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Idea vs. Reality: Perspectives and Barriers to the Development of Community-Supported Agriculture in Poland

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Abstract

The study examines the theoretical and practical dimensions of Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA). Its objective is to assess whether social capital theory explains food producers' engagement in CSA and whether this is reflected in practice. The research is based on a critical review of the relevant literature and on empirical investigations conducted in Poland among CSA producers using the CAWI method in 2024. The findings indicate that social capital theory plays a fundamental role in explaining the mechanisms underpinning CSA, with significant implications for the development of local food systems and for policies supporting small farms. This suggests the need for stronger institutional support aimed at enhancing trust and cooperation between food producers and consumers. Unfortunately, due to the low level of social capital in Poland, the CSA model remains only a niche complement to traditional forms of agriculture, functioning primarily as an alternative for a narrow group of socially and environmentally conscious consumers and small clusters of producers.

Keywords: Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA); social capital theory; short food supply chain (SFSC); Poland

1. Introduction

In recent years, the European Union has faced numerous challenges arising from climate change, the pandemic, and armed conflicts, including the war in Ukraine, which has disrupted agri-food supply chains and generated significant market pressures in neighbouring countries. These factors have significantly affected food security [1] and underscored the need to build food systems resilient to external shocks, based on short supply chains that directly connect producers with consumers.

Short food supply chains (SFSCs) and Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) have their conceptual origins in Japan, where the first consumer–producer partnerships (*teikei*) emerged in the 1960s in response to food safety concerns and environmental risks [2,3]. The model subsequently diffused to Europe and North America, where it evolved into diverse institutional forms adapted to local socio-economic contexts [4].

CSA represents one specific organisational form within this broader category of SFSCs, alongside other arrangements such as direct farm sales, farmers' markets, box schemes, and on-farm processing and sales, which currently constitute the dominant forms of short food supply chains in Poland [5–7].

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CSA is primarily a model designed for small-scale farms, aimed at ensuring stable and secure sources of food while strengthening social relations [8–11]. Its core principle consists of establishing a partnership agreement with a local farmer (or farmers) for the regular delivery of agricultural and food products [12]. As a result, producers gain stable income, while consumers receive fresh, high-quality products [13–15]. A key advantage of CSA is the sharing of risk between farmers and consumers [16]. Farmers receive part of the payment in advance (as a subscription), which enables necessary investments. At the same time, they are guaranteed an outlet for their products, which they supply to consumers at mutually agreed dates and through agreed delivery formats [8].

The classical CSA model is built upon four fundamental principles [8,17–21]:

1. Partnership: The price is determined on the basis of transparently calculated food production costs and reflects both farmers' labour and consumers' financial capacities.
2. Solidarity: Risks associated with food production are borne by both parties—consumers support farmers in difficult periods (e.g., during crop failures), while benefiting from surplus yields in abundant seasons.
3. Proximity: Shortening supply chains and supporting the local economy; consumers have the opportunity to engage directly with farmers and understand the realities of food production.
4. Diversity: Support for sustainable agricultural practices such as crop rotation, which promotes soil health and biodiversity.

CSA can therefore be viewed as an economic activity that goes beyond a simple profit-maximisation model, aiming instead to strengthen local interactions between food producers and consumers [22], thus forming the foundation for Alternative Food Networks [23,24].

The growing academic and policy interest in short food supply chains is also reflected in several European research and innovation projects, including FoodSHIFT 2030 [25] SKIN [26] or COREnet [27]. These initiatives focus on knowledge exchange, innovation diffusion, and network-building within SFSCs, including in Central and Eastern European countries, and highlight both the development potential of short food supply chains and the institutional and social barriers limiting their wider diffusion.

However, the development of this model of cooperation requires trust, which in turn stems from a high level of social capital. The main objective of this article is to determine whether social capital theory explains food producers' engagement in CSA and whether this is reflected in practice. Social capital theory is also used to identify potential barriers that prevent the wider implementation of this model, particularly in Poland.

The importance of this inquiry extends beyond academic interest. The findings align with the priorities of European public policies, including the Common Agricultural Policy, the Farm to Fork Strategy, and the EU's broader food policy framework, all of which stress the need to support short supply chains, sustainable production, and the strengthening of small farms. In this context, an in-depth analysis of the factors shaping producers' engagement in CSA provides valuable insights for designing support instruments and public interventions at local and national levels.

Based on the theoretical premises and the relevance of the topic for European public policies, three research questions were formulated:

1. Does CSA have development potential, particularly in countries characterised by fragmented family farm structures?
2. Is social capital a key determinant of CSA development, and does its low level constitute a fundamental barrier to the expansion of this cooperation model in Poland?
3. Does the insufficient level of social capital necessitate the involvement of local governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the CSA model?

In light of these questions, this article also attempts to contrast the assumptions of the classical, ideal CSA model with the real practices observed in Poland. This comparison makes it possible to highlight the differences between the "ideal" CSA—based on high levels of trust, partnership, and solidarity—and the socio-institutional "reality" in which the model is implemented. Such an approach enables a more comprehensive understanding of the sources of both the successes and limitations of CSA and provides a basis for a sound assessment of its development potential.

The article addresses a significant knowledge gap regarding the theoretical and empirical foundations of food producers' engagement in Community-Supported Agriculture. The existing literature has focused primarily on consumers' motivations and expectations [11,28–30], especially in Western Europe and the United States, where CSA is most developed [17,31,32]. As a result, the producers' perspective remains insufficiently explored [33–36], particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, where CSA operates under markedly different social, economic, and institutional conditions. There is a shortage of in-depth analyses of the factors influencing farmers' decisions to join CSA, barriers to participation, organisational capacities, and the institutional environment affecting their activities [8]. This study addresses these issues, emphasising the crucial yet thus far marginalised role of producers in the functioning of CSA. The analysis of their motivations, constraints, and enabling factors constitutes an important contribution to research on local food systems and the socio-economic dynamics of short supply chains in the context of Central and Eastern Europe.

2. Literature Review

In the scholarly literature, no single, universally accepted definition of social capital has emerged. Researchers interpret this concept from the perspectives of various disciplines and analytical levels—from the micro level (interpersonal relations), through the meso level (organisations, local communities), to the macro level (institutions and culture). Depending on the adopted approach, social capital may be conceptualised either as a private good available to specific individuals or groups, or as a public good generating benefits for entire communities. The literature highlights that the construct comprises three complementary dimensions: (1) structural—the networks of relationships among individuals and institutions; (2) regulatory—norms, values, patterns of cooperation, trust, and solidarity; and (3) behavioural—actual cooperative practices, information exchange, and mutual assistance.

The foundations of contemporary understandings of social capital are rooted in the definitions proposed by Bourdieu [37], Coleman [38], Fukuyama [39], and Putnam [40]. In Bourdieu's view [37], social capital represents the aggregate of actual and potential resources arising from an individual's membership in a durable network of relationships based on mutual recognition. Coleman [38] identifies social capital through its functions, treating it as those elements of the social structure that enable individuals to achieve goals that would be unattainable in its absence. For Fukuyama [39], the essence of social capital lies in the presence of informal norms conducive to cooperation, whereas Putnam [40] emphasises trust, norms, and social linkages that enhance the efficiency of collective action.

In a synthetic formulation, social capital serves as a mechanism sustaining trust among participants in economic life. Such trust is considered a prerequisite for economic exchange and cooperation, and thus one of the key determinants of market functioning. The regulations and "rules of the game" governing economic activity depend on the strength of institutions and the credibility of their participants, which means that social capital performs a role superior to other forms of capital—natural, human, physical, and financial [41,42]. It is perceived as a set of characteristics of social structures—

networks, relationships, norms, and values—that generate positive externalities for the broader community. Within the institutional approach, social capital is shaped by three fundamental determinants [43]:

1. Social trust, which constitutes the primary resource enabling cooperation [44,45],
2. Formal and informal institutions regulating relations among individuals and access to resources; these include legal rules as well as customs and social conventions [46],
3. Norms of reciprocity and reliability, which strengthen actors' capacity for cooperation [47].

The most important function of social capital is the coordination of economic and social actors. A high level of trust and strong norms of cooperation foster the development of stable organisations and economic initiatives. According to Fukuyama's concept [45], the most effective organisations develop where community members share a similar ethical value system. A higher level of social capital also enhances the adaptability of the economy—trust reduces fears associated with organisational innovations and restructuring processes [43].

Contemporary scholarship draws a clear distinction between three types of social capital: bonding, bridging, and linking social capital [48,49]. Bonding capital refers to strong ties within homogeneous groups, fostering support and solidarity but sometimes leading to closure and exclusion. Bridging capital facilitates relationships between groups with different resources and identities, promoting knowledge exchange and innovation. Linking capital concerns relationships with public institutions and power structures, increasing access to formal resources. In the context of CSA, bridging and linking social capital are particularly important, as the model creates a space for cooperation among producers, consumers, and local institutions, reducing the fragmentation of social environments.

The concept of social capital also has a controversial dimension, as emphasised by numerous authors. Critics argue that the term is ambiguous, overly broad, and susceptible to conceptual overstretching [50,51]. Moreover, social capital may generate negative effects such as clientelism, nepotism, conformity pressure, or the exclusion of outsiders [52]. Critics further highlight that overestimating the role of social capital shifts responsibility for development onto local communities, disregarding the importance of public policies and structural conditions. Social capital should therefore be viewed not as an inherently positive resource but as a complex relational structure that can both support cooperation and reproduce inequalities.

In post-socialist countries, analyses of social capital often emphasise the long-term effects of systemic and institutional discontinuities. Scholars point out that decades of centralised governance, limited civic autonomy, and the prevalence of informal coping strategies have contributed to a specific pattern of social relations characterised by low generalised trust, weak civic participation, and a fragmented public sphere, as widely discussed in the literature on post-socialist societies [53–55].

Within Central and Eastern Europe, researchers further note that past experiences with forced collectivisation and state-controlled cooperation have left a long-lasting imprint on social capital formation, often resulting in low levels of generalised trust and reluctance towards collective action [56,57]. Importantly, while CSA and socialist collective farms may appear superficially similar as collective arrangements, there is no direct institutional or cultural continuity between them. On the contrary, CSA initiatives are based on voluntary participation, horizontal relations, and trust-based cooperation, which fundamentally differentiates them from the hierarchical and coercive structures of socialist agriculture and helps explain both the limited diffusion and the fragile social embeddedness of CSA in post-socialist contexts.

In this context, rebuilding social capital requires sustained efforts aimed at strengthening transparent institutions, stabilising norms of cooperation, and creating environments in which repeated interactions can generate trust. Community-supported food initiatives can act as practical platforms for such processes: by fostering regular contact between farmers and consumers, they help overcome social distance, increase predictability of exchange, and gradually enable more open forms of collaboration. These initiatives, therefore, offer an opportunity to mitigate the relational legacies of the previous system, creating locally embedded spaces where cooperative practices can be tested, adapted, and internalised.

Viewed through this lens, CSA can be interpreted not only as an economic arrangement but also as a mechanism supporting the reconstitution of social capital. Stable producer–consumer partnerships, clear expectations, and shared responsibilities may contribute to strengthening civic competencies and trust-based governance structures at the local level—although the extent to which such effects occur depends on the broader institutional context and the willingness of actors to engage beyond transactional relations.

Within such a framework, social capital theory provides a valuable analytical lens for explaining stakeholders' engagement in Community-Supported Agriculture. Three mechanisms are particularly important:

1. Social trust: Farmers' willingness to cooperate increases when relationships with consumers are characterised by high trust. Production diversity and transparency in cultivation practices foster partnership and solidarity [58].
2. Norms of cooperation and reciprocity: The CSA model is built on shared responsibility and long-term commitments. Regular interaction among participants—including consumer participation in farm work—strengthens social ties and transforms consumers into prosumers. At the same time, consumer involvement can alleviate pressure arising from shortages of seasonal labour.
3. Institutions and organisational structures: Local organisations, formal agreements, and mechanisms securing exchange relations reduce transaction costs. However, in countries with low social capital, cooperation among small producers is often hindered, partly due to concerns about free-riding on collective efforts [59].

Based on the theoretical literature, social capital—understood as trust, norms of cooperation, and institutions regulating collaboration—plays a crucial role in shaping producer–consumer relations within CSA models. Consequently, social capital theory provides a particularly useful framework for explaining the varying levels of engagement of both producers and consumers in such initiatives.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Data Sources

The research area is Poland—the largest agricultural country among the new member states of the European Union. Poland ranks third in the EU in terms of agricultural land area, following France and Spain. The structure of Polish farms is highly fragmented: as much as 74% of all farms have an area of less than 10 hectares, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Number and percentage share of agricultural holdings in Poland in 2020.

Farm Size Category	Number of Agricultural Holdings [in Thousands]	Share of Agricultural Holdings [%]
Total	1317	100.0
Up to 10 ha	976	74.0
10–30 ha	285	19.6
30–50 ha	44	3.3
50–100 ha	26	2.0
Above 100 ha	13	1.0

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on [60].

Additionally, the specific historical context makes Poland a particularly compelling research area. Poland is a post-communist country that, moreover, remained under partition for more than 120 years. As a result, different informal institutions developed across regions. To date, the adaptation of CSA to Polish conditions has not been comprehensively examined, which underscores the importance of the present study.

The empirical research was conducted among CSA producers. In Poland, there is no official register of farms operating within the CSA model. Based on the only publicly available source—the wspierajrolnictwo.pl list [61]—10 farms declaring participation in this model were identified. These farms were included in the survey.

Ultimately, the empirical study was carried out between March and May 2024 in 6 out of the 10 CSA farms. Despite repeated attempts, the remaining four farms did not respond to the questionnaire. The surveyed farms were located in the voivodeships of Łódzkie, Mazowieckie, Wielkopolskie and Zachodniopomorskie. In total, Poland is divided into 16 voivodeships, meaning that the farms participating in the study represented four of these regions.

In each of these voivodeships, the farm structure is dominated by holdings of up to 10 hectares, as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Number of agricultural holdings in Poland in 2020 in the surveyed voivodeships.

Voivodeship	Number of Agricultural Holdings [in Thousands]						Share of Agricultural Holdings [%]				
	Total	Up to 10 ha	10–30 ha	30–50 ha	50–100 ha	Above 100 ha	Up to 10 ha	10–30 ha	30–50 ha	50–100 ha	Above 100 ha
Łódzkie	117	90	23	2	1	0	76.8	17.7	2.1	0.9	0.3
Mazowieckie	208	152	48	6	2	1	72.9	20.0	2.7	1.2	0.4
Wielkopolskie	116	71	33	6	3	2	62.2	10.9	5.1	2.7	1.4
Zachodniopomorskie	29	16	7	2	2	2	54.5	33.8	7.1	8.1	6.6

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on [60].

3.2. Methods of Analysis

The study applied a qualitative research design. Data were collected using the CAWI method (Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing), which allowed respondents to complete the questionnaire online. The survey consisted of 22 questions (Appendix A), including both open- and closed-ended items. For the closed-ended items, a Likert-type scale was employed to capture farmers' attitudes and perceptions related to the examined issues.

The open-ended questions focused on:

- key farm characteristics (e.g., agricultural land area, number of consumers, labour input),
- benefits farmers perceive from participating in CSA,
- challenges associated with operating within the CSA model.

The closed-ended questions addressed:

- motivations for engaging in CSA,
- expectations regarding consumer involvement in farm work,
- perceived development prospects of the farms,
- barriers limiting the expansion of CSA in Poland,
- preferred forms of institutional support.

Prior to distribution, the questionnaire underwent a pilot test to assess its clarity and content validity, which resulted in adjustments to several items. The final response rate was 60% (6 out of 10 farms), which aligns with typical participation levels in studies of small-scale farms engaged in alternative food networks.

The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistical methods and qualitative content analysis of the open-ended responses. Inferential statistical tests were not conducted due to the small sample size and the exploratory nature of the study.

The study involved anonymous adult participants and did not collect sensitive personal data. In accordance with institutional and national regulations, formal approval from an ethics committee was not required. Nevertheless, the research was conducted in line with ethical research principles, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participation in the study was voluntary, and anonymity was fully ensured.

3.3. Study Limitations

An unquestionable limitation of the study was the small number of surveyed farms (six entities located in six municipalities across four voivodeships), which restricts the ability to formulate generalisations for the entire CSA population in Poland. Despite repeated attempts to contact the remaining producers—by both email and telephone—no responses were obtained. This further confirms the difficulties associated with conducting research among farmers operating within alternative food models. The findings should therefore be regarded as exploratory and as a starting point for further research employing more advanced analytical methods.

The study also revealed a socio-cultural barrier. Similar to research on carp producers in Poland [62], farmers often display distrust toward external research institutions and reluctance to share knowledge. In the Polish agricultural sector, there remains a strong fear of potential external control, which may reduce respondents' openness and affect data accessibility. This is reflected in the fact that only 3.1% of farmers in Poland are registered within formal short food supply chain schemes [63].

Another limitation concerns the absence of an official register of CSA farms in Poland. The identification of entities relies on informal lists and producers' self-descriptions, which may result in the omission of some farms operating in a model close to CSA.

It should also be noted that CAWI surveys are vulnerable to self-report bias, particularly regarding assessments of cooperation, trust, and barriers to participation. The use of a single research method, without triangulation through in-depth interviews or field observations, limits the depth of analysis and the ability to verify respondents' declarations.

Moreover, CSA initiatives in Poland are characterised by significant organisational heterogeneity, the absence of a standardised definition, and considerable variation in cooperation practices between producers and consumers, which complicates the comparability of responses across farms.

Finally, the research timeframe (March–May 2024) coincided with a period of intensive agricultural work, which may have affected producers' availability and their willingness to participate in the study.

4. Results

As previously noted, the study covered six CSA farms operating in four voivodeships. The total area of the surveyed farms amounted to 103 hectares, of which approximately 75% was concentrated in the two largest farms. The areas of these farms were 41.0 ha and 36.0 ha, respectively. Among the remaining farms, the agricultural area ranged from 4.0 to 13.0 hectares. All CSA farms were engaged in vegetable cultivation, while individual farms additionally offered fruits, eggs, processed foods, groats, flour, dairy products, and meat. Details are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Profile of farms operating CSA in Poland.

Name of the CSA Farm	Production Profile	Share of CSA Activities in Total Farm Income	CSA Area (ha)	Total Farm Area (ha)	Number of CSA Consumers	Potential Maximum Size of the Consumer Group
Nad Bugiem	Vegetables, fruits, eggs, processed foods, groats and flours	Additional	2.0	4.0	30	60
Zielone Zagrody	Vegetables, fruits, eggs, dairy products, meat, processed foods	Additional	4.0	41.0	60	80
Zielona Rzodkiewka	Vegetables, processed foods, herbs	Additional	0.2	4.8	20	40
Farma Stary Jesion	Vegetables, fruits, eggs, processed foods, herbs	Additional	2.0	36.0	30	60
Marianka	Vegetables	Primary	1.2	4.2	120	120
Green leaf GR Kąkolewice	Vegetables, eggs, meat, herbs	Primary	1.0	13.0	70	80

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on survey data.

However, it is important to emphasise that not all agricultural land owned by the farms was used for CSA purposes. According to the survey, the total area allocated specifically to CSA activities amounted to only 10.4 hectares. It may therefore be concluded that, on average, farmers dedicated approximately 1.7 hectares to CSA production (ranging from 0.2 to 4.0 ha).

The situation described above may result from the fact that only in two cases did CSA constitute the sole source of farm income. This leads to the conclusion that CSA initiatives tend to represent an extension of existing agricultural activity rather than a standalone model. This, in turn, challenges the frequently cited claim in the literature that CSA is primarily adopted by small farms (up to 10 ha). Consequently, doubts arise as to whether the fragmented agrarian structure observed in Poland indeed facilitates the development of this type of cooperation model. Based on the conducted research, it may be equally justified to state that CSA initiatives are more likely to become part of larger farms, as an element of production diversification and market (consumer) segmentation. While such CSAs meet the basic criteria outlined earlier, they contradict the idea of CSA as a model supporting small-scale farming.

From an economic perspective, the effective functioning of a CSA depends on its production capacity and the number of participating consumers. To estimate the theoretical number of consumers required for a CSA to operate sustainably, a simplified alternative cost simulation can be applied. For this purpose, statutory wage indicators in Poland were used as reference points, namely the minimum gross wage and the average gross monthly wage in the enterprise sector. At the end of 2025, the monthly gross minimum wage amounted to 1091 euros, corresponding to an annual gross income of 13,092 euros (12 months). Over the same period, the average monthly gross wage in the enterprise sector (excluding profit-sharing bonuses) reached 2070 euros, resulting in an annual gross income of 24,840 euros [64,65].

Assuming that the price of a single weekly produce box offered to consumers is 19 euros (wspierajrolnictwo.pl; rwsmarianka.pl) and that the CSA season lasts 23 weeks (i.e., 23 deliveries per consumer), one participating consumer generates an annual revenue of 437 euros for the farmer (19×23) [66]. On this basis, revenue equivalent to the annual minimum wage is generated by approximately 28 consumers, while around 55 consumers are required to reach revenue corresponding to the average annual wage in the enterprise sector.

It must be emphasised, however, that these figures refer exclusively to gross revenue and do not take into account production costs, labour inputs, or capital depreciation. Moreover, farmers' income should ensure not only current subsistence but also the ability

to maintain and replace fixed assets. As a result, the actual number of consumers required for economically sustainable, long-term CSA operation is likely to be higher than suggested by these estimates.

The research findings indicate that the six surveyed farms supply agricultural products to a total of 330 consumers. The highest numbers of consumers cooperate with the farms for which CSA constitutes the sole source of income. These CSAs serve 120 and 70 consumers, respectively. Importantly, supplying 120 consumers with vegetables (CSA Marianka) and 70 consumers with vegetables, eggs, meat, and herbs (CSA Green Leaf GR Kąkolewice) required allocating only 1.2 ha and 1.0 ha of land for CSA purposes. This leads to the conclusion that economically efficient CSAs do not require large cultivation areas, meaning that small farms can successfully participate in such models. Consequently, from a financial perspective, the CSA model may be an attractive solution for small-scale farms.

For the remaining CSAs, the number of consumers ranges from 20 to 60. Based on the earlier simulations, it should be assumed that CSAs serving 20–30 members operate at the threshold of profitability. Making CSA the sole source of income would require increasing the number of consumers, which, as shown in Table 3, is feasible.

The study also indicates that small land areas dedicated to CSA are not, in themselves, a barrier to development. However, it should be noted that CSAs rely on traditional cultivation methods, which are labour-intensive. At the same time, the small scale of operations makes it impossible to employ additional workers; thus, most of the labour is provided by farmers and their family members. Theoretically, consumers are also expected to participate in farm work. Unfortunately, the study shows that consumers contribute to fieldwork in only one CSA. This is the farm where, on average, only one person is employed full-time throughout the year. In another CSA, farmers recognised the need for consumer support, although consumers currently do not participate in fieldwork. The remaining farmers are not interested in involving consumers in agricultural labour. These findings reveal a cognitive dissonance: on the one hand, farmers face labour shortages that hinder the functioning of CSAs; on the other hand, most are not interested in engaging consumers in fieldwork. The literature emphasises that CSAs generate benefits for farmers, consumers, and the natural environment. These claims were confronted with the actual motivations of Polish farmers to engage in CSA, as illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4. Factors motivating producers to participate in the CSA model.

	Opportunity to Access Premium-Price Markets	Reduced Logistical and Delivery Expenses	Strong Consumer Demand and Engagement	Lower Financial Exposure Due to Upfront Payments	Access to External Assistance (e.g., Grants, Subsidies)	Commitment to Environmental Stewardship	Preservation of Cultural Heritage and Agro-Biodiversity
Nad Bugiem	YES	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	YES
Zielone Zagrody	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO	YES	NO
Zielona Rzodkiewka	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO
Farma Stary Jesion	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO	NO	YES
Marianka	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	YES
Green leaf GR Kąkolewice	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on survey data.

The findings indicate that the most common reasons for establishing a CSA were farmers' desire to reduce financial risk through advance payments and their concern for preserving traditions and biodiversity. These motivations were indicated by four respondents. Environmental protection was also an important factor (three responses). It

may therefore be concluded that, when deciding to operate within the CSA model, farmers were primarily guided by financial and environmental considerations.

It is also noteworthy that in three cases the establishment of a CSA resulted, among other factors, from consumer interest. This demonstrates the significant influence of conscious consumers in shaping the direction of contemporary agricultural development.

Interestingly, only one farm indicated that identifying a market niche—and the resulting ability to obtain higher prices—was among the reasons for joining a CSA. A similar situation was observed with respect to another factor, namely reduced distribution costs.

The responses suggest that farmers do not consider higher prices or lower distribution costs to be key drivers of their activity. This may lead to the conclusion that, from the farmers' perspective, the predictability and stability of income are more important than the price level itself.

It is equally significant that none of the respondents identified the possibility of obtaining external support as a factor influencing their decision to join a CSA. This may be attributed to the limited interest of public institutions in supporting CSA initiatives. As a result, farmers do not perceive potential benefits that such institutions could offer.

In summary, the survey results allow for the identification of several key benefits obtained by farmers participating in CSAs, including:

- income predictability,
- guaranteed market outlets for products,
- time savings related to product sales and the ability to focus on cultivation,
- building cooperative networks,
- direct contact with consumers.

These findings suggest that farmers appreciate the advantages associated with short food supply chains, market stability, and predictable income streams.

Despite the potentially favourable conditions for CSA development in Poland—arising, among other factors, from the fragmented farm structure (according to the 2020 Agricultural Census, farms of up to 10 hectares accounted for 74% of all holdings)—the model is developing very slowly, and its overall impact remains limited. The reasons for this situation can be traced to barriers that hinder CSA functioning.

The survey results confirmed the existence of numerous barriers, varying in nature—from mental and cultural barriers, through regulatory and legal barriers, to constraints related to labour availability.

The most frequently cited difficulty was the challenge of building cooperation networks. The roots of these problems lie in persistently low levels of social capital, which translate into a lack of trust. Trust is crucial because the CSA model relies on advance payments made by consumers. One may even argue that the lack of trust and the reluctance to cooperate constitute a critical barrier to CSA development.

Another identified obstacle involves legal and regulatory barriers. Farmers pointed to difficulties in meeting sanitary and veterinary standards, which are particularly stringent for products of animal origin. The persistence of such barriers may lead to the reduction in CSA offerings to vegetables and fruits only.

An additional challenge is the limited access to labour, mentioned earlier. In this context, greater involvement of consumers in fieldwork would, in principle, be desirable. Paradoxically, environmental concerns and the desire to maintain biodiversity can also act as barriers, as meeting these requirements is highly labour-intensive and time-consuming.

In one of the surveyed farms, attention was also drawn to the lack of suitable collection points for CSA boxes in urban areas.

At the same time, farmers assessed the future prospects for CSA development in Poland generally positively. They see opportunities for growth arising from actions under-

taken by both farmers and consumers. Respondents emphasised the need for strengthening social capital and improving society's eating habits. Education was also considered essential, with educational activities needed for both farmers and consumers. Farmers additionally expect support in the form of improved online sales platforms and the development of marketing services.

Valuable insights also emerge from the analysis of responses concerning the institutions that currently support CSAs and those that, in the farmers' view, should be involved. According to the survey, CSA initiatives are mainly supported by non-governmental organisations—both those representing farmers/producers and those representing consumers. Respondents indicated a lack of involvement from local and national authorities. At the same time, farmers expect local governments (municipalities), Agricultural Advisory Centres, and County Veterinary Inspectorates to take a more active role in supporting CSA development.

5. Discussion

In the international literature, Community-Supported Agriculture is most often analysed in contexts where the model has reached a relatively high level of institutional maturity, particularly in Western Europe, North America, and parts of East Asia. In these settings, CSA is commonly framed as a community-based food provisioning system grounded in solidarity, risk-sharing, and strong producer–consumer relationships [2–4]. This established understanding provides an important reference point for interpreting the Polish case, where CSA operates under markedly different social, institutional, and historical conditions.

A distinct form of CSA developed in Europe, particularly in France (the AMAP system), driven by the need to safeguard non-industrial agricultural models. By 2015, more than 2000 AMAPs were operating across all French regions, serving over 250,000 consumers who received weekly food baskets from local producers with whom they had established formal agreements. A similar situation can be observed in Italy—with approximately 1000 initiatives—and in Switzerland, where around 300 CSA groups operate [67]. In Germany, only five CSAs were founded between 1988 and 2010, yet today more than 400 CSA farms are registered [68]. In China, the first CSA farm was established as late as 2009, but by 2016 the number had already risen to 254 [69].

However, scholars note that the vast majority of CSA-related research concerns Western European countries, with nearly 90% of quantitative studies focusing on the social dimensions of sustainable development [70].

The situation is markedly different in Central and Eastern European countries [26,30], including Poland, as evidenced by the limited number of CSA initiatives. In this region, the scale of CSA activity is significantly smaller than in Western Europe, reflecting the specific characteristics of local agricultural systems and the nature of producer–consumer relations. In 2016, the number of registered CSA initiatives amounted to 8 in Poland, 23 in the Czech Republic, and 5 in Romania; by 2020, these figures were 8 in Poland, 80 in the Czech Republic, and 10 in Romania [67,71].

At the same time, a recent study [72] shows that the scale of CSA in Poland remains marginal in operational terms as well. The authors identified 13 farms cooperating with 35 consumer groups and serving approximately 1200 households; however, it is important to note that their sample also included a CSA initiative operated by the University of Life Sciences, which is not a privately managed farm. This means that the actual number of market-based CSAs is even smaller, which is consistent with the findings of the present study that identified 10 initiatives. These results confirm that CSA in Poland remains a niche phenomenon and that the number of active initiatives is significantly lower than in Western European countries or even in the Czech Republic.

The Community-Supported Agriculture model is a relatively new phenomenon in Polish agriculture and has been developing slowly despite potentially favourable conditions, such as the fragmented farm structure and growing environmental awareness among consumers. Against this backdrop, a clear tension emerges between the "idea" and the "reality" of CSA functioning in Poland. On the one hand, the classical CSA model assumes a high level of community embeddedness, solidarity-based risk-sharing, intensive consumer involvement, and strong social capital. On the other hand, empirical findings point to the small scale of the phenomenon, the dominance of instrumental motivations, and limited institutional support. This discrepancy demonstrates that the transfer of the normative CSA concept into the Polish context takes place under conditions markedly different from those in which the model originally evolved.

The same research also suggests that most Polish CSA farms are organic with a high degree of production diversification and agroecological orientation. The present study partially confirms these observations, although a lower share of processed products and a lower level of organisational sophistication were noted among the analysed farms. This may indicate the existence of several distinct CSA models in Poland—ranging from fully professionalised operations to initiatives still in the development phase.

The development of CSA in Poland appears to be constrained by several factors, most notably the low levels of social capital. This issue, particularly acute in rural areas, has been confirmed in previous studies [73,74] and is rooted in broader historical experiences that have shaped a persistent reluctance to cooperate—a finding also corroborated by the farmer survey conducted for this study. A lack of trust in consumers may additionally explain farmers' unwillingness to involve them in on-farm work. It should be emphasised that social capital reduces transaction costs and facilitates advance payments, which constitute the core of the CSA model. As shown by the survey results, advance payments made by consumers are among the most important factors influencing farmers' participation. Trust is therefore a sine qua non condition for the functioning of this model. Interestingly, once such a model is established, it contributes to building trust between local farmers and consumers [75].

Although farmers tend to be relatively optimistic regarding the future prospects of CSA, this optimism does not appear to be reflected in the actual scale of the movement. Earlier literature suggested that support for sustainable rural development in Poland would stimulate the growth of small farms and encourage them to seek new organisational models to strengthen their competitiveness relative to large commercial operations [76,77]. It was also assumed that the fragmented structure of Polish agriculture would favour CSA expansion, especially for farms up to 10 hectares [8]. The findings of the present study do not confirm these predictions. Within CSA, not only small farms but also larger farms are represented, and for most surveyed entities CSA was not the sole source of income. These findings suggest that fragmented farm structures are not, in themselves, conducive to CSA development. On the contrary, CSA initiatives in Poland seem more likely to emerge within larger farms adopting market segmentation strategies and targeting consumers who value traditional and eco-friendly food products.

The referenced research further notes considerable variation in the level of professionalisation among Polish CSA farms. Some treat CSA as their main source of income, whereas others operate within hybrid economic models—an observation also reflected in the present study. While such diversity may support the broader diffusion of CSA, it remains at odds with the founding principles of the CSA model, which emphasise community-building and shared responsibility.

In practice, however, the social dimension of CSA seems to play a limited role. Although farmers acknowledge its importance, the primary objective of CSA operations

currently appears to be the production of organic agricultural goods rather than the cultivation of relationships and shared responsibility for the survival of small farms. This pattern is consistent with findings from other countries, where access to local, high-quality food tends to outweigh community-based motivations [78–81]. Ostrom [82] likewise argued that CSA participants are often not interested in the community-building aspects of the model.

Similar dynamics have been reported among Polish CSA members, who demonstrate limited engagement in community-building activities and only incidental involvement in on-farm work or educational events. When considered alongside the results of the present study, this suggests that Polish CSA initiatives primarily perform an instrumental function, while the community dimension remains underdeveloped.

These observations are consistent with research conducted among CSA members in New York State [83], which showed that most consumers join CSA mainly to obtain fresh, local, and organic food. Only a small share reported joining to build community, meet like-minded people, or share production risks. This parallel reinforces the argument that Polish CSA initiatives may be following an American-style, functional trajectory, distinct from Western European models in which community-building plays a central role [84,85].

Finally, the referenced study highlights the absence of a national umbrella organisation capable of integrating CSA stakeholders, representing their interests before public institutions, and facilitating knowledge exchange. Farmers participating in the present study likewise reported a lack of external support and the absence of a cooperation platform, suggesting that weak networking structures constitute a key systemic barrier to CSA development in Poland. Additional challenges include deficits in financial planning, distribution logistics, and communication with CSA members. Without targeted training and advisory support tailored to the specifics of short food supply chains—and without strengthening both managerial competencies and social capital—the further development of CSA in Poland is likely to remain constrained.

6. Conclusions

Based on the conducted research, it can be concluded that Community-Supported Agriculture represents a model of alternative food networks that promotes direct relationships between producers and consumers, supports local economies, minimises negative environmental impacts, and responds to contemporary challenges related to food security and sustainable development.

However, the findings reveal a clear discrepancy between the "*idea*" of the classical CSA model—founded on solidarity, partnership, and shared responsibility—and the "*reality*" of CSA functioning in Poland. While the theoretical model assumes a high level of consumer involvement, shared production risks, and strong social ties, practice shows that many of these elements are implemented only partially or in a fragmented manner. This divergence indicates that transferring the CSA concept into the Polish socio-institutional context requires adaptation to local conditions, which provides an important interpretive frame for understanding the empirical results.

The study further demonstrates that social capital theory offers an appropriate framework for explaining the mechanisms shaping farmers' engagement in CSA. Trust and cooperation emerged as key factors enabling the development of this model. Three components of social capital proved particularly significant: (1) trust between producers and consumers, which allows for the conclusion of pre-season contracts; (2) norms of reciprocity and shared responsibility, which facilitate the distribution of production risks; and (3) limited institutional infrastructure, which—rather than supporting—often constrains the development of cooperation. At the same time, the findings indicate that the generally low level of social capital in Poland constitutes a major obstacle to CSA devel-

opment. These deficits should be compensated by public-sector engagement, particularly by local governments. Unfortunately, this engagement remains limited, and there is little understanding of the essence and potential of the CSA model. As a result, neither local authorities nor agricultural advisory services have developed institutional mechanisms that could support the establishment and functioning of CSA initiatives.

The research also shows that medium-sized and large farms participate in CSA and treat this model as an additional source of income. This challenges previous assumptions about the adaptation of CSA in the Polish context and raises questions about the role and future of small farms in Poland. The limited interest of small farms in participating in CSA may indicate that they are not inclined to develop long-term relationships with consumers or improve their economic viability. There is also no evidence to suggest that such farms perform environmental functions. Consequently, their role may in practice be limited to satisfying the needs of the farm household.

Overall, the findings highlight the potential of CSA as a cooperative model linking farmers and consumers, particularly in serving niche markets. Strengthening social capital, expanding educational initiatives, and ensuring stable institutional support will be crucial for the future development of this model in Poland.

This analysis helps fill an important knowledge gap concerning the theoretical and practical foundations of farmer engagement in CSA in Poland. It considers key determinants such as social capital, farm structure, and institutional barriers that shape the development of the model in the national context.

Importantly, the results do not support the claim that CSA has specific development potential in countries characterised by fragmented agrarian structures. Although such structures may, in principle, facilitate CSA adoption, the low levels of social capital and limited institutional support significantly reduce this potential.

The conclusions should be interpreted with due consideration of the study's limitations, including the small number of surveyed farms, difficulties in data collection, respondents' mistrust, the absence of an official CSA register, and the organisational diversity of the analysed initiatives.

Future research on CSA in Poland should include larger and more diverse samples, the application of quantitative research methods, and comparative studies (e.g., Poland, Czech Republic, France, Italy) to better understand the conditions enabling stable CSA functioning in different institutional settings. Longitudinal research capturing changes over time and methodological triangulation (surveys, in-depth interviews, and case studies) are also recommended.

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Informed Consent Statement: Verbal informed consent was obtained from the participants. Verbal consent was obtained rather than written because participation in the survey was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, anonymity, and their right to withdraw at any time before starting the questionnaire.

Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors on request.

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Appendix A

CSA SURVEY for Farmers:

1. **Voivodeship:**

a. Dolnośląskie
b. Kujawsko-pomorskie
c. Lubelskie
d. Lubuskie
e. Łódzkie
f. Małopolskie
g. Mazowieckie
h. Opolskie
i. Podkarpackie
j. Podlaskie
k. Pomorskie
l. Śląskie
m. Świętokrzyskie
n. Warmińsko-mazurskie
o. Wielkopolskie
p. Zachodniopomorskie

2. **Name of the municipality**
3. **CSA area (in hectares)**
4. **Total farm area (in hectares)**
5. **Is CSA your only source of income?**

a. Yes
b. No

6. **Is CSA the main focus of your agricultural activity?**

a. Yes
b. No

7. **What percentage of your farmland is allocated to CSA?**

a. Please specify: ____ %

8. **How many consumers participate in your CSA?**

a. Please specify the number: ____

9. **What is the maximum number of consumers that could participate in your CSA?**

a. Please specify the number: ____

10. **How many people (on average per year) work on your farm (including family members and seasonal workers)?**

a. Please specify the number: ____

11. **Do consumers help you with fieldwork?**

a. Yes
b. No

12. **Do you see a need to involve consumers in fieldwork?**

a. Yes
b. Rather yes
c. Rather no
d. No

13. **Did you operate a farm before establishing the CSA?**

a. Yes
b. No

14. **What factors motivated you to operate within a CSA model?**

(multiple answers possible)

- ○ Opportunity to access premium-price markets
- ○ Reduced logistical and delivery expenses
- ○ Strong consumer demand and engagement
- ○ Lower financial exposure due to upfront payments
- ○ Access to external assistance (e.g., grants, subsidies)
- ○ Commitment to environmental stewardship
- ○ Preservation of cultural heritage and agro-biodiversity

15. **Please indicate the most important benefits you gain from participating in CSA:**

a. . . .
b. . . .
c. . . .
d. . . .
e. . . .

16. **Please indicate the key challenges associated with operating within the CSA model:**

a. . . .
b. . . .
c. . . .
d. . . .

17. **How do you assess the development prospects of your CSA?**

a. Good
b. Rather good
c. Hard to say
d. Rather poor
e. Poor

18. **How do you assess the development potential of CSA in Poland?**

a. Good
b. Rather good
c. Hard to say
d. Rather poor
e. Poor

19. **What factors could support the development of CSA in Poland?**

a. . . .
b. . . .
c. . . .
d. . . .

20. **What type of support is needed to improve the effectiveness of CSA in Poland?** *(multiple answers possible)*

- ○ Legal (regulatory compliance)
- ○ Sanitary (compliance with sanitary and veterinary standards)
- ○ Financial (development grants)
- ○ Accounting (tax regulations and settlements)
- ○ IT support (digital sales platforms)
- ○ Organisational (coordination of joint sales initiatives)
- ○ Marketing
- ○ Other (please specify):
- ○ No additional support is needed

21. **What, in your opinion, are the main barriers to the development of CSA?**

Barrier	Impact on the development of CSA				
	Strong	Rather strong	Neutral	Rather weak	Weak
Production (including production costs)					
Processing					
Logistics/Distribution					
Financial Issues (Investments, Liquidity)					
Legal Issues (Regulations)					
Certifications					
Cooperation Difficulties					
Consulting					
Market Competition					
Combating Unfair Competition					
Consumers and Their Habits					
Lack of Sufficient Funds for Promotion/Sales Development					
Lack of Promotion and Sales Knowledge and Skills					
Other, Specify?					

22. **Which institution provides the strongest SUPPORT for the development of CSA (left column), and which three SHOULD be more involved (right column)?**

Those that provide support (current situation)	Public Administration and Regulatory Institutions	Those that should provide support (desired situation)
☐	Voivodeship (Marshal's Office)	☐
☐	County (Starostwo)	☐
☐	Municipality	☐
☐	Village	☐
☐	Agricultural Advisory Centre (ARIMR)	☐
☐	Agricultural Advisory Centre in Brwinów	☐
☐	Provincial Agricultural Advisory Centre (ODR)	☐
☐	County Agricultural Advisory Teams	☐
☐	Provincial Chamber of Agriculture	☐
☐	County Councils of Agricultural Chambers	☐
☐	Other producer associations/cooperatives	☐
☐	Other consumer associations/cooperatives	☐
☐	Local Action Group (LGD)	☐
☐	Associations, foundations (NGOs)	☐
☐	County Sanitary Inspection (SANEPiD)	☐
☐	County Veterinary Inspection	☐
☐	Tax Office	☐
☐	Other (specify)	☐

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