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## MANAGING A CONSUMER-FARMER RELATIONSHIP IN RUSSIAN COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE

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**Abstract.** Establishing a sustainable consumer-farmer relationship is vital for Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). Meanwhile this relationship has not been studied in relation to the emerging economy of Russia yet. In our research we use a case-study method applying it to the Russian CSA. The uniqueness of this case is that it is the first officially recognized CSA in Russia established in 2018. Data analysis was carried out using Qualitative Data Analyses Miner Software. The qualitative analyses of Russian CSA allowed us to discover the actual managerial practices that lead to a sustainable CSA consumer-farmer relationship, identifying the modifications of cooperation between producers and consumers. Our study showed that sustainable consumer-farmer relationship in the CSA is based on the healthy and high-quality product (food basket); agroecological and organic farming; 3Rs business model (risk, reward and responsibility sharing); direct communication with consumers (social networking, community involvement, continuous education, etc.), and flexibility of CSA. Such modifications including limitation of the consumer's involvement in the farm governance; focus on biodynamic agriculture and social entrepreneurship; evolution from the one-farm CSA model to the multiple farms CSA-club model; flexible payments; selling and consulting outside the CSA community led to a more flexible and sustainable CSA model.

## УПРАВЛЕНИЕ ВЗАИМОДЕЙСТВИЕМ ПОТРЕБИТЕЛЯ И ФЕРМЕРА В РОССИЙСКОМ ПОДДЕРЖИВАЕМОМ СООБЩЕСТВОМ СЕЛЬСКОМ ХОЗЯЙСТВЕ

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### Ключевые слова

Поддерживаемое сообществом сельское хозяйство, взаимодействие между потребителем и фермером, биодинамическое сельское хозяйство, социальное предпринимательство

**Аннотация.** Установление устойчивых отношений между потребителем и фермером жизненно важно для поддерживаемого сообществом сельского хозяйства (CSA). Однако эти отношения еще не изучались применительно к развивающейся экономике России. В нашем исследовании мы используем метод кейс-стади, применяя его к российскому CSA. Уникальность этого случая заключается в том, что это первый официально признанный CSA в России, созданный в 2018 г. Анализ данных проводился с помощью программного обеспечения Qualitative Data Analysis Miner. Качественный анализ российского CSA позволил нам выявить актуальные управленческие практики, которые приводят к устойчивым отношениям между потребителями и фермерами в рамках CSA, определить модификации форм сотрудничества между производителями и потребителями. Наше исследование показало, что устойчивые отношения между потребителем и фермером в CSA основаны на здоровом и качественном продукте (продуктовая корзина); агроэкологическом и органическом земледелии; бизнес-модели 3Rs (разделение рисков, вознаграждений и ответственности); прямой коммуникации с потребителями (социальные сети, вовлечение сообществ, непрерывное образование и т. п.), а также гибкости CSA. Такие модификации, как ограничение участия потребителя в управлении фермой, акцент на биодинамическом сельском хозяйстве и социальном предпринимательстве, переход от модели CSA с одной фермой к модели CSA-клуба с несколькими фермами, гибкие платежи, продажа и консультирование за пределами сообщества CSA, привели к созданию более гибкой и устойчивой модели CSA.

**1. Introduction.** Nowadays Russian agriculture becomes more industrial and global, which leads to the domination of industrial food networks, especially around the big cities, increasing the distances between the producer and consumer. Alternative food networks exist in opposition to conventional food supply chains in Russia, but they are not spread so well as in the developed countries.

Alternative food networks aim the reunion of food producer and consumer, reviving local food systems and short supply chains, supporting rural communities and establishing sustainable consumer-producer relationships [1-4]. These non-conventional networks are adopted mostly by small and medium producers using the direct marketing approach.

The alternative food networks in Russia are presented by the farmers' markets, farmer cooperatives, box schemes, consumer cooperatives and Community Supported Agriculture. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is still a new phenomenon for Russia. Few farms employ the CSA model in practice.

A sustainable consumer-farmer relationship is a key framework for CSA that was not studied in relation to the emerging economy of Russia before. Our study is devoted to the first officially recognized CSA in Russia and aims to analyse the key elements (principles) of the CSA consumer-farmer relationship.

Case study analysis was carried out using QDA Miner Software. The key results were retrieved from the content analysis of the interviews with the CSA founders and manager. The reliability of these results was verified by the observation and qualitative analysis of the CSA materials published on the Internet.

The paper attempts to contribute to a deeper understanding of managerial practices that lead to a sustainable consumer-farmer relationship in the CSA in Russia. The key elements in managing the CSA sustainable consumer-farmer relationship in Russia follow the patterns of the CSA in the developed countries, including focus on the healthy and fresh food basket, agroecological and organic farming; 3Rs business model (risk sharing; reward sharing; responsibility) based on the formal CSA contract; constant communication with consumers (social networking, community involvement, continuous education, meetings and other on-farm activities); and flexibility of CSA business model.

The implication of research is also in the identification of modified and new forms of cooperation between producers and consumers in Russia. The limitation of the consumers' involvement in the farm governance; evolution from one-farm CSA model to the multiple farms CSA; possibility to reduce fees (by working on the farm, participating in packaging, delivering, etc.); flexible payment; selling outside the CSA (to restaurants, bio-shops, schools); focus on biodynamic agriculture and social entrepreneurship were not deeply discussed in the CSA studies yet.

**2. Theoretical background.** Community supported agriculture (CSA) is often considered as a business model of alternative and local food network comprising direct marketing and sustainability strategies usually adopted by small and medium sized farms [5; 6].

CSA is defined as a system of face-to-face relationship among different people who are members and manufacturers of agricultural produce where they share the risks, responsibilities and rewards (3Rs) of their farming activities thereby establishing long-term profitable agreement in the process [7].

The CSA business model involves agricultural producers (farmers) and consumers in a direct, usually long-term partnership in which consumers pay forward (in the beginning of the season/year, monthly/seasonal/annual membership) and in some cases even work on the farm for their share of crops and split up the risks and responsibility. Membership in the CSA brings to the consumer a portion of fresh seasonal healthy food from the farm every week as well as other rewards (e.g., education, eco-tourism etc.). The producer receives community support that makes him more sustainable in the economic, social and ecological dimensions [8].

A weekly basket received by a CSA member is usually composed of seasonal organic vegetables and herbs. It may also include fruits, as well as livestock production e.g., dairy products, eggs, and even meat, etc. [8; 9]. To diversify the basket with honey, bread and fresh fish consumers may participate in modified forms of CSA.

The CSA consumer-farmer relationship is based on the mutual assistance and solidarity ("solidarity contract"), including such principles as

1. Long-term connections between farmers (producers) and consumers. Regular consumers pay in advance and get fair and affordable prices, while farmers get financial sustainability.

2. Direct partnership between farmers and consumers. CSA excludes intermediaries and related intermediary costs.

3. 3Rs business model, including sharing of risks and rewards, and sometimes even responsibilities, by farmers and consumers. Consumers may get bigger or smaller, more or less diverse baskets of food in case of high/low harvest.

4. Mutual trust between farmers and consumers.

5. Supply of high-quality organic food. To ensure agro-ecological production the farmers could use such practices as organic techniques as well as biodynamic techniques.

6. Community education and training in ecological farming, sustainable food consumption and farming, and other topics related to ecology, food, health, sustainability and farming [3; 8; 10].

Creating and managing a sustainable consumer-farmer relationship is a core factor of CSA success [11]. Among the trends that reshape the CSA consumer-farmer relationship are new products, season extensions, multi-farm collaborations, new shareholder groups, marketing collaborations with different organisations, innovative aggregation and delivery strategies, new urban production connections, and health and wellness alliances.

According to the CSA business model consumers become shareholders, participate in the farm governing and share risks, rewards and responsibilities. The modern CSA has many varieties exploring different types of shareholder participation and distribution channels, limiting formal involvement of consumers and even offering a share in multiple farms [12].

Nowadays the business model of CSA is very flexible and still evolving under the influence of the new market, society and ecological forces, social networking and e-business. It leads to a lack of knowledge in CSA managerial approaches that would strengthen the direct relationship between food producers and consumers/community [6; 11].

*The relevant research gaps* lie in searching for

- effective managerial practices that lead to a long-term sustainable consumer-farmer relationship [13];

- new modifications of the CSA business model, including the new forms of cooperation between producers and consumers, that allow farmers to spread CSA effectively in the new reality [12].

CSA differs from country to country in terms of legal forms, agro-food production and consumption systems, types of partnership, government support, etc. Despite the existing studies, there is still a lack of understanding of the factors that drive CSA towards a sustainable consumer-farmer relationship, especially in emerging economies.

Hanson et al. (2019) pointed out that in CSA “consumer behaviour varies by culture and country” [14], for example, the studies conducted in the US, China or European countries show different top reasons to join CSA. At the same time almost all of these studies are focused on CSA in developed countries [15]. *The relevant research gap lies in* exploring the CSA, including consumer-farmer relationship, in emerging economies [14].

The identified research gaps led us to the following *research questions*:

- 1) What are the key elements (principles) in managing the CSA sustainable consumer-farmer relationship in Russia?

- 2) Are there any new modifications of the CSA business model implemented in Russia?

### **3. Materials and Methods**

**3.1. Methods of research.** This study is based on the qualitative methods of research. The qualitative approach, based on methodological holism, allows us to analyse the object of research in its context, in its relationship with other elements and external environment [16]. The use of qualitative methods leads to a holistic understanding of the research object. The qualitative methods of research are widely used in the CSA research articles related to Social, Business and Economics fields of studies. Among the most popular qualitative methods used in the CSA papers are focus groups [17], interviews [14; 18], and case-studies [8; 12; 19].

In our research we use a case-study method that contributes to a deep study of phenomena and processes in their real context and thereby offers a deep understanding of empirical reality [16; 20]. The data triangulation method is used to ensure the reliability of the results [21-23], which led us to a combination of the following data collection methods:

- in-depth interviews with project-leaders;
- observation (visits to the farm fields and pick-up points);
- analysis of the documents and materials published on the Internet.

Each interview was recorded manually (in the presence of the interviewee and with his consent) in text format. Among interviewees were two founders and a manager of CSA (all of them are male, middle-aged). The process of observation and analysis of documents and materials required interaction with CSA managers and owners for further clarification of some data (by phone, e-mail, messengers and offline). All data collection was done with respect for the views of the respondents, and protection of respondents' personal data.

Data analysis was carried out partly manually using the content analysis technique [24], partly using the software for the analysis of qualitative data – QDA Miner v.2.0.8. In this study we used a multi-stage scheme of data content analysis that included the assignment of codes to data (using keywords); consolidation of data and formation of major concepts and categories; clustering of categories into themes; and generalisation [25; 26]. QDA Miner allows us to ensure the iterative process of qualitative data analysis and identify the key elements of the CSA consumer-farmer relationship. The results of the analysis are illustrated with quotes from the interviews.

**3.2. Materials.** The collection of information was carried out in the period 2021-2023. According to the objective of our research we have chosen the case from Russia. The CSA, called "Live food club" (*Klub zhivoi edy*), was organised on

the basis of a small crop farm. Now this club involves one main farm and two partner-farms, a baker, agricultural consultants and about 50 families (consumers) for 2023. There is one more farm that has joined the club recently and plans to become a partner in CSA. This CSA club was started in 2018 in the Moscow region. The main CSA farm is located in the Kaluga region. The partner-farms are placed in the Kaluga and Tula regions that are close to Moscow.

The club has its own website (<https://www.ourcsa.info/#about>) and YouTube channel ([https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC0vmbTAdCQ2kxh9\\_Syvhpng/](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC0vmbTAdCQ2kxh9_Syvhpng/)).

The uniqueness of this case is that it is the first official CSA in Russia among the very few Russian CSA farms. The foundation of this club was inspired by the German CSA project "Kartoffelkombinat" and based on the co-founders' experience in agricultural management in Germany.

Russian CSA "Life food club" works on a regional level. Most consumers and all nine pick-up points are placed in the Moscow region. In 2023, the club organised 35 deliveries, that was about 10 tons of vegetables. The average weight of the weekly basket of crops is 5.2 kilograms, but it can be up to 10 kg.

**4. Results.** The results of the analysis are presented below. Table shows the main categories from the QDA miner clustered into the themes related to the CSA consumer-farmer relationship.

**Categories and themes related to the CSA consumer-farmer relationship**

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Categories</i>
Product	Food basket; food safety; nutrition
Production	Agroecological; organic; biodynamic; avoiding GMO; biodiversity
3Rs business model	Risk sharing; reward sharing; responsibility; contract; social enterprise
Communication with consumers	Trust building; social networking; delivery; exclusion of intermediaries; education and consulting
Flexibility	Reducing a fee; selling outside CSA; flexible payment

*Source:* Own study based on data from the interviews and analysed with the use of QDA Miner application.

The key elements (principles) in managing the CSA consumer-farmer relationship in "Life food club" are presented below, divided into themes:

**Product:** Safety and quality of food is the main priority for the CSA. Including mushrooms and bread adds a diversity to the regular food basket that fits to the modern trends in CSA modification. "The combination of our products

is most suitable for humans (their health and physiology) at the particular time of the year." "We improve the nutrition of our consumers. People start to feel a harmony of nature, of natural cycles."

**Production:** This CSA is based on agroecological farming using organic and biodynamic techniques. At the same time this club doesn't use organic certification. "We are moving

in this direction, but it is not a complete biodynamic farm yet.” “We do not use chemicals, pesticides and poisons. We do not use GMOs and other modified organisms in our production.” “Our production enhances biodiversity, as we have 97 different types of crops per year.”

**3Rs business model:** A CSA contract between CSA and consumers is formal (more or less). It includes an initial membership fee and a regular monthly payment. The weekly basket costs about 3000 RUB. This price is good and affordable for middle- and high-income families in Russia, but not for low-income families. “These funds are used to purchase everything necessary to start a season (seeds, equipment). These solidarity contributions are vital to our farm. Thanks to them, we can give you the freshest food and restore the soil.”

The CSA contract is usually long-term de facto. Consumers pay in advance usually for one season, but in fact they continue their membership for more than one year, which ensures the financial sustainability of the farmer that is vital for sustainable food production. “Usually, customers stay with us the whole year (4 seasons) and more.”

According to the 3Rs business model, consumers and farmers share the risks, rewards, and some responsibilities in the CSA. Farmers receive financial sustainability, while consumers receive a food basket of high quality, bio/organic, ecologically friendly. Farmers are responsible for food production and delivery, while consumers are responsible for the solidarity deposit and regular payments before the season. Consumers do not participate in the farm governing, but they discuss the plans for a season with a farmer. Consumers may participate in some activities on a farm and may organise the pick-up point. “Consumers receive more food in the case of a good harvest.” “If you participate in the farm life, and then, after a while, get a share of the harvest and see the carrots that you weeded, or eggplants you sprouted, then you have a completely different connection than if you just take the product from the store shelf.”

This CSA fits the model of a social enterprise. The CSA is a non-profit enterprise, so the main aims are ecological and social, while financial sustainability is needed to reach the ecological and social goals. “Live food club focuses not on market conditions, but on human and plant physiology. This is not a business or entrepre-

neurship in the classical sense, since the main goal is spiritual improvement. On the other hand, this is social entrepreneurship, as we need a financial framework to reach the goals.”

**Communication with consumers:** Education of CSA participants (farmers, consumers) and local community (local farmers, school teachers, pupils) is a continual process. Education involves the community in the CSA processes more deeply. Education is understood quite broadly including farm activities and consulting for farmers. “The educational process makes sense. We have an educational program called ‘The path of seed’. Live food club organises culinary meetings for consumers. We organise trips to the farm, where everyone can ask questions directly to the farmers. We also conduct open seminars that anyone can attend.”

Building trust between farmers and consumers is based on their personal connections including on-farm activities. “CSA creates a direct link of trust between farmers and consumers from the city. As in the old days, in villages, when we bought milk from neighbours, because we knew them personally and were confident in the quality.” Social networks are widely used to increase the awareness of consumers in the safety and quality of production. “Our members know their farmer and they are up to date with all the news through the online chats. We are presented in some social networks and YouTube channel, and we have a website.”

**Flexibility:** CSA model is flexible, that is vital for farmers nowadays. Consumers may work on the farm to reduce payment. “Each consumer can reduce a seasonal fee if, for example, he/she assists in sorting and harvesting, packaging and other organisational matters.”

The farms use the other market channels beside CSA to sell the farm product that increases financial sustainability of the farm. “We sell crops also to restaurants and their chiefs, bio-shops, schools.”

Flexible payment and share purchase options (part-season or special shares) are available. “If you cannot pick-up your share of the harvest, you can postpone the delivery to the next season.” “If you don't want to pay the initial membership fee, you can pay only for a season.”

**5. Discussion.** “Live food club” has many characteristics of the CSA business model, including the long-term relationship between farmer and consumer, the formal CSA contract, and the

3Rs model of the risk sharing, reward sharing, and responsibility [3; 10; 13]. At the same time, we can see that the responsibility of consumers is limited. Consumers share risks and rewards, but almost do not participate in the farm governing; they are not full sharers. The limitation of the consumers' involvement in the farm governance is one of the modern CSA trends notices in the US [12]. In Russia the development of the CSA started from this point.

In this case CSA is appearing as a social enterprise, non-profit, socially and ecologically conscious, and economically sustainable. Considering CSA as a social enterprise can open new angles of the CSA business model, as CSA was not studied in this way in recent literature.

Another difference compared to the CSA model is that this CSA club involves three farms, a baker, and consultants, they plan to involve more farmers, and even to open a dairy farm. The CSA model based on the multiple farms is also among the actual CSA trends [12].

Food safety, agroecological production of food, health and quality of food is the most important thing in the relationship with Russian consumers that is accepted by CSA owners. The US, China, and European studies show that fresh, ecological, and better quality food is the main reason for consumers to join CSA [15; 27].

The safety of food begins in the fields, that is why understanding and accepting the principles of agroecological, organic and biodynamic production are so important in the consumer-farmer relationship [10].

In this case the CSA does not have organic certification, that does not contradict the CSA business model [8; 15]. While CSA is quite often associated with organic agriculture and organic food [14; 27], biodynamic agriculture is not discussed so broadly in the framework of CSA.

Communication with consumers is one of the most important elements in the CSA consumer-farmer relationship. Education, organising on-farm activities, convenient delivery of the regular food basket (schedule, location of pick-up points); trust building and exclusion of intermediaries are the features of CSA business model [3; 8; 28].

The Russian model of CSA shows its flexibility. The reduction of fees through farm work was considered as a promising modification of the CSA model [11]. The Russian case shows the number of possibilities to reduce a fee – by work-

ing on the farm, participating in packaging, delivering and other activities.

Expanding the boundaries of the food basket beyond vegetables and herbs by adding bread, fruits, mushrooms and in the future dairy products, the Russian CSA increases its flexibility and follows the modern trends identified in the previous studies [14].

There are also different options of flexible payment, selling outside the CSA (restaurants, bio-shops, schools) identified in the Russian case, that are in the modern trend and add flexibility [14]. The consulting of farmers can be considered as additional activity that adds more flexibility to the CSA. The opportunity to organise the pick-up point by a consumer is also a feature of a new flexible model.

All these features of Russian CSA make it agile.

**6. Conclusion.** Our research allowed us to identify the following key elements (principles) in managing the CSA sustainable consumer-farmer relationship in Russia:

- Product: continuous management of product safety, freshness, variety of food in the basket. Healthy high-quality food for affordable prices is the main value of CSA in Russia.

- Production: agroecological and organic farming is required to ensure the high-quality of the food basket.

- 3Rs business model: risk sharing; reward sharing; responsibility; based on the formal CSA contract.

- Constant communication with consumers to build the long-term trustful relationship.

- Flexibility of the CSA business model.

Flexibility of CSA business model led to the implementation of some new modifications and new forms of cooperation between producers and consumers in Russia, including the following:

- The limitation of the consumers' involvement in the farm governance (limited responsibility).

- Focus on biodynamic agriculture.

- Considering CSA as a social enterprise.

- Evolution from one-farm CSA model to the club model (the multiple farms CSA), where CSA involves some farms, a baker, consultants and consumers.

- Possibility to reduce fees by working on the farm, participating in packaging, delivering, etc.

- Different options of flexible payment (e.g., only seasonal payment without a membership fee).

– Selling outside the CSA (to restaurants, bio-shops, schools) to increase economic sustainability.

This study has its limitations, as it is based on one case from Russia. While the observations include consumers' activities, there is a lack of in-depth study of consumers. Further research in Russia may focus on the CSA consumer behaviour as it is not studied yet. The search and analy-

sis of new CSA (even informal) would be fruitful. Another promising field of research lies in the further analysis of new forms of CSA, their modifications and flexibility. From our case we see that CSA aims at mostly middle-income families in Russia. Further research of CSA that involves low-income families in emerging economies would make sense, as the low-income people are those who mostly suffer from low-quality food.

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