PROVE vegetable box in Loures,
Photo: Ana Firmino, 2014
CSA in Portugal – missing links within urban agriculture

Firmino, A. — Author

Abstract

There are different schemes under Community Supported Agriculture, in different countries, under various designations, which often diverge in their organisation, but they all aim at linking producers and consumers and offer quality products, in a short cycle. In Portugal Community Supported Agriculture (in a broad sense) is a relatively recent concept; nevertheless there are already hundreds of initiatives, mostly known as Box Schemes.

The scope of this paper is to understand the profile of the box scheme’s users looking deeper into the functioning of an organic one in Loures, Portugal, point out the bottle-necks that hinder a larger diffusion of this concept, and identify approaches that may strengthen the links among the several actors and contribute to the sustainability of urban agriculture.

Keywords

CSA, Box Schemes, Loures

Introduction

Local economy, as synonymous of local scale, especially in Western thought, is often seen “as small and relatively powerless” (Herod, 2005, p.243). However, as emphasized by several authors short food supply chains may play a holistic role in contributing to sustainable development (Canfora, 2016; Smith, 2008; Sustain, 2002; Pretty et al, 2005). Food travels about 1500 kms on average before reaching the consumer and the emissions of carbon gas are 100 times higher than those resulting from a local sustainable production (Taipa, 2014). CSA may contribute to fight back climate change and protect the environment (water, soil, air), prevent fires, since the herds of sheep and goats not only supply the cheese industry but also control the dry mass, as it is the case in Loures; improve biodiversity and provide tasty and healthy food, safeguarding local varieties, by boosting local agriculture (FLFI, 2003), and last but not least linking producers and consumers.

Besides, as presented by Renting and Dubbeling (2013) for the urban farmer, CSA may play other roles not so common such as recreation, therapy and education. Paül et al (2013) refers to “hileriturisme” in Barcelona, which promotes weekly specific vegetables to consumers.

In 2012, a group of experts (GEVPAL) was created to elaborate the “Strategy to value the local agricultural production”, where it emphasized the need to invest more in its promotion, divulgation, training and organization of farmers. Nevertheless, even among educated people, who should have more access to information, only a few are aware of the contribution of Urban Agriculture “to improve security, livelihoods, environmental quality and overall social justice in our cities” (Mougeot, 2005, 278).

Methodology

The study area is located in the municipality of Loures, North of Lisbon (167 km2 and 207 567 inhabitants, INE, 2016).

In order to know better the motivations of both farmers and consumers of a PROVE organic vegetable box in Sacavém, Loures, an inquiry was launched between July and September 2014, which followed the structure presented by Jackson (2005) in order to know better consumers’ motivations to engage in these new consumption models; what factors shape and constrain their choices and actions; why (and when) do people behave in pro-environmental or pro-social ways; and finally how can we encourage, motivate and facilitate more sustainable attitudes, behaviors and lifestyles.

In total 32 consumers were interviewed, 14 men and 18 women (75% of the active members). This box scheme was created in the framework of a PROVE project, an “inter-territorial co-operation project between eight Local Action Groups located around Portugal that provide continuity to the experience and methodology developed as part of the IC EQUAL initiative which is intended to resolve issues related to the marketing of local products and to take advantage of the proximity of producers and consumers in peri-urban areas” (http://www.prove.com.pt/www/english.T9.php).

Two of the three farmers who supplied this project in Loures were also interviewed. The first version of the vegetables box was interrupted in July 2015, due to divergences among the producers and a new scheme only started on the 30th January 2017, with 10 farmers and 4 delivery sites (http://www.prove.com.pt/www/sk-pub-nucleos.php?dst=2). One of these farmers was interviewed in March 2018.

Results

Those interviewed were predominantly young: 43% were under 40 years old, 31% were in their forties, 25% were in their fifties and less than 1% were older than 60. The oldest were not the direct purchasers of the boxes, they picked them up for their children.

These are middle class consumers: four public servants who work for the municipality of Loures, which is part of the project, four informatics, three entrepreneurs and other jobs (nutritionist, geographer, biologist...).
All those interviewed considered the price of the box as reasonable (15 Euros for a box with 7 to 8 kgs; 10 Euros for the small size, 4 to 5 kgs). The majority purchased the box twice a month, less than 40% picked it up every week.

In terms of proximity, some did not live in the vicinity of the distribution point (one lived 80 kms away) but in this case they worked nearby or, for some reason, had to cross the area in Sacavém.

**Discussion**

By the end of September 2014 this Organic Vegetables Box had 43 active members and 8 in stand-by (some had to travel to work abroad or moved temporarily to another region, or had their own production for a certain period of the year). Since the start of the project (September 2013) 135 people had participated in this initiative, some of whom for a short period (Fig.1). Thus, in total, 84 members had withdrawn!

The three farmers involved in the project were able to keep more or less the same number of active members in the first year of existence but there was a relatively high percentage of new adherents and excluded members, which caused some concern (for how long is it possible to attract new members, that balance those stepping out?).

![Fig. 1 - PROVE Box Adhesions by clients admitted, excluded and in stand-by between 23.9.2013 and 31.8.2014 in Sacavém/Loures](image)

The reasons to give up the box are mainly because it is difficult to coordinate their routines with the day and hours to pick up the box. Although it is possible to get it delivered at home, it will be more expensive. Some have financial restrictions and others do not need to buy products so often and or so regularly, because they also have their own production or have a small family and thus some share the box with friends.

It may be a constraint the fact that they have to adapt their meals to the ingredients available, which are seasonal (86 different products) and not always known by many clients.

The disadvantages were mainly due to the difficult access to the place of distribution, that even for those living in the area was not easy to find the first time, distance to the consumers living in the northern part of the municipality, lack of parking places for cars or not much fruit available.

In terms of advantages of purchasing the boxes, the consumers emphasized the connection to the farmer, who taught them the names of the products such as Swiss chard (Beta vulgaris var. cicla) and Mizuna japonese (Rapa nipposinica) and how to prepare them. Food security is an important issue (particularly if they have children, and often these products are only for the youngest) also the quality and diversity, the freshness, flavours and smells of the products (particularly the herbs) and proximity to their dwelling.

In general those interviewed valued the boxes scheme more for the fact that they do not need to worry about what to buy (no need to “burn the neurone” as one said!), nor lose time looking for the ingredients in the supermarket.

The environmental concern and all the rest that we read about the theory related to local and proximity economy, apparently did not play an important role in their decision to purchase the box, probably because some respondents had not been the contractors. It was often the father or the husband who picked up the box. The women were in charge to pick up the children from school or are at home preparing dinner.

From the perspective of the farmers, although this represents much work, they seem satisfied with the results. The average income at the national level of the farmers who sell the boxes was about 500 Euros/month, which was the minimum wage in Portugal. Since they have other sources of income, selling in other markets, this is acceptable for most of them, as states Teresa Pouzada, coordinator of Local Action Group ADRITEM, in North Portugal (O Regional, 19.4.2012).

These data were updated last March, in an interview with the organic farmer responsible for the supply of a new delivery site (since end of February 2018) at the Hospital of Loures (only for collaborators) and for the original one at Sacavém (restarted on the 30 January 2017). At Sacavém he sells between 12 and 19 boxes per week. At the hospital, after a certain initial “boom”, he sells between 4 and 9 boxes/week, mainly to doctors.

Today, according to this informant, it seems that the clients are better informed but the adhesion is yet relatively low.

It is important to point out that the small box was eliminated, and the large keeps the same price (15 Euros) but has less quantity (5 to 7 kgs, formerly 7 to 8). The Municipality has shown much endeavour in responding to consumers’ complaints, offering several delivery sites and divulging these initiatives, but it is not yet sufficiently visible. This is a general problem as a survey among 20 students of Geography, at Universidade Nova de Lisboa, last March, shows: none of them had ever heard about box schemes!
Conclusions

The findings show that there is a high volatility among adherents to the studied box scheme in Loures, which may be explained by the fact that being a member of a CSA “requires a different consumer attitude” with more commitment and responsibility which people often do not want to accept (Kinga, 2001, 66).

This work allowed a better knowledge of the consumer’s profile of a box scheme. Some of the identified bottlenecks can be solved with more and better information diffusion.

In line with Marsden et al (2000, 426) who evokes as a critical issue that “product reach the consumer embedded with information”, mailing a flyer, involving citizens into a participatory approach and organizing visits to the farms and delivery sites, as it is already the case with schools, could eventually bring more people into the project. In Loures a certain variety of purple broccoli could be promoted through “holeriturisme”, also among local restaurants, which would benefit from a link to Slow Food Movements.

The links along the supply chain could also be strengthened by creating a label, which would identify the production with the local “saloio” culture (“hortas saloias”, for instance) as there was already an attempt in the past. Saloios are the Moorish people, who settled in the region and stayed after the conquest in the 12th century. They were excellent farmers, known for the quality of their agricultural products, and although there is no certification, a “saloio” product is still today acknowledged as a quality product.

The creation of more delivery sites at large employment centers (as it is already the case at the hospital) would also contribute to diversify the client base and reach out to other institutions and businesses.

The success of the box scheme is an added value for urban agriculture, contributing to keep the idyllic landscapes of the past (Firmino, 1999), as it is the case in Loures, but it may be restrained by the lack of land to extend the activities, especially in peri-urban areas (EIP-AGRI, 2015). Thus it is a challenge to combine all these factors, link producers and consumers to reach some food supply autonomy, back up the local economy and maintain a healthy environment.

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