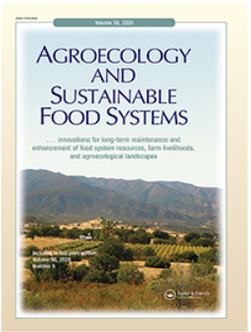

Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems

ISSN: 2168-3565 (Print) 2168-3573 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/wjsa21

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To cite this article: Hannah Bücheler & Christine Bosch (02 Mar 2026): Is community-supported agriculture a case of real utopia? The case of Germany, Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems, DOI: 10.1080/21683565.2026.2635585

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/21683565.2026.2635585

AGROECOLOGY AND SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS
https://doi.org/10.1080/21683565.2026.2635585

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Is community-supported agriculture a case of real utopia? The case of Germany

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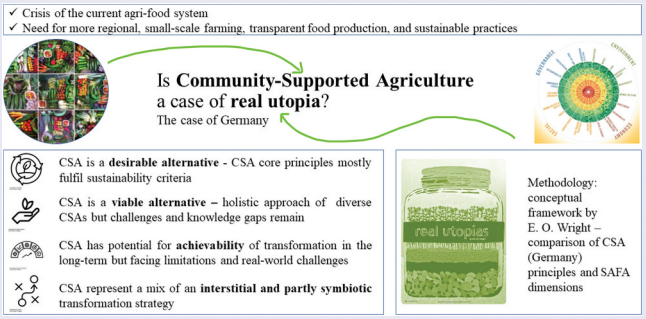
ABSTRACT

Community-supported agriculture (CSA) critiques industrialized agri-food systems and promotes fair partnerships between consumers and producers. This paper explores the potential of CSA beyond its niche, using Germany as a case study. Applying Erik Olin Wright's concept of real utopia, it examines whether CSA challenges capitalist structures. Drawing on secondary literature, it assesses the desirability, feasibility, and achievability of CSA. The results suggest that CSA in Germany qualifies as a real utopia, but that it faces limitations to growth due to implementation constraints such as the need for additional market channels and access to land.



KEYWORDS

Agri-food system transformation; institutional innovation; sustainability assessment of food and agriculture systems (SAFA)

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

SDG 12: Responsible consumption and production

Introduction

Many agri-food system actors agree on the need for an essential transformation, due to economic, ecological, and ethical concerns, and that the agri-food system cannot continue in its current form (e.g., Von Braun et al. 2021; Zukunftskommission Landwirtschaft Zukunft Landwirtschaft 2026). One transformation approach is agroecology. Community-supported agriculture (CSA)

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Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at https://doi.org/10.1080/21683565.2026.2635585

serves as a concrete example of how agroecological principles can be implemented in practice (Méndez et al. 2013; Gliessman 2016; Savels et al. 2024), and as one alternative to the current agri-food system (Mert-Cakal and Miele 2020). CSA contributes to systemic change toward an ecologically, economically and socially sustainable agri-food system and resilience with social institutions and economic relationships that establish more direct relationships between producers and consumers (Gliessman 2016). In a CSA, producers and consumers form a direct partnership (Bîrhală and Möllers 2014) and through mutual commitment enable local agricultural production and supply and risk sharing between members (Blättel-Mink et al. 2015). CSA is a suitable alternative as it goes beyond the current power relations in production and consumption, and builds a local agri-food system aiming for fair and sustainable practices (Hvitsand 2016). Globally, the number of CSAs and their members is increasing (Bîrhală and Möllers 2014). CSA can be seen as an alternative movement to current industrial agriculture, driven by the emergence of various economic, social, and ecological crises resulting from industrial agriculture (Blättel-Mink et al. 2015). Both consumers and producers face challenges: small-scale family farms struggle to hold up their businesses competing with large farming companies that dominate the industrial farming system while on the other side of the production chain, consumers loose trust and contact with food producers while simultaneously being dependent on industrial agriculture (Bîrhală and Möllers 2014). As one alternative movement, CSA tackles this situation in a collective and solidary way (Blättel-Mink et al. 2017).

To date, the concept of CSA has been subject of a range of studies, each focusing on different aspects, including: organizational structures (Stapleton 2019), economic, social and environmental aspects (Wellner 2018; Savarese et al. 2020), consumers' motivation (Diekmann and Theuvsen 2019a, 2019b; Yu et al. 2019) and the producer's perspective (Wellner and Theuvsen 2018; Samoggia et al. 2019). Nevertheless, in the current debate the question remains as to what role CSA will play in agri-food system transformation. Is it an exemplary solution that can direct the transformation, or only a rough inspiration or niche phenomenon? Does the concept of CSA have the potential to grow to a realistic model for future systems? Or, to use Erik Olin Wright's approach, is it a "real utopia?" With the concept of real utopias, Wright provides an approach to analyze alternatives and transformation processes of capitalist structures, considering the change in power relations (Wright 2012). Wright defines utopias as institutions that "embody emancipatory ideals" (Wright 2010, 10), that are real if they "attempt to formulate viable institutional designs" (Wright 2006, 110).

This article uses real utopias as a conceptual basis and Wright's four-step analysis of finding real utopias as an analytical framework. Among the moral principles against which alternatives can be judged, Wright proposes the concept of sustainability, which he argues is closely related to other moral principles such as democracy and equality (Wright 2006). The analysis is

therefore grounded in a commonly agreed sustainability concept, the comprehensive sustainability assessment of food and agriculture systems (SAFA) guidelines, published by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO).

Building on the above questions, this paper aims to analyze CSA based on its representation in the literature and to answer the following research question: To what extent can CSA, as it is currently implemented in Germany, be considered a real utopia? To assess whether CSA is a real utopia and can potentially move out of its niche and contribute to the transformation of the agri-food sector, it is crucial to ground the analysis in a specific context and economic system. Germany provides an interesting case, as it has a long tradition of CSA compared to other European countries, except Switzerland (Volz et al. 2016). For instance, CSAs in France only started in the 2000 s while in Germany, the first CSA was established in 1989 (Volz et al. 2016). Especially since the early 2010 s the number of CSAs in Germany has grown exponentially (Solawi 2021; Middendorf and Rommel 2024). While CSAs vary widely across Europe and within Germany (Middendorf and Rommel 2024), there are some general trends. For example, whereas Rosol and Barbosa Jr. argued that the CSA concept in North America moved away from the European one in its core principles, which are long-term agreements, and direct partnerships, other authors found significant similarities between CSAs in the US and Hungary, despite different agri-food systems (Samoggia et al. 2019).

Generally, the agricultural sector in Germany is very heterogenous with the main differences between northeast and southwest. Overall, in 2023 approximately 16.5 million hectares were used as agricultural area, of which nearly 1.9 million hectares are cultivated organically (Destatis 2025b). In 2023, 255,000 farms existed with an average farm size of 65 hectares, reflecting the ongoing trend of fewer farms cultivating ever larger area (BMEL 2025b). Most farms in Germany are run as family farms; 45% of the 875,900 people working in agriculture are family members, while the remaining workforce is spilt roughly equally between permanent and seasonal workers (BMEL 2025a). However, overall, the agricultural sector is very small in Germany compared to other sectors, accounting for only 0.8% of the gross domestic product in 2024 (Destatis 2025a).

Methodologically, this explorative study relies on secondary literature and evaluates the potential of CSA in Germany as represented in the literature. By reviewing the existing literature on CSA, we also identify knowledge gaps on specific aspects of CSA and its implementation.

Community-supported agriculture

Despite a plurality of definitions of CSA, some common aspects stand out. Core principles of CSA as described by the German CSA network, provide

mandatory characteristics that are necessary for a given initiative to be considered a CSA – these include: direct relationship between farmers and consumers, community financing (fee financing and true cost coverage of production), risk, award and responsibility sharing, transparency (budget and methods), long-term formal agreements, and sustainable farming practices (Gastinger et al. 2025).

Generally, CSA has been characterized as a producer–consumer partnership based on a yearly contract, ecological cultivation practices, distribution processes, and open transparent budgets as core elements, while differences occur regarding active involvement of members, decision-making, legal form and financial contribution per share (Gruber 2020). The shared risk and reward of production allows farmers to rely on a regular income, while consumers can trust in a regular provision of regionally-grown produce (Samoggia et al. 2019). A key difference from conventional farming and consumption is that a social mechanism, instead of the price mechanism, shapes a market's dynamic (Gruber 2020). Usually, CSA members jointly agree on the types of produce, the cultivation method and a local distribution channel, and commonly base these decisions on moral and ethical aspects and on joint values like regionality (Wellner and Theuvsen 2016). To foster core values like responsible use of resources, fair conditions for all parties, seasonal and local production based on agroecological practices, transparency, communication, and personal interaction, overall solidarity between CSA members and the farmers are key (Carlson and Bitsch 2019).

The rather broadly defined concept and few CSA principles allow every CSA farm and its members to be individual. Hence, various types of CSA models exist across Germany. For instance, Blättel-Mink et al. distinguish between CSAs based on their ideologies, i.e. as "part of a sociopolitical change," "spiritual-communal practice" or as "a pragmatic-economic strategy" (Blättel-Mink et al. 2015; 2017, 419). Gruber differentiates CSA as either self-organized, participative, or service-oriented, depending on the different motivations that drive members to join (Gruber 2020). Middendorf and Rommel define three CSA types based on their organizational governance: producer-led CSA, consumer-led CSA or integrated (all-in-one) CSA. In the end, each CSA is formed according to its circumstances, the mind-set and preferences of participants, legal form, available resources and their development over time (Carlson and Bitsch 2019).

Despite different individual factors determining farmers' and consumers' decisions to join CSA, an overarching core motivation is the belief that industrialized agri-food systems, on the one hand, are not able to provide quality food to consumers and, on the other hand, do not lead to fair incomes for farmers (Carlson and Bitsch 2019). Therefore, the joint aim of the CSA movement is to find an alternative way to shape the relation between producer and consumer, a direct exchange allowing for a more sustainable

system (Carlson and Bitsch 2019). In other words, CSA presents an alternative approach to food production, or rather an alternative economic system (Gruber 2020) which is built on critiques of the current agriculture and economic system.

The first forms of CSA were developed in the US in the 1960 s by a black farmer (Layman and Civita 2022), and in Japan and Switzerland in the 1970 s, triggered by food scandals, lost confidence in the farming industry and the desire for local food and connection between producer and consumer (Yan 2010). The concept spread, was further developed in the US and reached Germany in the 1980 s (Yan 2010; Solawi 2021). In 2023, 445 CSAs are known and an additional 101 are in the founding process (Solawi 2023). Especially during the last 10 years, numbers increased exponentially. However, no figures are known regarding the continued existence or termination of CSAs.

The German CSA network Solawi was founded in 2011 to enable CSAs to connect, exchange information and experiences, and to jointly promote CSA development (Solawi 2020b). Their goal is stated as: "We engage in maintaining and supporting sustainable small-scale peasant agriculture in which producers and consumers work together in a binding manner and see agriculture as a social responsibility" (Solawi 2020a, own translation). Solawi serves as exchange platform, offers advisory services and supports networking at regional, national, and international level with different initiatives (Solawi 2020a). The development of the Solawi network might have increased publicity and interest in CSA in Germany, as there has been a strong increase in the number of new CSAs between 2011 and 2012 (Wellner and Theuvsen 2018). While allowing for a variety of CSA models to develop, to save the principles and to prevent a commercialization of the Solawi idea, the name "Solawi" stands under legal protection in Germany (Carlson and Bitsch 2019).

Conceptual framework

The core motivation for the development of CSA is the critique against existing industrial agriculture as part of the prevailing economic system (Carlson and Bitsch 2019; Gruber 2020), which often implies a critique against the capitalist economy. Consequently, the analysis of CSA's potential can be conceptualized in parallel with the idea of real utopia. Erik Olin Wright bases his concept on the criticism of capitalism and builds real utopias as potential social alternatives to it (Wright 2012).

The core goal of the real utopia idea is to think about different alternatives and transformation processes of capitalist structures, with the aim to change existing power relations in an economic system (Wright 2012). Wright argues that mechanisms inherent to capitalism itself lead to consequences which motivate searching for social alternatives, which, for example, do not deepen

the difference between rich and poor, do not hinder emancipatory development, do not fail to consider environmental externalities and do not limit democracy (Wright 2006). The definition of "real utopia" intentionally illustrates the

> tension between dreams and practice: utopia implies developing visions of alternatives to dominant institutions that embody our deepest aspirations [. . .]; real means proposing alternatives attentive to problems of unintended consequences, self-destructive dynamics, and difficult dilemmas of normative trade-offs. (Wright 2012, 3)

Furthermore, Wright described a process of four steps, that structures the search for alternatives in the sense of real utopias (Table 1) (2012).

The moral principles build the basis for the following steps, as they serve as a tool to judge the object of criticism (the current economic and social system), and the potential alternatives and the transformation in a standardized manner (Wright 2012). While various moral principles can be used, Wright refers to "equality, democracy, and sustainability" (2012, 3). The diagnosis and critique intend to figure out the mechanisms causing problematic consequences and therefore to find an explanation of the existing system, based on a moral judgment (Wright 2006).

For the development of alternatives, three properties need to be taken into account: "desirability, viability and achievability" (Wright 2006, 96). Desirability of an alternative emphasizes the rather abstract moral principles and core values that should be reached (Wright 2006). Viability and achievability reflect the "real" part of real utopia. An alternative is assumed to be viable if the desired transformation can be maintained after its implementation, especially when facing changing conditions of the surrounding context (Wright 2006). Finally, the aspect of achievability concerns the theory of transformation, meaning how the desired social alternative can be reached in the long term. Here the power relations of the system and the contextual conditions are crucial (Wright 2006). Viability influences the assumption of achievability since limits in this context are also determined by beliefs about what is possible. Still, it is very difficult to assess whether a specific alternative is achievable, especially when focusing on the long- or even middle-term (Wright 2012).

Table 1. Four process steps (based on Wright 2012, 3).

Moral principles	• specification of moral principles as basis for judgment
Diagnosis and critique	• application of defined moral principles as standard for diagnosis and critique
Viable alternative	• finding desirable, viable, and achievable alternatives that are designed to counteract the diagnosed problem
Transformation	• transformation towards the alternative situation • different theoretical approaches on how the change can be achieved

For the final step, Wright introduced three potential strategies of ruptural, interstitial, and symbiotic transformation, considering the potential of an alternative to undermine capitalist power in the future (2012). The ruptural transformation displays a picture of a revolutionary, clear cut with the existing system, where structures and institutions are replaced within a short period of time (Wright 2012). In contrast, symbiotic transformations take place within the existing system without a radical change. In the first moment, they may counterintuitively even benefit the powerful actors of the existing system and only serve the general social aim of change in the long-term (Wright 2006). The interstitial transformation neither aims to destroy existing structures directly nor does it seek to change them from within but rather builds a bottom-up approach that sets up alternatives in the system's niches, which may not catch direct attention by powerful actors and therefore may grow next to them. Naturally, such an approach's impact may be limited (Wright 2006). Wright proposed a mix of interstitial and symbiotic transformation strategies with occasional interruptions of ruptural character as a promising way of societal transformations (2012).

The understanding of the socioeconomic conceptions of capitalism, statism, and socialism defined by Wright is key to understanding the power-centered framework he uses to develop and classify the real utopia concept (Wright 2012). The hybrid form of different power structures may serve as an analytical framework which can be applied to analyze different systems, including sectors and regional economies (Wright 2012). Interpreting CSA as a specific sector and considering its origin founded in a criticism of the current industrialized, capitalist market logic and system (Cone and Myhre 2000; Plank et al. 2020), the concept of real utopia fits well to analyze the potential of CSA (see Cucco and Fonte 2015, for an application to local food networks).

Methodology

This analysis adopted Wright's four-step framework, focusing on steps three – viable alternatives and four – strategy (Wright 2006). Steps one and two – identifying CSA's underlying moral principles and systemic critiques – are well-covered in existing literature, so they were only briefly summarized here. Wright notes that these diagnostic steps are the most developed, while practical implementation and institution-building remain underexplored (Wright 2006).

For step three, the extent to which the CSA concept fulfills the requirements of being a desirable, viable and achievable alternative, and therefore a potential real utopia, is explored. Following Wright's suggestion to set the focus on an alternative's viability (Wright 2012), the central aim was to analyze whether CSA constitutes a viable alternative. As CSA is not only a theoretical concept but has been implemented in practice for many years,

the existing literature about the implementation of CSA was reviewed to explore whether the desired aims of CSA persist when put into practice. As each CSA is an individual project, setting their own structures and agreements, the analysis focused on the CSA principles published by Solawi (2022). However, the assumption was that CSAs aim to fulfil and act in accordance with their principles and values and that most CSAs move within the range of defined principles.

To respect sustainability, as a moral principle that would make an alternative desirable (see Conceptual Framework), the analysis in step three was based on the SAFA guidelines (FAO 2013). These guidelines are recognized, comprehensive, and operationalized. They define sustainability goals and merge them into four main dimensions: "good governance", "environmental integrity", "economic resilience" and "social well-being", each further disaggregated into themes and sub-themes (FAO 2013; Blättel-Mink et al. 2015). In this context, the themes were understood as criteria that make an alternative desirable. The criteria allowed assessing whether CSA fulfills the principles when being implemented and therefore build the basis of desirability. As an intermediate step, the SAFA themes were contrasted with the CSA principles. To increase rigor and minimize individual bias, both authors independently assessed whether each principle relates to a SAFA theme and respective subthemes (see table SI1). This juxtaposition served as criteria for the following step: the analysis of CSA as viable alternative.

Viability was assessed to determine if CSA criteria hold in practice. First, an URGENCI report from within the CSA movement provided initial evidence. Second, literature on CSA and SAFA dimensions was reviewed, identifying challenges relevant to evaluating CSA as a "real utopia". Literature was identified through targeted searches in Scopus using keywords like "CSA SAFA" or "Community Supported Agriculture sustainability assessment". As this study focuses on Germany, we prioritized literature on empirical cases from Germany. We complemented this with relevant studies from other countries where German-specific literature has been limited. This approach ensured comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed sources addressing SAFA dimensions in CSA contexts. Finally, CSA's transformation strategies against the capitalist agri-food system were examined as Wright's fourth step. Since the analysis was based on the representation of CSA in the literature, the available sources may not include all evaluation criteria to the same extent and may therefore influence which criteria could be considered. Additionally, it is important to critically reflect on the fact that the criteria used in the current analysis are themes and not detailed indicators. These themes were utilized as substitutes for concrete indicators, to check whether a theme was addressed, and if so, which position the authors assume. This analysis is less precise and concrete than assessing indicators but offers a robust first exploratory assessment.

Based on the concept by Wright and the outlined concept of CSA, the following hypothesis can be stated: *Given the characteristics and current ways of implementing CSA in Germany, CSA is a desirable, viable and achievable alternative which follows an interstitial transformation strategy.*

Community-supported agriculture as a real utopia

Morale principles, diagnosis, and critique

The general, underlying critique is that the global system of agriculture and food production is failing to achieve, on the one side, valuing and remunerating the work of farmers such that their daily work allows for a decent livelihood and, on the other side, providing consumers with high-quality food (Carlson and Bitsch 2019). Agriculture as currently practiced in Germany has caused environmental damage, including soil degradation from intensive agri-chemicals, and contributes to climate change (Hartmann 2024). Furthermore, the power relations in such a system emphasize profits of food chain actors such as retailers and distributors (Williams et al. 2023). While in Germany most CSAs produce organic food, this considers only the production level but not the distribution level (Middendorf and Rommel 2024). Not just different produce, but a stronger focus on local and small-scale farming is needed (Gruber 2020). Consumers and farmers seek to return to a more regional-based agriculture supporting small-scale farming (Volz et al. 2016). The German farming sector has to deal with acute problems, e.g., farmers facing structural changes and challenges in finding successors to continue the small-scale farms in the next generation and consumers asking for quality food and transparent food production processes based on ethical and environmentally friendly practices (Solawi 2020b).

CSA is a direct response to the critique mentioned above. In Germany, CSAs aim to build a regional, direct partnership in which consumers and producers share responsibility and benefits on the basis of an equal and fair relationship, ensuring that consumers receive high-quality, transparently produced food while farmers gain a reliable, fair income that allows them to focus on agroecological and socially sustainable farming practices (Gastinger et al. 2025).

Desirable, viable, and achievable alternative

Alternatives need to be desirable, viable, and achievable to be considered a real utopia, and especially viability is crucial. All three properties are analyzed below.

Desirability

The SAFA themes were applied as criteria that make an alternative desirable. Before doing so and to double check desirability, the SAFA themes were compared with the CSA principles. Sustainability as outlined in the SAFA themes is a core element of CSA moral principles and thus relevant for the desirability of an alternative.

The CSA principles are all represented and covered by the SAFA dimensions and themes (see table SI1). The juxtaposition revealed that while not all 21 SAFA themes are covered by the CSA principles, all four dimensions are covered. This corroborates the decision to apply the themes as criteria for the analysis of CSA as an alternative in the sense of real utopia. CSAs according to the principles, build a desirable alternative as the core moral principle of sustainability is achieved.

Viability

To examine viability and to verify if the set of criteria based on sustainability dimensions and themes is fulfilled, the chapter about CSA in Germany in the URGENCI report 2016 was reviewed (Volz et al. 2016). Similar to the comparison with CSA principles, all four dimensions are fulfilled by CSA in Germany, but not all themes are mentioned, and the criteria are disproportionately represented. A detailed summary of the analysis is provided in Table SI2.

Volz et al. themselves raise challenges like decent income and access to farmland (2016). As mentioned above, the second analytical step critically assesses CSA implementation using secondary literature, first based on German cases and then complemented with relevant literature from other countries.

Good governance. All good governance themes have been found in the literature on CSA. Regarding accountability and participation, Zoll et al. found high degrees of both in German CSAs (2021). Some types of legal setup of CSAs, such as investor-financed, however only allow for limited accountability (Partzsch 2019). Carlson and Bitsch found that mutual exchange between producers and consumers and trustful relationships reduced transaction costs (2019).

Several authors found a lack of member participation in governance or farming in Germany (Zoll et al. 2017, 2021; Bonfert 2022). Some German CSA farmers mentioned high supervision costs as a limit to member participation in farming (Opitz et al. 2017). While some members of German CSAs were found to prefer having more influence, some acknowledged their lack of farming knowledge and would not speak up (Partzsch 2019), and CSA farmers wanted to keep authority over farming decisions (Zoll et al. 2021). Holistic management in German CSAs is

sufficiently fulfilled, as they usually aim to calculate a budget that consider all costs for farming, including the regular income for farming members involved, but explicitly do not seek to gain profit (Wellner 2018).

The literature on CSAs in other countries mostly confirmed these findings and also explored other good governance themes. The importance of ethics has been highlighted for the CSA (*teikei*) movement in Japan, where farmers use *teikei* principles as guidance in their everyday work (Kondoh 2015). Member participation was also found to be limited in US-based CSAs (e.g., Delind and Bingen 2008). Although risk and reward sharing are core elements of the CSA concept, Paul (2019) found that some CSA farmers in the US only feel the short-term release of risk sharing, namely the season subject to the contract, while still carrying the farm's long-term challenges on their own. Higher member shares have been associated with lower risk transfer from producer to consumers (Sproul et al. 2015). Similarly, in Italy, most smaller CSAs are not able to cover investment costs and land rents with member shares (Medici et al. 2021). Although principal–agent problems like information asymmetry and consequently moral hazard also exist in CSA contracts, US-based CSA farmers were found to have less incentive to shirk as they want consumers to continue their membership on a longer term (Sproul and Kropp 2015). Van Oers et al. (2018) studied how CSAs in the Netherlands gain legitimacy – they do so internally by creating trust and social capital, and then externally, e.g., by formalizing their organization or becoming externally certified.

Environmental integrity. Criteria are only partially covered in the literature, but some CSA principles go beyond the SAFA themes. Theoretically, CSA fosters ecological integrity due to the choice of farming practices, short-distance transportation to consumers without packaging and the general awareness of members regarding environmental issues. In Germany, most CSA farms produced according to organic principles (Middendorf and Rommel 2024). CSA members tend to have a stronger concern for the environment compared to the general population (Diekmann and Theuvsen 2019b). While food loss and waste could be reduced by about 50–70% at the production stage and by 20% through consumer involvement in decision-making and valuation of all produce (Voge et al. 2023), during the harvest and holiday periods food losses still occur (Doernberg et al. 2016). Food miles could be reduced thanks to the distribution via depots in the city (Wellner 2018).

In CSAs with a high level of consumers' on-farm participation, their practical commitment was seen as a learning process about environmental and sustainability issues (Opitz et al. 2017). CSAs have been focusing on horticulture and less on animal products (Middendorf and Rommel 2024). Some have promoted reduced or no meat consumption, which can make

livestock keeping a contentious issue (Bonfert 2022). Therefore, there are few accounts in the literature on animal welfare.

Most of these aspects were also found for other countries. This includes reduced but continued food losses (Galt et al. 2016), and environmental sustainability as a motivation for joining (Medici et al. 2021). A systematic review of European CSAs found that the majority of the included studies conclude that CSA farms mostly performed better than non-CSA farms regarding resource use efficiency and greenhouse gas emissions (Egli et al. 2023). With regard to food miles, Christensen et al. (2018) argue that food miles are only a part of the emissions of the whole production chain (see also Schnell 2013). While CSAs emit less carbon dioxide by avoiding pesticides and plastic, and reduce the use of machinery and vehicles on farms, there are still emissions caused, e.g., by electricity consumption and on-farm soil compost (Christensen et al. 2018). These parameters vary widely depending on the size of the farm, the kind of energy used, and the way products are distributed (Christensen et al. 2018).

With regard to animals, CSAs in the UK and Ireland have been shown to improve human-livestock relationships (Gorman 2018). Analogously, community-supported fisheries have been said to reduce environmental impacts of fishing, but are more limited than CSAs, due to the common-good nature of fisheries and less available alternative fishing methods (e.g., Campbell et al. 2014).

Moreover, additional environmental aspects were found for other countries. In Italian CSAs, closed nutrient and water cycles and a reduction of external inputs was reported (Medici et al. 2021). Moreover, positive ecological effects of CSAs include increasing crop diversity and seasonal consumption, protecting biodiversity, and reducing water use (Samoggia et al. 2019).

Economic resilience. Criteria are fulfilled. Economic stability was one of the main factors why German farms converted to CSAs (Schmidt et al. 2025). Rosman et al. found that German CSA farmers perceived themselves more resilient compared to non-CSA farmers, with the main mechanisms being income security, risk protection and market independence (Rosman et al. 2024).

CSA was found to support the local economy and foster relations between urban and rural areas (Wellner 2018). Another specific characteristic of the CSA concept is the de-commodification of food. The single product is not directly linked to a monetary value and purchased in a normal market transaction, but the farming activity is financed for consumers to receive a share of an uncertain amount of food (Carlson and Bitsch 2019). This allows producers and consumers to act alongside the general market mechanisms, which makes them less vulnerable to fluctuations. During the Covid-19 pandemic, consumer applications in Germany increased (Bioland 2020). CSAs in

Wales have also been proven to be "resilient in times of crisis" (Mert-Cakal & Miele 2020).

Further aspects of economic resilience were found for other countries. A key aspect of the CSA concept is the direct interaction between consumers and producers, allowing for economic benefits for farmers as it excludes intermediate actors, reduces expenses for marketing, allows farmers to set prices and receive advance payments (Samoggia et al. 2019). A cost–benefit analysis of Italian CSAs has found a positive socio-environmental return on investment, particularly in terms of knowledge on agriculture (Medici et al. 2023). At the same time, farmers face different challenges like engaging members and farm employees, and calculating a convenient overall budget (Samoggia et al. 2019). Organising the distribution, especially the easily accessible points for consumers to pick up the produce on a regular base, is a CSA-specific managerial task for farmers and CSA members (Samoggia et al. 2019). In Italian CSAs, trust among members, exchange and participation replaces third-party certifications and furthermore, farming practices often go beyond organic standards (Medici et al. 2021).

Social well-being. The social dimension is well represented in the literature and is the most critically seen. For example, workers were not given an insurable income, which led to high staff turnover (Partzsch 2019). Low farm incomes can be due to miscalculations during the budget planning which hints at the importance of thoughtful advance planning (Wellner 2018). Contradicting the idealized perception of consumer commitment, Wellner (2018) highlights that CSAs often face a low level of solidarity and social engagement, and that CSA membership is rather motivated by personal interests and prestige. Closely linked to the question of equity is the aspect of solidarity and responsibility, which not only refers to the support between consumers and farmers, and between members in an economic sense, but also to nature as an indispensable resource (Antoni-Komar 2018). The support and overall value creation for the whole community and responsible use of resources is even more valued by members than their personal benefit from the agreement (Carlson and Bitsch 2019). This sense of responsibility goes beyond a restricted communal focus and considers people outside the community and future generations (Carlson and Bitsch 2019). One risk of building CSAs is that over time and due to the shared value and mind-set, a rather closed homogeneous group evolves (Antoni-Komar 2018). This development can be observed in various cases of CSA, as studies present the typical CSA participant as being well educated, wealthy, in a stable employment position, living in an urban region, critically questioning the current food production system and not seeing a monetary amount as the true value of a product (Blättel-Mink et al. 2015; Volz et al. 2016; Wellner 2018). Therefore, the idea of equal access to CSA can be seen critically. A common method to determine a consumer's financial contribution to the overall budget

is anonymous bidding. While jointly covering the whole budget, individual payments differ, and less well-situated people can join the community (Wellner 2018). Another way to include low-income members is to allow for work on the farm to pay off part of the share (Wellner 2018). However, important barriers remain, like the lack of capacity to cope with harvest failures (Partzsch 2019).

Literature from other countries mostly confirms these aspects and adds additional aspects. Paul revealed that CSA farmers in the US do not earn enough for a living, since the agreement with consumers, which should allow for a decent income does not sufficiently value a farmer's fulltime commitment (2019). Although the price is "freely set and fair-minded" (Samoggia et al. 2019, 14), it often did not add up to an adequate income for Hungarian and US farmers. Galt et al. found self-exploitation of CSA farmers in the US, because income is not their main priority, because they feel obliged to members to provide food at low costs, and because of competition for members (Galt et al. 2013; 2016). Nevertheless, CSA farmers in general receive a higher and more stable and reliable income than farmers of comparable regular farms, and generally experience a better livelihood, as the capital needed for cultivation is provided in advance (Paul 2019).

Concerning the livelihood of consumers, CSA encourages a healthy and elaborate diet (Samoggia et al. 2019), as consumers receive fresh and seasonal food that stimulates creativeness in meals based around the received produce (Bîrhală and Möllers 2014). Farming practices used by CSAs led to high general prices for CSA produce in Romania, which is not affordable when receiving a low income (Bîrhală and Möllers 2014).

In response to this generally observed pattern, two Dutch CSAs introduced solidarity payment schemes with the double aim to increase farmers' incomes and not to exclude low-income members (van Oers et al. 2023). Due to the character of their partnership, which contradicts the classical economic concept, CSA farmers and consumers in New Zealand perceived their relationship to be rather equal (Savarese et al. 2020). Although, regarded objectively, the economic power lies on the side of the consumers: they provide the financial resources for the project to work (Savarese et al. 2020). CSA consumers interpreted their financial contribution as an investment and accordingly show active commitment to farm activities (Savarese et al. 2020). The more integrated they are in the overall process, the more they feel part of the community and are motivated to contribute to it (Savarese et al. 2020).

In sum, most sustainability dimensions are sufficiently covered in the literature on CSA and mostly show that CSAs, as currently implemented in Germany, but also elsewhere, are a viable alternative. Topics not sufficiently covered, but presenting challenges for viability of CSAs, are the environmental effects of CSAs (including all sub-themes), especially in view of necessary supplemental shopping (for an exception see Moruzzi and Sirieix 2015), and

how sound ecological practices could be ensured. Moreover, regarding social aspects, there is a lack of knowledge on how internal power relations and conflicts could be avoided, and aspects of labor and working hours (Ekers 2019; for exceptions see Watson 2020), and gender (for exceptions see Jarosz 2011; Kondoh 2015).

The literature shows that CSAs are being implemented in diverse forms in Germany, are adjusted to different contexts and challenges are being tackled (see also Middendorf and Rommel 2024). According to Wellner, the increase of CSAs and their members came with a dissolution of the original core concept, i.e. some CSAs see the concept as a marketing strategy instead of the originally appreciated values of community and solidarity (Wellner 2018). Gruber discusses that the reliance on value-based member mobilization might make it harder to create stable CSAs over time (2020). Despite the variation between CSAs and some discrepancies from the CSA principles, they hold true in a range of circumstances and hence can be interpreted as a viable alternative.

Achievability

Achievability deals with the long-term achievement of the alternative, namely the questions of whether and how an alternative reaches the overall goal, or the desired and viable alternative in the long run. As outlined before, it is rather difficult to assess achievability as long as the "new" desired status has not been achieved. There is a lack of literature on the exiting of CSA farms, and the dynamics of CSA farms over time, that might help to assess achievability. A few studies looking at dynamics (Feagan and Henderson 2009; Kondoh 2015) argue that CSAs adapted to local circumstances, thus become more pragmatic but maintained core principles and their transformative potential.

Transformation

Step four of Wright's approach deals with the strategy of transformation. Generally, CSA co-exists within the existing agri-food system. It does not try to destroy the prevailing market but rather represents itself as an alternative, thus the ruptural transformation strategy can be ruled out. The question remains whether it is an interstitial or symbiotic strategy, or a mix of both. CSA closes the gap between producers and consumers which is a characteristic of the current agri-food system. Producers who are aiming for sustainable small-scale farming are appreciated accordingly, and consumers who are willing to value and pay for socially, locally, and ecologically produced food meet, and jointly build a niche (Wellner 2018). A specific feature of CSA is that it reflects a mutual search for an alternative way of production and consumption alike, and that the target goes beyond the produce in trying to build a partnership (Zoll et al. 2021). As CSA in Germany is seen as a niche

Table 2. Summary of the four-step analysis.

Step 1/2	Failure of current industrialised agri-food system and need for more regional, small-scale farming, transparent food production, and sustainable practices.
Step 3	CSA is a desirable alternative. The comparison of the German CSA core principles with comprehensive and globally supported sustainability criteria yielded that most are fulfilled, although not all to the same extent. CSA is a viable alternative. Both internal reports and secondary literature show a diversity and growing number of CSAs in Germany. Sustainability is addressed more holistically than in other forms of agriculture and food networks, although challenges and knowledge gaps remain. Existing literature hints at long-term achievability of transformation, but there are limitations of the concept itself and real-world challenges need to be addressed.
Step 4	CSA represent a mix of an interstitial and partly symbiotic transformation strategy.

phenomenon (Blättel-Mink et al. 2015; Middendorf and Rommel 2024) and clearly changes the process of food production and consumption, the transformation process can be interpreted as interstitial. Critically seen, consumers and producers are still part of the overall capitalist economic system without provoking radical changes. Examples are the legal framework, and the use of inputs and infrastructure. Hence, characteristics of the symbiotic strategy are fulfilled too.

The main findings of the four-step analysis are summarized in Table 2.

Discussion

The CSA concept in Germany fulfills the features of a desirable and viable alternative in the sense of a real utopia but it cannot be assessed as achievable based on the available literature, as long-term data is lacking. Theoretically, however, the criterion of desirability is met, as the CSA principles underlying the concept address all dimensions of the SAFA sustainability guidelines. Likewise, the criterion of viability appears to be met, as the literature indicates that the four sustainability dimensions are maintained in the practical implementation of CSAs. However, at the same time, individual CSAs may realize these dimensions and principles to varying degrees, and minor deviations can be expected. Thus, although the implementation as reported in the literature, is not always carried out in perfect accordance with the theoretical concept and CSA principles, CSAs can still be considered a real utopia. This corresponds with several other authors. We discuss first the literature on German CSAs and complement with relevant literature from other countries. Schiller-Merkens suggested that alternative movements like CSAs show their viability through their everyday practices, which include dealing with challenges (2022). Gruber argued that CSAs manage to balance means-end and value rationality and can therefore be a key to a transition toward a sustainable agri-food system (2020). Plank et al. argued for the case of Austria that in contrast to bio-physical challenges, institutional challenges such as legal or financial constraints can be mitigated for CSAs to grow out of their niche. Cucco and Fonte concluded theoretically that local food networks are real utopia (2015). Based on the

studied literature the achievability of CSA and a truly fulfilled transformation of the current system cannot be observed yet. The hypothesis of an interstitial transformation strategy holds only partially as CSA also follows a symbiotic strategy. This corresponds to Wright's suggestion that a mix of interstitial and symbiotic transformation is most likely to lead to a successful transformation.

The real potential of CSA to grow and completely transform the dominant agri-food system as part of a capitalist economic order cannot be assessed based on the real utopia approach. Wright (2006, 121) states that, "proposals, taken individually, might be considered only modest movements along a particular pathway of social empowerment, taken collectively they would constitute a fundamental transformation of capitalism's class relations and the structures of power." Hence, along with other initiatives questioning capitalist market structures, CSA contributes to the agri-food system transformation in the long run, despite lacking the power to change the system directly. One characteristic that challenges the current food system is "the unconventional organizational model [. . .] itself" (Hvitsand 2016, 347). Gruber goes further, emphasizing that CSAs manage to evade capitalism by avoiding the competition of capitalist markets (2020). By establishing their own local food systems CSAs transcend existing power regimes (Hvitsand 2016). This does not mean they are autonomous, since CSAs still rely on inputs and general infrastructure and are therefore part of the economic capitalist market. The food regime literature has argued that CSA and others represent a countermovement to the corporate food regime (McMichael 2009). At the same time, corporations have profited by appropriating demands of alternative food networks which can create a virtuous cycle within the food regime (Friedmann 2016). However, corporations and other market actors also enter into competition with CSAs. In Austria, direct marketing and organic pioneers had initiated an interstitial development before being appropriated by the mainstream, a process that only few CSAs survived (Schermer 2015). For Japan, Kondoh (2015) shows that the conventional system has absorbed the *teikei* movement but was also shaped by it.

There are limitations within the CSA concept itself that question the potential growth of CSA. These include the inability of CSAs to produce the full range of products members need for their daily diet because of geographic and climatic conditions, and consumers therefore still need to use additional market channels (Doernberg et al. 2016; Wellner 2018); the need for CSAs to reach higher levels of productivity and professionalism if it is to serve an increasing number of members (Wellner 2018); lack of access to land and its high cost (Volz et al. 2017) and government support (Plank et al. 2020; Vicente-Vicente et al. 2023). Within larger groups core values, sense of community, exchange, and trustful relationships are at risk (Carlson and Bitsch 2019). Effective communication between consumers

and producers is relevant for long-term commitment and behavior change (Cox et al. 2008). Discussions within the Solawi network about the margin of how flexibly and widely the concept can be applied while still being appropriately called a CSA is an example of the dilemma (Carlson and Bitsch 2019). To maintain cooperation within a CSA and keep the social mechanism functioning, a certain level of moral motivation among members is crucial (Gruber 2020). Barriers for farmers to convert to CSA include incompatibility with working processes, transparency of profits, fear of losing reputation and many uncertainties (Zech et al. 2025). Not only internal development but also consumers pose challenges to the future of CSA. For example, non-participants have been found to lack altruistic and universalistic values and fear the effort associated with CSA (Diekmann and Theuvsen 2019b), members show a lack of sense of belonging to a social movement (Zoll et al. 2017) and there is possible competition for members where multiple CSAs emerge in one location (Galt et al. 2016; Bonfert 2022).

For Germany, some authors described how collaborations have overcome some of these barriers. One approach for a CSA to serve a larger community is to cooperate with other CSAs in order to expand the range and amount of produce and use synergies between farms, thus creating so-called "multi-farm CSAs" (Volz et al. 2016; Bonfert 2022; Rommel et al. 2022; Middendorf and Rommel 2024). Rommel et al. found cooperation in seed supply, training provision and with processors like bakeries; sharing of machinery, labor and produce with other CSA farms; and with the German CSA network via food councils and intermediaries (2022). Bonfert showed how multi-CSA networks collaborate with many other actors, including policymakers, other social and environmental movements, and activists, which helps them to increase the effectiveness and reach of CSA (2022). Other German CSAs have contacted individual policymakers to discuss issues like access to land (Wittenberg et al. 2022). This is in contrast to CSAs in other countries such as Spain, where González-Azcárate et al. found deep mistrust in the public sector (González-Azcárate et al. 2023). Generally, policymakers are advised to consider the specific features of CSA when regulating food production and can even foster the process by providing relevant incentives (Carlson and Bitsch 2019; Sulistyowati et al. 2023). Public policies can also provide technical or financial support to agroecological and smallholder agriculture in general (González-Azcárate et al. 2023).

Despite criticism and the known limitations, Volz et al. recognize the CSA concept's real potential as a "model for a much-needed shift towards a truly sustainable economy on a human scale" (2016, 10). In Germany, the transition to a more professionalized and economically stable form of CSA has been achieved through the establishment of a CSA cooperative (Solawi-Genossenschaft) which is seen as a potential way to get out of the niche

position without losing the core values of the original CSA concept (Solawi-Genossenschaften 2020).

This paper has some limitations. The analysis is based on secondary literature only. Although a number of thoroughly selected studies were included, the analysis is limited to what other authors have examined, so there might be bias due to omitted arguments that might have influenced the overall results. The analysis of the SAFA dimensions seems somewhat disproportionate in terms of content, as most studies analyzed social well-being and only very few addressed environmental integrity. This reflects the status of literature and thus illustrates the issues that were subject to an in-depth study. It correspondingly highlights the issues for further analysis with in-depth case studies; for example, the environmental impacts of CSAs, including effects on soil, water, air and animal welfare, covering production and consumption. There is consensus that CSA faces changes due to the increased numbers of CSAs and members and more general attention. This perceived change, its implications, challenges, and development ideas discussed and tested within CSA, could be potential topics for further research. One example which is already implemented in Germany that could be analyzed in detail to investigate its potential to change the agri-food system is the CSA cooperative (Solawi-Genossenschaften 2020).

Another difficulty in analyzing the potential of CSA is the diversity of its implementation. This study considered this continuum in two ways. First, the diversity is neglected when examining the theoretical desirability of CSA principles. Second, diversity is acknowledged when analyzing CSA as a viable alternative by reviewing secondary literature on implemented CSAs. Diversity can be seen as a potential to provide space for testing and developing utopian elements of CSA. Tailoring to the context is seen desirable as it leads to long-lasting CSAs (Vaderna et al. 2022). While some new governance models with intermediaries move away from the core principles and should be monitored, some can still be seen as valuable alternatives (Rosol and Barbosa Jr. 2021). In the same line, DuPuis and Goodman argue for promoting democratic processes rather than a perfectionist utopian vision of the agri-food system (DuPuis et al. 2006).

Further research could study specific types of CSAs and their individual potential, e.g., producer-led, consumer-led or integrated CSAs (Middendorf and Rommel 2024). Max Weber's concept of ideal types could contribute, by comparing different CSAs with an ideal-type CSA (see e.g., Rosol and Barbosa Jr. 2021). Additional to case studies closing the current research gaps on sustainability dimensions, further studies could explicitly address the transformation potential, i.e. achievability (step 4). One option is to combine a multi-level perspective assessing interactions between niches and regimes, with an analysis of social practices, governance processes, politics, and power, and the

sustainability of the transitions (see El Bilali 2019). Finally, analyzing the factors leading to the discontinuation of CSAs could yield valuable lessons for improving the sustainability of existing initiatives.

Conclusion

Once considered a niche, CSA now warrants a reassessment due to its growing global presence. This study used the real utopia framework to examine whether CSA qualifies as a real utopia, analyzing it with the help of Wright's four-step approach of moral principles, diagnosis and critique, alternative, and transformation. The SAFA themes assessed the desirability and feasibility of CSA. In Germany, CSA fits into this framework and represents a potential real utopia. Despite successes, challenges remain, such as fair remuneration, and there are gaps in environmental knowledge. CSA offers a pathway for an agroecological transformation of the agri-food system, promoting environmental, economic and social sustainability. To facilitate further growth, practitioners need to address internal and external barriers while upholding the principles of CSA. Collaboration between scientists and practitioners can fill knowledge gaps, while policymakers should support the establishment and maintenance of CSA. Future research could differentiate between different CSA types, for example through ideal-type comparison, and focus on the transformation potential, namely the achievability aspect of Wright's real utopia. The core idea of community-based sustainable regional production and consumption, contributing to sustainable nutrition and land use, is valuable and should be further strengthened to transform the agri-food system.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to Prof. Dr. Regina Birner, Chair of Social and Institutional Change in Agricultural Development at the University of Hohenheim for the initial idea, support in the conceptualisation of the article, and the continued exchange. We also thank participants of a research seminar at the University of Hohenheim as well as Dr. Viviane Yameogo for helpful feedback. Furthermore, we thank two anonymous reviewers for their valuable recommendations.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Consent for publication

Permission to reproduce materials from other sources: Not applicable.

Ethics approval

Not applicable as entirely based on a literature review.

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Zukunftskommission Landwirtschaft Zukunft Landwirtschaft. 2026. Eine gesamtgesellschaftliche Aufgabe. Empfehlungen der Zukunftskommission Landwirtschaft. Rangsdorf, Germany: Zukunftskommission Landwirtschaft.