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## ***COVID-19 and Community Supported Agriculture: The Uncertain Promise of Food Security<sup>1</sup>***

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During the early months of the pandemic, alternative urban farming practices garnered more attention from a wider audience. One such practice is the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)-type projects, which saw a boon in interest and activity. For some, this new level of interest is a potential sign of a new era of food security for all. However, there are major roadblocks, primarily that CSA-type projects are prohibitively expensive and thus inaccessible to many. While touted as community supported, CSA farms tend to be supported by well-to-do individuals and families and thus the benefits of the farm's produce are generally only made available to those that are not susceptible to food insecurity.

CSA is a form of alternative agriculture. Modelled on beliefs of environmental sustainability, organic produce, combating climate change and fostering a community, CSAs are one of the more successful attempts at alternative farming in the West. In Europe and the United State there are roughly 20,000 CSA-type projects in operation. Between the farmer(s), members and volunteers, a CSA produces shares of fruit and vegetables for the paying members each week. CSAs attract a variety of people with different backgrounds and interests, but being a member of a CSA is primarily a middle-class endeavour.

The ethnography was collected during fieldwork between 2018 and 2020 on a CSA in the Greater Dublin Area, Ireland. Using this material, I will discuss the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the beliefs of my research participants in relation to their role in the future of food security and the issues that arise when those beliefs are challenged by the current state of the CSA model.

Food is always on the frontline of a crisis, be it issues of food availability for at risk communities, domestic production or importing and exporting. During the catastrophic First and Second World Wars, the Victory Gardens of the United States and their counterparts, the War Gardens of the United Kingdom and Germany, produced food for impoverished citizens and the continuation of the war effort. In more recent crises, community-centred farms and gardens have been used to combat food insecurity. The current pandemic is no different, and a discourse similar to that of the war garden ignited in the recent emergency. Take, for example, the title of a CBS article published on 5 April 2020, 'Victory Gardens for the War Against COVID-19' (D'Amelio 2020). While the article focuses on the United States, the evocation of the Victory Garden lends itself to the feelings of severity and inexorable change felt by my research participants, many of whom discussed the possible new reality that the seemingly tectonic shift in public discourse might afford them. For them, the idea that CSAs could become

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Mairéad for all her support throughout my doctoral studies. I would also like to thank the Irish Research Council; without their funding this research would not be possible.

an integral part of food production in the near future, potentially removing the threat of food insecurity for all through sustainable farming seemed one step closer to being actualised. The wider middle-class turn toward local food production has been growing for some time, with a move toward locally grown organic produce. However, the concentration of attention toward alternative urban farming practices during the most severe weeks of lockdown was unparalleled. During this time of what Samimian-Darash (2013) calls ‘potential uncertainty’,<sup>2</sup> people began to look to alternative ways of ensuring access to food. Issues of food security are not new, but from the perspective of the Irish middle class, the pandemic shined a light on the fallibility of even the most seemingly secure Western food networks. In the uncertain scenario of the pandemic, CSAs seemingly offer an alternative to the established food networks of industrial farms and supermarkets.

At the onset of the pandemic in March there was a run on certain staple food products in supermarkets. This led to temporary shortages throughout the country. While only temporary, the shortages coupled with the pandemic in general had a noticeable effect on interest in the CSA among the local town’s community. Although for much of March and April the farm was closed to everyone but the head farmer, membership applications increased dramatically. When the first harvest shares became available in June, later than the first harvest in April of previous years, curious passers-by expressed their newly-found awareness of the locally grown produce. Surprise at the variety and availability of produce was a consistent reaction from both members and non-members. When harvest shares resumed, social distancing was implemented when working on the farm and collecting shares. An outdoor collection stand was installed to allow for social distancing and face masks were mandatory for volunteers, when handling food and for members on collection days. These measures not only adhered to the hygiene guidelines but also ensured a safe and predictable experience for all involved.

Wutich and Brewis state; ‘food insecurity creates uncertainty and unpredictability’ (2014: 451). For my participants, local urban agriculture, primarily the CSA, is the obvious choice to combat the uncertainty created by food insecurity. Due to its small scale, the CSA is much more resilient and adaptable to change than its large-scale industrial cousins. However, the perception of CSA-type projects being the answer to food insecurity may not be the solution its proponents hope it to be. DeMuynck uncovered that ‘the experience of being at the [farmers’] market is often more important than the products that they purchase there’ (2019: 12). From discussions with volunteers and members at the CSA, it was clear that a similar mindset to the visitors of farmer’s markets was carried by some of those who came to collect their share of fruit and vegetables each week of the season. A research participant explained that joining the CSA was down simply to having the spare income and that the CSA seemed like a nice idea. For some, the experience or the kudos one can claim for supporting a local project are more valuable than the products provided.

Financially supporting a community farming project such as the CSA, or buying food at a farmers’ market, are middle class endeavours, reserved for those who can afford the above average prices and the annual subscription fees. Due to the relatively small scale and sporadic

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<sup>2</sup> Specifically, the ‘space between what has occurred and what is about to occur’ (2013: 3).

nature of outside funding, government or otherwise, CSA projects in Ireland source much of their financial support through membership subscriptions. The income from subscription fees ensures the CSA can continue to operate.<sup>3</sup> And yet, it is those who cannot afford CSA membership that are far more likely to struggle with food insecurity, not the middle-class a CSA tends to attract.

Urban centres throughout the West, including neighbourhoods in Toronto, Glasgow and Belfast, are home to identified ‘food deserts’. A food desert can be defined as an urban area in which it is almost impossible to obtain affordable nutritious food. In the Greater Dublin Area, there are no official ‘food deserts’ but many people still cannot access good quality, nutritious food. During lockdown the ‘food desert’ problem undoubtedly intensified; the increased lack of accessibility to supermarkets and restrictions on public transport (which in some cases was stopped entirely) exacerbated matters further. Some of my research participants advocate the creation of more CSA projects to combat food deserts. But, as already stated, people on a low or extremely low income, who are most susceptible to the effects of food deserts, would not be in a position to afford a membership. Even supplementary donations on subscriptions to subsidise fees, a tactic employed at the CSA where I volunteered, are not enough to support many additional members. Regardless of the surge in interest in urban farming projects, those who are at most risk in a crisis — whether it be the result of a virus or an economic collapse — still find the produce out of reach.

Another noteworthy issue is the kind of community the CSA fosters. While the intention is that the CSA should be part of the geographic community where it is situated, it tends instead to be focused on its own cultural community. While it is true that this cultural community is exclusive in several ways, especially because of the previously mentioned cost of entrance, it is also true that it proved invaluable to members who were required to self-isolate, forming a network of care they could access whether they required their food share to be delivered or were in need of other assistance. Delivery was carried out on an informal basis, generally consisting of members picking up shares for other members they knew. On occasion the head farmer would deliver shares to members as well. However, this community network does not currently spread far beyond the confines of the CSA’s community, if at all. In the vision of the future portrayed by research participants and the media, the CSA is a pillar of the community that is accessible to all. In reality this is not yet the case.

For many research participants, accessible, locally produced organic produce is a resource for those who lack access to nutritious and sustainable food. As stated however, food produced by the CSA is unattainable by those who reside outside of the middle classes. As it currently stands, it would seem that the values held by the CSA are not being fully realised. Many factors are, of course, outside the control of the CSA itself but as the notion of ‘accessibility to all’ is of great importance there appears to be discrepancies. Next to the matter of accessibility is the issue of eco-ethics, or rather an arguably misguided form of eco-ethics exploited by rampant

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<sup>3</sup> In many cases, the subscription fees only cover the minimum expenses of a CSA. Rarely do the subscriptions alone allow for investment in large projects, instead going toward the farmer’s pay and farm maintenance.

commodification. Throughout the alternative agriculture movement there are issues around the moralising of the local produce and the installation of a moralising framework upon those who can afford to be part of the community and those who cannot. Buying imported food with unknown origins and an assumed high carbon footprint, not only are people who shop in supermarkets or discount stores judged to be less moral because they choose to feed their families with less nutritious food but also because, in the process, they contribute to damage the environment. Choosing to support a project like the CSA, one might claim moral superiority because of one buys from a farm in one's community, high entrance cost and all. There is the obvious appeal of more nutritious, organic food of course, and for some this is the main attraction of local community farms, but it is difficult to ignore the eco-ethically charged discourse and values attributed to being part of a project like CSA. One must also ask whether this shift is truly being fostered in a new cooperative spirit, in resistance to neoliberalism, or is simply feeding into the creation and exploitation of an unwittingly commodified eco-ethics or environmental ethics. It is worth noting here, that much like the farmers' market in DeMuynck's piece, the CSA is always under threat as 'being used to construct a commodified eco-ethical cultural image' (2019: 14).

The apparent shift in the general public's attitude as a result of the pandemic has emboldened alternative urban agriculture projects. My CSA field site is no different. In group text messages and during the interviews I conducted during the early stages of the pandemic, participants were clear in their sense of renewed vigour. While the human toll taken by the virus has been overwhelming, the situation has created unprecedented support amongst the CSA's community. Touted by some as the silver lining, COVID-19 has been labelled a catalyst of sorts for the CSA farm and other similar projects, and to a healthier future for the local community and eventually society as a whole. Alongside much of the environmental activist spectrum, the pandemic is seen by many in the alternative food production realm as the signal flare for change. A battle cry from the Guardian newspaper echoes the sentiment; 'Not everyone can access locally farmed food, especially in urban areas. We need to expand and fund initiatives such as urban farms, community gardens and mobile food markets' (Matei 2020). It may very well be that we are standing on the precipice of a new age in urban food growing, an age in which the reality of universal food security in urban spaces is realised. But, as it stands, only time will tell if this pandemic will result in community supported agriculture becoming an integral part of our urban communities. It seems far more likely that for the foreseeable future Community Supported Agriculture will remain only available to, and supported by, the middle classes. It is difficult to know if the renewed public interest in community farming projects is the sign of a permanent shift in Irish, and wider Western, attitudes or if it is a temporary blip that will fade alongside the memory of the destruction wrought by the virus.

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