



# Proximity despite distance? A community-supported agriculture initiative across rural mountain and urban areas in Switzerland

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## Abstract

Various grassroots initiatives that have emerged in recent decades reduce our dependence on large-scale industrial agriculture. They decouple food value from volatile markets through close producer-consumer relations, displaying potential for food system transformations towards post-growth. Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) is an organizational form among them. While most CSAs cover short distances between farmers and consumers within (peri-)urban areas, this qualitative research focuses on an initiative in Switzerland that links rural mountains with urban areas. The study examines the role of institutional, organizational, cognitive, social, and experiential proximity among consumers and farmers in co-creating a food production and consumption system despite geographical distance. It found that consumers and farmers are facing challenges in establishing proximity; nevertheless, shared experiences of farming activities and social events, as well as participants' willingness to improve the CSA operation and strengthen ties for mutual understanding and joint efforts, contribute to the ongoing process of establishing proximity.

## Keywords

Alternative Food Networks, Community-Supported Agriculture, post-growth, food, urban-rural relations

## 1. Consumer-producer relations in post-growth food systems

Calls for post-growth food systems, countering increasing globalization and industrialization, concern not only a 'localization' or 're-spatialization' but also a 're-socialization.' Food systems that aim to offer such an 'alternative food geography' (Wiskerke, 2009) or 'spaces of possibility' (Moragues-Faus & Marsden, 2017), reconnecting producers and consumers through grassroots initiatives, are often referred to as Alternative Food Networks (AFNs). AFNs provide "food markets that redistribute value through the network against the logic of bulk commodity production; that reconvene 'trust' between food producers and consumers; and that articulate new forms of political association and market governance" (Whatmore *et al.*, 2003, p. 389). Research relates the alterity of AFNs to their form of organization, structural processes that affect them, as well as the values they encompass (Blumberg *et al.*, 2020). Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) constitutes a form of AFN. According to the International Network for Community-Supported Agriculture (Urgenci, 2016b, p. 4), the core principles of CSAs encompass agroecological production methods and animal welfare, local knowledge, fair working conditions, community building, active participation, and solidarity, as well as accessible, fresh, local, seasonal, healthy, and diverse food. CSA initiatives hold these principles to varying degrees and manifest in various consumer-producer arrangements (e.g., Degens & Lapschieß, 2023). CSAs typically align the production capabilities of agricultural land with the number of people who can be nourished, forming the

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foundation for participants' subscriptions or harvest shares (Urgenci, 2016a). In addition to increasing farmers' security through advance payments and contractual acceptance guarantees, some CSAs expand the principle of solidarity to include consumers in farm labor, packaging, and transportation. Such 'prosumption' practices blur the roles of consumers and producers (Pineda Revilla & Essbai, 2022).

Current research highlights the high transformative potential of CSAs towards post-growth by co-creating a food production and consumption system among farmers and consumers: CSAs can reduce the dependence on large-scale industrial agriculture and decouple food value from volatile markets through shared risks, joint decisions, and farm labor among producers and consumers, as well as upfront financing for farmers and the distribution of actual yields to consumers (Blättel-Mink *et al.*, 2017; Bloemmen *et al.*, 2015; Hvitsand, 2016; Pineda Revilla & Essbai, 2022). Along these lines, CSAs have been framed as part of the commons, because of the strong interdependencies found between producers and consumers in their collective self-organization of food production and consumption systems (Cameron, 2015; Vivero-Pol *et al.*, 2019).

We studied a CSA<sup>3</sup> that was founded to support structurally disadvantaged mountain agriculture in Switzerland. Swiss mountain agriculture is heavily influenced by topographic and climatic conditions, such as high altitudes, shorter growing seasons, and steep gradients (Flury *et al.*, 2013). Particularly in areas where arable farming is difficult or impossible, mountain farmers rely heavily on extensive livestock grazing (Spengler, 2020). Distances to processing and distribution facilities are significant (Flury *et al.*, 2013). Due to these competitive disadvantages and smaller farm sizes, the production volumes and income levels in mountain agriculture are generally lower than lowland farming, despite significant state subsidies (Hochuli *et al.*, 2021). Mountain agriculture does contribute to biodiversity, cultural landscapes, and the sustainable use of land that would otherwise be unsuitable for cultivation (Flury *et al.*, 2013).

The CSA we studied connects urban consumers with mountain farmers, but it is challenged by elevation and distance, particularly for its product processing. It has logistical challenges across regions that participants perceive as considerable distances apart and they associate them with different 'lifeworlds.' CSAs mostly involve short geographical distances between consumers and producers in urban and peri-urban areas and predominantly focus on vegetable production rather than processed food products, so this is something of an atypical case (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Further, to our knowledge, CSA initiatives do not typically extend beyond regional boundaries and do not involve significantly different socio-cultural contexts.<sup>4</sup> This article, therefore, aims to contribute to a discussion on how close consumer-producer relations – at the core of post-growth transformations – can be established despite the challenges of distance and socio-cultural differences. We ask how consumers and farmers in the CSA co-create their food production and consumption system across mountainous rural and urban areas and their associated 'lifeworlds' in Switzerland.

## 2. Conceptualizing producer-consumer proximity despite geographical distance

Previous research on inter-organizational coordination proposes proximity as important for interactive learning, innovation, conflict resolution, and the negotiation of divergent interests (Boschma, 2005; Knobén & Oerlemans, 2006; Torre & Rallet, 2005).

According to Boschma (2005), geographical proximity refers to the absolute and relative physical distance between actors, while cognitive, organizational, social, and institutional proximity are intangible attributes that overlap conceptually and empirically and might be grouped as relational proximity, more than distance alone. Institutional proximity can be defined as a shared base of the rules of the game, values, and cultural norms, providing stable conditions for interactive learning. Organizational proximity refers to governance structure and encompasses the shared formal relations within or between organizations that allow an exchange of knowledge and expertise, balancing flexibility and control in experimentation and knowledge sharing. Cognitive proximity facilitates mutual understanding and knowledge sharing, depending on the extent

<sup>3</sup> To protect anonymity, we do not refer to the CSA by its name.

<sup>4</sup> To the knowledge of the authors, another CSA in an Italian mountain area has been studied by Immovilli (2023), but this case does not have the same characteristics.

to which group members share the same knowledge base and expertise while allowing access to complementary knowledge domains and skillsets. Social proximity describes the degree to which economic relations are embedded in a social context. It facilitates tacit knowledge exchange, fostering trust-based social relationships and mutual commitment and experience. Notwithstanding, strongly pronounced social proximity can also diminish an organization's ability to learn. While geographical proximity is beneficial for conveying tacit knowledge and encourages interaction and collaboration, other forms of proximity based on intangible and relational aspects can serve as substitutes.

Proximity conceptualizations have been applied to the study of collective organizations and value chains in the agri-food sector (e.g., Dubois, 2018; Eriksen, 2013; Gugerell *et al.*, 2021, 2022). Gugerell *et al.* (2021) have adapted Boschma's (2005) proximity conceptualization to look at the attractiveness of a CSA to its members and outside actors. We consider their work useful for this case of a recent CSA initiative that is still in its infancy, undergoing experimentation with its day-to-day operations and the negotiation of its rules and values. Moreover, its reach extends across a geographical distance that participants perceive as influencing its everyday operations.

We complemented the operationalization of Gugerell *et al.* (2021) with the dimension of experiential proximity (see Table 1). We do so to account for consumer members' direct involvement in agricultural work. Previous studies on CSAs emphasize that consumers' participation in agricultural work creates added value through direct relationships with food and producers, in the context of a local landscape (Geissberger & Chapman, 2023; Watson, 2020). This can counter the alienation many consumers have from how food is grown and the work involved (Watson, 2020). Furthermore, members can gain a new sense of agency if they perceive agricultural work as meaningful, embedded in a new social sphere characterized by practices of care for the environment and community interactions (Geissberger & Chapman, 2023).

<i>Proximity dimensions</i>	<i>Operationalization in food production and consumption systems</i>
<i>Geographical</i>	Degree of spatial distance between participants
<i>Institutional</i>	Degree of collective establishment of institutions (i.e., rules and values) among participants, guiding the operation
<i>Organizational</i>	Degree of formal connections among participants in the organizational arrangement
<i>Cognitive</i>	Degree of shared knowledge and competencies among participants
<i>Social</i>	Degree of connections and personal acquaintance among participants (trust in each other and knowledge about each other) and social acceptance between participants
<i>Experiential</i>	Degree of participants' direct involvement in agricultural work and experience with farm animals, plants, and soil in a particular landscape

Table 1: Operationalization of proximity dimensions for food production and consumption systems. Adapted from Gugerell *et al.* (2021, p. 4) with the experiential dimension

### 3. Methodology

#### *The CSA*

To the authors' knowledge, among the approximately 70 CSA initiatives in Switzerland (Dyttrich & Hösli, 2015; Scharrer *et al.*, 2023), the CSA we studied is a pioneer in establishing a link between rural mountainous and urban areas. It was founded as a cooperative in April 2021 in a Swiss city. By 2023, it had around 50 consumer members who lived in the same city and its surrounding region, except for three who lived

in the region of the collaborating farms or elsewhere. Members include families with children and adults up to approximately 70 years old. In 2023, the CSA worked with two farms in a rural mountain area, each contributing a part of their farm operations (see Figure 1). Officially, the farmers are not members of the CSA cooperative but its partners. An older farmer and his successor contribute fruit trees from their farm in the valley (farm A). Another farmer couple in their forties and fifties with an Alpine farm<sup>5</sup> at 1,900 meters altitude, participate during the summer months, keeping around 70 goats for dairy and meat (farm B).

Membership of the CSA is based on identification with guiding principles, the purchase of cooperative shares, a yearly financial contribution, and participation in work activities—for either five to seven days per year for a minimum of three years, or two to three weeks over three years. Members have a variety of roles within the CSA, depending on their interests, skills, occupations, and availability. Their activities at the farms include goat herding and stable work (farm B), tree care, apple and pear harvesting, and apple juice processing (farm A). The CSA responds flexibly to members' ability to participate in the required work stays by involving them in the transport of food, administration, and communication. It also provides a solidarity fund for members with limited financial means. In return for their contributions to farm labor and finances, consumer members receive various products, including apple juice, fruit, goat and cow milk cheese, and goat meat, with some flexibility in the selection. The farmers participating in the CSA emphasized the importance of direct collaboration with consumers in maintaining their labor-intensive apple production and goat herding. They also highlighted that this collaboration gives them a direct market for their apple varieties, goat meat, and cheese, which would otherwise be challenging to commercialize.

#### *Research methods*

Our research with this CSA initiative used an ethnographic methodology (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015) conducted between spring and winter 2023, triangulating participant observation, document analysis, and an interview. We conducted participant observation during a general assembly (28 members) and an extraordinary general meeting (33 members and a farmer) to gain insights into social relations and the CSA participants' engagement in institution-building through decision-making and negotiating its purpose. We complemented these observations with the analysis of internal documents (the website and bylaws). Participant observation during three agricultural work assignments at the partner farms provided insights into the CSA's operational procedures, the practices and social dynamics characterizing work assignments, and the motivations of both consumers and farmers. The first author attended the work assignment at farm A in March (one day of work, including lunch with three farmers, eight members, and one prospective member). Together with the second author, they also attended a work assignment in October (dinner with six members, and one day of work, including lunch with two farmers, six members, and two prospective members). Furthermore, the second author conducted a fortnight-long research stay at farm B in July, collaborating with two farmers and herding goats alongside four consumer members. To interpret the observed practices and dynamics and gather additional information, the first author conducted a qualitative interview with one of the initiators in December 2023. The authors then performed a content analysis (Schreier, 2012) of their notes, guided by the conceptual framework. Additionally, a master's thesis, newspaper articles, and two documentaries featuring the CSA provided further context and information.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Alpine farms or Alps account for one-third of agricultural land cultivated in Switzerland (Agroscope, 2024). They are summer areas, and including mountain pastures, farm buildings, and infrastructure (e.g., milk processing) used during the summer months.

<sup>6</sup> The references are not provided for anonymity reasons.

## 4. Proximity relations in the CSA

### *Geographical proximity*

As explained above, in contrast to other CSAs (for Switzerland, see Dyttrich & Hösli, 2015; Scharrer *et al.*, 2023), the farms and consumers are far apart, and at different altitudes. The vast majority of the 50 consumer members live in an urban area, except for the three mentioned above. Some have a personal connection to this mountain region, either having worked on a farm or Alp, or by regularly vacationing there, in some cases at their holiday homes. The farm locations require most members to travel by car or public transport for approximately two to three hours, making food storage, transportation, and distribution more complex than in other CSAs. Geographical distance necessitates careful planning and adaptability to unforeseen circumstances.

Due to the distance between the farms and most members' homes, work assignments at the partnering farms are organized as extended stays, ranging from three days twice a year at farm A to at least seven consecutive days at the goat Alp of farm B (as of 2023). In the latter case, longer stays are required due to its remote location, which is only accessible via a two- to three-hour hike. They also are required for goat herding, as CSA members need time to become familiar with the goats and their alpine surroundings. Although these work stays involve financial costs and entail long-term planning as well as logistical difficulties, they are central to the CSA and establish temporary geographical proximity among members and with farmers, important for CSA operations (Boschma, 2005; Knoblen & Oerlemans, 2006; Torre & Rallet, 2005) and specifically within agri-food organizations (Edelmann *et al.*, 2020; Gugereil *et al.*, 2021, 2022).

### *Institutional proximity*

The CSA is founded on guiding principles that outline shared rules and values, establishing institutional proximity. According to an initiator, these guiding principles emerged from discussions and negotiations among the five initiators (some of whom are still members), various farmers from the mountain region, and workshop participants from diverse backgrounds. They continue to be discussed and refined. CSA membership is contingent upon agreement with these principles, in addition to the binding financial contributions, which include yearly farm operation dues and the acquisition of a cooperative share certificate.

The guiding principles encompass the following: 1) similar to other CSAs (Urgenci, 2016a), direct cooperation among participants is envisioned to increase independence and sustainability of food production. This entails consumer participation, as well as joint decision-making and planning between consumer members and farmers. 2) Continuity and commitment require consumers to sign up for a three-year contribution period, facilitating planning of agricultural activities and establishing a binding relationship of solidarity among participants. Membership of the CSA therefore extends beyond the typical membership duration of 9-12 months (Urgenci, 2016a). Founding members specified that this requirement is linked to the size of the goat herd at farm B, which they do not want to adjust abruptly. However, the long-term commitment remains contested. 3) As in other CSAs (see Urgenci, 2016a), prices are based on farm operation costs rather than on product unit prices. This enhances risk-sharing among participants, relieves farmers from price pressure, and guarantees stable farmer incomes. Overall, the guiding principles and the emphasis placed on them reflect the CSA's aspirations to co-create a food system among its participants through 'prosumption' practices, joint decision-making, and solidarity.

Agreeing on shared rules and values extends the definition of guiding principles, as it is a dynamic process that involves becoming acquainted with the CSA's day-to-day operations. This was evident during the CSA's work assignments and the extraordinary general assembly, where participants raised numerous comments and questions and engaged in lively discussions. Members expressed differing opinions on applying and modifying existing rules and processes. These differing perspectives centered on the initiative's economic sustainability, participant flexibility, transparency, and solidarity among members. Several motions were submitted to the assembly, calling for increased transparency through stricter regulations governing

cooperation with the partnering farms and the cheesemakers. Additionally, some members proposed that the CSA should evaluate costs at every stage of the value chain and make unpaid work more visible.

In this context, a few members voiced concerns about a perceived imbalance in solidarity, particularly regarding the significant financial contributions and work commitments required of some members, sometimes tied to dissatisfaction with the taste of the cheese, which made them feel that their contributions outweighed what they received in return. Others stressed that members do not fully recognize that the farmers often step in at short notice and do not charge the CSA cooperative for all of their labor. Some members and the farmer highlighted that the CSA is not a commercial enterprise but a solidarity-based initiative that requires compromises from everyone involved. As a result, it may not conform to conventional business relationships nor be subject to typical business analyses or economic rationalities. Previous research (Feagan & Henderson, 2009; Vadera *et al.*, 2022) suggests that balancing different expectations and orientations among CSA participants—such as idealism and pragmatism—requires transparency in workload distribution and a reciprocal understanding of needs, resources, and financial constraints among participants.

### *Organizational proximity*

Only consumers are CSA cooperative members with voting rights at the general assemblies, which limits organizational proximity between consumers and farmers. The farmers rely on cooperation contracts and implementation agreements with the cooperative, which define the financial contribution of the CSA cooperative to the farm operations, the type and intended quantity of food products, and members' work assignments. The processors (i.e., two cheesemakers, the butcher, and the apple juice processor) do not have formal organizational ties to the CSA but are long-term partners with the farmers and take orders from them based on social relations and geographical dependencies.

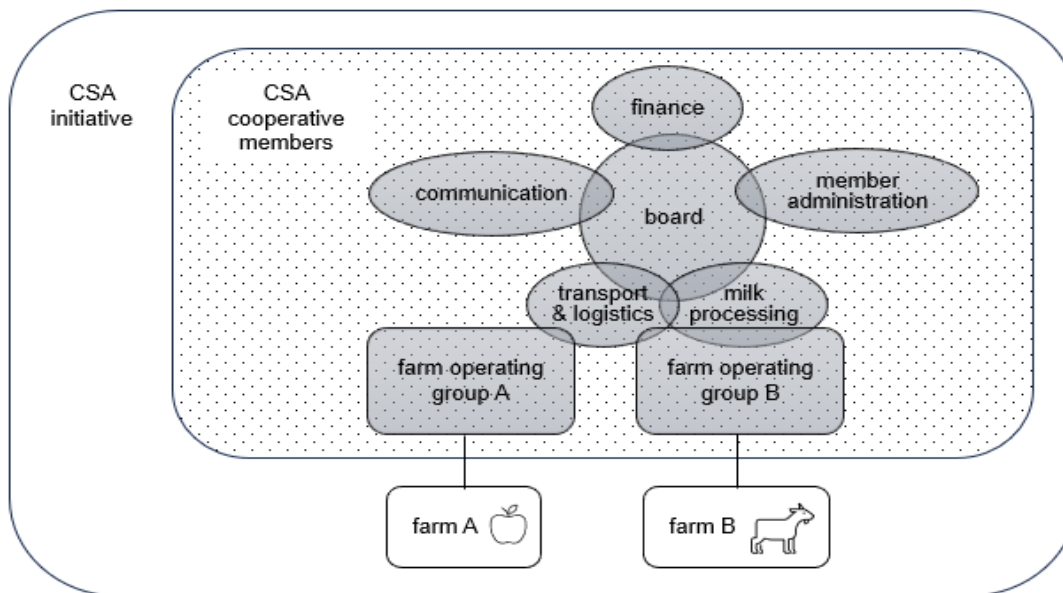


Figure 1: Organizational structure of the CSA (own elaboration)

Organizational proximity to the partnering farmers appears to be a core idea of CSAs and 'prosumption' practices. While farmers may be invited to attend the general assemblies in the city, they are regarded as guests and do not have voting rights. This imbalance stems from the partnering farmers granting the CSA consumers greater influence over idea development when the CSA was founded. Although farmers are not CSA members,

they are involved in decision-making in practice, such as negotiating contract terms and outlining their needs for work assignments. Admitting farmers as CSA members would further increase organizational proximity—a change advocated for by both the farmer and the majority of members at the extraordinary general assembly in 2023. This could lead to a more equitable distribution of risks, responsibilities, and decision-making power between farmers and consumers. Indeed, previous research (Raj *et al.*, 2023) suggests that creating post-capitalist, non-alienated work relations requires dismantling CSA internal hierarchies and decentralizing decision-making within CSAs.

The CSA provides various formal connections among its members, fostering organizational proximity. The organizers (grey elements in Figure 1) operate with a board, two farm operating groups, and five working groups. Operational decisions are delegated to the working groups and the two operating groups, which liaise with the partner farms and processors and organize work assignments at the farms. The board is responsible for overseeing these operational decisions. Additionally, board members participate in working and/or operating groups, giving them a comprehensive overview of CSA activities and their interconnections while strengthening organizational proximity among the organizers. The board also ensures that higher-level decisions, such as the annual budget, are presented to the general assembly for approval and are subsequently implemented.

However, as Figure 1 illustrates, there are multiple overlaps between the working groups and farm operating groups. For instance, the farm operating group B, along with the working groups for transport and logistics and milk processing, communicates with the cheesemakers and/or the butcher in consultation with the farmers. Reducing these overlaps could improve communication flow and reduce workload. Furthermore, at the extraordinary general assembly in 2023, CSA members acknowledged the need for additional platforms to facilitate exchange between organizers and regular members. Similarly, other studies highlight the importance of improving information flow between CSA organizers and regular members and promoting a more balanced distribution of tasks and responsibilities among all participants (Raj *et al.*, 2023). Thus, while a more extensive interface between regular members and organizers will require greater coordination, it could also help resolve operational challenges by allowing regular members to contribute to problem-solving and alleviate the burden on organizers.

### *Cognitive proximity*

The complex operation of the CSA requires a broad repertoire of skills and a shared base of knowledge and competence to foster cognitive proximity and, eventually, effective collaboration. Several members have prior experience with farming – including Alpine farming – through part-time or seasonal employment, civilian service, and volunteer work. Furthermore, most members repeatedly complete their work assignments at one of the farms and exchange tips and tricks with others. Thanks to their experience, their exchange with less experienced members, and written documentation of instructions for work stays, farmers are not always required to provide comprehensive explanations of their tasks to everyone during the work assignments. One CSA member has also acquired knowledge of cheese-making to support cheese production at the Alpine pasture operation that collaborates with the CSA. Members' farming and cheese-making experiences thus contribute to a shared knowledge base among themselves and the partnering farmers and cheesemakers, which facilitates collaboration.

Members from diverse backgrounds and age groups also contribute expertise in various domains, such as accounting, logistics, and communication. For the creative power of collaborative knowledge production to emerge, the CSA must integrate farming and food processing experience with these complementary skills (Degens & Lapschieß, 2023). While the diverse knowledge and experience of CSA participants primarily benefit its operation, they can sometimes lead to challenges. Partnering farmers regularly emphasize that farming and food processing require constant flexibility in response to uncontrollable factors such as the weather or animal health and behavior. Meanwhile, members usually require more advanced planning for their work assignments and for coordinating the logistical interfaces involved in processing and transporting food products. As most members do not live locally and must integrate their CSA commitments with other activities,

some have requested that logistical handovers be adhered to more strictly. This reflects the differing daily realities of farmers and consumers and the challenge of aligning their expectations regarding spontaneity and planning (Vaderna *et al.*, 2022). Nevertheless, one member improved communication among members, farmers, cheesemakers, and the butcher by acting as an intermediary. This member regularly visited the farmers, cheesemakers, and butcher, relaying wishes and concerns back to members to improve mutual understanding of what she described as the different 'lifeworlds' of participants in urban and rural mountain areas, respectively.

### *Social proximity*

Social proximity emerges in the context of annual formal meetings, quarterly product pick-up days, regular organizational meetings, and agricultural work stays.

Formal decision-making meetings – the general assemblies and meetings of the working and operating groups – are embedded in social interactions, contributing to social proximity. General assemblies are accompanied by snacks and drinks, encouraging socializing among participants. Similarly, dinners are held at members' homes during working and operating group meetings to ensure that discussions on the CSA's operation feel more like leisure. This suggests that the CSA constitutes a community of individuals with strong social cohesion. This may be related to the fact that organizing groups are predominantly built on a pre-existing group of friends. The strong social proximity among the members of this CSA contrasts with the findings of Vaderna *et al.* (2022), who found that consumers participating in Swiss CSAs – unlike farmers – tend to perceive the CSA community as an interest group, displaying little interest in social interaction. Nevertheless, not all members of the CSA we studied seek strong social ties, and social proximity among members is not uniform. Furthermore, the strong social proximity among the organizers of the CSA may have exclusionary effects on other members and hinder its capacity to incorporate diverse experiences and inputs.

Although pick-up days occur three times a year, which is less often than in vegetable produce CSAs, they still serve an important social function by allowing face-to-face and informal exchanges among members. Sometimes, pick-up days also extend into longer social gatherings, like barbecues, which the members appreciate. Thus, instead of being mere points of food transaction, food pick-up days are accompanied by shared meals and conversations about experiences with goat herding and the fruit harvest. This aligns with previous studies that identified food pick-up—along with agricultural work—as a key moment in fostering social relationships among CSA participants (Hayden & Buck, 2012; Liu *et al.*, 2017; Savarese *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, the social dimension of food pick-up days reflects that the alternative organization of labor and food provision in CSAs, and foregrounds multiple values of food and associated work, rather than subordinating them to their exchange value (Watson, 2020).

The work stays on the farms are concentrated periods spent together, during which social connections and personal acquaintance among participants develop and intensify, fostering social proximity. As members usually undertake work stays at one of the participating farms, social interaction, mutual commitment, and a sense of trust tend to be more concentrated in the relationships among those who share a common experience of agricultural work. This is in line with previous research on CSAs, which emphasizes the impact of participants' collaboration on consumers' appreciation of farmers and their work, and the development of trust-based relationships (Geissberger & Chapman, 2023; Watson, 2020). Furthermore, it reflects the ability of CSAs to foster a sense of belonging to a community through voluntary dedication to a shared purpose (Liu *et al.*, 2017).

### *Experiential proximity*

While the farm stays contribute to various proximity dimensions within the CSA, consumers' participation in agricultural work also provides them with direct experience of food production, farm animals, plants, and soil in specific landscapes. This experiential proximity is especially evident, since most members stay over on the farms for between three days to two weeks. In particular, herding goats for a week or more creates an intimate experiential connection with the Alp and the goats. As some members noted in a discussion



about goat meat, familiarity with the animals can be challenging for some, as the later slaughtering of some of the animals they cared for is tangible. Others value this proximity, including some vegetarians, who stated that they make a dietary exception for the CSA's goat meat. In general, members emphasize that they participate in the CSA because they seek a deeper understanding of farming and food production. They also appreciate physical work in the mountain terrain and direct engagement with the farms from which they consume. Involvement in agricultural labor can thus mediate other values of food than its physical and tangible qualities (Watson, 2020), such as an attachment to a place, landscape, farm, or animal.

This attachment through experiential proximity includes a temporal component as it builds with time. Longer-term members tend to have stronger ties to the CSA than those without first-hand experience at the farms. This reflects previous research on CSAs, which suggests that consumers' direct experience of agricultural work and sensory involvement transforms their relationship to the environment, food, agriculture, and fellow participants, fostering environmental and ethical linkages (Geissberger & Chapman, 2023; Hayden & Buck, 2012; Savarese *et al.*, 2020; Watson, 2020). Consumers' experience with farm animals, plants, and soil in specific landscapes might thus influence their willingness to co-create the CSA's operation.

The fact that the CSA collaborates with farmers in rural mountain areas shapes experiential proximity. Members must immerse themselves in and adapt to the biophysical conditions of mountain areas, especially when herding goats. Even experienced goat herders reported that they had to get used to navigating and walking up and down the steep slopes over the considerable distances that goats cover during grazing. Members describe herding as physically demanding but also appreciate its restorative value in connecting with the animals and the landscape. Moreover, they find it a welcome escape from their everyday lives and perceive it as a purposeful activity. CSA members attribute the meaningfulness of goat herding to their individual and the CSA's collective responsibility toward the well-being of the animals, the importance of herd protection, and the farmers' challenges in organizing and financing the associated labor. Furthermore, members who work at farm A highly value the labor and care required for arboriculture. Thus, the embodied experience of consumers with hard agricultural work establishes a sense of their contribution to the maintenance of low-input, labor-intensive, and place-adapted agriculture, as well as to the well-being of farm animals and farmers (Liu *et al.*, 2017).

## 5. Conclusion

In this article, we used multiple proximity dimensions to examine the co-creation of a food production and consumption system across rural mountain and urban areas and the associated 'lifeworlds.' The CSA constitutes an organization of 'prosumers' (farmers and consumers) who balance their expectations and abilities, enhancing organizational and institutional proximity through experimentation. Through temporary geographical proximity—spending time together and shaping spaces—the CSA also fosters cognitive, social, and experiential proximity. It generates interactions among consumers and farmers, transforming them into 'prosumers' (Hayden & Buck, 2012; Liu *et al.*, 2017; Savarese *et al.*, 2020). As suggested by other studies, joint decision-making among CSA consumers and farmers, along with consumers taking on responsibilities, counters their alienation from agricultural labor and food, enhances their appreciation of farmers' work, and disrupts unequal consumer-producer relationships (Raj *et al.*, 2023; Watson, 2020). Knowledge about food production is transmitted through interpersonal relationships and direct experience over time, creating a shared knowledge and experience base about food quality and origin (Dubois, 2018; Geissberger & Chapman, 2023).

Due to its particular geography, an imbalance in decision-making, and the different expectations of participants, the CSA we researched faces challenges in creating different forms of proximity. However, its members and farmers display a strong willingness to improve its operation and strengthen ties for mutual understanding and meeting expectations, as evidenced in ongoing discussions. A food system based on proximity among farmers and consumers depends on participation, interaction, and reciprocal relations based on collaboration and mutual benefits (Galt, 2013; Grasseni, 2014; Pineda Revilla & Essbai, 2022). This embeds food production and consumption into social relations and contributes to post-growth transformations identified by political ecologists among others (Blättel-Mink *et al.*, 2017; Bloemmen *et al.*, 2015; Feagan &

Henderson, 2009). As in other CSAs, the 'learning by doing' approach of participants and the dynamic development found in this organization implies a high level of reflexive resilience in terms of participants' awareness of challenges, and their adaptive capacity. This may play a pivotal role in enabling the CSA to reach its full transformative potential, particularly regarding the actual participation of farmers and consumers—representing various socio-economic groups—in decision-making processes (Degens & Lapschies, 2023).

In particular, consumers' first-hand experience with farm animals, plants, and soil in a specific landscape can enhance their perception of engaging in meaningful activities and thereby contribute to the maintenance of extensive agriculture and landscape stewardship (Geissberger & Chapman, 2023; Hayden & Buck, 2012), which is highly relevant in the context of mountain agriculture. To account for this immediate experiential involvement of members, we added experiential proximity as an extra dimension of the evaluative criteria for a CSA (Table 1). While the proximity dimensions are interdependent, we call for further research to examine whether experiential proximity predetermines how farmers and consumers interact, influencing social, cognitive, organizational, and institutional proximity. We assume that, in particular, the blurring of the boundaries between production and consumption spaces through experiential proximity in CSAs can contribute to "rebuilding connections between the urban and the rural" (Pineda Revilla & Essbai, 2022, p. 184). Thus, experiential proximity might also hold potential for other AFNs and 'prosumption' practices.

The CSA is a small and dynamic initiative with a unique set-up connecting urban and rural mountain areas. From a methodological perspective, this poses challenges in gaining access to and keeping up with ongoing discussions while also avoiding participants' research fatigue. Nevertheless, our positionality and participatory methodology facilitated close relations with research participants and helped mitigate the extensive time required for our investigations. It also involved a dialogue about the subjectivity of research, which we have partially overcome by maintaining anonymity here. We suggest that, despite—or perhaps because of—its particular spatial configuration, the CSA can be seen as a space of experimentation. Its ongoing formation and negotiations may serve as a testing ground for post-growth food systems (Bloemmen *et al.*, 2015; Moragues-Faus & Marsden, 2017), especially for fostering close consumer-producer relationships across spatial distances and different 'lifeworlds.'

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

## **Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process**

During the preparation of this work, the first author used DeepL Write and Grammarly to enhance the text's clarity. After using these tools, the authors reviewed and edited the content, and take full responsibility for the publication's content.

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