

Article

A Socially-Based Redesign of Sustainable Food Practices: Community Supported Agriculture in Italy

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Abstract: Several grassroots initiatives in the last two decades have shown the need for different food practices that should be locally based and founded on ethical goals of social and environmental justice. Among the many “alternative food networks”, the Community Supported Agriculture model is particularly significant and interesting. By redefining meanings and social norms around food practices, this model actualizes significant processes of food re-socialization and re-territorialization. Focusing on Italy, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of the potential of this model. It does so through two investigations carried out in 2019 and 2020, aimed at analyzing, respectively, structural and organizational aspects of CSAs and the features of resilience shown by these initiatives during the first COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. On the whole, the two surveys give us the image of a radically innovative experience, potentially capable of deeply redefining production and consumption practices, being rooted in socially-shared knowledge, motivations, willingness, commitment and sense of community. In addition to being characterized by a determination to pursue sustainability and equity goals, the model shows a remarkable character of resilience thanks to the original arrangements that the common value basis and the strong sense of interdependence and solidarity of its members can provide.

Keywords: Community Supported Agriculture; social innovation; social embeddedness; food re-commonification; resilient food systems; food sovereignty; food re-socialisation



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1. Introduction

The social and environmental challenges that have accompanied the development of the global agro-food system have fostered increasing interest in innovative food practices. In particular, the development of several grassroots initiatives in the last two decades has reflected the need for different modes of understanding, producing and consuming food, aimed at re-localizing food practices and founding them on ethical goals of social and environmental justice. The logic guiding these reorganization processes refers to the principles of food sovereignty [1,2]—the right of people to choose their own kind of food and food system. They foster the social and spatial reconnection around food, overcoming the separation of roles (between producers and consumers) and spaces (rural and urban) that characterize the dominant food system. They also express the willingness to take care of essential natural resources, which are recognized for their multiple values and increasingly considered as commons.

The many manifestations of this movement have been encompassed in the “alternative food networks” experience; see among many others [3–10]. Within this framework, the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) model is considered as particularly advanced. Like other transformative experiences promoted by alternative food networks [11], CSA initiatives have developed within the context of the solidarity economy, where they are considered as the highest manifestations of coherence and effectiveness in implementing its

principles of mutuality and equity [12]. The distinctive feature of the CSA model is the close integration between production and consumption, through consumers' active participation in the farm activities, including pre-financing and sharing of enterprise risk, as well as crop planning. CSAs are the expression of new subjectivities—communities of practice including rural and urban actors—which put forward a radically different vision of food-related practices—notably, production, provisioning-distribution and consumption—and of the related implications in terms of power, knowledge, rights and responsibility. By redefining meanings and social norms around these practices, these active social groups assume an important role as carriers of innovation around food. In doing so, much more than in other alternative food networks, they bridge the separateness between spheres of action and related perspectives and interests, leading to a unified dimension of management of a common good. Moreover, they foreground the social and ecological dimensions of food practices, conceiving of economic exchanges as instrumental in meeting social needs and conditional on achieving social and environmental justice.

The CSA model is considered as “an agent of change” [13]. Against the background of the serious failures of the dominant agri-food system, in terms of impacts on health [14–18], environment [19–21], economic sustainability for small agriculture [22–25] and consumers' skills and knowledge [6,26–28], and considering the need to address climate change challenges [21,29], the CSA model is seen as an effort to actualize more sustainable and just food practices, re-empowering the weakest actors in the supply chain.

Despite the strong commitment of the international CSA Network (Urgenci, (<https://urgenci.net/the-network> (accessed on 9 March 2021))) [30] and the various research studies on CSA practices in Europe and the rest of the world [31–38], there is a gap in in-depth and up-to-date analysis of CSA practices within specific European countries. Focusing on Italy, this study seeks to fill that gap. A first purpose was mapping CSA initiatives and characterizing them in general and in relation to aspects relevant to innovativeness about food significance and in food practices: actors' awareness of the meaning of the CSA model, the structural and organizational features of the initiatives and their strengths and weaknesses as social experiences of innovation.

The study also analyzes specific features of CSAs as highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy. The purpose here was understanding the character of resilience of the model and how this character relates to the re-socialisation of food practices that underpins the model. The pandemic has, in fact, been a disruptive element for these particular initiatives as well. As with other alternative food networks, the measures to contain the health emergency severely challenged their social interactions and practices. In the diversity of situations that developed and allowed these initiatives to survive, this study investigates the features of CSA resilience, focusing on the relationship between producers and consumers and on the role of the social (relational) dimension, as a fundamental constitutive element of these organizations and of the way they transform attitudes and practices (as discussed in the next section). Although the pandemic experience has been a challenge for CSA activities, the ways in which the related networks have reacted to this challenge are an indicator of their innovative character in the conception and management of food practices. In that regard, the analysis of the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on the social dimension might uncover the weight of this component, as an expression of the social embeddedness of economic activities pursued by this model.

Building on a national study based on the above-mentioned research questions, this work seeks to contribute to the international reflection on change in food practices from the perspective of moving towards a more diversified and sustainable food system. In this context, CSA is investigated as a tangible practice providing interesting insights in operationalizing this transition.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 introduces some features of the CSA model in the international context. Section 3 illustrates the conceptual-analytical framework adopted, and Section 4 deals with the methodological aspects. Section 5 reports the findings of the two investigations on CSA practices in Italy. Section 6 discusses the results, and

the last section summarizes the contribution and limitations of the study with respect to understanding the potential of CSA in redefining food practices and its contribution from the perspective of sustainability transition.

2. The CSA Model in the International Literature

Community Supported Agriculture is widely acknowledged to foster a new culture of food, a new socially-shared way to understand food that gives rise to innovative practices in its implementation. Since its adoption in the late sixties, the CSA model has called attention to solidarity, a non-market-based economy, community empowerment and re-localization of food practices.

The CSA model can be included in the larger family of Alternative Food Networks (AFNs). According to Corsi and Barbera, “alternative food networks are a wide-ranging body of practices dealing with food provisioning in a way that differs from the mainstream agro-food system” [39] (p. 10). Key elements in defining an AFN are the shortness of the supply chain and the close relationship between producers and consumers. Other aspects include the democracy of network governance and solidarity among participants. Knowledge sharing is a crucial element for their success, in order to establish a solid community around food practices [40], align around a different approach to commercial practices and participate in the collective activities [41].

According to the European CSA Declaration adopted in Ostrava during the 3rd European CSA meeting in 2016, “Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a direct partnership based on the human relationship between people and one or several producer(s), whereby the risks, responsibilities and rewards of farming are shared, through a long-term, binding agreement.” (https://urgenci.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/European-CSA-Declaration_final-1.pdf (accessed on 9 March 2021)). Using this narrow definition of CSA, the latest available data estimate that there were 2783 CSAs operating in Europe in 2015 [30], involving about 4000 producers [42] and 475,000 consumers. According to the survey findings, CSA actors seek direct control over food while developing communities, with the aim of promoting social well-being and environmental sustainability. These initiatives support small farmers with approaches that are very often creative in their solutions. They are based on different organizational models, which include: subscription CSAs, generally set up by farmers who are in contact with a certain number of consumers; shareholder CSAs, which are usually promoted by associated consumers; and multi-farm CSAs, where groups of consumers have relations with more than one farmer [43]. In terms of their management structure, they can be fully run by volunteers or employ paid professional staff [44]. Although there may be differences among the initiatives, often based on their stage of development, the CSA model is usually characterized by a distinctive way to manage the economic value exchanged. The majority of CSAs adopt the true cost system, by summing production costs to obtain the annual budget and dividing it into the number of subscribers [45]. This approach is inherent to the idea of community engagement in supporting agriculture.

Solidarity is a fundamental aspect of CSAs. It concerns the relationships both with farmers, who generally run small-scale locally-based farms (“peasants”), and with the other CSA members. This model builds on a shared view of power balances in the agro-food system. Peasants are considered to be in a weak position in conventional circuits, in terms of bargaining power in pricing and ability to meet the requirements of the major players in the agro-food system, where they are in fact completely marginalized [23]. On the other hand, consumers too are seen as increasingly alienated from food production, including its methods and places, finding themselves completely dependent on food models driven by the agro-industry and on large-scale distribution for their purchasing habits [46].

The CSA model aims to provide an alternative to this situation, re-establishing a direct relationship where the needs of both the parties are met and all the activities are inspired by principles of mutuality: farmers regain autonomy and recognition for their work; consumers acquire knowledge and autonomy in their choices. “The main idea of

CSA is simple: a group of consumers get together with a farm in their vicinity. Together, they share the costs of the farming season, including land rent, seeds, tools and the farmers' salaries. Likewise, they share the produce of the farm. This way: consumers get fresh food from a nearby farm, produced by farmers who they know; farmers get good working conditions and produce for people they know" [30] (p. 8). More generally, CSAs are considered capable of fostering community empowerment and food sovereignty, as well as a re-embedding of the economy and food production within society [47,48], prioritizing social and environmental ethics [49–51].

The reasons to join a CSA and remain members for a long time are several [52]. The literature reveals a broad spectrum of different motives and rationales, as well as different priorities among these. Some studies suggest that in CSA experiences, consumers are mainly driven by the desire for safe, nutritious and organic food, as well as the desire to show solidarity with producers [43]. Other scholars argue that CSA members have more defined environmental and ethical concerns [49]. They also show solidarity with local agriculture, as well as a sense of community attachment and a desire to support their local economy [33,34,50,51,53–55]. Some studies have shown that this more complex approach derives from learning while taking part in CSA activities [51,53]. Producers are interested in having a stable market with fair prices; in some cases, they also aim to reposition themselves socially [51,56]. Through CSAs, consumers and producers alike seek a solution to market failures, in economic and social terms. Indeed, participating in a CSA allows re-territorializing the market system, re-connecting the local rural and urban components [33], but, most importantly, the social and the economic components. In CSAs, the social connections and economic exchanges between the two parties are, in fact, intertwined on a local scale, embedding local agriculture into local communities [47]. This has meaningful implications. Far from "un-reflexive localism" [57–59], the "localness"—the sense of belonging to the same "place", and, thus, the shared sense of responsibility in caring for the related resources according to principles of sustainability, mutuality and justice—is a key feature of this model [34,49,50,60]. Within CSA practice, "food becomes a means by which people recognize themselves as part of a broader economy, environment, and community." [50] (p. 12). Based on the coexistence of distinct motivations, rather than on specific reasons, the choice of relating with local food through the CSA model well represents the role that embeddedness in a social-physical-cultural environment may play in signifying individual attitudes and practices around food [50,61]. In many cases, similarly to the other radical experience of alternative food networks [9,11,62,63], there is a conscious political determination to achieve this condition, which informs the relationship with farmers and local agriculture and the sense of re-empowerment stemming from collective responsibility and action around food.

This complex sense of belonging enriches CSA members' perception of the benefits stemming from taking part in this collective experience. As stated above, these benefits are believed to include functional advantages [64], but also social, psychological, spiritual and political aspects [55,64–67]. The former is linked to the availability of quality (safe, nutritious) food, whereas the latter are associated with the strong (human, social) bonds established between consumers and farmers and within a collective dimension of like-minded people. More generally, they refer to the other meanings and rationales (agroecological, political) of the support given to certain local farming systems and of a regained closeness to nature and place (as opposed to the disconnection effects of industrial food systems). The last type of benefit also includes pedagogical effects, which are considered important for societal (re-)education (also taking into account the needs of distinct generations) [51].

The sharing of the sense of community and active participation in the collective activities are considered to be key elements of the sustainability of CSA experiences. Participation, engagement and belonging to the related social environment are indeed crucial to support social learning and nurture motivations and enduring willingness to be part of the CSA. However, many studies have shown that these conditions are not to be taken for granted and, therefore, constitute a critical factor [47,48,68].

3. The Conceptual-Analytical Framework

Taking into consideration the overall peculiar features of this model, the article analyzes the Italian CSA initiatives and their behavior during the first period of the COVID-19 pandemic from three different theoretical perspectives: social innovation, social embeddedness and re-commonification around food.

The first perspective allows understanding the origin, operational methods and purposes of these experiences, so as to highlight their specific potential for change. Social innovation refers to a process of change (i) aimed at responding in alternative ways to social needs not fully satisfied by the market or state intervention, (ii) developing through social relations and reinforcing them, and (iii) aimed at achieving social benefits [69–71]. Social interactions play a key role in this process, providing a space where significant growth in awareness, social capital and collective agency may occur. Considering the transformative potential of social innovation, the process of change in the ways of framing and/or knowing, doing and organizing that is supported by social interactions may deeply challenge or replace established (dominant) institutions and practices in specific socio-material contexts [72]. These features of social innovation match well the processes underlying the search for, and the building of, alternatives around food practices, especially within defined social contexts, such as communities of people who share common visions and goals around food [12]. At the basis of innovative relationships between producers and consumers there is a shared dissatisfaction with conventional practices/products and a common basis of values and principles on which to build alternatives. As highlighted by many studies, common visions, needs and aspirations underpinning the setting up of a CSA often go beyond the mere satisfaction of the need for good food or a generic link with the countryside. They also, or rather, involve deeper needs and seek: re-appropriation of social control over food and related production systems; actualization of environmental and social justice goals, taking responsibility and directly engaging to that end; and to use food practices to re-create a communitarian and/or spiritual dimension of living [34,53,54,65–67]. The interactions among CSA members provide fertile ground for the development of the collective project and the achievement of the pursued social purposes. The social learning that develops within this relational space, creating and sharing the common knowledge and value basis, is key to the sustainability of these innovative experiences over time and, ultimately, to their transformative potential, contributing to a broader change in food-related practices.

Closely related to the first, the second perspective, social embeddedness [73,74], allows us to highlight the importance that the social dimension, in all its human, relational, cultural and contextual components, plays in the CSA experiences, similarly to, and even more markedly than in, other alternative food networks [47,48,50,61]. This concerns many aspects. The model is rooted in a collective, place-based project aimed at a community management. It builds on social processes and conditions such as knowledge, values and norms sharing, co-participation, interdependence, mutuality and solidarity. These factors play a key role: they enable and shape the collective “enterprise” and, in the relationship with producers, make it possible to overcome the traditional separation of the two parties and their competing economic exchange. Indeed, the value system and set of norms socially shared (including the trust that develops through social relations) inform relationships among the actors involved and the CSA functioning over time. As both a factor and an effect of social learning, the development of an adequate social capital [75,76] underpins such processes, enabling the actualization and management of the collective project. Social embeddedness clearly emerges in the approach to food that characterizes the CSA model—the name of the model clearly expresses this embedded nature. More generally, the immaterial/value/spiritual determinants that, as mentioned above, are believed to underpin the search for a change in food practices [51,55,65–67] on a community basis, are deeply rooted in social psychology, in the nature of food practices as a social medium, and in its role as a gateway to societal changes.

The third perspective, food re-commonification [77,78], which is also integrated within the previous two, allows the foregrounding of an essential component of the new approaches around food. It highlights the transformative capacity of these experiences in terms of re-signification of food and related practices, and redefinition of the ways to relate to the environmental, cultural, human and social resources and processes mobilized. This different approach involves the methods employed to produce food, the degree of localness of food practices, the local communities' sense of closeness to local farming systems, and the more general transformative role that food practices can play in contributing to a broader change.

Together, these three perspectives, although with a different degree of relevance when looking at the specifics of implementation, allow capturing the particular features of innovation and resilience of the CSA model, due to the particular relationship between producers and consumers, and the crucial role played by the social dimension as a fundamental constitutive element of these experiences. To that end, Table 1 shows the main elements, already introduced above, that are used as "indicators" to develop the analysis. Although they are identified separately, they are all intrinsically linked and interdependent.

Table 1. Perspectives and related indicators used to develop the analysis.

Perspectives	Indicators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ common vision ■ common needs and aspirations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • dissatisfaction with the conventional agri-food system • need of re-appropriation of social control over food and related production systems • environmental and social justice goals to be achieved through new practices • other needs related to a communitarian and less material dimension of living
Social innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • development of bonds, mutual acquaintance, trust • social learning • taking responsibility collectively • development of a collective project
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ pursuing and achieving social purposes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • environmental and social justice goals • development of a communitarian and less material dimension of living • contribution to a broader transformation
Social embeddedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • role of social interactions and related social learning: development of socially shared knowledge, norms and values, social capital, mutuality and solidarity • broader role of relational environment in meeting individual/collective needs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ integration between social dimension and economic sphere 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • integration between social processes, needs, benefits and economic practices • flexibility in managing economic practices
Food re-commonification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • assigning values to food and practices around it • importance given to modes of food production-consumption • importance given to localness of food practices • local communities' sense of closeness to local farming systems • recognition of the transformative role of food practices

4. Methodological Aspects

4.1. CSAs Identification and Involvement in Research Activities

The analysis is based on the empirical material collected through two surveys conducted in collaboration with the Italian network of CSAs: an initial exploratory survey carried out between the summer and autumn of 2019, and a second survey carried out during the summer of 2020, in the first post-lockdown phase. This is actually the first study specifically focused on mapping and analyzing CSA practices in Italy.

In both cases, qualitative methodologies were adopted, and interviews were conducted aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of some organizational aspects of CSAs, of the relationship between consumers and producers, and the ways in which the activities were carried out during the lockdown imposed throughout the country between March and May 2020.

In the case of the first survey, conducted in 2019, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the members of the Italian CSA network. This is an informal organization that was set up in June 2018 during a first meeting organized by one of the Italian CSAs, with the aim of sharing the experience of the existing Italian CSA initiatives. The interviews were conducted in December 2019 with 16 contact persons of the CSAs taking part in the meeting, and they concerned the CSA experience and the structural and organizational aspects. The interviews were conducted by telephone, using a list of questions that had previously been sent to the CSA contact persons by email. For each CSA, one interview was conducted with the contact person of the CSA, who could be a farmer or a representative of the consumer-members involved with a leadership role, depending on the organization of each CSA.

In the second survey, data concerning the COVID-19 challenge for Italian CSAs were collected through in-person and telephone interviews during August and September 2020. The interviews aimed to explore the practical management of work in the fields and produce distribution during the lockdown and the relationship among members. Out of the 16 CSAs mapped in 2019, four had ceased activities, and five others chose not to take part in the survey. The interviews thus involved seven CSAs. The reduction of the CSA number was a first interesting data, worthy to be understood in its meaning, as it could be related to the difficulties of the development of these initiatives. In its turn, the unwillingness to participate in the research is difficult to explain, being possibly related to lack of interest or, alternatively, of time due to the intensive engagement in production-distribution activities. On the whole, the lack of data concerning the five CSAs that did not wish to take part in the study, as well as the other four that are no longer operating as CSAs, undoubtedly represents a limitation for this study. Further research would be thus required to complete the investigation of Italian CSAs.

4.2. Aspects Investigated

The first survey investigated the main characteristics of CSAs; the 30 questions concerned the following aspects:

- CSA creation role (by producers or consumers)
- Year of creation
- Number of families involved
- Number of producers involved
- Formal regulatory system
- Hectares of land and main activities
- Other stakeholders involved
- Product distribution channels
- Organizational model (families' commitment)
- Relationship between consumers-members and producers
- Main strengths and weakness
- During the second survey, three main questions were posed:
- How have you managed production and distribution during the lockdown?

- What has changed during the lockdown in production/distribution and what in participants' involvement?
- Which have been the main problems/obstacles you have faced during the lockdown?

4.3. Data Processing and Analysis

Processing of qualitative data [79] was performed through Content Analysis and, in particular, using the Framework Analysis approach [80]. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were used to avoid restricting the respondents'/interviewees' choice of answers [81]. Data processing followed the main steps of the qualitative research process. Firstly, we familiarized ourselves with the transcriptions of all the interviews, gaining an overview of the collected data and making notes on the key ideas and recurrent themes [80]. Then, the basis of the thematic framework was set out according to the research questions driving the research (second step). The thematic framework was refined and data were organized in line with the focus of analysis in the indexing phase (third step). Each specific piece of data was charted according to the research themes. These charted data were analyzed in relation to their key characteristics, mapped and interpreted, according to the objectives of qualitative analysis: "defining concepts, mapping range and nature of phenomena, creating typologies, finding associations, providing explanations, and developing strategies" [80] (p. 186).

The findings of both the first and the second surveys are discussed here using the conceptual framework adopted, referring to the three perspectives of social innovation, social embeddedness and food re-commonification. For each perspective, the analysis refers to the indicators highlighted in Table 1. Their manifestation in the features and processes analyzed, however, is considered without a precise assessment (quantifying it in some way), but rather through an evaluation that is as detailed as possible.

4.4. On Bias and Synergies When Analysing

Qualitative data specifically call for a reflexive perspective on data collection and analysis [82]. The academic researchers running the project were all involved in the CSA building process in Italy, raising the issue of the boundaries between academics and activists [83,84]. The research project was a participatory research project involving the Italian CSA network in shaping the research activities, including both the interview questions, as well as the discussion of the results. Because of the authors' engagement in CSA practices, the positivist stance of "neutrality" may not have been guaranteed. On the other hand, the activism–academic research relationship can provide an insider insight into the issue, which would be very difficult to gain by researchers without any kind of involvement. The academic authors' personal engagement with the topic does not actually become a militant perspective, but rather allows a synergy between activism and academic research that can fruitfully contribute to the development of knowledge and deep reflection on CSA practices.

5. Results

5.1. The Picture of Italian CSAs

The aim of mapping Italian CSAs and investigating their characteristics was to shed light on a phenomenon that, although the first CSA experience appeared in 2011, has only developed and spread throughout the country in recent years. Most experiences are, in fact, relatively recent. Only two have been operating for over five years, having been active since 2013 and 2014, two others have been active since 2015, whereas the remaining twelve have been operational since 2017 (4 CSAs), 2018 (5 CSAs) and 2019 (3 CSAs).

In this regard, it is important to point out that in Italy, as in other European countries (France, Spain), other significant experiences of alternative food networks have developed over the last three decades. The Italian context has been particularly conducive to this process, thanks to a strong culture of high-quality food, often linked to specific, locally-based, small-scale production systems. These features have been preserved through the

phase of agricultural modernization, reducing, to a certain extent, its effects and enabling the development of diverse trajectories. Among alternative food networks, Solidarity Purchase Groups, known as GAS (self-organized groups of consumers establishing direct relationships with producers, based on the shared criteria of solidarity and social and environmental justice [85–87]), have been the most significant experience. Since the early 2000s, GAS have spread extensively throughout the country, becoming quite popular and taking a variety of forms. The CSA model, due to its particular characteristics, constitutes an even more advanced experience, aimed at bringing the actualization of principles and goals guiding GAS to greater coherence. All of this partly explains the more limited and delayed development of this model in Italy.

The 16 CSAs investigated are distributed across several Italian regions, as reported in Table 2, and are mainly concentrated in the regions of Northern and Central Italy. Lombardy and Emilia Romagna are characterized by a greater presence of CSAs.

Table 2. The CSAs investigated.

CSA Name	CSA Code	Region	Geographical Area
Orobica Animante	B	Lombardy	North
Piano B	N	Lombardy	North
La Vitalba	O	Lombardy	North
Iside	I	Lombardy	North
Coltiviamoci	G	Veneto	North
CSA Veneto	P	Veneto	North
Ortazzo	A	Trentino	North
Il biricoccolo	F	Emilia Romagna	Centre
Prati al sole	M	Emilia Romagna	Centre
Arvaia	R	Emilia Romagna	Centre
Montepacini	H	Marche	Centre
Case Bottero	L	Marche	Centre
Ortobioattivo	E	Tuscany	Centre
Semi di comunità	D	Lazio	Centre
Ortomangione	Q	Tuscany	Centre
Piccapane	C	Apulia	South

As previously stated, the investigation gathered data about the structural and organizational characteristics of the CSAs, and also analyzed the perception of the CSA model from the people involved in it.

5.1.1. The Structural and Organizational Characteristics

The following table (Table 3) illustrates the findings for each of the structural and organizational characteristics investigated.

5.1.2. The Social Relationship in CSA Practices

Regarding the characteristics of the social relationship, the main element emerging is the key role attributed to the trust between consumers and producers. Indeed, CSAs are presented as a place where complementary needs come together and agreements are based on trust: “a sustainable solution for the small-scale production of vegetables and the creation of long-term trading relationships based on mutual trust” (C). All the interviewees highlight the fact that trust between producers and consumers is the crucial element in CSA practices. “The advance investment is made on a trust basis to allow the realization of objectives that must be shared (hiring a worker, buying a greenhouse, etc.)” (H).

Table 3. Structural and organizational characteristics.

Theme/Variable	Findings
CSA creation role	Most CSAs were formed at the initiative of the producers (12 out of 16), whereas in 4 cases out of 16, their creation was consumer-led. Hence, the dominant model in Italy is the so called “subscription model” set by farmers, whereas the shareholder CSA model, promoted by associated consumers, is less dominant [43]. However, the sharing of visions and aspirations by the two parties is a common feature, although, as we will see later, it does not always achieve the same degree of actualization in practices.
Number of families involved	The size of these collective experiences is quite diverse. The average number of families involved at the start of the CSA experience was 51, but with values ranging between 6 and 220. Today (2021), the largest and oldest experience involves 493 members.
Number of producers involved	Half of the CSAs are characterized by the presence of a single producer, whereas the others involve a small number of local producers (up to six producers). Only one is characterized by a very high number of producers, the result of a very wide organization, associated with the multi-farms CSA model [43].
Formal regulatory system	Out of 16 CSAs, only 5 have a formalized regulatory system, whereas the rest do not have one. The formalization of the agreements is independent of both the number of families involved and years of operation.
Hectares of land and main activities	Most CSAs are linked to the production-consumption of vegetables only, and have, in fact, a limited amount of land: half work on 1 hectare of land, while a further three work on areas ranging from 2 to 3 hectares. There are 4 CSAs with more than 8 hectares, and the largest CSA has 40 hectares.
Other stakeholders involved	In only 4 out of the 16 CSAs, other players are involved besides consumers and producers. In particular, the two Veneto experiences have interacted with the local Solidarity Economy District for the construction of a business network and the sharing of distribution points. The two CSAs in Veneto are also engaged in promoting and carrying out cultural activities and events, in addition to the production of food, which are significant in terms of formative and transformative pathways for the local territory. The formative aspect is also present in the Lombardy experience, whereas work sharing and conviviality appear in other CSAs.
Product distribution channels	11 CSAs out of 16 engage in direct sales, and 3 CSAs use distribution points not integrated in the production structures.
Organizational model (families’ commitment)	The involvement of members in the production activities is required in 11 CSAs, with different methods and forms relating to both the work in the fields and the logistical and administrative aspects. Some CSAs provide for a minimum number of days per year, where others organize days dedicated to events for the involvement of the members themselves.

Moreover, in most of the cases, there is a perception that the two identities overlap: “we are always producers and consumers” (in 5 CSAs). “CSA provides for a commitment on the part of the co-producer, who is expected to participate in life and in making choices, to establish relationships with the people welcomed in the farm (also people with disabilities, refugees), to personally verify how the work is done and also to share some moments of work and conviviality” (H). This closeness and strong integration is shown even more clearly by the willingness to accept a condition that seems paradoxical: “they pay in advance and we produce later” (I). All of this clearly exemplifies the unhinging of the logic characterizing the dominant food system, governed by a clear division of roles and functions, with production and sale on one side, and purchase and consumption on the other.

5.1.3. The CSAs' Strengths and Weaknesses

Respondents highlighted their deep awareness of the innovative character represented by CSA practices. CSA is considered as a new business model, in which the boundary between consumer and producer characterizing the conventional food system is questioned. The choice to share the risk of production binds producer and consumer in a common enterprise in which both take risks, aware that, in their choices, there is a concrete commitment to the construction of different approaches and practices. It is a model in which social and economic aspects are combined, giving shape to an unprecedented collaborative relationship: "A pact between farmers and consumers, where the former undertake to produce food for the latter in a sustainable and responsible way; consumers, in turn, undertake to support the farmers by purchasing the products" (A).

It is a vision of the work carried out by the small local farms that recognize its broader social value: "Recognition of the dignity of agricultural work" (L). This practice of production becomes protection of the territory, considered as a common good. Behind CSAs, there seems to be an awareness of a close relationship between the territory in which one lives, the quality of the food that is produced and the well-being in the local area. At the same time, these practices are perceived as a new way of building community: "An alternative paradigm to the system, to live together in harmony" (B). "A tool for change and community building" (P).

In addition to the CSAs' strengths, however, some weaknesses were highlighted too. It is precisely the construction of the close relationship between producers and consumers—the essential element of CSAs—that is perceived by most CSAs as the main critical area. The overlap between consumer and producer roles leaves a grey area of interaction, which poses some challenges. For instance, there is a widespread perception of the risk that consumers may not be sufficiently motivated (C): "people prefer to contribute financially rather than providing physical and working support" (O), or there is a persisting uncertainty in the relationship, and consequently, the "need to chase up families" (F), and, in fact, "not all families become truly loyal, that is, they try for a year then they prefer to shop in stores" (M). All of this is perceived as weakening the economic sustainability of CSA practices.

The aspect of solidarity among members is another distinctive aspect of this experience that is not handled in the same way by all the CSAs. This applies, for example, to the financial methods of subscribing to the joint relationship with farmers. The most advanced approach is one adopted by two CSAs, where the cost of individual subscriptions varies on a case-by-case basis, with wealthier members paying more and the less affluent paying less, in order to secure substantial solidarity among the group of participants (R, P). In the other CSAs, this mechanism is not applied, and the subscription fee is the same for all members, leaving open the question of accessibility of this model.

5.2. The Situation of Italian CSAs during the 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic

In Italy, as elsewhere, the COVID-19 epidemic that spread throughout the world in 2020 represented a major challenge for the economy and society. Italian CSAs have been directly affected by the restrictions imposed by government bodies to reduce the spread of the virus, and have had to face various critical issues. We investigated how Italian CSAs reacted in practice to the COVID-19 challenge, what strategies were adopted for continuing operations and what the social effects were of the situation experienced. As already described in the section on methodology, the survey focused, on the one hand, on how the production and distribution activity was carried out and, on the other, on how the community dimension was safeguarded during the lockdown. The situation was different in the various CSAs, according to specificities linked both to the territory and, above all, to the organizational and legal form of the individual entities.

A brief description of these aspects is provided below for each of the seven CSAs analyzed.

In the case of Rome, *Semi di Comunità* (D) is a social cooperative in which the members play an important role as volunteers, recognized by law. For this reason, it was

possible for them to continue to work normally by referring to the regional legislation that authorizes the volunteers of social cooperatives to continue their mutual aid services. Thus, from an organizational point of view, nothing changed during the lockdown period, except for distribution. In this case, a door-to-door service was set up, once again managed by members as volunteers. In many cases, this engagement was also experienced as an opportunity to get out of the house, doing outdoor activities and having social interactions, while observing all the precautions required by law. At the same time, there was strong concern among some members and associates not to place the cooperative in a difficult situation, showing a strong sense of belonging to the common project. The experience of one volunteer emerges from the interview: “despite being really afraid of infection, she came to the field so as not to miss making her contribution and she stood a kilometre away from everyone, but she always came”.

In Siena, the situation of Ortomangione (Q), which is part of the Mondomangione consumers’ cooperative, was quite similar. The CSA was able to continue its production activities carried out by the cooperative’s volunteer members. The distribution activities, taking place within the Mondomangione selling point, continued regularly too. Regarding the social dimension, on the other hand, the coordinator pointed out that the CSA suffered, in some degree, due to the impossibility of organizing meetings and evenings regularly as they did before, with a weakening of relationships, particularly with new members who had just joined and people who were interested in joining the CSA. This is pointed out as a risk for the CSA model if social distancing measures go on for too long: “without evening and cultural activities we are unable to involve new people and the turnover of members who move away is interrupted, and we, on the other hand, need to grow!”

In Bologna, Arvaia (R), the largest Italian CSA, is an agricultural cooperative and, as such, was not able to benefit from the mutual aid regulations reserved for social cooperatives. This apparently secondary difference meant that, in order to continue operating during the lockdown, the CSA required a massive effort from its employees, who found themselves volunteering many overtime hours to compensate for the absence of volunteer members, trainees and university students: “for us the biggest challenge was not having members coming in . . . we felt the decline in attendance a lot”. Distribution, normally managed autonomously by the subscribers, was organized with a door-to-door approach, which required further effort. Ordinary distribution, with shareholders going to the pre-established points, would, in fact, have been unlawful—the first distribution as soon as the lockdown started was skipped for organizational reasons. To cover the need for manpower, the entire Arvaia workforce was employed in the fields, including those who normally work in administration or communication. Afterwards, when new regulations allowed work to take place in the CSA’s gardens and lands, many members resumed their activities in the fields and, through discussion with the authorities, distribution was also resumed regularly. In May 2020, they opened a direct sales point in the cooperative headquarters, where many people learned about the CSA, creating the right conditions for expanding the membership. Overall, “it was sustainable, thanks to the extra voluntary work performed by the working members, which we then accounted for in the social responsibility report. This has great value in terms of workers’ awareness, and people must know the cost of labour embodied in products, it must be recognized”.

The nascent CSA of Ravenna (S) has a different structure, with a farm that involves a multitude of diverse members around it. This experience started in conjunction with the epidemic and was immediately very successful. There were numerous subscriptions, on the wave of the enthusiasm to support a local initiative and with the convenience of home deliveries during a period in which it did not feel safe to leave the house. What could seem as quite a different experience from the usual process of setting up a CSA afterwards allowed the start of something new: “the nice thing was when the lockdown ended, on June 4th, people came and said ‘how beautiful it is here’; they rediscovered the beauty of nature, the beauty of flowers and how food is really good.” However, the lack of a common project soon showed its effects, as the change was not lasting: “Over time, however, we

saw a decline in the strength of relations, some people remained, but others returned to ordinary practices.”

In Trentino, the Ortazzo CSA (A) showed the potential of a community that supports agriculture. Again, the formula is different: three informally associated farms are linked to an independent GAS through an annual contract with the individual members. Farming activities therefore did not change in any way during the epidemic. The lockdown, however, prevented the normal distribution of products, which could only take place door-to-door, a very energy-intensive undertaking for farmers. Consumers, however, took steps to obtain special authorization to provide a home delivery service of food as volunteers, allowing farmers to concentrate on their work. One farmer said: “what I felt during this period, what I sensed, is a two-way flow between farmers and families: we, as small farmers, have contributed in some way with our products, and consumers have somehow kept faith to our pact through concrete support. Yes . . . a two-way exchange in social terms . . . that’s what there was, I felt it”.

The members of the Orobica CSA (B) in Bergamo did not suffer much from the pandemic, of course, not in terms of low incidence of the virus (the town was where the pandemic started in Italy), but in terms of the CSA’s organizational system. They do not supply vegetable boxes, but rather, cereals, which are easier to manage. Furthermore, cultivation is entirely entrusted to farmers outside the group. During the summer, delivery was not hindered, as there were no more restrictions on movements. At the same time, they manage a community garden in Bergamo, which works as a social and educational garden. Here, to comply with the regulations, they slightly delayed the seedbed activity, which should have been done at the high point of the COVID pandemic, and cropping resumed in June, observing safety distances. The situation experienced seems to have given impetus to the desire to strengthen the community: “now we are engaged in a strong attempt to develop; we are trying to grow, with the idea of structuring a cooperative within the community. We are not going to take a farm from the territory, to support it; we are trying to find a farm to cultivate . . . we are resilient anyway, right? the CSA is a model that fits well, we try . . . after COVID many are wondering how to change the system . . . ”

The case of the CSA Veneto (P), which involves a producer, a group of consumers, and an association, which, together, constitute a solidarity economy district that coordinates the initiatives (DES Oltreconfin), provides a different case again. The production (vegetables) is carried out by a farm, which continued to operate regularly. With regard to distribution, this CSA operates in a few towns in the Veneto region, through various distribution points. Some of these are based in places where each member has the key and can collect the produce independently; in this case, there were no changes during the lockdown. Where this arrangement was not possible, a home delivery service was organized, with a great effort by the workers. Even the work of making up the boxes, which is normally the participants’ responsibility, was done by the farmers, as a further unpaid burden. The restrictions posed a serious challenge for the social dimension. For example, in March, the annual assembly was held remotely via Zoom, and this mode limited participation significantly: “the assembly is public and allows us to attract new people; this is important to compensate for people leaving the CSA. This year we have had lower numbers because people who were undecided did not come. As a consequence, we risked not reaching budget coverage; so we had to raise the price, make a certain number of rounds and therefore the price was a little higher”. The group has held together so far and has developed a sense of resilience. This, however, does not dispel the fear that, in the long run, the impossibility of meeting, especially of meeting new people, is a very serious threat to the community and relationship components: “engaging in a community action...how can we do that in these conditions [without meeting]? In the long term, this situation risks eroding it more than enthusiasm can do to foster it”.

The following table (Table 4) summarizes all the findings of this second survey. For each CSA investigated, it refers to the main aspects: type of organization; whether or not

production and distribution activities stopped; whether or not volunteers' activities at the CSA stopped; and the main critical aspects that emerged.

Table 4. Findings of the second survey.

CSA Code	Type	Suspension of Activities	Suspension of Volunteers' Engagement	Main Critical Aspects
D	Social cooperative	NO	NO	None
Q	Consumer cooperative	NO	YES	Suffered due to the lack of public events leading to reduced renewal
R	Agricultural cooperative	NO	YES	Absence of volunteers leading to extra work
S	Association	NO	YES	Weakening of enthusiasm due to lack of contact
A	Association	NO	NO	Bureaucracy
B	Informal	YES	YES	Lack of relationship and cooperation
P	Solidarity economy district	NO	YES	Economic unsustainability due to lack of participation and engagement

6. Discussion

The three theoretical perspectives adopted to analyze the Italian CSA experiences allow interpreting the various aspects that emerged, and highlighting and assessing the innovation potential and the features of resilience of the CSA model.

For each perspective, the following analysis refers to the indicators highlighted in Table 1. Perspectives and related indicators are used both for the features that emerged from the first survey and for what was uncovered by the second survey related to the COVID-19 experience.

6.1. Social Innovation

The perspective of social innovation confirms that, in its character as an innovation niche, the CSA model actually represents an advanced expression of the search for alternative food practices promoted by grassroots networks. According to the concept of social innovation adopted, the model redefines needs, rules, roles and relations around food, mobilizing a complex set of non-economic elements and pursuing social purposes. In doing this, despite its limited size, the model shows considerable prefigurative value. At the same time, this perspective foregrounds some weaknesses in the actualization of this innovative model.

6.1.1. Visions, Needs and Aspirations

The motivations underpinning the setting up of a CSA undoubtedly mirror an adherence to common visions, needs and aspirations, which concern the provision of healthy and tasty food, but also involve other aspects related to values and lifestyle. As we have seen, these refer to the need and the will to build/be part of an alternative food system that provides scope for small-scale farming and to recognize the dignity of the work embedded in it, the will to maintain a respectful relationship with environment and to respect consumers' right to good food, and the need to regain a social dimension of life and to reconnect food practices to the territory. To this end, they express the willingness to make a mutual commitment based on shared principles, actually disrupting the rules governing conventional market relationships, mostly based on pursuing one-sided interests. In so doing, they also highlight the CSA's inherent aspiration to food sovereignty, in terms of a

desire to regain autonomy in farming/food choices and re-connect, respectively, to local communities and food systems.

These aspects also emerge in most of the reactions to the COVID-19 challenges. Taking responsibility and mobilizing all the resources available, on the part of both parties to the pact, draws strength from the cohesion around their alternative project and the idea of keeping it alive. Farmers' willingness to make a greater effort to overcome the emergency was crucial in many cases (A, C, Q, R, S, P), but there was also a belief that this added value of the products would be recognized by like-minded consumers (A, D, B). The same occurred where consumer involvement was allowed, demonstrating the innovative character of the relationship with food practices, significantly driven by social values, needs and purposes.

6.1.2. Social Interactions

All of this is linked to the other important feature of CSA as social innovation, namely the role of the relational environment provided by the collective experience. Indeed, the CSA's engagement in building innovative food-related practices is inherently social. The collective space and the related interactions allow tapping into resources not accessible individually, enabling significant changes in attitudes and practices and creating the conditions for the development of social capital and collective agency. Learning and advancing understanding is the first main advantage of this social environment. The evidence shows how this may concern farming and its positive features and criticalities, the meaning of food, and the potential, as well as the weaknesses, of consumption practices.

Through learning, other resources are mobilized. The variety of organizational solutions shown by Italian CSAs bears testimony to the complexity of the innovation process that CSAs represent. This results from the quality of the interactions that develop within the groups and from the resources that these interactions make it possible to create and exchange, including knowledge, trust, ethical concerns, solidarity, sense of belonging and political awareness, among others. This social, interactive approach to rebuilding food practices provides the chance to reconnect actors usually distant from each other (farmers and consumers) or acting individually (as consumers), redefining roles and establishing new innovative relationships, capable of meeting new common goals and needs. However, these processes do not take place with equal intensity in all CSAs, hence, the different degree of innovation of their internal arrangements. Examples include the different ways in which the solidarity principle is implemented, leading some CSAs to adopt mechanisms to tackle income inequalities and the related different levels of affordability of the model (R, P); or the different degrees of consumers' engagement, with cases in which farmers experience a condition of persisting uncertainty in the relationship (F, M).

In addition to being crucial for the degree of innovation represented by the CSA model, social interaction and the associated collective learning prove to be fundamentally important for the sustainability of these experiences over time, supporting participants' involvement and ensuring that an adequate size is maintained. Indeed, the role of learning is continuous: it affects the setting up of a CSA; its performance, based on members' steady commitment and active participation and interaction; and the management of members' turnover or increase. In this regard, the differences in the sizes of Italian CSAs may mirror different situations in terms of internal participation or different economic conditions. An excessive reduction of the membership may undermine the economic viability of the CSA, at least with regard to its characteristic configuration (full support to farming activities). As a possible consequence, the desire to maintain its original support function may lead to making the model not equally accessible: the trade-off between fairness towards farmers and accessibility for consumers emerges clearly. On the other hand, a considerable increase in member numbers (R), although positive in economic terms, may challenge the internal organization and the social structure, leading to potential change in the innovative status/nature of the CSA.

The weight of the interactions and the mutually reinforcing relations existing with common action were also clearly evident during the COVID-19 lockdown, both positively and negatively. The close relationship between farmers and consumers in some cases (A, D) underpinned the implementation of special arrangements to handle the forced changes in the management of activities, although they were often very energy- and time-consuming. On the other hand, the forced suspension of social interactions was experienced as a major complication, with regard to maintaining internal cohesion and agency, and, even more, to managing access of new members (P, Q, R). The CSA model, due to the advanced level of commitment it requires, in fact, builds on the intensive involvement of members, to foster awareness and solidarity, and, through them, a decisive and lasting change in practices. This confirms the findings of other research studies [88].

6.1.3. Pursuing and Achieving Social Purposes

Many of the aspects considered above, such as the sharing of visions and ethical goals, can be related to the third component of social innovation, namely, the collective pursuit of social value, within a vision of common good. The Italian CSAs do indeed seem to embody the full integration between fulfilment of functional needs and the search for multiple social benefits. Despite the variety of local-specific and social-/case-specific situations, the initiatives investigated in this study appear to be communities of practice committed to redesigning their food system according to a shared goal, in order to actualize a more equal and sustainable model. In addition to environmental sustainability and social equity goals, the common project also aims to (re-)build a relational environment in which to attain other social benefits. All this seems to confirm, and even reinforce, what has already been shown by other studies, namely, the role of food practices as a social medium, capable of facilitating societal changes.

6.2. Social Embeddedness

6.2.1. Role of Social Interaction

The importance of the social dimension of CSA practices, in particular, the weight of social interactions, the development of social capital and the sharing of social purposes, is also related to the condition of social embeddedness. The features of the CSAs we investigated show this. As previously highlighted, the importance of the alignment of members, in terms of understanding, motivations and behavior, and of their sense of inter-dependence, mutuality and solidarity comes to the fore. Collective learning and related development of shared knowledge, values and norms, taking place through internal interactions, prove to be crucial in that regard. The same applies to the development of social capital, as the effect of strengthening relations: trust and willingness to cooperate underpin the common enterprise. The weakness of these processes, due to limited participation—spontaneous, or determined by large organization size, or imposed by external limitations, as occurred during the COVID-19 lockdown—may lead to weakening members' sense of solidarity and responsibility, as well as collective agency. More generally, the relational environment, combining practical opportunities and normative, cultural, political and psycho-social components, plays an important role in permeating CSA members' attitude, their shared sense of mutuality in managing practices and their sense of commonality. Fulfilment of individual multiple non-material needs and production of collective/social benefits are further outcomes of these (re-)socialized food practices.

6.2.2. Integration between Social and Economic Spheres

The close, mutually reinforcing relationship between the social dimension and the economic sphere is at the basis of the meaning CSAs assign to the relationship with production activity. The commitment to supporting local farming, recognized for its social value as an activity managing vital resources for the well-being of people and the territory, is confirmed as being an inherent feature of the model. In some cases, this engagement leads to an integration of roles, with consumers identifying themselves

as co-producers. In addition, the study reveals an awareness of the link between the special production-consumption practices and community-building, rooted in the local territory (B, P). In this regard, the evidence confirms that CSA food practices (and related engagement in redefining production-distribution-consumption modes) are experienced as practices allowing the achievement of something else in addition to “good food” (as ethical value-laden), related to the re-creation of a communitarian dimension of living, positively perceived in its social and spiritual components. Indeed, when there is also a political awareness, this approach demonstrates the ideologically-based willingness to recreate a society-/community-based food system.

The social embeddedness of the food provisioning relationship proves to be conducive to the search for solutions to cope with the impact of the COVID-19 restrictions, once again overcoming role distinction and facing time/energy challenges. In particular, this dynamic organization, based on flexibility in managing relationships and functions, already evidenced by other studies [89], is confirmed as a characteristic element of the socially-embedded CSA model and part of its innovative potential.

6.3. Food Re-Commonification

Most of the characteristics described above are also meaningful when looking at CSAs from the perspective of food re-commodification. It further highlights the transformative potential of this model, focusing on its most peculiar feature, namely, the communitarian engagement in supporting local agriculture and building an alternative food system together. This concerns the different approach to food and to food-related practices, in relation to the meanings, values and goals with which they are loaded. The CSAs investigated, though in varying degrees, show this feature in many different aspects: in the way their members consider agriculture and its role in producing food and sustaining the resources involved; in the consumers’ willingness to directly engage in the farming activities and, more generally, to be involved in the management of their food system; in the desire to overcome the separation of roles of producers and consumers; and in building community around food production.

The efforts made in reacting to the COVID-19 restrictions, although not in all cases based on consumers’ direct engagement (Q, A, P), clearly show the level of involvement in, and the sense of responsibility towards, the common project around food.

7. Conclusions

This article aimed to explore the features of Italian CSAs and their potential from the perspective of a transition towards a more diversified and sustainable food system. In doing so, it also sought to contribute to understanding the potential of the CSA movement at an international level. This aim was accompanied by the awareness that the CSA model represents a niche in the panorama of food systems, as well as a small part of alternative food networks themselves. However, there was a conviction that its characterization as an innovation niche gives it remarkable value, making it worthy of observation and reflection.

On the whole, the two surveys on Italian CSAs indeed give us the image of a radically innovative experience, potentially capable of deeply redefining production and consumption practices, as rooted in socially-shared knowledge, motivations, commitment and sense of community. In addition to being characterized by a determination to pursue environmental sustainability and social equity goals, the model shows a remarkable character of resilience thanks to the original arrangements that the common value basis and the strong sense of interdependence and solidarity of its members can provide.

Of course, these results have general value, which does not ignore the differences shown by the various CSA initiatives. On the other hand, these differences may be related to the diverse origins of the initiatives and to the particular stage they are at, with respect to an ideal and necessary process of development over time. We have underlined that the CSA movement is quite young in Italy, with several initiatives that have only a few years of experience.

This also points to the obvious limitations of the study, which was able to consider a limited number of cases through two different snapshots, although taken in two contiguous periods. A deeper understanding of the CSA model would benefit from a more extensive and more detailed analysis, through the collection of data covering a longer timeframe and involving all the existing initiatives, including the new experiences that have appeared in the meantime on the Italian scene.

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