



GROWING COMMUNITY-SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE IN THE UK



When a group of people have a great idea for a new and environmentally sustainable way of doing something, how do they develop that idea until it's ready to take on the status quo? Learning from transitions like these is recorded in 'strategic niche management' academic literature.

Current industrial agricultural practices are key drivers of the world's most serious environmental problems, including climate breakdown and biodiversity loss. Agroecological approaches address both the ecological and socio-economic aspects of farming. [Community-supported agriculture](#) (CSA) is an agroecological model, in which a community shares the risks and rewards of farming. CSA makes up a small part of the agriculture sector in the UK, but is a positive and sustainable way of producing food. How could it develop further?

This research project framed CSA as a sustainable innovation – a niche within the current food and farming regime – and investigated what the UK's CSA movement could learn from strategic niche management. Interviews explored experiences of the CSA movement, particularly in relation to the three key pillars of strategic niche management – networking, learning, and vision. The project found that the three pillars are in place, but each could be further developed and strengthened.



NETWORKING

In strategic niche management, the network built around a niche innovation is thought of as bringing together resources from a broad range of stakeholders to support the development of the niche. With a strong and broad network of supporters, the niche can grow, diversify, and campaign for policies that would support it.

For CSA in the UK, a key element of the network is [CSA Network UK](#), an independent membership organisation for CSAs. It has an important role in sharing knowledge, particularly for start-up CSAs; raising awareness of CSA; and representing CSAs at a policy level. However, it is hampered by having little stable funding.

"It is about just being part of something slightly bigger. And not being on your own."

Interviewee

In the context of strategic niche management, a niche network goes beyond people who are actively involved in developing the innovation to include people in institutions who support it. Who might these people be, in terms of CSA? Not only relevant local and central government contacts, but those in the private and third sector involved in food and farming, and, based on the interviews in this research, potentially also in health and education. Expanding the network of people actively supporting CSA beyond CSA projects and their members could increase capacity and influence.



LEARNING

An important element of a strong niche is its ability to learn collectively. This includes 'first-order learning' (more technical aspects), which for CSAs might include crop-planning, business management, and marketing. It also includes 'second-order learning' (often more self-reflective), which could be learning about the 'socio-technical regime' (the existing rules, norms and practices in society which impact on CSAs) and reflecting on the values and assumptions which affect CSA, and its acceptability to others.

First-order learning is widely shared in the CSA community, both directly between CSAs and through the support offered by the CSA Network UK, in the form of publications, direct advice and a mentoring programme.

Second-order learning is useful for understanding members' and potential members' motivations, and for understanding how to present CSA to others. The interviews highlighted a wealth of knowledge in this area – with individuals showing a high level of awareness of the attitudes, values and systems which motivate and constrain people. Recognition and sharing of second-order learning could facilitate niche development: shared insights could help individual projects with recruitment and interaction with the local community; pooled knowledge could strengthen and influence the direction of collective campaigns; and discussion could lead to new ideas and the better alignment of vision.

"I think that's maybe something that's special about this sort of area is that people are very generous with wanting to share, because they do tend to be big advocates of this as a way of doing food, people do tend to be very keen to promote and share and want to encourage the success."

Interviewee



VISION

Rather than simply highlighting the importance of having 'a vision', strategic niche management literature often frames this third pillar in terms of 'expectations and visions' – particularly refining, aligning and articulating the expectations of those involved in the network. Having a shared vision, with measurable and achievable goals, enables better collaboration within the network and clearer communication with people outside the network about what the innovation does and the problems it aims to solve.

The interview data from this research suggest that this is the weakest of the three pillars for CSA. Where there is consensus and shared vision around CSA, it is broad and often framed in opposition to the existing food and farming system. Individuals expressed a range of visions for the future of CSA – some highly developed and specific, others more philosophical – but with little agreement on the way forward for CSA beyond welcoming more CSA projects.

Without agreement on a shared vision, the network is overstretched, and limited progress can be made in any direction. With the current limited resources available, directing and prioritising the focus of activities could be the key in making progress towards a goal. Within the CSA movement, this could be a crucial step, although not an easy one, as there is such variety within the movement that agreeing on goals would not be straightforward.

"What I would like to see is a CSA in every town, every village in the country."

Interviewee

