

## Solidarity: a Key Element in Alternative Food Networks

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### ABSTRACT

Alternative food networks (AFN) are self-organized groups of individuals and businesses that form new economic relationships intended to mitigate perceived problems in conventional food systems. These relationships are based on a set of principles and activities that contribute to a feeling of solidarity among participants. A grounded theory approach is used to examine the importance of solidarity in the operations of four AFN projects in the former East Germany. Data collection methods include document analysis and participant observation. Data were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis package Atlas-ti, and include photographs, printed materials, and field notes. Projects investigated include two community supported agriculture projects, one cooperative grocery, and one urban agriculture project. Results show that, although solidarity is explicitly mentioned by actors and official documents from each initiative, the concept is conceived of and implemented differently. Interactions between characteristics of the individuals who create and live out the rules that govern these new relationships, local social, environmental and economic history and current conditions and outside institutions result in complex, evolving socio-ecological systems that ripple out to related sets of actors.

*Keywords: Community; cooperative; food supply chains; grounded theory; urban gardening*

### 1. Introduction

Consumers are becoming increasingly aware of and concerned about the social, economic and ecological effects of the globalization of systems of food production and distribution. The disenchantment of some consumers has resulted in social movements forming around issues related to globalization as an effort to collectively organize responses to shared concerns. Social movements have historically used a variety of means to convince decision makers in governance institutions and business to change policies and practices deemed detrimental by movement participants. One realm in which movement actors are becoming increasingly active is in food supply chains, through the development of alternative food networks (AFNs).

AFNs have been described as “an antidote to the standardizing and industrializing tendencies of conventional food production” (Bowen and Mutersbaugh, 2014, p. 201). Participants perceive them as a form of resistance to the corporatization and depersonalization of food provision (Rossi, 2017, p. 1). Thus, participants make

conscious attempts to create “new institutional forms, parallel to mainstream channels” of food production and distribution (Goodman and Goodman, 2009, p. 209). Commonly cited examples include food cooperatives, farmers’ markets, box schemes and community-supported agriculture (CSA) (Goodman and Goodman, 2009). This paper analyzes an interconnected network of different types of initiatives in and near a city in the former (socialist) East Germany. During data collection and analysis, the concept of solidarity turned out to play a central role in participants’ understanding of and engagement with one another in (and between) each of the projects investigated. There is a body of literature beginning to form around what some refer to as solidarity-based food systems (SFS). However, as AFNs are increasingly being examined from multiple national and disciplinary perspectives, the language used to describe these initiatives is diverse (e.g., CSA, food cooperatives). Thus, the central role of solidarity in the operations of the AFN initiatives examined here was not anticipated when developing the initial study plan. Instead, it developed through the grounded theory-based qualitative analysis process in which actions and meanings behind those actions are compared to one another in order to uncover overarching concepts that govern them. Therefore, although the paper follows a traditional structure, solidarity is not presented and explored as a central theme in the beginning of the manuscript, but rather, is described in the context from which it emerged during the grounded theory analysis of the data obtained from the actors interviewed and observed.

The objective of this paper is to more fully understand participants’ definitions of the central themes that drive the formation of and govern the daily operation of AFNs in the German context. Three broad types of AFN are examined, including two CSAs, a food cooperative, and an urban gardening project. Due to the emergence of the central role of solidarity in these definitions, the paper addresses how solidarity is operationalized in the formal structures and working rules of each initiative.

## 2. Literature Review

AFNs can be thought of as social innovations in the sense that, beyond solving a particular social problem, they attempt to change the way social problems are approached by consciously creating new institutional structures (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014, p. 44). Cajaiba-Santana (2014) points out that while technological innovation has been the focus of much discussion in research and business, social innovation as a concept and a process needs further refinement. To better understand social innovations, he proposes a theoretical framework for analyzing the process of social innovation that both includes the importance of collective efforts (rather than those of key individuals), and acknowledges how such collective action co-evolves with the social setting in which it takes place.

Current research on AFNs is disjoint and is generally focused on individual forms and instances, of which several are commonly practiced at present. One of these, CSA, has recently received international recognition for its potential to improve food security and associated aspects of economic and environmental sustainability: The Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has named the international network of these organizations an official partner (FAO, 2017). Blättel-Mink et al. (2017) investigated the growing number of CSA projects in Germany. In a typical CSA arrangement, consumers sign a binding contract to pay a set amount per month for which they receive a weekly delivery of a share of the harvest, whatever amount, quality or variety that may be (Brown and Miller, 2008). In this way, consumers provide a producer a reliable source of income that is unrelated to changes in price on the open market. The risk of potential losses in the event of crop failure or poor harvest are thus, jointly carried by consumers. For their part, the consumers receive both material value in the form of freshly harvested produce or other food products; and ideological value, in that they are contributing to the economic and social strength and resilience of their own community by supporting a local producer. Thus, both risks and rewards are shared amongst participating members of a CSA in a way

that is not reflected in prices paid for particular goods, but rather in a system of mutual exchange of labor and social and economic capital intended to build and maintain long-term relationships.

The number of groups in Germany calling their efforts CSA remained below 10 until after 2011. At this time, a network of such initiatives formed (European CSA Research Group, 2016) under the name “Solidarity-based Agriculture” (Solidarische Landwirtschaft or Solawi in German), and obtained exclusive legal right to the use of this term. Since the establishment of the Solawi network, the number of operations identifying themselves as Solawis has increased dramatically, reaching 144 by 2017 (European CSA Research Group, 2016). Blättel-Mink et al. (2017) assessed the capability of CSAs in Germany to promote social innovation based on the potential for the organizing principles and reasons behind their formation to diffuse to other social areas (e.g. politics, the wider economy, and culture). They identified three main innovative elements of CSAs: 1) de-commodification of food through elimination of an open market; 2) “prosuming” – an alternative to consuming, in which purposeful participation in alternative means of exchange is expected to have add-on effects on individual behavior in other realms of life; and finally 3) solidarity – in which resources are distributed according to need (rather than means to pay) in a process based on close connections, empathy and shared support.

Cembalo et al. (2015) analyzed reasons for consumer participation in an alternative food chain model practiced in Italy known as Solidarity Purchase Groups (SDG). This work “examines the root drivers of participation in a form of food distribution that goes beyond the mere concept of food procurement in a context where the concept of quality assumes a wider meaning often related to social aspects” (p. 159). Based on this analysis, the authors purport that, contrary to assertions of other researchers, such consumers are “rational” rather than being driven by emotion in their purchasing decisions.

McClintock (2010) looked at urban agriculture (UA) in terms of the concept of metabolic rift. Ever-increasing urban populations consume vast amounts of resources that are then not available to the populations that remain in the rural areas where they are sourced, or to future generations. Thus, the ecological and social consequences of consumption are temporally and spatially displaced. This closely resembles the defining principles behind the concept of sustainability put forth in the Brundtland report (United Nations, 1987). Still, just as social sustainability has been largely ignored in many treatments of sustainability, “most scholarship on metabolic rift has emphasized the ecological dimensions” (McClintock, 2010, p. 193). UA is seen by McClintock (2010) as a protest against the opacity of the current agri-food system.

### 3. Methods

The analysis is based on a grounded theory approach to data collection and analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This qualitative approach is appropriate for investigating how participants structure and operate within AFNs in that it focuses on gaining rich descriptions of “not only how people act but also how they give meaning to their actions” (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014, p. 49). Four projects involved in alternative food networks in a rapidly growing city in the former East Germany with a strong socialist background were analyzed. These include one collective grocery store (COOP), two CSAs, and one urban agriculture project (UA).

Initial data were gathered during field visits to each of the projects, and include photographs, printed materials, and field notes. While no formal interviews took place during these visits, when possible, questions were asked of the individuals guiding the field visits to clarify issues surrounding the structure and organization of each initiative. Each of those questioned were individuals currently active in the management of the various initiatives. These initial data sources were then analyzed using the qualitative data analysis package Atlas-ti. This analysis was accomplished by grouping similar statements or other data fragments (such as pictures or descriptions of practices) and assigning conceptual codes based on the grounded theory method (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). This method makes use of a practice known as constant comparison, in which initially defined concepts and relationships are continually revisited as new data are analyzed to refine or redefine these initial

concepts. Also in keeping with the grounded theory approach, additional data collection was done based on theoretical sampling, which is sampling that is directed at clarifying concepts identified during the process of constant comparison.

Sources for the additional data used here include websites of the initiatives visited (as well as those of related initiatives referred to in the initial data sources) and publicly available videos, press reports and information from various social media outlets depicting the projects and their work.

Subsequent participation in a networking meeting hosted by the German Solawi network allowed for further refinement of the conceptual codes, as well as additional data collection through participant observation and collection of more photographs and documents. Based on the emerging findings, the concept of solidarity in terms of how it is understood and implemented in each initiative was explored, and its potential for generating sustained social change examined.

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

This section begins with a brief description of the socioeconomic setting in which the four initiatives operate – the city and its more rural surroundings (4.1). This is followed by a short history of the development of each initiative focusing on the initial conditions under which they came to be, what purpose they were initially intended to serve, and the institutions (both formal and informal rules) each group uses to guide their interactions (4.2). Following that, a comparison is made of how these institutions are designed to support the principle of solidarity (4.3). The purpose of this comparison is to see how participants define and practice solidarity, what external and internal factors affect those meanings and practices, and what that means for the ability of solidary practices to diffuse to a wider social sphere, and thus, create social innovation.

##### **4.1. Local history and social and economic setting of initiatives**

The city in which the initiatives are based is located in the former East Germany, and has a history that includes an important role in both industrial production and in trade between European nations and other countries. The collapse of the socialist system initially resulted in the city and surrounding region experiencing economic distress and outmigration. Now, however, it is one of the fastest growing cities in Germany. Along with increasing prosperity, this resurgence has brought with it gentrification, land speculation and threats to green and open space. In response to these trends, a variety of grassroots efforts have begun to emerge, many of them surrounding issues of food production.

##### **4.2. Description and analysis of individual initiatives**

###### ***Cooperative grocery (COOP)***

The first initiative examined is a retail cooperative grocery formed to provide a means for local residents to obtain ecologically produced food, preferably of local origin. The idea to found the store grew out of a self-organized buyers' cooperative that had been operating several years on a volunteer basis and was organized as a non-profit buyers' club. The founding members decided to abandon this business form, in part due to the strain involved with long decision processes, and reorganize as a partnership with limited liability. This partnership was formally founded in 2012. Organization under this particular business form means that each partner is legally authorized to represent the business in dealings with sellers and others, and each carries the responsibility for the financial solvency of the collective enterprise personally.

Each of the currently five) partners spends about 25-30 hours per week working for the operation, for which they each receive the same hourly wage. The startup financing was obtained largely through loans from friends of the founding partners, and the initial customer base for the COOP was recruited largely through word of mouth. While the store is open to the general public, membership is encouraged. In exchange for signing a

contract to pay a monthly membership fee, paying members receive a discount on their purchases. Consumer members are not part of the managing collective of partners, and thus have no formal decision making or representative power. The storefront itself was founded in 2013. Currently the cooperative has over 500 adult members whose purchases represent about 50% of annual sales. The store is in a rented location, for which they have a 15-year contract.

One of the ways in which the cooperative supports locally grown food is that they obtain it from another local initiative whose stated purpose is providing jobs to adults with special needs. Thus, the concept of inclusion is embedded in their daily operations. Another source of products is the urban agriculture project (UA) examined in detail in the following paragraphs. Fresh vegetables produced using organic methods (non-certified) are purchased from the UA project, which delivers the produce to the COOP via specially fitted bicycles. Thus, the principle of climate-friendly production and distribution methods is upheld. While the managing partnership makes every effort to purchase based on these principles, when products desired by customers that are not available from local sources, other means of supply are also used- i.e. local is not a requirement.

#### **Urban Agriculture Project (UA)**

The UA examined here grew out of a community gardening project that began in 2011. The garden was established in a neighborhood where many abandoned industrial buildings and open lots provided affordable living space and room for young people to explore creative new business and social ideas. The initial organization of the UA project was concentrated in the hands of a few dedicated members, but as the base of dedicated volunteers steadily rose to 30, responsibilities were given over to several self-organizing volunteer working groups. Among other projects, the volunteer working groups organize and carry out planting and harvest of over 100 vegetable and salad varieties and over 20 varieties of herbs. In exchange for their work, the volunteers can take as much produce as they want for their own use. The rest is sold to local residents and to retail outlets such as the COOP described above and to local restaurants. The proceeds of these sales go back into the project.

The ground on which the community garden is located is leased from the city. As recently as 2015, the garden only had a lease until the end of 2016. In response to a plan developed by the city finance official to sell the land to an investor, community organizing resulted in an extension of the lease until 2021. Still, the threat of losing the space exists and contributes to structural aspects of the garden, in that all plantings are in raised beds.

This relatively insecure tenure situation combined with increasing interest among local residents in the horticultural products produced and the opportunities for creating more community activities surrounding food and gardening, participants began to look for room to enlarge their space. In 2013, they took over one of the last remaining horticultural enterprises in the city. In order to allow them to finance the operation without becoming a commercial operation, they decided to form a gGmbH. This German business form is a type of non-profit corporation that allows for goods and services to be offered in exchange for financial compensation, but limits accumulation of capital. A prerequisite for achieving this status is a clear statement of how business activities provide services to the local community that meet clearly stated social goals. In this case, stated goals include providing climate mitigation effects, and educational benefits to youth and other target groups. The non-profit status also has benefits in terms of financial liquidity and risk. A gGmbH is eligible to receive various forms of grant money from government and other funders, while its corporate structure provides those involved with more financial protection than the limited partnership model adopted by the COOP.

The other ways in which the UA initiative and its various projects manage to finance themselves are diverse, but seem to be moving in a more market-based direction. Currently, twenty-five households purchase boxes of produce produced by the volunteers. In addition, a weekly market for vegetables brings in other customers, as it offers products which are not available in stores. A brochure from the initiative describes a “new project” for

the period from 2016-2018 which will develop and offer products and services that are able to compete on the open market. Thus, as the UA project continues to evolve and expand, its participation in the market economy appears to be increasing.

### **CSA 1**

The stated goals and operating principles of the first CSA examined provide a stark contrast to the UA project's stated goal of expanding their marketable products. Before settling in the area, the founders (among them several who migrated from the more economically prosperous southern states of the former West Germany) had investigated significant time and energy defining what they hoped to accomplish with the project. Part of this process was locating an appropriate piece of property and a willing group of participants with which to accomplish those goals. While the initial land was purchased in the name of one of the founding members and the business originally organized as a single-owner business, CSA 1 recently took the legal steps to form a type of enterprise known under German law as a "Genossenschaft" (or cooperative). In order to distinguish this legal form from the cooperative grocery described above, the German term will be used here. One advantage of the business form Genossenschaft is that it allows formal legal ownership of accumulated capital (machines, land, and other improvements) to be spread across the entire membership. Each of the members of CSA 1 (both producers and consumers) had the option (but was not required) to purchase shares in the Genossenschaft. This change not only protects the founding member owner from risk, but creates more incentive for each member of the CSA to support its longevity, as they have a share in its accumulated value. Six people currently receive a salary from CSA 1 for their work on the farm, none of whom works an average of more than 25-30 hours per week. Despite this arrangement, the website declares the farmers not to be employees, but rather, equal participants in the cooperative effort. All of those currently paid for their work on the farm have formal training in this field. In addition to their financial contributions, CSA 1 members who provide monthly financial contributions in exchange for shares in the harvest are also expected to help on the farm three days per year. These workdays are organized by the paid farmers, and add over 90 additional work hours per year without any expense. This helps ensure that the quality of the working conditions on the farm remains high even during peak work periods, such as planting and harvest. It also provides consuming members with opportunities to experience the connectedness to the natural environment of an agricultural operation, recognize the strenuous nature of the work involved in producing food and build relationships with fellow members.

The paid farmers are primarily responsible for organizing planting, maintenance and harvest activities in the total area of 5 ha. During the season, open field plantings of vegetable crops cover 2.6 ha, in rotation with green manure plantings. The remaining area is either cultivated under hoop houses or maintained under permanent vegetative cover with hedgerow plantings which were financed through government funds aimed at environmental protection.

Currently this configuration produces enough to supply 180 member shares that provide vegetables and herbs to 400-500 people for the entire season, which runs from mid-March through late October. Each of nine distribution locations in the nearby city is collectively managed by a group of CSA members whose responsibilities include redistributing produce from shares of members who are not able to use them and basic cleaning and maintenance of the distribution centers.

The average calculated share price for 2017 was 75 Euros. However, the prices paid for each share vary in keeping with the concept of solidarity: An average price is computed based on the current number of shares and a budget for the coming season developed by the team of farmers. All of this is communicated to the members at an annual meeting, where an anonymous bidding round follows in which each share purchaser pledges to pay an amount they feel they can afford, based on the calculated average share price. This provides those with greater financial means the opportunity to support other community members who they know to

have less money. Thus, its success is dependent both on individual relationships among share purchasers and willingness to contribute based on one's own assets. This process has reportedly never required more than two rounds of bidding to reach total budget amount.

#### **CSA 2**

The second CSA initiative is located in close proximity to the previously described larger CSA 1, and based on the same basic goals there are. Most of the organization and production work of CSA 2 is accomplished by a single farmer and his partner who together receive less financial compensation than those in CSA 1. The couple are responsible for organizing all planting and harvesting activities. Work days are also expected, but participation is low. The farmer stated that members express frequent concerns with lack of transparency in the operation, despite the fact that he spends nearly a third of his time communicating with members. The operation is much smaller, with only 5,000 square meters (sqm) production area, of which only 3,600 sqm are in production at one time, 35 consuming members, and no other paid employees. Working groups do not appear to have formed, although a small number of members do provide some additional help with communication tasks. The production area is rented, and the farmer expressed doubts about the future of that rental arrangement and the potential need to find a new location.

As in CSA 1, the current average share cost of 74 Euro per month per share is only a target value. Again, since its founding in 2014, the farmer also reports never having had more than two bidding rounds until the target sum was reached. The distribution system of this operation is concentrated in one location in the city that is also an open space for discussion about largely political topics.

#### **4.3. Key elements contributing to the concept of solidarity in the initiatives analyzed**

The key elements identified during the analysis that contribute to the concept of solidarity differ across the initiatives. However, one element common to all initiatives is the assumption that organic production techniques are preferable to ones using chemical inputs and extensive mechanization. This reflects both the importance of solidarity with other life forms currently existing on the planet, and with future generations of humans that will inherit the legacy of current production methods (United Nations, 1987).

Another common element is that there are few if any formal mechanisms of control or sanctioning practiced in any of the initiatives. Rather, adherence to the principles and commitments of each initiative is a matter of trust and individual responsibility. For instance, while both CSAs ask that members help in the field when needed, and a specific number of days are part of the membership agreement, both openly acknowledge that some members do not fulfill the obligation, yet no sanctions are imposed. Similarly, the COOP does not require members to provide proof that only the stated number of adults are making use of their membership to buy discounted foods at the coop, or undertake any efforts to calculate whether this might be abused, for instance by groups of young adults living together at one address.

The importance of shared work is clearly present in both of the CSAs and the various projects associated with the UA, but notably absent from the COOP, at least in terms of the involvement of non-partner members. This is in contrast to the level of shared work expected of members in the two CSAs, both of which expect a commitment to a year-long monthly payment, as well as contributions to both gardening and administrative tasks. The UA emphasizes the importance of shared work among people of various backgrounds – including cultivation and harvest of food and group preparation of meals.

Both CSAs have rule structures that reflect and reinforce the importance of shared decision-making and shared responsibility in creating community. Still, here too, large differences were evident between the two CSAs in that the larger and more collectively organized project reported success in this regard, while the single farmer in the smaller project talked about the difficulties in effectively communicating with members and in getting them to take part in joint work projects. In contrast, at the COOP, the creating community aspect is fulfilled

largely through providing public space to sit, eat and talk and peruse information material from related initiatives, many of which make explicit use of the term solidarity. In addition, both the COOP and the UA support agricultural production projects designed to employ the handicapped either through conducting them themselves or purchasing their products.

The level of shared risk also varies among initiatives. While the costs, and thus the full financial risks, of running the two CSAs are, in theory, carried jointly by all members; the costs of running the COOP are largely financed through retail sales. The costs of COOP membership (both financial contributions and in-kind contributions in terms of shared work) are low in comparison to the two CSAs, and the UA represents the lowest level of shared risk, due to its organizational form as a non-profit and the fact that participants contribute time rather than money.

Differences in the way participants in the various initiatives view the concept of solidarity are reflected in the different rules and norms on which they are based, and the different organizational structures that result. This includes the fact that each of the initiatives has chosen a slightly different legal business form, requires varying degrees of commitment of time and financial contribution from its members, and shows varying degrees of exclusivity of membership, based on the amount and type of resources committed. The COOP and the UA provide tangible economic and nutritional benefits to individuals outside the circle of shared responsibility and commitment, while the two CSAs are focused primarily on providing these benefits to their members. Still wider-reaching educational and ecological benefits are explicit goals, and participation in public events to support that is also part of the work of many members

The different business forms require different levels of commitment and responsibility of participants, and in some cases, these differences exist even among participants. For instance, while the farmers in the two CSAs receive both financial compensation and fresh produce for their participation, the members receive only vegetables and are not financially compensated for their work contributions. While this is a reflection of the extra level of responsibility the farmers have for production and their particular expertise, their position perhaps allows them to better integrate the way they secure their personal livelihoods with the commitments they have to the solidarity effort than those who must work other jobs to earn the required financial contributions. Thus, specialization still provides additional benefits.

## **5. Conclusions**

The cases within the network investigated demonstrate that the concept of solidarity is equally as difficult to define and to realize as the much-discussed concept of sustainability. The definitions on which participants base their rules are context-specific and subjective, and depend on the perspectives of those making them and the external constraints they face. This is in keeping with the individualist perspective on social innovation identified by Cajaiba-Santana (2014). In each of the cases investigated, a core group of individuals took concrete action to establish new institutional forms in which a larger group of individuals chose to take part. In addition, a local network of these actors (and others involved in projects promoting various forms of solidarity) has begun to form around the initial efforts, and to interact with one another and with increasing numbers of other individuals outside.

The other dominant perspective identified by Cajaiba-Santana (2014) stressed the importance of existing social and economic structures in affecting the potential for social innovation. Particularly important are formal institutional constraints such as the range of choices among potential legal business forms and their associated risks and benefits, and market constraints that limit the potential for creating truly innovative networks. Ideological differences and social and economic inequalities make communication among participants even more complex and time-consuming while at the same time making them more crucial. The level of organizational effort required to develop new institutional forms and maintain the close relationships on which



they are predicated is a severe limit to the potential power of the concept for widespread diffusion and transformation. To facilitate this type of innovation, tools and skills must be developed and made available to potential and actual practitioners to help alleviate the costs of communication and coordination. The formation of the Solawi network represents collective efforts to accomplish this.

The socially open atmosphere of the young and vibrant population in the urban and peri-urban location of these initiatives and the availability of relatively cheap land provided room in both the figurative and literal senses for these initiatives to develop. As the city continues to grow, and available space becomes scarcer, it might be that the increasing marketization that is happening in the case of the UA will be seen as necessary by participants in other initiatives. This could result in a watered down notion of solidarity that will lessen its potential for instituting sustained social and economic innovation. Again, legal protection of the Solawi name is a conscious effort to prevent this and institutionalize the solidarity principles.

As Cajaiba-Santana (2014, p. 45) pointed out, even when they are successful, social innovations are not always perceived by everyone as improvements. AFNs, at least the ones presented here, are based on the normative assumption that maintaining the small farm as part of our socioeconomic system is an important and socially valuable goal. The context of the former East Germany plays an important role in this belief, as the dismantling of large collective and state-run farms after the fall of socialism often led to the privatization of large tracts of land. Other professions and livelihoods have ceased to exist as societies have evolved, resulting in social and technological changes that most consider improvements. Thus, one of the challenges of social scientists, and society in general, is to determine what aspects of the sociocultural set-up are worthy of preserving. This presents a particularly difficult puzzle for those advocating AFNs, who see the process of globalization as negative and seek alternatives. To successfully transfer innovations to other locations, the key elements of such alternatives must be identified and modified to meet the variety of different local cultures they are trying to influence.

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