meet the research objectives, investigators used a mixed methods approach. For objectives 1, 2, and 5, they used a survey instrument for producers to complete online or as a hard copy, and a telephone survey for producers who also were coordinators. For objectives 3, 4, and 5, they developed a survey instrument for cCSA members to complete online or by mail.

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Budget:
$13,429 for year one
With the help of an advisory committee formed in cooperation with the Iowa Network for Community Agriculture (INCA) and a group of central Iowa CSA producers and members, four formal cCSAs were identified in Iowa. Coordinators for three of the four groups agreed to take part in the study.

Initially, project organizers planned to survey all collaborative CSA coordinators in Iowa, all former and current producers, and a sample of 10 current and 10 former members from each CSA. Ultimately, they included the entire population of Iowa cCSA members to ensure that they had a sample of sufficient size to draw conclusions.

Results and discussion

The overall producer response rate to the surveys was 70 percent, and member response rate was 46 percent. Producer demographics revealed that a majority of cCSA producers in Iowa are female, and they also sell farm products through local food markets but cannot sustain household income solely through CSA or farm sales. The average cCSA member is female, urban, middle-aged, and lives in an upper-income household. This suggests that in Iowa, cCSA is not yet an effective mechanism to provide food access to lower income families, even though it does make significant contributions to community development.

One community benefit of cCSA is business incubation. Nearly half of the producers said that CSA participation helped them start, expand, or plan new farm-related enterprises. Among these new ventures were single-proprietor-owned vegetable CSAs and enterprises related to agri-tourism. Participation in cCSA also helps producers expand and diversify farm operations.

Participation in cCSA also has influenced business decisions made by producers. They cited increased practical farming knowledge, improved marketing skills, help in focusing on specific crops, increased confidence and pride in their operations, assistance in making decisions, and support for producers who are beginning local food production.

The researchers also linked producers’ reasons for getting involved with benefits they received as a result of participation to explain why producers might choose to expand, diversify, or even shut down their operations. Results showed that producers experienced the greatest benefits in natural, social, and cultural “capital,” while participation brings them the fewest benefits in terms of political and financial gain. That is, producers believe their activities have a positive impact on the environment in terms of improving soil health, biodiversity, water quality, wildlife habitat and landscape appearance. Social capital benefits include access to support networks and stronger relationships and trust with other producers, CSA members and the community. Cultural capital includes the set of values, customs, and traditions that defines what people believe is important. Cultural capital benefits producers received were linked with a stronger identity and ties to the land, farming, food, and others who hold similar beliefs, ethics, values and philosophies. Producers reported few, if any, gains in their ability to influence the distribution of resources, often achieved by having access or opportunities to interact with elected officials. CSA participation was limited in its ability to increase financial capital, which includes money, debt capital, tax breaks, and any other source of currency that can be used for business investments or household gain. However, CSA participation did help producers stabilize and diversify farm income.

Thus, it was not surprising that with nearly two in five producers no longer participating in cCSA, investigators were able to link turnover to lack of financial benefits. Women producers cited more cultural and social benefits
than men. And all producers agreed that their participation brought more benefits to the community than to themselves individually.

In stark contrast to producers, members ranked financial capital as the greatest benefit of participation. However, this was measured in terms of economic benefits to the community, not to members themselves. Political capital benefits were ranked last among members. Nearly half of the member respondents were former members; their top reasons for dropping out were related to coordination issues, and level of involvement was no guarantee of staying power. Current members were more likely than former members to supplement their share by raising their own food. Higher producer turnover was related to higher member turnover; perhaps because CSA members appeared to value their relationships with CSA producers more than those with other CSA members.

Conclusions

CSA is more than an opportunity for direct marketing; it also is an opportunity for to grow relationships. How CSA producers invest their time communicating with others is important to their business success. Here are strategies used by some CSA producers to build stronger enterprises and communities:

• Relationship brokering. Some producers rely on relationship brokers to dedicate the time and energy necessary to build relationships with members and other producers. They recognize that strengthening social capital is critical to the fiscal health of their business.

• Unconventional labor inputs and management. Producers of collaborative CSAs can share their labor responsibilities by turning to unconventional sources of labor, such as their members and the larger community.

• Producing and partnering for inclusion. Some producers participate in ventures that appeal to different kinds of eaters—those who can afford the cost and adventure of CSA membership and those who cannot. One example is working with nonprofits that use CSA shares for families who might not have access to CSA products.

• Members as co-creators. CSA producers are unusually well-connected to their members and tend to generate unconventional relationships that give rise to new food-related businesses.

• Members as marketers. Many producers recognize the valuable role that members play in advocating and marketing for the CSA. They may help draw in new members or educate their friends and family about food decisions.

• Creative producer partnerships. Collaborative CSA producers initiate unconventional, creative relationships with other producers to better serve their members. These partnerships serve as the CSA producers’ version of agricultural efficiency. Producers may out-source production of certain crops, livestock or food products to other growers or processors who have their own ideas about what they want to grow.

Impact of study results

1. When one of the cCSAs participating in the study dissolved, investigators worked closely with a small group of coordinators and producers interested in establishing a new multi-producer marketing initiative. In cooperation with NCRCRD, this group used relevant results of the member survey to organize and design a local food system market with features that were termed appealing in the 2005 study. More households were enrolled in 2006 than in the previous year’s CSA.

2. In March 2006, NCRCRD, along with two producers who had CSA experience, held a workshop in southeast Minnesota for a group interested in organizing a multi-producer association. Two months after the workshop, the group took tentative steps toward collaborative marketing to individuals, buying clubs, and other groups.

3. A key contact for one of the participating cCSAs said that results from this study served as the “first major systematic information [our local food system group] had on how successful our efforts have been.” The group was able to use member feedback from the cCSA study as part of its evaluation of broader local food system activities which, in turn, affects where the group will focus future efforts.

4. The project has allowed NCRCRD to formalize its involvement in local food system development as an
engine for rural and community economic development in the region. The study allowed NCRCRD to establish and cement more than 10 new working relationships and an estimated 25 new relationships with Extension educators and local food system advocates in our region to support their work in developing local food systems in their service areas.

Education and outreach

Reports, publications and presentations from this project can be accessed online at http://www.ncrcrd.iastate.edu/projects/csa/.

Eleven informational presentations were made about project findings in 2005 and 2006. Among the presentation venues were the 2006 National SARE Conference in Wisconsin, the Community Development Society Annual Meeting in Missouri, the National Small Farm Conference in North Carolina, and Iowa Network for Community Action annual conference in Des Moines.

A publication, “How Can Extension Educators Promote and Support Local Food System Development?” was distributed at the 2006 meetings of the Illinois County Extension Directors, the National Extension Women in Agriculture Education Conference, and the National Association for Community Development Extension Professionals. It is available online at www.ncrcrd.iastate.edu/projects/csa/index/html. An article about the project appeared in Rural Development News in 2005.

A presentation on the project can be viewed at http://www.leopold.iastate.edu/research/marketing_files/workshop06/index.htm

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