

CASE STUDY

Stroud Community Supported Agriculture A Model Of Sustainable Agriculture (Stroud, England)

INTRODUCTION

This case study was prepared by BRASS (Centre for Business Relationships Accountability, Sustainability & Society) as part of an HCA/ESRC funded research project investigating Skills & Knowledge for Sustainable Communities. The research looked in depth at the skills and knowledge applied in a range of sustainability initiatives concerned with food, energy, home, transport and community engagement.



Essentially, it involves a partnership between farmers and consumers where the responsibility and rewards of farming are shared equally. This case study describes the approach taken by Stroud Community Agriculture (SCA) based on new research (2008).

THE PROJECT

Stroud Community Supported Agriculture (SCA)

The overarching goal of SCA and most CSA supported schemes is to reconnect people with farming, the land and food. Equally important is the desire to encourage a sense of community amongst its members. It aims to integrate community and agriculture through the management of a sustainable and environmentally responsible farm that benefits everyone involved. It practices organic and biodynamic agriculture. The latter is recognised as a precursor to organic farming but is firmly grounded in Steiner philosophy which emphasises a holistic and spiritual understanding of the relationship between nature and humans. Furthermore, the SCA strives to assist small farm businesses through direct local support such as sourcing locally produced food within a mutually supportive, rather than competitive, economic system. This is facilitated by being set up as a cooperative which ensures that the risks and rewards of farming are shared between the community (as consumers) and the farmers. Farmers are guaranteed a fair income and the

BACKGROUND

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) has grown in popularity in the UK in the past few decades and is described as providing a model for sustainable agriculture. Influenced by the CSA movement, organic and biodynamic farms in North America, Japan and Germany, CSA is described as an approach to farming aimed at achieving a “self sustaining localised food and farming system” (Soil Association). Although there are many different models of CSA, most are set up as farm enterprises or cooperatives where members own ‘shares’ which helps to spread the risk between the farmer and the members.

KEY WORDS

■ **Community**

■ **Skills**

■ **Food**

■ **Agriculture**



produce is shared equally between the supporting consumers.

The SCA operates under the premise that members contribute towards the cost of running the farm through membership fees. Members also have the opportunity to play an active role in the running of the farm and can volunteer their time to help with farm work or assist in the management of the farm. A range of social events are organised around the farming calendar to foster and encourage the sense of community.

The key aims of the SCA include: paying the people who work on the farm a fair wage; developing a rich variety of crops, livestock and other projects that meet the needs of the farm and the people who support it; to provide opportunities for people to make connections to the farm; to manage the farm in a ways that is sensitive to the environment; and to encourage similar projects to be set up.

From a skills angle, the SCA promotes re-skilling in terms of teaching people how to produce their own food. This is deeply embedded in a strong moral and symbolic message about getting members to appreciate and respect the land from which their food is produced.

The SCA was setup in 2001 and currently has 189 members. Members pay £2 per household per month and £33 for the first share of seasonal vegetables (£22 for



additional shares) per month which they collect on their allocated days. This works out to roughly £8 per week for 52 weeks in the year (a recent internal survey calculated that a similar share of organic vegetables at Tesco

works out at £9 compared to £6 for non-organic vegetables). Members also have the option to buy frozen beef, pork and lamb from the farm's own produce. There is a bursary scheme for members on low incomes of a reduced membership fee and the opportunity to pay for their share of vegetables through 'work share'.

The SCA is managed by an elected core group of 8/9 volunteers who meet once a month. Regular members have the option to feed into this process through regular quarterly planning meetings and the yearly AGM. Decisions are made through 'consensus'. Members are kept up to date on the farm's progress via emails and quarterly newsletters.

The SCA currently leases approximately 50 acres of land split over two sites, employs two fulltime farmers, provides vegetables and meat to 189 households, makes enough profit to pay a bonus to the farmers, pay for a part-time treasurer and membership administrator. They also maintain a regular programme of social and working events. Since its inception, a second separate CSA has been set up in Stroud in 2007 called Stroud Slad Farm Community (SSFC).

IMPACT

The impact of skills and knowledge utilised for developing the initiative included:

Institutional knowledge was essential for the start up of the SCA scheme in relation to the practicalities of starting up a community supported agriculture initiative and what this process actually involved (such as motivating people, advertising, business management, book-keeping, knowing how to register as a legal entity (limited company), and setting up a core group). This knowledge came from key actors' previous involvement in the local food group of the Soil Association.

Technical skills were also of great significance for the operation of the SCA. These skills

consist of the actual farming techniques possessed by the two farmers required to produce the crops and rear livestock, and those that relate to biodynamic and organic agriculture practices. Their skills are transferred to other members during regular volunteer farm day, providing opportunities for members to re-skill in order to learn to produce their own food.

Management and communication skills, particularly in relation to community group facilitation, assisted with the organisation of the SCA. A central feature of this management process was the concept of 'consensus' which plays a pivotal role in the decision making of the core group. Various key actors had extensive experience in facilitating groups based on prior experience of working on community development and conflict management.

Marketing skills were key in promoting the scheme and increasing membership. Payment of a part-time development worker expanded the membership of the group through presentations to local interest groups.

LESSONS LEARNED

In relation to skills required for further development, two key issues emerged relating to management skills and progression of the initiative:

There is a need for the meetings to be managed with greater efficiency. This relates to what could be termed the *technical skills* of running a meeting such as: chairing; constructing, sticking and getting through an agenda; taking minutes; and ensuring actions from the minutes get carried out.

Management of the core group is a further issue that relates to the consensus process.

First, there is a need for *facilitation skills* so that new ideas are transformed into action. Second, the consensus process requires facilitating in such a way that key decisions are not blocked by one individual. This relates to issues of *confidence and assertiveness*.

Several issues emerged in relation to the development of community supported agriculture. In particular:

- *Learning by doing*: 'Re-skilling' by getting members to physically get involved in growing their own food and play a role in managing the farm. This serves the dual purpose of instilling new values and behaviours by encouraging respect for the land that produces your food. The farm is also used as a resource for families who home- educate their children.
- *Re-localisation*: CSAs can be regarded as a way of reacting against the dominance of supermarkets and global agricultural systems, and a means of supporting small farmers and spreading risk and mutual support.
- *Membership/social cut off point necessary for maintaining a sense of community*: This is crucial for the functioning of a successful CSA. Membership is capped to around 200 members in order to maintain a strong sense of community. This enables the 'consensus' process to work and for everyone to know each other and recognise each other. Many members join as much for the 'community' as for the food aspect.

Contact:

Dr Julie Newton

Email: Newtonj2@cf.ac.uk



REFERENCE

This case study was prepared by BRASS (ESRC Centre for Business Relationships Accountability, Sustainability & Society) as part of an HCA/ESRC funded research initiative investigating Skills & Knowledge for Sustainable Communities.

For more information on the research, see:

http://www.brass.cf.ac.uk/projects/Sustainable_Lifestyles_and_Communities/sustainable-lifestyles--Sustainable-Communities.html

http://www.brass.cf.ac.uk/Virtual_Sustainable_Community.html

http://www.brass.cf.ac.uk/uploads/Sus_Community/Case_Study_Food.pdf

<http://gs.strath.ac.uk/suscoms>

For more information on Stroud Community Agriculture and Community Supported Agriculture more generally, see:

<http://www.stroudcommunityagriculture.org/>

<http://www.soilassociation.org/csa>