

RIFS-Blogpost

Datum:

Autor*innen:

Projekt:



Fließtext



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You can regularly find people helping out on the fields of 'Gärtnerhof Himmel und Erde' in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. In keeping

! Zum Aktualisieren der Textelemente, Zitation markieren und dann F9 drücken !

Zitation: [Halbach, Armin-Laszlo] (2026): Enjoying Vegetables and Lending a Hand: What Strengthens Participation in Community-Supported Agriculture? – RIFS-Blogpost, [02.10.2025].

URL:





with the principles of community-supported agriculture, producers and consumers share responsibility for sustainable food production.

By Hannah-Charlotte Schwering and Armin-Laszlo Halbach

Do you know the farm where the vegetables you eat are grown? And do you know the conditions under which those vegetables are grown? If not, you are like many people. It's different for people who are members of community-supported agriculture initiatives (CSA) – known as 'Solidarische Landwirtschaft' (German for 'Solidary Agriculture') in Germany. They pay a monthly amount to support a farm or market garden in the region and regularly receive a share of the vegetables grown and harvested there. This makes regional and sustainable food production possible, while the risks and costs of agricultural production are borne jointly by everyone – the producers and the consumers. There are currently almost 500 CSA initiatives in Germany, varying in size and organisation.

1.1 How is solidarity practiced in a CSA initiative?

According to the German CSA umbrella organization Netzwerk Solidarische Landwirtschaft e.V., there are three main aspects of solidarity in CSA: the distribution of production costs among a wider group, solidarity between members, and voluntary help with cultivation, harvesting, distribution and coordination. We investigated CSA member participation further within the [pane] project during Hannah Schwering's internship at RIFS. In this project, we are analysing the social, economic and ecological effects of CSA in rural regions of eastern Germany.

In the [pane] project, Armin-Laszlo Halbach supervised the master's thesis of Şaziye Aksungur, a student at the Eberswalde University of Sustainable Development. She conducted a nationwide survey on social cohesion within CSA initiatives, and investigated current membership figures and the proportion of members who regularly



participate. Based on this data, we were able to analyse how various characteristics of CSA initiatives relate to member participation for 84 farms in Germany. As psychologists, we were particularly interested in the role of social structures, such as whether informal community activities – like farm festivals or educational events – are organised. We would like to present the results of our analysis in this blog article.

1.2 Which CSA farms have the highest levels of member participation?

A first – and unsurprisingly – finding was that CSA initiatives located in cities have significantly larger memberships than those in more rural regions. However, what was new for us was that the proportion of participating members – averaging around 28% in our sample – does not depend on the size or location of the CSA. This suggests that CSA initiatives in rural areas may struggle to attract a large number of members, but can rely on a consistent level of participation regardless of their size.

It appears that whether participation is voluntary or mandatory has a greater impact on the proportion of participating members. Although voluntary participation is central to the solidarity principle of the CSA concept, the data showed that participation rates were around 18% higher in the ten CSA initiatives that stipulate some level of member involvement.

Participation extends beyond helping with agricultural and horticultural activities in the field. It also includes attending meetings, contributing to cultivation plans, and handling public relations. Many CSA initiatives also offer farm festivals, workshops, and informal gatherings. In the CSA initiatives we analysed that



offer such social activities, the participation rate is significantly higher – around 13%. One possible explanation is provided by the Theory of Social Identity, which suggests that people’s identity and behaviour are shaped by their belonging to certain groups. If they have positive shared experiences, people feel more connected to a group and are more motivated to engage with it.

CSA initiatives also vary in how they communicate within the community. Relatively one-way and/or virtual communication channels are often used, such as email newsletters, notice boards, and messenger groups. However, some CSA initiatives offer opportunities for face-to-face interaction on site, for example at member meetings at pick-up points or via exchange with the farm team. The survey data analysed showed no significant impact of the communication channels used on member participation. Virtual communication does not appear to be inferior to on-site interaction in terms of motivating members to participate.

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1.3 What have we learnt about the organisation of CSA initiatives?

The results presented here are based on a relatively small dataset, and some of the characteristics analysed were only found in a few CSA initiatives. We also found that the way membership is recorded varies between initiatives: some count vegetable boxes, some count households supplied, and others maintain lists of individuals. Therefore, the number of (participating) members is always an approximation.

Nevertheless, the results provide valuable insights into CSA member participation. We therefore recommend that CSA initiatives in both cities and rural areas offer their members a variety of group



experiences. This could strengthen member identification with the CSA and boost their commitment. If producers need more support, more binding arrangements for participation could be considered. Ultimately, it is active participation – alongside shared costs and a sense of community – that brings solidarity to life within the CSA.