

Community Supported Urban Agriculture: The *Orti Solidali* project in Rome

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In Italy local food networks are mostly farmer-driven initiatives, with little consumer involvement. An exception is the *Progetto Orti Solidali* – solidarity gardens project – an ambitious example of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) in Rome. Since its start in early 2009, the *Orti* has aimed to create a more sustainable way of producing and consuming food. Its slogan is ‘We don’t sell vegetables; we grow *your* garden’.

One of a variety of urban agriculture initiatives, CSA has become a means to create closer relations between producers and consumers. According to Henderson and Van En (1999) each CSA initiative is unique. CSA can be considered as a tool for change with which to take advantage of the current food climate to encourage more sustainable production with greater accountability to the consumer and fair returns for producers.

Urban land access

In Italy access to urban land is guaranteed only to citizens’ associations or companies (e.g. in town and country parks or urban gardens) or to particular population groups (such as vegetable gardens for the elderly or educational gardens for children). Access to land is not granted simply for general community use.

To expand land access in today’s urban spaces, some activists propose to revive and adapt the old concept of commons. These were the lands, forests and streams that could be freely used by the peasants in medieval Europe. For example, arable land can be seen as commons that should be preserved; likewise urban commons could have collective alternative uses.

Orti Solidali project as a partnership

In the *Progetto Orti Solidali* the farm workers come from a semi-autonomous care home (*Il Tetto Casal Fattoria*), which hosts refugees and socially disadvantaged youth, with the aim of helping them to develop their full potential. One of their tutors working in the care home is also an organic agronomist and member of the *Free School of Synergistic*

Agriculture ‘Emilia Hazelip’. These activities gave her the idea of starting an urban local food initiative – which became the *Orti Solidali* project.

More than a producer-consumer relationship, the *Orti Solidali* aims to be an economically and environmentally sustainable initiative. It also aims to create social inclusion, both for the subscribers and the farm workers – who in this case are four young refugees from the care home. A direct partnership allows them to learn skills that they will be able to apply independently wherever they continue their lives. After a training course on synergistic agriculture, the farmers (together with the tutor) built 60 family-sized garden plots on about one hectare of land on the outskirts of Rome. The tenancy came from a social cooperative that produces organic food in the urban green belt.

Each garden plot is allocated to a family (or individual) who pays an annual subscription and receives a home delivery with a fixed amount of vegetables every week. Vegetables come from their specific plot, which can be customised according to the subscriber’s preferences, with a choice of several crops cultivated according to the seasonal sowing plan of synergistic agriculture. In this CSA all the necessary labour is provided by the four refugees. The yearly subscription is designed to cover the direct costs of the initiative (such as seeds, plants and tools) and the workers’ yearly salary, so that the activity is entirely self-financing. Many essential items – e.g. farm implements, irrigation material and seeds – were donated in response to appeals on the website, made so that the *Orti* could avoid or minimise financial debt.

This initiative combines three aims of sustainability. The environmental aim is to promote an agricultural method with low environmental impact. An economic aim is to create stable income for young refugees through low-scale agricultural activity. Social aims are to rebuild a relationship of cooperation between producers and consumers, to create social inclusion for the refugee farmers through work opportunities and to link subscribers through participation in a food community.

Synergistic Agriculture

The plots are cultivated according to the 'Synergistic Agriculture' method, refined by the Spaniard Emilia Hazelip, in turn based on the ideas and experience of Masanobu Fukuoka (1985; see also El Jardín de Emilia Hazelip). This method consists of an ecological approach that provides solutions to the problems of industrial agriculture and the environmental damage it causes. Synergistic agriculture improves soil quality by using permanent beds, with mulches to keep the ground permanently covered, and by planting different crop families together according to the principles of phytosociology. Synergistic agriculture allows no fertilisers and no tilling of the soil. Most of the work required by conventional agriculture is not necessary in this method, making it the best choice for such a low labour initiative, as well as for its environmental and economic benefits. Vegetables cultivated under a synergistic regime are top quality, completely organic and usually cheaper than organic products in farmers' markets or supermarkets because there are no costs for fertiliser and only low costs for labour. Although similar methods may be used also in permaculture, they are distinct systems.

Building subscribers' commitment

As seen in many similar initiatives around the world, CSA is more than just a short-chain supply model. It is also an instrument to create and strengthen social relationships in an urban context, by building food communities around common needs such as food quality and food security. Community links can be built through greater interaction between farmers and other participants, especially through sharing responsibilities and rewards. And this has many benefits beyond the CSA itself.

As one of the first steps for building the Orti initiative, the tutor organised public presentations to find committed subscribers. Initially 200 applications were received for only 60 available plots. The tutor carefully selected those who showed a strong commitment to the distinctive social aims of the initiative; no social, economic or age requirements were stipulated.

At the beginning of the subscription campaign, the tutor gave Synergistic Agriculture workshops free-of-charge to interested subscribers. This subscriber education campaign attempted to move from the consumer (*consumatore*) concept to the active consumer-citizen (*consum-attore*), a term which has been popularised in Italy (<http://consumattore.wordpress.com>, <http://www.altromercato.it>). In return for the workshop, subscribers were expected to do some volunteering in the gardens. Subscribers were asked to help in the initial establishment of the gardens, though this voluntary labour was not required to cover part of their share.

The *Orti Solidali* initiative is structured as a shareholder CSA, where subscribers and farm workers share responsibilities and rewards, unlike some CSAs. Subscribers have paid the

same fixed share from the start, approximately 300 Euros for 52 vegetable boxes per year. This has been enough for the 60 subscribers to maintain the salaries of the four farm workers, despite many difficulties in production. The farm workers receive less money than from conventional food chains, but they gain financial security. With payments at the beginning of the season, they can purchase seeds, equipment and other supplies. Subscribers receive more and better-quality produce for lower prices than at farmers' markets; they also have a personal, highly customised garden plot compared with other short supply chains.

As in all CSAs, the main strengths are the subscribers' trust, participation and long-term commitment, rather than lower prices of food products or other commercial benefits. This commitment has allowed the project to surmount many obstacles that could have undermined it.

Ways forward: a new ethic

The initiative encountered many misunderstandings and conflicts with the cooperative farm that provided the land and infrastructure, apparently because of different organisational aims. Furthermore, the *Orti* faced drought and strong winds; sheep entered the plots, eating and destroying everything. By autumn 2009 the initiative had to move to another site and rebuild the garden infrastructure from scratch.

These difficulties caused a great delay in producing and distributing food boxes, thus limiting the involvement of subscribers in the CSA network. Minimal participation of subscribers may also be due to the heavy time-burdens of urban workers and especially the periurban location of both garden sites, requiring a long journey from the city. Nevertheless the CSA subscribers maintained their commitment, partly thanks to the careful initial selection. Despite the long delays in providing food boxes, none of the 60 subscribers has complained: only one decided to end his contract.



CSA subscribers do volunteer work
Photo: Michele Vitiello

To investigate the subscribers' attitudes, especially their commitment to the *Orti* project, we gave them questionnaires asking about their motivations, satisfaction and involvement in the CSA initiative. In order of importance, their motivations were ethical, environmental and social. Most respondents emphasised their broad ethical commitment to such an initiative, though the answers also included 'economic' and 'food safety' choices. These responses illustrate the emergence of a new ethics which affects economic, social and environmental factors; this ethics gives rise to new alternative relationships for food production and distribution (Dalla Costa, 2007).

In the *Orti* project, communication between farmers and subscribers takes place mostly through the internet – via the mailing list and a blog. In subscribers' responses to the questionnaire, communication was seen as sufficient for the subscribers to feel involved in the initiative, despite the delays in receiving food boxes. When asked how these difficulties should be addressed, many suggested to 'wait for the obstacles to go away' and 'use group strength and resources' to continue the *Orti*. When asked how the project could be enriched, subscribers suggested the following activities: building a network, combining different types of knowledge, strengthening the group and its interrelations.

The table below summarises the main strengths and weaknesses of the *Orti Solidali* after one year of activity.

Based on this assessment of our experience, we would suggest that a CSA initiative could usefully begin with the following measures: a careful initial selection of the participants for their motivations to ensure an essential commitment; close spatial proximity between the field and the subscribers' community, and community activities around the gardens to improve social cohesion among subscribers.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The agronomic method reduces pressure on environment and reliance on fossil fuels. - Economic benefits – both labour and net income per unit land area – are greater than in conventional agriculture. - Soil value increases due to the introduction of social function in agriculture. - Periurban territory becomes an everyday reference point for city dwellers. - Subscribers pay directly for the farming activity, with no intermediary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Potential employment, and therefore economic sustainability, is little developed. - Geographical distance deters involvement by urban subscribers. - Subscribers have little involvement, especially in the agricultural activities.

The *Orti Solidali* project shows that CSA initiatives can develop alternatives to economic growth, ever-increasing consumption and large-scale retail chains, driven by profit maximisation. Some alternative strategies have been conceptualised as degrowth – attempting to fulfil human needs with minimal use of natural resources, thus operating

outside of a rationally calculable economy (Fotopoulos, 2007; Fournier, 2008; Latouche, 2006, 2009). An example of degrowth, the *Orti* obtains resources and provides benefits that are not measurable by conventional value chains. At the same time, its methods have a broader relevance beyond degrowth objectives.

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