

## **Grassroots Innovation for Sustainability: The diffusion of Community Supported Agriculture in Germany**

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One of the most demanding challenges of our time is the creation of sustainable consumption and production systems in order to prevent the systematic destruction of the foundations we live on. Sustainable Development is an internationally agreed guiding principle. It asks societal stakeholders to address the social and ecological drawbacks of our society. But even though a lot of effort has been undertaken over the last two decades and several conferences and international meetings have been held to shape international agreements in the area of climate protection, biodiversity or poverty reduction, only a few of the so-called „Megatrends“ could be successfully fought. The German Advisory Council on Global Change (Wissenschaftlicher Beirat der Bundesregierung Globale Umweltveränderungen, WBGU) therefore states that the support of a „Great Transformation“ from a coal-based unsustainable economic model to a climate neutral society should be a high-priority political task (WBGU, 2011). Therefore, it would be necessary not only to radically change our economic system but our whole way of life.

The present work deals with the question of how radical societal change for a sustainable development can be fostered and tries to answer this for the agricultural sector. Therefore it investigates the diffusion of an alternative food production and consumption practice – Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). CSA is a concept describing a community which reorganises agricultural production and food consumption in a solidary way. Members of the CSA-community share the costs, the risks, the harvest solidarily – for at least one year. This leads to another production, distribution and consumption structure than the dominant market structure offers. The study shows that this kind of farming can be considered as more sustainable than the dominant practices in agriculture. Thus conclusion leads to the following questions: How did the movement of CSA managed to spread out till now? And how can it get supported to become even more relevant in society?

The study is based on the ideas of Transition Theories and Strategic Niche Management. Here, 'niches' are discussed as initial point for societal change (Grin et al., 2010; Kemp, Rip & Schot, 2001; Hoogma, 2002). This concept of niches refers to protected spaces where experiments can take place and alternative practices to the current dominant 'regime' can be developed. Approaches like the Strategic Niche Management (SNM) deliberately try to grant more space for experimentation and the development of innovative and sustainable practices (Kemp, Schot & Hoogma, 1998; Schot & Geels, 2008). In the study CSA gets conceptualised as 'alternative niche' within the current unsustainable agricultural system. But unlike the technological niches addressed in the classical approach of SNM, CSA is a 'grassroots innovation' which developed bottom-up. This paper argues in line with other authors that 1.) the classical approach of SNM is too technocratic (Hendriks, 2008; Scrase & Smith, 2009), 2.) hereby no radical alterations as opposition to the mainstream can be expected, but 3.) in fact non-governmental groups and parts of civil society are the stakeholders initiating fundamental shifts in different societal sectors (Iten, 2009).

To find out more about the CSA movement therefore was a necessary step, because till now just a few scientists started to research the emergence, development and diffusion of production and consumption systems which started bottom-up (Kroh et al., 2012; Bauler et al., 2013; Seyfang & Smith, 2007). Especially in terms of driving and drawback factors related to a diffusion of those 'socio-technical niches' (Iten, 2009), 'social experiments' (Verheul & Vergragt, 1995) or 'grassroots innovations' (Seyfang & Haxeltine, 2010; Monaghan, 2009) a lot of research needs to be done (Debardou et al., 2012). The empirical work of this study addresses exactly this research gap. Seven farms which could be considered as 'typical cases' got visited and selected multipliers were interviewed. It got analysed, if the factors which are considered relevant for a diffusion of a (technological) innovation initiated top-down (building a social network, learning, managing expectations) are also applicable and significant for a social innovation, driven bottom-up. Besides this, other influencing factors for the diffusion of CSA could be described.

The study showed, that the grassroots organisation CSA managed itself to spread out around Germany. Thereby three different phases of diffusion could be characterised: (1) the emergence of CSA, (2) the beginning of replication and (3) bundling/networking, whereby every phase showed a specific formation of significant factors, influencing the development of the niche. The significance of a heterogeneous network, learning and the development of a shared vision could be underlined. But in contrast to the classical SNM approach it could be shown that, (1) people criticising the current system built an initial point for taking action in order to change the regime, (2) social movements play a significant role in order to support the diffusion of such a niche and (3) state interventions also got perceived as non-supportive. Then again it could be shown that a financial support of the state Brandenburg seems to have directly influenced the emergence of 10 new CSA initiatives around Berlin in just a few years. All the influencing factors get summarised in a fishbone diagram. Thus the study provides feasible ways of support for grassroots niches, as well as their limits.