

## Food Sovereignty, CSAs and Agroecology

### Creating Well-Being for People & Planet through Community Supported Agriculture

*On Wednesday 13th November, representatives from 4theRegion attended an event entitled, Sustainable Food Production: Potential for CSA in Wales. This is our write up of the event, intended to capture the key discussion points, themes and “actions arising”.*

Cinema & Co in Swansea City Centre was packed out on Wed 13th November 2019, with a diverse mix of people from organisations and communities across the region, to hear more about the work of [Cae Tan CSA](#) and co-create some answers to a central question: how might we develop more Community Supported Agriculture in Wales?

The event was organised by Cae Tan, Wales’ largest Community Supported Agriculture initiative. Based on Gower, Cae Tan supplies locally grown veg boxes to 120 Swansea households, and over the last 5 years has created a thriving community around its biodynamic farm. Cae Tan offers volunteering and learning opportunities to a range of groups and individuals, such as local schools, raising awareness of sustainable farming and reconnecting people to the land and their food.

Rupert Dunn, founder of St Davids based CSA [Torth y Tir](#) chaired the event, which opened with a film screening about the work of the FAO, the Food & Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations. Featuring interviews with farmers around the world, the film highlighted the importance of Agroecology as a means of addressing the root causes of hunger, poverty and inequality by helping to transform food systems and build resilient livelihoods, through a holistic approach that balances the three dimensions of sustainability – social, economic and environmental.

**“Agroecology is the science of sustainable farming as well as a political movement that aims to improve the way food is grown and processed globally.”**

“It’s an exciting time for the agroecology and food sovereignty movements around the world,” said Rupert. “Through the diversity of perspectives of farmers in different countries, there are common threads emerging about the benefits of a return to the traditional ways of managing the land - farming practices that have proven to be sustainable over generations. We can also see how agroecology is not just a set of techniques. It’s about a way of life, community, culture. It’s a completely different understanding of how food is grown, which impacts every aspect of life for people and the environment.”

Key themes in discussions about agroecology and food sovereignty are:

- Diversity - including animals and multi-cropping;
- Seed saving - ownership of seeds;
- “Grandma varieties” of fruits and vegetables and their nutritional importance;
- Access to food processing facilities and infrastructure

From a global perspective, Rupert shifted focus to the agroecology movement here in Wales, which includes the development of Community Supported Agriculture and is raising serious questions about the way “economic scale” farming is negatively impacting our environment and our well-being - particularly the well-being of farmers themselves.

The meeting agreed that there is an urgent need to transform our food system here in Wales, and a huge opportunity to create a more resilient, more equal and healthier society, if we are able to successfully speed up and scale the creation of more CSAs and more investment in sustainable agricultural practices.

The agroecology movement is not just about agriculture. It has to be a political, strategic and collaborative movement. Rupert concluded his introduction by saying that in conventional farming, and in our current food system, the knowledge of ordinary farmers is not being valued enough. “Economics is pushing farmers into monocultures, where they have to keep 600 cows instead of 60 and can’t grow varied crops”. And yet they know this isn’t sustainable, either ecologically, or in terms of food sovereignty for the population of Wales.

***“What we need to create is a “dialogue of knowing” based on the wisdom of farmers about their land. Let’s work together to identify obstacles and figure out how we can work differently.”***

Tom Kane, who is the director of Cae Tan CSA, spoke next about his experiences of creating Wales’ largest community supported agriculture project. He outlined some of the benefits of the model, which include a guaranteed fair income for growers throughout the year, because households “subscribe” in advance and growers know that whatever they produce, they have a market for.

The direct connection between the community and its food has many other benefits. Where conventional industrial farming has become a lonely and isolated way of life for many farmers, who work on their own on large farms disconnected from their neighbours, Tom described how CSA provides a radical level of community involvement, creating an engaged community around the farm and boosting the well-being of growers, volunteers and everyone involved.

CSA is also a means to low carbon prosperity for rural communities. Locally grown food is provided direct to households with a very low carbon footprint, and money spent is retained locally, creating worthwhile employment for local people.

What Cae Tan CSA has successfully proven over the last few years is that growers can create an economically viable business, they can produce a good amount of food, and with that, a wealth of benefits in terms of community cohesion, for the environment, and through education.

After 5 years, Cae Tan is a stable, well functioning system, and it’s a blueprint that Tom hopes can now be rolled out across the region.



### 3 Challenges for Cae Tan and the Community Supporting Agriculture movement in Wales

Tom Kane spoke about what he regards as his main challenges, or priorities, going forward.

**The first is the need to share the knowledge gained at Cae Tan**, by expanding their capacity to provide training and education, to share skills and enable more people to become growers, and support them to establish more CSA projects. Cae Tan needs funding to carry out this important work of disseminating their learnings and sharing their valuable experience, and Tom regards **the creation of a training and support network as a key priority if we are to see more CSAs in Wales**. Locally, Cae Tan is supporting the creation of a new CSA in Llangennith, and is able to support that project in so many ways, including by sharing knowledge and by referring its own waiting list of around 80 Swansea households who want to buy from another local CSA. Not all new growers would have access to such support.

So, the second key challenge, and an obstacle to the foundation of new CSAs, is the need for **financial start up support for the first 1-2 years of each new enterprise**. In those first two years, CSAs aren't in a position to start selling produce immediately, as they need to prepare the land and get themselves established, find households to get involved, and train volunteers. All of this means that we need to find ways of collectively supporting new CSA to get started.

And the third priority for the Community Supported Agriculture movement, and for Cae Tan specifically, is to **invest in outreach initiatives with local schools**. Cae Tan has a part time schools officer, Jessie Kidd, whose role is to go into schools and teach children about how food is grown. Jessie supports schools to grow their own food, including growing the ingredients to make their own pizzas - planting the tomatoes, milling the flour, and so on. At the moment, Cae Tan is involved with 5 schools but they want to do so much more, and too much time is taken up with applying for the funding to renew the project. Many schools in Swansea would love to do more and to go further, for example converting their playgrounds into community gardens, growing food for their own school meals. We need to figure out how to fund this work and roll out schools engagement projects across the region.

- 1) Share knowledge - establish a training and support network for CSAs
- 2) Financial support for CSA start-ups
- 3) Investment in outreach with local schools

## Crowdsourcing Wisdom

In the second half of the meeting, all participants were invited to contribute to the conversation, to emerge a shared understanding of the challenges faced by different people and different parts of the system. Members of the meeting shared diverse perspectives, and there was representation from grassroots farmers, other local food producers, land owners, the Gower Society, universities, all levels of government including Welsh Government officers, two Swansea MPs, several people from Swansea Council, and a wide range of people with different personal and professional interests in food and farming.

Several people spoke of the sad decline of growing on Gower during their lifetimes, and the disappearance of market gardens. Not long ago, “everyone” on Gower had a garden and grew vegetables, kept chickens and so on. The supermarkets are widely regarded as having destroyed all that.

### **A number of key themes and challenges emerged:**

- **Access to land** - how might we make more land, particularly urban land, available to growers and communities for growing food? Are there more farmers interested in sharing some of their land, to create CSAs alongside conventional farms? How can we match prospective growers to available, suitable land?
- **The need to educate consumers** - people spoke of the importance of reconnecting people with their food, educating people about the value of locally grown produce, teaching people to want local food, and to want to know about the provenance of what they buy and consume.
- **The importance of seed sovereignty and seed sharing**
- **The question of scale and speed** - CSAs are currently small, slow to develop and hard to scale. If we are to meet the challenges of the climate emergency, create resilience in the food supply chain, feed more of the population, and make a real health and well-being impact, we need to work out how to scale CSAs at speed. Cae Tan serves 120 households, but there are more than 120,000 households in Swansea alone...
- **Recruiting the skills** - not enough people have the traditional skills to enable them to grow food and care for the land. The movement needs money for training and also funding for more educational outreach to inspire the next generation.
- **Creating an evidence base** to demonstrate the mental health and well-being impacts of CSAs on children and families. Cae Tan is currently working with a child psychologist who is looking at the benefits to children in schools, and the research is shining a light on the many positive outcomes for everyone involved, not least for the teachers.
- **The intersection of poverty and access to healthy food** was a talking point, along with the role of a transformed food system in addressing many societal problems. It was noted that Cae Tan is a very successful example, but other CSAs, for example one in Carmarthenshire, in a more deprived area, illustrates the challenge of starting a CSA and growing a membership base in particular types of community.

Tonia Antoniazzi, former MP and current MP candidate for Gower, encouraged the CSA community to lobby her and other politicians, to put the issue at the top of the UK and Welsh government agenda. Government needs to develop better policy around this area, and the CSA movement needs **a strong voice** in the ongoing conversations about the future of food and farming.

Small producers shared the challenges of starting a viable business making and selling local produce, eg home made locally grown “borlotti bean chocolate truffles”, and artisan bread etc. “You can do it if your spouse happens to have a well-paid job, but otherwise...”

**Connecting buyers with suppliers is a challenge for small producers.** Cafes and restaurants struggle to find local suppliers, there is no equivalent to a commercial wholesaler for the local produce sector - could we create a producers co-operative to engage with commercial buyers collectively?

It was noted that **public procurement should be used imaginatively to enable and encourage** the growth of Community Supported Agriculture and local food businesses.

And the importance of **engineering skills and innovation** was mentioned. Growers need the support of others with skills in machinery, soil science, and other fields of technology / engineering. One participant shared his dilemma - “I’m a highly-paid engineering academic, but I really want to be a farmer!” This comment speaks to our innate desire to reconnect with the land, which is not about money but is about well-being, happiness, fulfilment...

As the discussion concluded, Rupert summarised some of the shared challenges that had emerged from the room, and proposed a follow up meeting to discuss the **potential to create a network or a co-operative** of some kind, to support the growth of the sector in Swansea and Gower.

## Next Steps

Dawn Lyle from 4theRegion volunteered to help facilitate a working group and a follow up event to explore this as an opportunity area. 4theRegion is a regional network of businesses, organisations and individuals, through which collaborative initiatives such as this can be taken forward by groups of independent changemakers. 4theRegion brings a regional perspective, and asks whether any such network or collaborative could in fact be “regional” (NPT, Swansea, Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire) rather than purely local. Projects like Pembrokeshire Food Park in Haverfordwest, work being undertaken on the University of Wales Trinity Saint David farm in Carmarthenshire, the role of the National Botanic Garden of Wales, not to mention the many farmers, growers, food producers and enthusiasts spread out across the region: all could add value and gain benefit from the establishment of a regional infrastructure supporting the agroecology, CSA and food sovereignty movement.

Congratulations to Rhian and colleagues at Cae Tan for an excellent event with a truly impressive range of people in the room. And expertly chaired in a collaborative and co-creative way by Rupert Dunn. We hope this is the start of a conversation that could make a real difference, and we look forward to co-hosting a follow up discussion to move things forward.

***May we invite those interested in continuing the conversation to join us on Slack. Please email [dawn@4theregion.com](mailto:dawn@4theregion.com) if you would like an invitation to collaborate via this online platform.***