How collaborations shape the practice of community supported agriculture

A single case study from southern Germany

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How collaborations shape the practice of community supported agriculture

Hanna Pfeifer

Supervisor:	**Jonas Bååth, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Department of people and society**
Assistant supervisor:	Sebastian Carlsson, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Department of people and society
External supervisor:	Pia Laborgne, Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, Institute for Technology Assessment and Systems Analysis
Examiner:	Sara Spendrup, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Department of people and society

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Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences
Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences
Department of Molecular Sciences

Abstract

Multiple crises have drawn attention to the vulnerability of the dominant food system, and increased interest in alternatives to its unsustainable structures. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is often seen as a promising model with the potential to change the food system, as its direct marketing approach enables small-scale farming to remain economically viable while reducing the distance between producers and consumers. However, there is still limited understanding of how the impact of CSA can be effectively scaled beyond its niche position. In this context, collaborations and networks are increasingly viewed as potential ways to strengthen the scalability, accessibility, and broader influence of CSA initiatives.

This paper contributes to this discussion by examining collaborations from the perspective of the CSA farm. It asks: How do collaborations shape the practices of CSA? The study is based on a single-case study of a CSA farm in southern Germany and draws on participant observation and interviews with key actors at the farm. The analysis is informed by the framework of social practice theory developed by Elizabeth Shove et al. (2012), which understands practices as configurations of three interrelated elements: materials, competences, and meanings. This perspective is used to explore how CSA farm practices enable collaborations and how collaborations, in turn, shape these practices.

The findings suggest that collaborations are enabled through the integration of materials, competences, and meanings into the CSA farm's existing practices. To facilitate collaborations, practices are adapted, thereby some elements are more flexible than others. However, collaborations do not fundamentally transform the CSA farm's practices, nor do they require entirely new practices to emerge. Rather, collaborations expand existing practices by adding on the materials, competences, and meanings. These expansions also influence the potential of CSA farms to shape the wider food system and can be related to strategies of scaling.

This research provides insights into how CSA can be strengthened and which practices support these initiatives in expanding their influence on the wider food system.

Keywords: Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), collaborations, practice theory, Alternative Food Networks (AFN)

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Completing this thesis leaves me happy and sad at the same time. Happy to complete it, and sad because this marks the end to the great chapter of being a student. During my student years, I have had the freedom to let my hunger for new experiences and my curiosity guide my way. This has been a great guide, resulting in very rich and fun years full of interesting and insightful experiences. I hope work-life will offer at least a small opportunity to let my curiosity continue to be my guide.

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Abbreviation	Description
AFN	Alternative food network
CSA	Community Supported Agriculture

1. Introduction

Global food trade and supply chains spanning international borders have led to a growing disconnection between food producers and consumers. As a result, consumers often know little about the origin of their food (Gomez y Paloma et al. 2013). At the same time, small-scale farmers receive only a small share of the profits generated along the value chain, which are largely captured by large agribusinesses and wholesalers (Gomez y Paloma et al., 2013).

One response to this development are alternative food networks (AFNs), which aim to organise food systems differently from conventional models (Chiffoleau et al., 2019). A key element of AFNs is short food supply chains, in which intermediaries are reduced, and farmers and consumers are more directly connected (Chiffoleau et al., 2019).

Community-supported agriculture (CSA) is one example of an AFN in which farmers and consumers are closely connected through the formation of an economic community (Wellner & Theuvsen, 2017). The core idea of CSA is that the entire agricultural production of a farm - not only individual food products - is financed by a group of consumers (Netzwerk Solidarische Landwirtschaft, 2026). In this way they share the risks of agricultural production. This direct marketing model was developed to counteract the decline of small farms in Europe (Egli et al., 2025).

Research on German CSA farms highlights several positive social and environmental effects. CSA initiatives can raise individuals' awareness of healthier and more sustainable consumption patterns (Wellner & Theuvsen 2017), while CSA farms are often less reliant on fertilizers and machinery, as well as show greater crop diversity than conventional farms (Haack et al. 2020; Egli et al. 2023). Most CSA farms also report following ecological farming standards (Wellner & Theuvsen, 2017). Furthermore, the sharing of economic risks between farmers and consumers reduces market pressure (Bonfert 2022).

In German policy and academic debates, CSA farms are increasingly recognised as potential catalysts for regional food supply systems (Egli et al., 2023) and as actors with the potential to transform the wider food system (Haack et al. 2020; Schrode et al. 2020).

Nevertheless, CSA farms remain a small minority, accounting for only 0.2% of all farms in Germany (Egli et al. 2025). In recent years, many CSA farms have struggled to retain members and remain economically viable (Egli et al., 2023). To address declining membership numbers and difficulties in attracting new members, diversification and the development of additional income sources have become important strategies (Egli et al., 2025). Especially collaborations may play a key role in strengthening the impact and resilience of CSA initiatives (Bonfert 2022;

Rommel et al. 2022; Stoeva et al. 2024). In Germany, CSAs commonly collaborate with other organizations and initiatives in their local area (Bonfert 2022).

However, existing literature on collaborations within the CSA movement is often focused on the business and economic perspective, overlooking the activist and political dimensions of CSA farms. Therefore, a more holistic perspective to understand how partnerships and networks shape the practices and development of CSA farms is important (Bonfert 2022).

1.1 Aim and research question

This study addresses a gap in the existing literature by examining more holistically how collaborations shape CSA farm practices and their role within the wider food system. Accordingly, the aim of this study is to develop a deeper understanding of what the CSA movement gains from collaborations with external partners. Rather than focusing on a single dimension - such as economic, social, or political aspects - this study utilises a holistic perspective in examining the collaborative practice of CSA farms to better understand the processes and effects of collaboration.

The central research question guiding this study is: **How do collaborations shape the practices of CSA?**

Given the complexity of this question, it is divided into three sub-questions:

- Why do CSA farms collaborate?
- How do CSA farms enable collaborations?
- How do collaborations influence the different elements of CSA farms practice?

To generate data suitable for analysing these processes, this study employs a qualitative research design combining participant observation and interviews.

The analytical framework is informed by social practice theory, particularly the approach developed by Shove et al. (2012), which enables an exploration of the CSA farms practices.

Developing a differentiated understanding of collaborative practices, including their underlying motivations and processes, is essential for identifying measures that can effectively support and strengthen CSA initiatives.

2. Food for thought

This chapter aims to familiarise the reader with the practices of CSA farms and their connection to AFNs. It further discusses CSA practices in relation to the environments in which they are embedded, such as the markets in which they operate and their effects on the wider food system. Examining this prior to the empirical study is important for developing a better understanding of the context in which CSA farms operate and how they may, in turn, affect these environments.

Furthermore, collaborations within AFNs are examined to facilitate a subsequent comparison of the potential effects of collaboration on CSA farms with findings from the existing literature.

2.1 Characteristics of Alternative Food Networks

AFNs encompass initiatives that aim to develop food systems operating outside conventional agri-food structures and can be understood as a countermovement to the dominant agri-food model (Brislen 2018). AFNs include a wide range of systems. Related concepts such as short food supply chains, value chains, and alternative food systems are often used interchangeably, as they overlap in meaning and describe similar core features. What these approaches share is the promise to function differently from conventional food systems (Le Velly 2019). Furthermore, practices in AFNs are based on alternative moral values (Schiller-Merkens 2024). Jarosz (2008)identifies four key characteristics of AFNs:

(1) Supply chains are shorter with a shorter distance between producers and consumers.
(2) Production is based on small-scale instead of large-scale industrial practices.
(3) Distribution happens via direct markets such as food cooperatives, farmers' markets, CSAs, and local farm-to-school programs.
(4) Commitment to the social, economic, and environmental sustainability of food production, distribution, and consumption.

AFNs often consist of value-based supply chains which are built on the idea that food is associated with specific product attributes, values and shared ethics (such as regionality or sustainability) (Hilchey 2011).

However, AFNs are not composed solely of alternative organizational elements but rather combine features of both conventional and alternative systems (Bååth 2024). For example, value-based supply chains do not necessarily need to be short. Moreover, they can provide good market opportunities for medium-sized producers that are too large or ill-equipped for direct sales, as well as for smaller producers by allowing them to combine their products to access bigger markets (Peterson et al. 2022). A discussion exists on whether those hybrid forms of practice are still in

line with the original idea of offering an alternative, and whether the original intentions and values of AFNs are being diluted (Gritzas & Kavoulakos 2016). Bååth & Fuentes (2025) found, that hybrid forms can remain alternatives when conventional tools and market mechanisms are used to strengthen alternative values and goals, rather than replacing them. When interactions of AFNs are guided by a certain frame[1] it prevents that those initiatives are absorbed into conventional systems (Bååth & Fuentes 2025).

CSAs are considered a more radical example of AFNs in terms of their alterity[2] (Gritzas & Kavoulakos 2016; Schiller-Merkens 2024), as their practice radically stands in contrast to the industrial agricultural system dominated by capitalist values (Schiller-Merkens 2024).

CSA can be defined as a direct partnership between consumers and producers in which the risks and harvest of agricultural production are shared (Wellner & Theuvsen 2017). The core idea of CSA is that an entire agricultural production of a farm—not just individual food products—is financed by a group of consumers (Netzwerk solidarische Landwirtschaft, 2026), thereby reducing market pressure (Bonfert 2022). Therefore, it can be argued that the direct marketing model used by CSA farms is a model designed to counteract the decline of small farms in Europe (Egli et al. 2025).

In Germany, a large proportion of the CSA initiatives founded over the last decade are community-supported market gardens. Farms with diversified production systems, as implemented by the pioneers of CSA in Germany, have become less common (Strüber et al. 2025). Even though the number of CSA farms in Germany has increased drastically over the past 15 years (Strüber et al. 2025), CSA farms in Germany have recently struggled to retain existing members and attract new ones (Egli et al. 2025).

2.2 How CSA can shape food systems

Some literature identifies significant potential within the CSA movement to transform the current food system (Haack et al. 2020; Schrode et al. 2020). One argument for this potential is that CSAs could, in principle, be replicated anywhere, as the necessary resources are widely available (Haack et al. 2020). Through this potential for replication, CSAs could contribute to more decentralized rural and urban development (Haack et al. 2020).

1 Framing determines the central principles according to which interactions take place and how actors organise. This interpretative framework determines which forms of coordination are considered to be acceptable (Bååth & Fuentes 2025).

2 Alterity is a way of understanding and representing something different without reducing this to dominant categories, instead challenging existing frameworks and creating new ones that reflect alternative social and economic realities (Fuller & Jonas 2003).

However, CSAs also face several limitations. Difficult access to land, reliance on trust-based relationships, and the lack of a legal framework constrain the growth of the CSA movement (Haack et al. 2020; Buecheler & Bosch 2023). Furthermore, members nonetheless depend on other distribution channels, as CSA farms are usually unable to provide the full range of products required for a daily diet (Buecheler & Bosch 2023). CSAs are also often criticized for not appealing to a broad range of society, as participation requires an interest in sustainable and healthy nutrition, cooking skills, and financial security (Bonfert 2022). Although some studies have identified positive effects of the CSA model on economic viability (Egli et al. 2023), others argue that farmers' incomes remain low even when operating within the CSA model (Bonfert 2022). Nevertheless, strategies such as scaling and market shaping are seen as potential ways for the CSA movement to increase its influence on changing the food system.

2.2.1 Strategies of scaling

AFNs have a prefigurative role, acting as niches that depict what is possible beyond capitalism (Schiller-Merkens 2024). The central idea of prefiguration is that the process through which change is created should already reflect the kind of outcome it aims to achieve (Laycock Pedersen & Nicholas 2025). In other words, the methods should embody the goals. AFNs may be seen as prefigurative of an alternative economy because they enact social practices differing from dominant ones (Schiller-Merkens 2024). Through practices based on alternative moral values, they can be understood as niches demonstrating what is possible beyond capitalism congruently operating within a capitalist system (Schiller-Merkens 2024). However, Reinecke (2018) argues that, in pursuing their purpose of critiquing the established system, alternative initiatives risk becoming isolated and inward-focused rather than seeking to scale their impact. This raises the question of how such alternatives can move beyond their niche position and achieve a more transformative impact on the dominant system. Related to this, the concept of scaling explores different strategies for effectively transforming existing structures (Laamanen et al. 2023) and moving beyond a merely prefigurative role (Schiller-Merkens 2024). Five main scaling approaches are discussed in the literature:

- **Scaling deep** focuses on transforming individuals' beliefs and everyday practices (Laamanen et al. 2023).
- **Scaling over** refers to the shift from conventional production to alternative forms of production (Brislen 2018).
- **Scaling up** describes vertical organizing aimed at gaining greater public recognition and influence (Brislen 2018; Bonfert 2022).

- **Scaling out** refers to the replication of initiatives as independent copies that are often connected through networks (Brislen 2018).

- **Scaling through** involves cooperating with local governments or transforming institutions from "within" (Laamanen et al. 2023).

These approaches to scaling offer alternatives to traditional forms of growth and may therefore make the scaling of CSAs possible, as they address the following dilemma: because the CSA model relies on close relationships and non-hierarchical structures, there are inherent limits to growth. Expansion can undermine trust-based and personal relationships, increase coordination efforts, and require more hierarchical structures, thereby reducing the alterity of CSA farms (Rommel et al. 2019; Strüber et al. 2025).

In Germany, the association Netzwerk Solidarische Landwirtschaft e.V. serves as the central umbrella organization and representative voice of the CSA movement. The association connects CSA farms across Germany and facilitates exchange between them (Netzwerk Solidarische Landwirtschaft, 2026). Furthermore, it cooperates with partner organizations at both the national and international levels to promote the further development and spread of CSA (Netzwerk Solidarische Landwirtschaft, 2026). In doing so, the organization combines the approaches of scaling out and scaling up.

2.2.2 Shaping market exchange

Another way for AFNs to shape the system is to impact how market exchange is organised and what kind of market exchange is seen as legitimate.

In economic sociology, markets are defined as "arenas of social interaction in which rights for goods and services are exchanged for money under conditions of competition" (Beckert & Aspers 2020, p. 3). It is emphasised that markets are shaped by their participants, who in turn are shaped by institutional, social and cultural structures (Beckert 2009). With this, markets are socially structured systems whose functioning depends on shared expectations, institutional frameworks and cultural meanings – and not solely on supply and demand (Beckert 2009) and markets can be shaped by their participants.

According to Beckert (2009), to organise in conventional markets three problems of coordination must be solved: determining the economic value of an offer (value problem), managing competition in order to achieve stable prices (competition problem), and making contract actors feel confident that they are not exploited (cooperation problem).

A connection exists between moral values and markets. Moral values may decrease or increase the value of a product and can even hinder products from reaching the market (Beckert & Aspers 2020). For example, customers consider the trade of human body parts as illegitimate and don't demand the product, therefore

leading to no real market existing for it. For products to be considered valuable, they must not only fulfil a need but also need to be perceived legitimate for trade (Beckert & Aspers 2020).

If exchange is guided by higher moral standards than those typically found in conventional markets, it can be described as taking place within moral markets. Even though AFNs operating in the prevalent capitalistic system they often organise their exchange practices according to moral market principles, as their exchange is guided by higher moral standards (Balsiger 2019). While conventional markets are shaped by moral values and expectations as well, the difference is that in moral markets moral values form the key principle while in conventional markets growth and generating profit are the guiding principles (Suckert 2018). Actors in moral markets must solve in addition to conventional coordination problems also moral coordination problems (Bååth & Fuentes 2025). Suckert (2018) argues that morality is not only a difference between moral and conventional market actors, but rather a direct opposition to economic values. Although moral markets still function based on economic values since products are judged by economic efficiency, at the same time they are constituted by values which are explicitly non-economic (Suckert 2018). Facing opposing demands - moral and economic ones creates a state of "ambivalence" (Suckert 2018, p. 683). Nevertheless, market exchange also takes place within AFNs. To establish forms of market exchange that are considered legitimate, participants base these exchanges on a shared meaning (Bååth 2024). They adopt practices that align with this shared understanding while resisting practices perceived as inconsistent with it (Bååth 2024).

Bliss (2019) takes a more radical stance, arguing that markets are fundamentally not suitable to distribute food in a just and sustainable way. Markets are unjust because actors with more purchasing power can influence economic decisions (Bliss 2019). For food markets the implications include that the actors who have the most power can decide what is produced and how it gets distributed (Bliss 2019). Furthermore, markets only distribute food to the one who is able to pay and not to the ones who are most in need. Therefore, non-market food systems may promote the public good more effectively than markets do (Bliss 2019).

In CSA, farmers and consumers share the costs and risks of agricultural production. Rather than paying for a single product, the cost of the entire production is financed (Strüber et al. 2025). In practice, this means that producers and consumers form an economic community where members buy shares of the farm's harvest in advance, and in return receive the harvest (Wellner & Theuvsen 2017). In this way, they reframe what forms of economic coordination are considered morally legitimate.

CSA farms do not sell their products in a conventional marketplace where they compete directly with other producers. Since there are no prices for individual products, consumers cannot easily compare the cost of one product with others.

Competition with other food sellers—such as supermarkets or local markets—occurs only once a year, or once per harvest season, when consumers decide whether to subscribe. Once members commit, they are usually tied to the CSA for the entire harvest period (Strüber et al. 2025). The CSA model attempts to address the problem of competition by creating closer ties between consumers through binding subscriptions and personal relationships.

2.3 The role of collaborations for CSA farms

Collaborations organize interactions and relationship-building differently than markets. Supply chain collaborations describe interorganizational relationships between independent organizations in the supply chain which are working together (Soosay & Hyland 2015). While cooperation refers to longer-term, contract-based operating within conventional coordination mechanisms, (Rommel et al. 2022), collaboration relies on shared goals and negotiated alternatives to market or hierarchical control in order to advance a common mission (Phillips et al. 2000).

Farmers who interact directly with consumers usually have less time and less know-how to market their products to traditional markets and therefore have a greater need to collaborate (Rommel et al. 2022). Collaboration can potentially help CSAs cope with the challenges of working differently from the conventional system (Rommel et al. 2022).

The concept of "relational rent" from supply chain management research describes how supply chain collaborations generate both tangible and intangible benefits (Stoeva et al. 2024; Hu et al. 2015). Tangible rents refer to measurable benefits such as new products, increased revenue, or enhanced skills (Stoeva et al. 2024). Collaborations can help CSAs access key resources such as land (Wittenberg et al. 2022) advice, funding, and greater public visibility (Rommel et al. 2022). Through collaboration between several CSA farms, resources can be shared and a wider range of products can be offered, which may increase their attractiveness to consumers (Buecheler & Bosch 2023). Furthermore, sharing risks within the supply chain can increase resilience, while cooperation between farms enables a broader product range, making CSAs more appealing (Rommel et al. 2022).

Intangible rents, meaning non-measurable effects, include an improved market position, increased trust between actors within the supply chain, and greater knowledge exchange (Stoeva et al. 2024). Collaboration between CSAs and organizations such as the German CSA network for example, can provide guidance on balancing financial viability with core CSA values. This is particularly important because non-hierarchical structures and close coordination with members are time-consuming and become increasingly demanding as a CSA grows (Rommel et al. 2022).

Beyond the benefits for CSAs themselves, partnerships can also support the spread of the CSA model. For example, training and knowledge sharing between

initiatives along the supply chain as well as seed-sharing practices can help disseminate CSA practices (Rommel et al. 2022).

Phillips et al. (2000) argue that, as collaboration processes are relatively unstructured, they can give rise to new rules of interaction and new forms of organizing. Since actors shape the institutions in which they are embedded through their actions, collaborations can be understood as a potential means of shaping the surrounding environment as well as the internal practices (Phillips et al. 2000).

In summary, chapter 2 has shown that the existing literature identifies collaboration as offering potential benefits for CSA farms, both in terms of strengthening their internal organization and enhancing the visibility and dissemination of the CSA movement. However, it remains unclear how collaborations shape the internal practices of CSA farms and to what extent CSA farms adapt or change their practices to enable collaborations. To better understand these processes, a practice-theoretical approach can be helpful, as outlined in the following chapter.

3. Theoretical Framework: Practice Theory

For answering the question of how collaborations affect CSA farms practice, a theoretical framework that can explain how practices are affected by their environment and how they change is suitable. Practice theory allows for clarifying how collaborations are formed through the integration of materials, competences, and meanings. Using this framework makes it possible to analyse elements of practice individually, helping to better understand which aspects are collaborative. At the same time, the framework enables practices to be examined in relation to their social context, supporting an analysis of how collaboration shapes CSA practices and potentially their environment.

3.1 Social Practice Theory

This study draws on social practice theory, and particularly on the framework developed by Shove et al. (2012). Social practice theory is used in this study to disentangle the elements of the processes through which the CSA farm builds their collaborations, and what the farm forwards through their partnerships.

At their core, practice theories examine the relationship between individual actions and the broader social world in which these actions are embedded. The framework from Shove et al. (2012) builds on the structuration theory of Giddens (1984), which conceptualizes the relationship between agency and structure as recursive. Social structures both shape human action and are simultaneously reproduced and transformed through it (Shove et al. 2012). In other words, while social norms, institutions, and material conditions guide what actors do, these structures persist only because they are continually enacted in everyday practices. This perspective is particularly interesting for understanding AFNs, because they re-frame structures of dominant agri-food systems. With their practice, they actively shape what is seen as legitimate economic coordination. At the same time, the practices of AFNs are also shaped by dominant structures of the agri-food system because in the end, they are also businesses that must pay wages and survive economically.

3.1.1 Three elements of Practice

A practice is described a combination of cognitive and physical activity and is performed in a routinized way (Reckwitz 2002). Shove et al. (2012) summarizes these cognitive and physical activities in three elements. They develop a framework which describes practices as configurations of three interrelated elements: materials, competences and meanings:

Materials refer to physical objects and infrastructure such as land, tools, distribution systems or facilities.

Competences encompass the skills, knowledge, and know-how required to perform a practice.

Meanings capture the symbolic dimensions, including values, norms, and shared understandings that give purpose to a practice.

This relatively simple and clear framework helps to untangle the complex processes underlying the practices of CSA farms. Drawing on the three elements of practice helps to answer the sub-research questions. The element of meaning can be conceptualized as explaining the why of a practice, while competences and materials help to explain the how and what. Therefore, this theoretical framework guides where to look and what to ask in order to better understand both the why and the how of collaborative practices.

Collaborations can be understood as mechanisms through which farms reconfigure materials (e.g., access to new resources), develop competences (e.g., learning new skills), and negotiate meanings (e.g., shared visions of sustainable food systems). At the same time, through the CSA farm's practices, they actively shape the conditions under which they operate.

3.1.2 Links of Elements

Crucially, practices appear only when the three elements of practice are successfully integrated (Shove et al. 2012). If elements remain unconnected, a practice exists only as a "proto-practice"; if connections break down, the practice may disintegrate (Shove et al. 2012) (compare Figure 1).

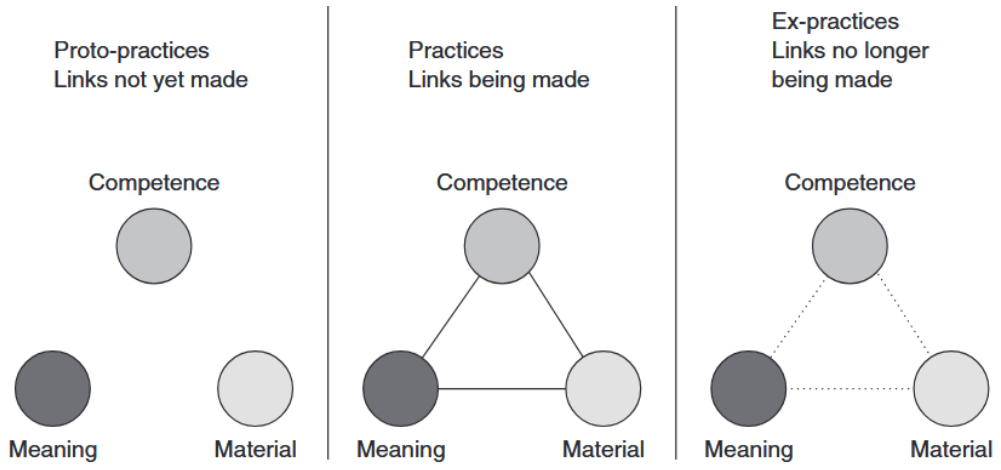

Figure 1 Proto-practices, practices and ex-practices (Shove et al. 2012, p. 25)

Practices evolve as their constitutive elements change and as links between them are reconfigured (Shove et al. 2012), for example changing one single element can change the whole practice. This perspective helps to analyse how the integration of the elements of practice enables collaborations. Further, it helps to analyse how

collaborations affect the links between the three elements. This is important, to understand how collaborations are built and how they develop over time.

4. Methodology

The following chapter outlines the research process used to generate the knowledge necessary to answer the research question. It justifies the choice of the case study and explains why the selected methods are appropriate.

4.1 The Case

This study is a single case study of a CSA farm in Germany. The CSA farm is a farm found by an initiative of private members and not part of an existing farm.

4.1.1 Description

Founded in 2014 as a private citizen initiative, the CSA farm has since grown into a registered association with approximately 200 members. Vegetables are cultivated year-round by four part-time employed gardeners, two of whom also serve on the association's board.

Figure 2 shows the main field of the CSA farm. The farm is located on the outskirts of a village, directly next to a cycling path. It operates on approximately one hectare of land according to market gardening principles, which can be seen from the layout of the farm shown in the picture, and it incorporates also permaculture and agroecological approaches. In addition to the cultivated land, the farm includes a community space in the middle of the site—the green area visible in the centre of the picture, to the right of the polytunnels—where the gardeners can spend their breaks, have parties, and host groups visiting the garden.

Figure 2 Satellite imagery of the CSA farm. Google Earth (2026, May 22).

Members contribute voluntarily across all areas of the farm's operation, from bookkeeping to compost maintenance. The farm operates with an open-door policy during working hours, welcoming visitors and members alike.

Approximately 90 vegetable shares are distributed once a week at a local collection point, supplying around 150 people. The farm's annual budget is approximately €100,000. The costs of shares are based on a solidary model (pay as much as you can). However, the average cost of a share is €100 per month and consists of a weekly vegetable box of roughly 3.6 kg, though the quantity varies considerably across seasons. Vegetables are harvested weekly by members under the guidance of a hired gardener and collected by shareholders - during summer directly at the farm, and during winter at an alternative collection point in town. This year, distribution was extended to a larger nearby city. To purchase a share, one must first become a member of the association. Membership currently costs €12 per year and automatically provides insurance coverage when helping on the farm. Members are asked either to contribute time on the farm - with a suggested average of two hours per month - or to pay an additional fee of €20 per month in lieu of participation. The farm maintains collaborations with several local institutions, including schools and kindergartens in the town, a university, a large drugstore chain, and various other associations.

4.1.2 Selection

The value of a single case study is not necessarily to prove something, but rather to learn something new and develop a deeper understanding of the context surrounding specific circumstances (Flyvbjerg 2006). In the social sciences, case studies are especially suitable because strong predictive claims are difficult to make and the context of human action is of central interest (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Given that this study aimed to better understand practices within the context of CSA farms, a case study design was appropriate.

Germany was selected as the research context because recent studies there have found that CSA farms are struggling to remain economically viable (Egli et al., 2023), while also suggesting that diversification and the development of additional income streams are important strategies for sustaining that viability (Egli et al., 2025). This situation was of particular interest because the study sought to examine the influence of partners beyond the farm's membership base.

The farm was selected as a suitable case for several reasons. First, board members and farmers indicated an interest in exploring ways to strengthen their farm and form new collaborations, making the farm an engaged and relevant research site. Second, the farm is located in a small town of approximately 10,000 inhabitants in southern Germany - a comparatively small setting that makes it easier to trace existing structures and networks. It is of note that this CSA was founded by its members and operates independently, rather than as an extension of an existing farm. This means the farm was built entirely from the ground up, without pre-existing infrastructure such as farm buildings or accumulated knowledge structures. In recent years the farm managed to stabilize its operations, The farm managed to stabilise itself, as evidenced, among other things, by the fact that the gardeners' wages could be significantly increased. This history and the farm's development in recent years made it especially interesting to take a closer look at their practices.

4.2 Research Design

This study follows an abductive - iterative approach in which a combination of different qualitative methods was employed to generate data.

The abductive approach facilitated continuous interaction between existing theoretical perspectives and emerging empirical insights, rather than strictly testing theory deductively or developing it inductively (Döring & Bortz 2016). In an iterative process, it is possible to revisit and refine the research question in light of empirical findings, allowing new insights to be incorporated and integrated with existing theoretical assumptions (Döring & Bortz 2016). This process was helpful for this research project since little was known about the processes of how collaborations affect CSA farms practice, and so initial interviews were needed to sense which practices warranted closer examination. Following the logic on an

iterative approach the data collection began in an early stage of the project, and the generated data were immediately subjected to initial preparation and analysis. Based on these preliminary findings, the research question and theory were adapted gradually, and subsequent data collection was guided accordingly.

In developing the interview guide, deductive elements were applied by drawing on social practice theory developed by Shove et al. (2012) as a foundation for formulating initial questions. At the same time, inductive elements allowed the guide to be expanded during data collection as new relevant topics emerged. This combination was appropriate because practice theory is not so commonly applied in producer contexts. It was therefore anticipated that unexpected findings would arise during the interviews - findings that a purely deductive approach would be unable to adequately capture or explain. Nevertheless, deductive elements remained valuable for developing initial questions and for the early stages of analysis, as they helped to disentangle the complexity of CSA farm practices and to maintain focus on aspects relevant to the research question. Rather than approaching the material with a fully open mind, an abductive approach helps the researcher to enter the field equipped with a theoretical understanding that serves as a framework to avoid drifting toward abstract concerns disconnected from the research focus (Thompson, 2022).

To sum up, this study applies an abductive, iterative approach combining qualitative methods, enabling continuous interplay between theory and empirical data while refining the research question throughout the process. The thesis began with the general question on how collaborations influence CSA farms, which was later refined to examine how collaborations shape specifically the practice of CSA farms.

4.2.1 Data Collection

Qualitative methods are suitable to gather descriptions of the participant's lived experience, with the goal of interpreting the meaning of the phenomena discussed (Brinkmann 2023). The aim of this project was to gain a deeper understanding of how collaborations affect the CSA farms viability. For this, it was important to understand why actors collaborate, how they experience collaborations and how collaborative processes are organised. Interviews and participant observation were employed in an ethnographic manner. Ethnography is a method where the researcher immerses themself in a social group or in people's daily life to better understand their practices and beliefs with the aim to produce a full and nuanced picture (O'Reilly 2013).

Interviews are suitable to illuminate human action as they gather a description of participants' lived experiences (Brinkmann 2023). Five face-to-face interviews were conducted with gardeners and members of the board of the CSA farm. Table

1 shows the interview participants and their roles. All interviews were recorded for further analysis and reflection.

Table 1 Interview Participants

Participant	Role	Date
Participant 1	Founder and previous member of the board	2026/02/27
Participant 2	Gardener and member of the board	2026/03/11
Participant 3	Gardener	2026/03/13
Participant 3 and 4	Gardener, Gardener and member of the board	2026/03/24
Participant 5	Member of the board and principal of cooperating school	2026/03/25

What people do is important to understand how practices develop (Shove et al. 2012). Therefore, participant observation was especially suitable to explore the three elements of practice: competence, material and meaning. Being daily present on-site (in the garden) and actively engaging in the farm's practices allowed for a direct experience of the doing to be able to experience the materials and methods involved, as well as the opportunity to observe interactions with partners and visitors. Furthermore, this immersive presence facilitated access to a broader range of people, enabling spontaneous conversations that would not have been possible through more formal research settings.

Data were collected during a three-week stay at the CSA farm in the role of a garden intern. In this role, I worked alongside the other gardeners, carrying out the tasks assigned to me, which were often the same tasks performed by the other gardeners. The work provided many opportunities for conversations, which mostly took place while working together in the garden. I also participated in the weekly meetings held by the garden team to organise and discuss upcoming tasks. Furthermore, I had the opportunity to engage in conversations during communal lunches and breaks with CSA members who came to help in the garden.

Observations and the content of conversations were documented through voice recordings during short breaks throughout the day. In addition, I took photographs and added notes explaining why the photographs were taken. After the stay, these materials were prepared for subsequent analysis.

4.2.2 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed in this study as a method for identifying patterns and structuring the material into theoretical themes that can be compared with existing research (Thompson 2022).

The coding process was conducted using the software MAXQDA and consisted of three rounds. In the first round, the transcripts from the fieldnotes and recorded

interviews were assessed against a basic scheme comprising four themes derived from the three elements of practice - material, meaning, and competence, and their links (integrated practice). Any statement identified as relevant for at least one of those four schemes were marked and assigned a descriptive term – a code and clustered according to the four themes. For example, sections in which participants described forming collaborations in the hope of generating additional income were marked with the colour code for meaning and assigned the code "economic motivation".

Statements, which couldn't directly be linked to one of the four themes but were relevant because of being unique or frequently mentioned, were also marked and assigned a descriptive code but not assigned to one of the four themes. This was done to gain the fullest possible understanding of the data. As suggested by Thompson (2022), all potentially relevant observations should be included as codes during the first round of coding. This helps to ensure that important meanings and patterns are not overlooked at an early stage of the analysis (Thompson 2022).

During a second round, redundant codes such as "economic motivation" and "motivation to give out more shares" were merged into a single code. The codes were also reviewed to ensure they were assigned to the appropriate theme and, where necessary, moved to another theme. From this resulted the coding scheme which is presented in Appendix 2.

In the third round, the material was re-examined using the coding scheme developed in the first and second round. Again, relevant statements were marked now with the appropriate existing codes and grouped under the corresponding theme.

4.3 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations include the treatment of study participants during data generation and analysis, as well as scientific practice regarding the interpretation and publication of scientific findings (Döring & Bortz 2016). Fundamental elements for data collection are: voluntary participation, informed consent and, confidentiality with data (Döring & Bortz 2016). In accordance with these principles, participants were informed of the aim of the thesis and the research interest prior to each interview. Permission to record the conversation was requested, and participants were informed of how the recordings would be handled afterwards. To protect privacy, neither the names of interviewees nor the name of the CSA farm was disclosed.

The research process was further guided by the four principles of good research practice - reliability, honesty, respect, and accountability - as set out in the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity and by the Swedish guidelines for "good research practice" (Swedish Research Council 2024). The findings were critically reflected upon and compared with those of other studies. In addition, the influence

of the researcher's own role on the research process was examined (see chapter 6.2: Researcher's effects on the results), and limitations are openly discussed (see chapter 7 on limitations). Interview recordings and transcripts were stored exclusively on a local device to prevent data breaches or loss.

A further ethical consideration was the decision to participate as an intern during the on-farm data collection. Rather than solely drawing on participants' time and knowledge, this arrangement allowed the researcher to 'give back' by actively assisting with the farm's work throughout the stay.

5. Results and Analysis

The following chapter presents the generated data from the interviews and participant observation and analyses the results. It is structured around the three sub-questions derived from the main research question. How do collaborations shape the practices of CSA?

Chapter 5.1 analyses why the CSA farm collaborates, while chapter 5.2 examines how the CSA farm's practice enables collaboration. Chapter 5.3 summarizes how collaborations influence the different elements of the CSA farm's practice.

5.1 Why does the CSA farm form collaborations?

To examine how collaborations shape practice, we must first look into the meaning of their practice. This can be done by asking the question: Why does the CSA farm form collaborations?

5.1.1 Collaborating to disseminate their practice beyond the farm level

Participants described the meaning of their practice as actively shaping their environment and creating alternatives through their own actions. They emphasised "shaping by doing" — changing aspects they perceive as problematic through the active practice of doing things differently. As Participant 1 outlined: "For us it is about […] to practice change" and further explained their practice as a "hands-on, applied local politics." (Participant 1).

This highlights, that they want to shape their environment through concrete actions. Participants explained what they want to create with their practice is an alternative. In this context one participant referred to the meaning of the CSA farm's practice as:

> A proposal for a collective social alternative, or something positive to bring to society through community. […] We can survive, and we can show the world, so to speak, how a community can stick together and can create something. (Participant 5)

Furthermore, they highlighted that their work is not only about practicing an alternative internally, but also about communicating it to the wider public. Participants stressed that they do not simply want to do the practice differently but also want to make these alternatives visible to "the world." They noted the importance of interacting with their surrounding environment and reaching beyond the farm level.

Visibility was described as central to conveying the CSA farm's message. The farm does not aim to operate solely within its immediate setting and member circle but seeks recognition from a broader public. Participants explained that the CSA farm should not function as an isolated entity but rather remain visible and connected to the village and its wider social environment.

> We can't just be here, like some sort of UFO on the outskirts of [the village]. We are very closely connected to this village, and that's how we want it to be. (Participant 1)

It involves interacting with others, including with people who are not members of the farm. The farm forms collaborations to extend its reach beyond its member base.

> And it's about engaging with people on this, bringing them in, but also sharing it with the outside world and simply putting change into practice. And for that, you need cooperation, because you have to experience it in practice. You can't just tell people about it; they have to come here and find this field lovely, or try the vegetables and find them tasty, or experience this community and feel at home. Then it really takes off. (Participant 1)

This statement also makes clear that their practice plays a crucial role in conveying meaning to others. Rather than simply describing their project or explaining how they envision an alternative, they invite people to actively experience their practice. In this sense, they apply the same logic externally that they follow themselves: instead of merely talking about alternatives, they actively enact them. This applies also to their work with others: they do not only talk about their work but allow others to experience it directly.

In this context, material components, such as the vegetables and the garden site itself, where cultivation can be directly experienced, play a crucial role in communicating the message underlying the CSA farm's practice. The materials serve as a means of conveying this message. They need their fields, vegetables, and soil to create these experiences for others. However, these materials do not exist independently of their competences, as they are shaped, for example, by their knowledge of sustainable gardening. Because of this know-how, the vegetables taste different and the soil looks different. Furthermore, by allowing others to experience their practice directly, they not only convey meanings but also their competences, as others can actively engage in and practice these activities themselves.

Another aspect illustrating the role of materials in the farms ability to reach out beyond its borders (meaning) are the considerations about the farm's location. For the purpose of visibility and accessibility, the CSA farm's location is of considerable importance. In addition to a main site, the CSA operates a separate field for vegetable cultivation, which is situated on top of a hill. Initially, this hilltop field served as the primary cultivation site; however, the main cultivation was later

relocated. The intention behind this move was to improve accessibility, both for members and for people passing by.

The main field is located adjacent to a popular cycling path. According to the gardeners, this proximity is valuable, as it encourages passersby to stop and inquire about the project. figure 3 shows the garden, with the cycling path right next to it in the right corner of the picture. During the participatory observation, this dynamic was also evident: people stopped to ask what activities were taking place, after which a gardener explained the initiative to them. Their motivation of disseminating their practice by showing it to others affected also their material considerations.

Furthermore, the farm has installed an information board, visible in the left corner of figure 3, with the aim of communicating its work and objectives to people passing by. This shows how materials are used to disseminate information and to fulfil the meaning of spreading the message through increasing their visibility.

Figure 3 Location of the field right next to a busy bike line

5.1.2 Collaborations to educate about the CSA farm's meaning

As outlined in the previous chapter, the CSA farm does not aim to only practice their work but also to enable others to experience it. In this context, education plays a crucial role. Beyond the mere cultivation of vegetables, their practice is oriented toward communicating and disseminating a broader message, as reflected in the following statement:

> Well, it's more than just vegetables; it is about vegetables, of course, but it's really about awareness and raising awareness – which means that this whole CSA farm is, in a way, a huge educational project and is making a huge difference in this village. (Participant 1)

Education plays such an important role that, for participant 1, the farm was perceived as an educational project. In further elaborations of what "more than just vegetables" entails, raising awareness was frequently identified as a central objective. In some instances, this was described in general terms, referring to the aim of informing others about the activities taking place on the farm. In other cases, more specific topics were highlighted, such as sustainable nutrition and agriculture, and alternatives to the dominant food system. The educational dimension was thereby perceived as an inherent characteristic of CSA farms and was, for example, described as a key distinction from non-CSA gardens.

> So, I think that's a big difference compared to a market garden which simply sells their produce at the market. [...] We're a community-supported agriculture, and this social aspect plays a major role here, and. And we don't just do this; we actually want to share information about what we do and. And pass that on to people. (Participant 2)

Moreover, it could be observed that the spatial arrangement of the garden is designed to facilitate the hosting of visitors and groups. A designated section of the farmland is explicitly reserved as a social space and is not used for cultivation. While this area serves practical functions—such as tool storage, providing a space for gardeners to take breaks, and enabling members to collect vegetables or hold gatherings—it is also an important space to accommodate visits from school classes and other groups. As the following statement describes:

> So if you're offering community, you've got to provide somewhere for it to take place. And (…) It can take place right here. And it's used in all sorts of different ways. For example, the primary school's after-school day care , […] they always have a sleepover here in the summer before the holidays; they camp here, over there under the trees. Of course, we can't offer them that amongst our vegetable beds, but it works perfectly well here. Or my daughter was in Year 3 when they had their building project, and that's when they built this little toilet block. And then, for a whole week, the 30 children were here and we did this, and it went really well because you can just spread out and make space for everyone. (Participant 2)

During the participant observation it could be experienced that the notion of the CSA farm being more than just vegetable growing is not only reflected in the participants meanings of practice, but that it also affects the other elements of practice. They adjust their materials, such as their area of land, to enable hosting people. In this context it was mentioned that it is very important to have a piece of land which is not for production, but where there is space to host visits, to sit with them or do other projects.

Another example is a dedicated area, the "Kindergarten Area," located in one corner of the garden, where the plots are designed to facilitate group activities for children. During my work in the garden, I observed that the shorter beds in this area make gardening tasks more motivating, as the end of a bed—and thus the completion of a task—is reached more quickly. In addition, movement within the

area is easier because the distance to the end of the bed, where it can be crossed, is shorter. According to garden members, these considerations played an important role in the redesign of this area, with the aim of creating a more enjoyable and accessible working environment for children. This example also reveals how meaning, material and competences are interrelated. The adjustment of the beds is based on know-how gained through experience working with children in the garden. There they realised it would be better to have shorter beds for the children, and by adjusting the beds they improve their educational offer. In this way, elements of practice are adjusted to accommodate and support educational engagement.

5.1.3 The economic motivation to collaborate

Apart from the motivation to disseminate their practice the economic motivation is another important aspect for cooperation, as mentioned in several conversations. This motivation had different dimensions. Sometimes the concrete wish to grow was described:

> Yes, we want to grow. We don't want to grow, like expanding very rapidly in such a short time, but we do want to have more people, primarily so that we can really earn more money and, above all, that we can pay better wages. (Participant 1)

As described in the statement, growing refers to increasing the number of people buying a share, meaning purchasing vegetables from the farm. Furthermore, having multiple sources of income to increase economic stability and resilience was also mentioned several times as a motivation for collaborations.

The underlying motivation for economic gains is to be able to pay gardeners higher wages and to offer them more stable work contracts. With their know-how and skills, the gardeners are an important element of the farm's competences. The participants see increasing the number of shares sold as the main way to support to keep the gardeners and with this maintain their competences. In addition, this motivation can also be understood as a social motivation, fulfilling the wish to generate jobs in the region and be an employer with good working conditions.

This was achieved, for example, through a collaboration with another garden in a nearby city. The CSA farm is allowed to use space there as a new pick-up point for weekly vegetable distribution. This enables them to attract more members buying shares, as the new pick-up point allows them to expand into a new city and access a new market. This is described in the following statement:

> That's the idea at the moment with [a district in a close by city] to say we sell [there]. So, looking at [the village], we feel it's become a bit saturated. There are always new [customers], but some are also leaving. And so, if we want to make substantial gains, [the bigger city close by] is the obvious choice. (Participant 1)

They emphasised that they still want to further increase wages. For this, also other direct income sources from collaborations were named as motivation to form collaborations:

> I mean, that's all just extra income where you can think, 'OK, if this goes well, you could do it more regularly […]And with all these things, it's always the case that we become more visible again, through a different channel, perhaps reaching out to new people, perhaps even attracting new people who come to the fields for other reasons, try the vegetables, come into contact with good vegetables, which they wouldn't have come into contact with before. So really more in the sense of public relations and building a broader base. (Participant 1)

Another point mentioned was the aim to increase the visibility of the CSA farm with the purpose of attracting more people who buy shares. Even though a collaboration wouldn't offer a direct source of income, increased visibility is seen as an important benefit. For example, the CSA farm collaborates with other CSA farms in the nearby region, presenting themselves as a collective CSA rather than as individual farms, increasing joint visibility.

> Perhaps a joint appearance stands out more. […] Someone might have heard something about [the other CSA farm] and then perhaps stumble across us next time without making the connection. And if they'd heard the thing twice, it might stick in their mind a bit better. (Participant 3)

The collaboration that was mentioned as the most important in terms of revenue is the cooperation with the local government of the village, where the local authority purchases eleven vegetable shares from the CSA farm. While this number was lower in previous years, it has increased recently. The vegetables from these shares are distributed to local kindergartens and schools in the village.

A special aspect of this arrangement is that the schools themselves do not pay for the vegetables; instead, the village authority covers the costs. Furthermore, while the village authority pays the shares for the entire year, most kindergartens and schools only use the vegetables during the six summer months.

This surplus financing is used by the CSA farm to support its educational programme, through which schools and kinder garden groups from the area can book visits to the garden. These visits are offered free of charge, as they are co-financed by the surplus from the vegetable shares. The income from those shares is perceived as an important and reliable source of income source:

> So, in fact, these shares that the institutions[3] receive are actually a fixed base amount that we also earn as a result. Through the local authority, there are simply ten fixed large shares. (Participant 4)

[3] With Institutions they refer here to schools and kindergartens

What makes this collaboration particularly interesting is that it provides the CSA farm with a fixed and reliable source of income, while at the same time enabling it to fulfil its educational mission, as described in the previous chapter. Thus, it benefits their practice in multiple ways. First, it helps them realise their aim of education, as it serves as a connection point to educational institutions, as outlined above. Second, it affects their material and competences, since a reliable source of income from the municipality supports the CSA farm to pay their gardeners wages, retaining their know-how and knowledge and maintaining the competences of their practice.

> Probably they said it anyways already but the local authority, that is, after all the educational mission with the kindergartens. But first and foremost, financially, it was a really huge source of income, for us, that we really always had those six or eight shares coming to the till. (Participant 5)

So, it can be said that this collaboration extends the elements of the CSA farm's practice. It extends the meaning of their practice, namely, to educate about alternative food production and consumption. They can also express this meaning simply by enacting it and showing it to their members, but through collaboration with kindergartens and schools it is extended to a broader group of people.

The collaboration extends their materials, as they sell more shares, meaning more income. It also extends their competences, first through gaining experience in educational work and second, through the specific setup of the collaboration. As outlined above, they generate a surplus that creates the opportunity for educational work to be at least partly financed. This in turn shapes their practice, by allowing them to shift their practice towards a stronger focus on educational work. As one gardener outlined, her core task is to grow vegetables, and she cannot simply use her gardening hours, which are financed through the shares, for educational activities, even though she believes education is very important. Since their core practice is the vegetable production, that is what the shares are paying for. However, with this surplus of money, she is given the opportunity to allocate more of her competences to educational work, as funding is now available for it.

In this sense, collaborations are economically important as they stabilise their competences by enabling stable and, in the best case, higher wages for gardeners. At the same time, they are important for dedicating more of their competences towards education, since generating a surplus provides additional material to support these competences without limiting their core practice of vegetable production.

The generation of surplus also takes place through another collaboration with a partner association. This partner association is responsible for cultivating part of the seedlings used by the CSA farm, while the remaining seedlings are sold to external customers. The Revenue from this selling is donated to the CSA farm. From this extra income, part of one gardener's working hours is financed to support

the educational work they do. It also became clear that they would like to generate even more surplus to further develop their educational work. In this context, the wish for external funding for educational work was mentioned. In this way, they aim to achieve the same logic: generating surplus through external collaborations to expand their competences towards more educational work.

Bringing chapter 5.1 together, the CSA farm perceives collaborations as an important strategy to improve their practice. Collaboration is important to improve their meaning by enabling them to shape beyond the farm level. For this, they demonstrate a strong motivation to collaborate with the aim to educate about their practice. For them, education means to let others actively experience their practice rather than simply lecturing about what they are doing. This is achieved by inviting people to their fields, allowing others to experience their materials and competences.

In this sense, materials and competences serve as a medium through which their message is conveyed. However, they do not only disseminate meaning, but their entire practice. By letting others participate in their practice, they share their materials, for example by offering vegetables for tasting or delivering vegetables to kindergartens, and they disseminate their competences by letting others work with them.

Furthermore, the CSA farm perceives collaborations as a valuable strategy to improve their materials and competences. From an economic perspective, collaborations are seen as important to extent market access, increase shares and subsequently improve gardener salaries.

5.2 How do they build and maintain collaborations?

After understanding the meaning of the CSA farm's practices, this chapter answers the second sub-question of how collaborations are enabled. This requires exploring how the farm integrates competences, materials, and meanings to enable collaboration, as well as how these three elements are, in turn, shaped through collaborative processes.

5.2.1 Stability as a necessary condition for collaborations

It became clear from various conversations that establishing stability within the organisation of the CSA was a crucial prerequisite for focusing more on collaboration. The core of their practice are the gardeners as outlined in the following quote by participant 1: "So our gardeners are our greatest asset, the most valuable thing we have."

The gardeners are of such importance because they constitute a key element of the CSA farm's competences. Without skilled gardeners, there are no vegetables (material). Even though they state, "that it is more than just vegetables" (Participant

1), vegetables remain a central element of their practice. They are the material through which the CSA farm conveys its meaning and the material through which the farm is sustained, since the main income is generated through the vegetables. It could be observed how skilled gardening directly affects this key material, the vegetables. Therefore, it is not surprising that a lack of stability in the gardening team affected the overall stability of the CSA farm as outlined in the following quote:

> "Well, the gardeners […] was, of course, something that made us feel very, very unstable. Temporarily. And it's been giving us a great deal of stability for several years now. (Participant 5)

A key factor affecting this stability can be drawn back to the establishment of a consistent garden team, ensuring that the gardeners employed did not change frequently but instead remained over time. The fact that they established a team helped to bring continuity. To do so, they did not need additional financial resources (material), as they initiated the team by working with two part-time gardeners instead of one full-time position. The available budget was simply redistributed from one person to two. In this way, the workload and the associated burdens of garden work were also shared between them.

> The fact that [the gardeners] always been changing, and that before that we only ever had one person on whom everyone's hopes rested […] was simply far too much of a burden. And then at some point we said, maybe it's not such a good idea to always be waiting for that one saviour who then works flat out here from morning till night. So first of all we took on several part-time staff, so that, firstly, they'd form a team, and secondly, they could sort of cover for each other. Or, if one is off, the other is still there, and vice versa. That was definitely a huge factor in terms of stability. (Participant 5)

With a consistent gardening team, they were able to improve their competences. It further increased the overall know-how, as multiple people know more than one person alone. At the same time, the development of their competences led to improvements in their materials, which subsequently improved working conditions as it made the work easier. Projects such as the redesign of the garden into a market garden, which was described as making the work significantly easier, could be implemented and consistently established over a longer period. The experiences form the participant observation also supports that the layout of the garden significantly affect the work processes. For example, the length of the paths, how and where the tools are organised, and whether the width and length of the beds are suitable for working by hand – has a significant influence on how well the gardening works. Improved working conditions led to the gardeners staying longer, improving again their competences as the gardeners increased their experience season after season. From this example it gets clear that the elements of practice are interdependent.

Moreover, stability show a reciprocal effect: with a stable gardening team, working conditions improved and the turnover of gardeners decreased. This improvement in their competences also led to an increase in the number of vegetables grown, because better growing skills resulted in more harvest from the same area. This led to the possibility to sell more harvest shares, which in turn opened the opportunity to pay higher salaries to the gardeners.

The importance of retaining gardeners is reflected in several statements and in the overall efforts to create an attractive working environment.

> So, our gardeners are our capital, the most valuable thing we have. And actually, we want to pay them more, treat them better, provide them with better facilities, offer a great community, a lovely place to work, well we want to keep them. (Participant 1)

This statement shows how materials and competences are interdependent. An attractive work environment, consisting for example of good facilities, appropriate tools, and an attractive income (materials), improves the development of skills and know-how (competences), as it attracts skilled people to work there and remain over time. Vise versa those skilled people also affect the materials on the farm. Since the better their skills, experiences and know-how the more they improve the materials.

This case shows that materials and competences mutually influence each other, meaning that changing one element also affects the other. As a result, the effects of change can reinforce one another. Forming a garden team not only improved competences, but also strengthened material elements, such as the vegetables and the layout of the garden. In turn, these improved materials further strengthened competences by making the workplace more attractive. In this way, materials and competences reinforce each other.

5.2.2 Expanded practice to maintain collaborations

In addition to a more stable gardening team, there are also other processes which are important to maintain collaborations. More structured processes for the educational programme were perceived as important to improve the collaboration with the schools, but they also contributed to stability in the collaboration by clarifying workflows and facilitating communication. For example, a more structured educational programme offering on-site learning in the garden and an easy booking process was established to increase attractiveness for school classes and kindergarten groups, as described in the following statement:

> And at the same time, to be more service-oriented, if you want to use that term, [a gardener] has come up with this lovely concept […] she actually set up a sort of booking system on the website. I book […] a programme over the course of the year, [and then] I can watch the peas grow. (Participant 2, 4)

To improve collaboration and make the process more convenient for kindergartens and schools, the CSA farm introduced a new booking system on its website. So to say, they expanded their materials to be more "service-oriented" (Participant 4) towards their collaboration partners. This expansion of their materials not only improved cooperation with their partners, but also benefited their own practice, as the booking system enhanced planning processes for gardeners and teachers on site at the farm by for example reducing the number of emails needed to be written to organise visits at the farm:

> You have to send far fewer emails back and forth. Um, and yes, it's more like an educational programme than just popping in now and then to see where your vegetables are growing. (Participant 4)

Furthermore, as outlined in the quote a more structured programme supports the perception of the farm as an educational offering rather than merely a visit to the farm. These small adaptations in one element of their practice - in this case, the materials - also affect the other elements. Their competences are increasingly perceived as contributing to formal education, allowing them to present themselves more strongly as an educational institution. In addition, their meaning-making is strengthened, as they can emphasise and practice their educational role more effectively.

Another example of a small change in their practice to improve collaborations is the acquisition of new boxes for delivering vegetables to kindergartens. This improvement in equipment was also described as important for ensuring the smooth running of the farm's daily operations.

> Now, with these new crates, we've got these returnable crates. [...] That's another upgrade. Before, we always had wooden crates, which were different sizes. (Participant 2)

> They weren't easy to stack. (Participant 4)

> [...] Now it's a bit more uniform, and it's also quite clear that they're meant to come back to us. (Participant 2)

> We're optimising it to make it smoother, so that the offer remains attractive and everything just runs smoothly, and so that the partnership lasts longer as a result, so that everyone is happy. (Participant 4)

Another aspect that was emphasised several times as important for maintaining collaborations, is the support from others, particularly from members. This includes members who assist with transport as outlined in the following statement describing how the support of a member helps to maintain a collaboration with a drugstore, from which the CSA farm obtains coffee grounds. These provide valuable input for

composting and generate a small financial return. However, without the member who regularly collects the coffee grounds, this cooperation would not be viable.

> Like, for example, the coffee-run service – they just do it all the time, reliably, and drive it over, and then arrange a replacement if it doesn't work out. I couldn't manage that at all. I mean, I don't drive around all the time either, but there are quite a few people who take on really important tasks. And without them... (..) it wouldn't work. (Participant 1)

In addition to supporting with practical task such as driving, members also contribute new ideas and use personal contacts to initiate collaborations. It can be analysed that due to their large membership base, the CSA farm's competences are extended, as they can draw on a broad pool of people. This means that there is usually someone available who can support with tasks that cannot be carried out by hired staff. There is also typically someone with relevant personal contacts, as well as someone with new ideas.

This extension of competences can also be observed in the collaboration with the local authority. The maintenance service of the public administration delivers vegetable boxes from the CSA farm to cooperating kindergartens. Such support was described in some cases as crucial for maintaining and improving the collaboration. Here, it is interesting that the extension of the CSA farm's practice is not performed through their own competences or materials, but the collaboration partner brings in the additional competences, in this case a delivery service.

In summary, stability in the CSA farm's core operations, the vegetable production, is essential for enabling the farm to focus on developing, improving, and expanding external collaborations. This stability is highly affected by maintaining a stable garden team (competences). It became clear that there is a strong interaction between the elements of practice. A stable garden team strengthened competences, which improved material elements such as the quantity of vegetables grown and the layout of the garden. These improvements, in turn, enhanced salaries and working conditions, which then further strengthened competences.

To maintain collaborations, an extension of at least one element of their practice is often necessary. In some cases, this extension can be achieved without external help, for example through small adaptations to their materials. Often, however, they require support from their members. In other cases, the collaboration partners introduce new elements into their practices, which in turn strengthen this or other collaborations. Across all cases, it became clear that changes in one element of the practice also affect the other elements. These changes do not drastically transform the practice but rather lead to subtle shifts within it.

Lastly, it can be concluded that to form and maintain collaborations, key competences and practice often need to be further integrated. It is also clear that the three elements of practice are very interdependent.

5.3 Limitations of Collaborations

To explore how much the CSA farm would let collaborations affect their practice it is helpful to look at the limitations of collaborations.

5.3.1 When collaborations don't work out

To better understand what is essential for the CSA farm to establish collaborations, it is helpful to examine the challenges associated with establishing and sustaining such partnerships, as well as the factors that can lead to their failure. One example discussed by the CSA farm is its attempted collaboration within the field of public procurement. Initially, the idea was to explore whether entering this field would be feasible, with the motivation to generate an additional source of income to increase the gardeners' salaries. To this end, the CSA farm made use of funding from a research project to independently assess how access to public procurement might be achieved.

However, it was clear from the outset that the farm would not be able to supply large-scale caterers or canteens and would instead need to focus on more specialized, niche opportunities. This is made clear in the following statement:

> We anyway know. A proper canteen is far too big for us – we simply couldn't manage that, and we wouldn't want to supply one anyway. […] And I think the challenge is, was, is finding places that are the right size and that can cope with this sort of vegetable and fluctuating supply. - Well, it is seasonal and you just have what's available – and [someone] that can cope with that sort of preparation, no preparation. (Participant 1)

This example illustrates that due to the CSA farm's competences and material conditions, supplying conventional canteens or caterers is not feasible. The farm does not provide enough of a single type of vegetable, cannot guarantee consistent delivery, and lacks the capacity for pre-processing (e.g., washing and cutting), which is typically required by canteens. Furthermore, the CSA farm does not possess the necessary logistics, as its distribution model is based on members collecting produce directly from the garden.

In addition, the CSA farm also emphasised that even if they could, they in fact would not want to supply large-scale canteens. It became evident that the CSA farm is not willing to allocate parts of its production area to serve what they refer to as the "market". It was emphasised that the primary purpose of the fields is to produce for their members, and if the CSA farm cannot maintain and promote the values embedded in its practices, as in their meaning, they are not interested in the collaboration even though it might be otherwise possible and beneficial. One participant noted that even if their competences and material resources would allow supplying caterers or canteens, they would be reluctant to do so if their produce were to be incorporated indistinguishably into conventionally produced goods, rather than being recognised for its distinct qualities.

> Even if we deliver to them, it just gets lost in that mush[4]. So even if we deliver our lovely carrots there, they get lost in that mush. (Participant 4)

It was emphasised several times that their aim is not to produce for the established market, where products are simply sold. Rather, it is essential for the CSA farm that collaborations align with their underlying meaning, which includes the idea that the value lies in the entire agricultural production rather than in individual products. The CSA farm uses its competences and materials to communicate this meaning. It is not simply about selling vegetables; it is about conveying a message and demonstrating how they produce food differently from others. If their products are disconnected from this distinct meaning and are perceived as just vegetables, this does not reflect what they seek to achieve.

5.3.2 The frame for collaborations

It is important to note that the farm's core activity - and the main factor ensuring its economic stability - is based on a stable member base. Members are essential not only because they finance the farm through shares, but also because they provide a pool of competences and serve as a means of sustaining the practice.

The CSA farm's practice is shaped by collaboration, as it expands its elements. Nevertheless, this shaping doesn't extant a certain frame. Framing determines the central principles according to which interactions take place and how actor organise (Bååth & Fuentes 2025). This interpretative framework determines which forms of coordination are considered to be acceptable (Bååth & Fuentes 2025).

Although their core practice needs to be slightly adapted to enable the collaborations, and this is done by adapting parts of their fields, buying certain materials, or shifting competences from pure gardening to communication. The farm does not establish fundamental new practices to enable collaboration. Instead of this the farm integrates collaborative activities into its "core" practice. For example, to do education they do not establish a new practice of holding a lecture but rather invite people to their fields to grow vegetables with them.

The CSA farm's practice is embedded in a certain frame, and this frame also defines the collaboration they consider as meaningful and thus choose to pursue. Their materials and competences shape with whom and how they are able to collaborate. If they do not have the right materials, such as enough of a certain type of vegetable, or the right competences, such as delivery services or preprocessing capacities, this limits with whom they can collaborate. This was outlined in chapter 5.3.1.

However, the CSA farm could, of course, adapt their practices in ways that would enable collaboration — for example, by changing their production or

[4] In this context the participant refers with "mush" to a mass of vegetables which is of lower quality than the vegetables produced by the CSA farm.

incorporating processing into their practices. Yet, they outlined that they don't want to do this because their work is connected to certain meanings. These meanings shape the extent to which they are willing to adapt their practices to enable collaborations, or conversely, the extent to which they allow collaborations to shape their practices.

Their practices can generally be described as highly collaborative, as they are fundamentally based on collaboration with and between their members. Members are not merely passive shareholders; rather, it is crucial for the farm that they actively engage. Their competences, for example, are built around collaboration with members, meaning that the farms depend on members actively participating in farm practices. This applies not only to the internal practices of the farm, but also to their practices with collaboration partners. These collaborations are often initiated through personal contacts emerging from their members and are also maintained through this engagement (as described in chapter 5.2.2). In this sense, their internal collaborative[5] practice is important for their ability to collaborate with external partners.

When looking more closely at the elements of their practice, it can be said that there are some elements they are motivated to share or change to facilitate collaborations, and others they are not.

Looking at their materials, it can be said that the CSA farm is not willing to share their vegetables beyond the farm level to a large extent. Even though, due to a professionalisation of the farm, they now produce more vegetables on the same area of land, they decided to look for more members who would buy shares instead of using the surplus vegetables to form other collaborations, for example by selling them at a market. Here it can be seen again, how the elements of practice are connected and affect each other. Their meaning of not producing for the conventional market but rather distribute their vegetables based on the CSA principles directly to their members affects how they handle their materials (the vegetables). Furthermore, it also affects how they handle their fields (materials) as the CSA farm is clear that they do not want to allocate part of their fields to produce for non-members.

It can be argued that their understanding of market exchange shapes the framework for collaborations. Vegetable production follows the CSA logic, in which not a single agricultural product is assigned a monetary value; instead, the entire agricultural production is financed through shares. Their meaning affects how they use their materials.

However, it cannot be said in general that they are unwilling to use their land for collaborations. This can be seen in the importance they place on having part of their land as a space for people to meet, as well as in the fact that they transformed part

[5] Internal collaborative practice, refers here to the collaborations within the farm, meaning how the members and hired farmers work together

of their fields to make them more suitable for collaborations with schools and kindergartens.

Looking at their competences, the gardeners are very willing to share their experiences and skills with others beyond their farm level. As outlined in the following statement, when asked whether they see other CSA farms in the region as competitors, the participant answered that this was not the case, but rather the opposite, as they try to support one another.

> In the community-supported agriculture and market garden scene […] it's also the case that people tend to be quite generous with sharing their experiences and, well, whatever else. (..) Mutual exchange. That you don't have company secrets there. (Participant 2)

Furthermore, as outlined in chapter 5.2.2, they are also willing to adapt their competences to enable educational collaborations. To be able to add competences in education, they are even motivated to generate surplus income (as outlined in chapter 5.1.3.

Their meanings are also a very collaborative element of the CSA farm's practice. Collaborations help the CSA farm to reach beyond the farm level, which is why it is not surprising that they share their meanings through, for example, educational offers and collaborations with others. However, they are not really willing to adapt these meanings in order to enable collaborations.

In summary, it can be said that there are some elements they are not willing to use to enable collaborations, such as their vegetables, and others they are very willing to share, such as their competences and meanings. At the same time, there are also some elements they are more willing to adapt to establish collaborations, such as their land or the addition of educational competences to their gardening competences. Other elements, however, they are not willing to adapt, such as their meanings.

The framing of these readjustments is defined by the core of the CSA practice: practicing an alternative through the establishment of an alternative food system and "show[ing it to] the world." (Participant 5). Collaborations are not pursued if they would negatively affect this practice. As interviewees clearly outlined, that they first produce for their members, meaning that they are not willing to reduce production capacity to produce for the conventional market. This is further limited by their meaning of "shaping by doing" (Participant 1). Their aim is to change the conventional food system, and their way of doing this is by practicing the kind of food system they want to see. Identifying this as their core meaning also clarifies the boundaries of their collaborations: they are not willing to adapt their practices in ways that would challenge their alterity.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This master's thesis aimed to answer the research question: How do collaborations shape the practices of CSA? Drawing on the case study that exemplifies CSA farm practices, the findings suggest that these practices are expanded through collaborations, as the collaborations add to existing meanings, competences, and materials.

However, it became clear that collaborations do not fundamentally alter the core practice of CSA farms, nor do they exist separately from it. Rather, they are integrated into the existing, expanding practice. This has implications for the potential of collaborations for CSA farms, as well as for the role of CSA farms within the broader food system. These implications will be discussed in chapter 6.1. After this, chapter 6.2 focuses on reflection of the research, while chapter 7 discusses limitations, and implications on further research.

6.1 The potential of collaborations

The potential of collaborations for CSA farms lies in strengthening their internal practice and strengthening their effects on the external system. These cannot be seen separately, since a stronger CSA farm also enfolds more potential in changing the system. If the CSA farm would not be stable enough to sustain itself, it could not shape a food system beyond the farm level.

6.1.1 Potential for the CSA farm's practice

The potential of collaborations for the CSA farm's practice lies in their ability to strengthen the core elements of the practice and thereby benefit the farm overall. Collaborations contribute to all three elements of the farm's practice: material, competences and meaning.

Collaborations contribute to the material dimension in two ways. First, they enable access to input resources such as the coffee grounds for their compost from a nearby drugstore without the CSA farm needing to pay for it. These findings are in line with Rommel et al. (2022), who argue that cooperations have an enabling effect for CSA farms by facilitating access to resources. Second, collaborations indirectly strengthen the materials by improving market access, since increased visibility and market reach can lead to higher sales of shares. This is also in line with Rommel et al. (2022) who found that collaborations are beneficial for CSA because they increase their visibility.

Furthermore, collaborations strengthen the CSA farm's competences in several ways. For example, cooperation with educational institutions increases know-how and skills related to educational activities. This expands their expertise because farmers gain experience in areas outside their core activity of gardening. Similarly,

competences are expanded when additional income generated through collaborations enable farms to allocate more time to educational activities. These findings are consistent with existing research, according to which collaborations increase the access to new skills and knowledge, as in, collaborations partners are willing to share knowledge and skills (Koponen & Julkunen 2022; Stoeva et al. 2024).

Some collaborations also generate direct financial income for farmers, such as those with the adult education centre, where the CSA gains income by providing courses on their farm. In this way, collaborations indirectly improve the competence of the farm because, as outlined in chapter 5.2.1, a stable garden team is crucial for maintaining their practice. Generating extra income for the gardeners is a way for the farm to raise salaries, which is an important factor in retaining staff and ensuring the farm remains an attractive employer.

A different form of competence extension involves collaboration partners providing services, such as support with vegetable deliveries which are not part of the competences of the CSA farm. In this case, the farm's existing competences are not improved, but an entirely new competence is added: the farm gains the ability to deliver vegetables. This finding is in line with Rommel et al. (2022), who argue that one potential of collaborations between CSAs and other players in the value chain is that their competences can complement each other. However, these additional competences only exist for as long as the collaboration does. This is because the CSA farm doesn't gain the skills, know-how or materials for delivering vegetables from this practice, which they could then incorporate into their own practice and apply in the future. This additional competence is tied to a specific collaboration and ends when the collaboration ends.

Furthermore, collaborations improve the CSA farm's meaning of shaping the food system. Collaborations enable farms to shape the food system not only by practising an alternative, but also by involving people beyond their membership into their alternative practices. However, no extant literature could be identified that discusses how collaboration also benefit the underlying meaning and values of CSA farms.

Overall, it can be argued that collaborations benefit the CSA farm's practices by enabling them to gain new competences (for example, in education), improve their resources and create additional income, and improve their meaning through expanding the group they reach beyond their members. These beneficial effects of collaborations identified in this study align with the concept of "relational rent" from supply chain management research, which describes how supply chain collaborations generate both tangible (material) and intangible (non-material) benefits (Stoeva et al., 2024; Hu et al. 2015). Similarly, this study shows that collaborations create both material and non-material benefits for CSA farms. Nevertheless, when examining the potential of collaborations for CSA farms, it

becomes clear that the benefits should be understood as interdependent rather than as separate categories such as tangible and intangible benefits. Treating them as separate categories risks limiting the understanding of their actual potential. This study demonstrates that material, competences and meaning are closely interconnected and mutually reinforcing. For example, increasing market access through collaborations directly strengthens the material dimension by increasing income from higher sales of shares. At the same time, this also strengthens competences, as higher income enables farms to pay better salaries for gardeners, making it more attractive for them to remain at the farm and thereby retain their knowledge and skills within the CSA. Similarly, collaboration with schools both feed into the farm's meaning to shape through their practice and increases their competences because the gardeners gain new skills in education from this collaboration.

6.1.2 Potential for shaping the food system

Collaborations also have the potential to strengthen the influence of the CSA farm on the wider food system by disseminating their practices. This has been identified in previous studies, which argue that cooperation helps CSA farms to increase their reach (Bonfert 2022; Rommel et al. 2022; Buecheler & Bosch 2023). This study could find that collaborations help the farm to disseminate the elements of their practice. In line with this, Rommel et al. (2022) found that competence sharing between CSA farms helps to disseminate CSA competences and practices along the supply chain, for example, in the form of training programmes, or through seed saving and sharing. Both examples describe how the CSA farm model is disseminated in ways similar to those identified in this study. Specifically, the CSA farm spread their underlying meanings by sharing elements of their practices, such as know-how (competences) and resources like vegetables (materials).

However, this study argues that the potential of collaborations for shaping the food system goes beyond the dissemination of individual competences, meanings, or materials. Their transformative potential lies in the integration of collaborations into their practice without establishing a new practice for enabling collaborations. The CSA farm mainly builds collaborations on the existing elements of their core practice, such as their fields, agricultural know-how, member support, and commitment to an alternative food system. Still, collaborations require these elements to be adapted and reallocated, for example by shifting work capacities or adjusting the use of resources. This study also shows that the adjustments remain relatively limited and are constrained by the core elements of CSA practice. The farm is not willing to move away from these core elements to collaborate. Rather, the idea of "shaping through doing" is not only strongly emphasised in the CSA farm's core practices but also in their collaborative activities. The role of "shaping through doing" is described by prefiguration theory (Yates 2015; Schiller-Merkens

2024; Laycock Pedersen & Nicholas 2025), whose central idea is that the process through which change is created should already reflect the kind of outcome it seeks to achieve (Laycock Pedersen & Nicholas 2025). Schiller-Merkens (2024) argues that AFNs have a prefigurative role, acting as niches that demonstrate what is possible beyond capitalism. They can therefore be understood as prefigurative forms of alternative economies because they enact social practices that differ from dominant ones (Le Velly 2019; Schiller-Merkens 2024).

This study found that collaborations allow the farm not only to prefigure an alternative food system themselves, but also to enable others to participate in this prefiguration. The CSA farm does not merely transfer materials, meanings, or competences individually. Rather, this study shows that collaborations are enabled through the integration of these three elements. Through collaborations, the practice of "doing the alternative" is disseminated. Schiller-Merkens (2024) argues that prefigurative initiatives need stronger and more lasting connections with others to create broader social change. Without these networks, they risk becoming isolated communities that focus only on themselves instead of transforming society (Reinecke 2018). Instead of changing society more broadly, they may simply create small safe spaces that exist separately from the dominant system. Forming collaborations can be seen as one strategy for CSA farms to not operate isolated but rather shape the dominant system. Instead of operating in their safe space, the CSA farm explicitly outlines that it is important for them not to "operate like some sort of UFO on the outskirts" (Participant 1) but rather be closely connected to the village and "show the world" (Participant 5) their practice.

This became particularly visible in the educational activities of the CSA farm. Education does not primarily mean lecturing about CSA practices. Instead, the farm combines competences, materials, and meanings within their educational work, thereby enabling others to experience these practices directly. By doing so, others are able to experience the prefigurative role of CSA farms themselves, creating the potential for people not only to learn about CSA practices, but also to acquire the materials, competences, and meanings necessary to adopt these practices themselves.

In this sense, collaborations offer the CSA farm the possibility to expand their reach without needing to grow organizationally. This addresses a dilemma frequently described in the CSA literature: since the CSA model relies on close relationships and non-hierarchical structures, there are limits to growth because growth can undermine trust-based and personal relationships, increase coordination efforts and require more hierarchical structures, thus reducing the alterity of CSA farms (Rommel et al. 2019; Strüber et al. 2025). Collaborations with other actors can therefore enable CSA farms to increase their reach without organizational growth, as collaborations support the diffusion of CSA practices. This argument can be related to the concept of scaling, which explores different strategies to

effectively transform existing structures (Laamanen et al., 2023) and to move beyond a purely prefigurative role (Schiller-Merkens, 2024). Viewed through the lens of scaling, the findings of this study provide insights into how scaling can be practically achieved.

The CSA farm's general practice can be understood as scaling deep, as their work actively changes their members' behaviour of food purchasing, food preparation, and food consumption. Collaborations beyond the farm allow this scaling deep to extend beyond the member circle. For example, collaborations with schools incorporate children into farm practices by letting them taste vegetables and participate in growing processes on the farm, hence changing their taste and understanding of when and how vegetables grow. Delivering weekly vegetable boxes to the kindergartens change the children's eating habits, as they eat at least once a week, regional and seasonal vegetables.

Furthermore, the farm combines competences, materials, and meanings thereby enabling others to experience these practices directly. This creates the potential not only for people to learn about CSA practices, but also to acquire the materials, competences, and meanings necessary to adopt these practices themselves. By this, the CSA model can potentially scale out[6].

In addition, the findings indicate initial forms of scaling through in the CSA farm's collaboration with the local municipality. Scaling through is described by Laamanen et al. (2023) as recognising (local) government as a key pathway for achieving change. Scaling through strategies can involve building cooperation with local authorities or entering institutional positions to change institutions from "within" (Laamanen et al. 2023). Maintaining close ties with the local authority and the village itself has been considered important for the CSA farm from the start. A particularly fruitful result of this approach is the collaboration in which the local authority purchases harvest shares for local kindergartens. This arrangement not only supports the CSA farm's materials and competences (as described in chapter 5.1.3) but also helps to disseminate its practices beyond the farm level. First, it enhances competences, as the municipality offers to deliver vegetables to the kindergartens. Second, it enables the dissemination of materials through the provision of vegetables to the kindergartens. Third, and perhaps most importantly, it supports the dissemination of practices by partly financing the farm's educational work.

These findings support arguments that scaling through holds significant potential for gaining institutional support for alternative movements, and with this, increase their effect of changing dominant structures (Laamanen et al. 2023). Furthermore, this study provides a practical example of scaling through and supports the

[6] The concept of scaling out refers to the replication of initiatives which can function like independent copies but are often connected through networks

argument that collaborations with local authorities are beneficial not only for the movement itself, but also for shaping the food system beyond the farm level.

In summary, the findings from this study support arguments that collaborations have the potential to actively shape their environment (Phillips et al. 2000). The CSA farm enables collaborations by adapting their practices while remaining rooted in its core principles. In this way, collaborations help introduce the CSA model as a legitimate form of economic action to actors outside the CSA context, for example to the local municipalities.

6.2 Researcher's effects on the results

Reflexivity means for the researcher to be aware of their own relation to the research object, the content and the participants (Benson & O'Reilly 2022). The kind of knowledge I got and, the statements I considered as relevant to be included into this thesis, are based on my knowledge and understanding. But this knowledge and understanding is of course shaped by the process through which I gained it. Therefore, there are two aspects I want to reflect on, which I think strongly affected my results.

First, I believe that the fact that this research was conducted within the context of a master's thesis influenced the overall research process. In particular, feedback from my supervisors played a significant role in shaping key decisions. I want to highlight that their guidance was throughout collaborative and felt like a dialogue conducted on equal terms. Nevertheless, I remained aware of my position as a student whose primary aim was to learn, and of my comparatively limited experience. This awareness led me to question my own assumptions more readily than those of my supervisors.

As a result, their perspectives on research, as well as their academic interests, influenced the direction of the study. This is particularly important to acknowledge, as, without their input, my approach would have been more strongly guided by the methodological training I received during my bachelor's studies, which were predominantly focused on quantitative research.

During my bachelor's program, I learned that good research practice consists of clearly defined research questions and carefully structured research design, which ensure the validity of measurements. Had I adhered strictly to this approach, I would likely not have adopted an iterative research design, nor would I have initiated data collection at such an early stage without a clearly fixed research question or with a relatively flexible interview guideline.

This iterative design shaped the outcomes of the study. It allowed greater space for reflection and adaptation throughout the research process. Specifically, it encouraged be to have an initial interview and conversations at the CSA farm's member assembly, in a very early stage of the research process, without having

decided yet on theory I would use for interpretation. This open approach helped me reflect on how well different theories could support my analysis of the topics relevant to the CSA farm. Had I selected a theory before the initial conversations with the farm, I would not have chosen practice theory. Likewise, without discussions with my supervisors, I likely would have relied on the theories commonly used in existing supply chain collaboration literature. Practice theory, however, enabled a deeper understanding of the processes through which CSA farms operate. Combined with the integrated framework, it made it possible not only to identify individual benefits, but also to understand the effects more holistically.

Second, the choice of methods, namely the combination of participant observation and interviews, strongly influenced the results. Participant observation enabled a deeper understanding from the interviews. It allowed for follow-up questions, ongoing reflection, and a more comprehensive view of everyday practices. This helped to challenge initial assumptions - for instance, my early expectation that public procurement would generally benefit CSA farms. I reconsidered this after observing practical challenges in aligning the CSA farm's daily operations with public procurement.

Moreover, participant observation influenced what data entered the analysis. By engaging directly in the practice, I could observe materials, competences, and meanings myself rather than relying solely on participants' accounts. This reduced the filtering effect of interview questions and made it possible to identify relevant aspects that might not have been mentioned otherwise, such as specific infrastructure, the effect of location or the use of dedicated fields for educational work. Experiencing the materials helped me understand that it plays an important role in collaborations. This made me realize later in the analysis that the integration of the elements of practice is key in the CSA farm's collaborative practice. Not realizing this would have probably underestimated the effects of collaborations, as I would not have seen its interdependence and how benefits on material, competences and meaning can mutually reinforce one another.

At the same time, recorded interviews played a crucial role in ensuring analytical accuracy. Revisiting transcripts helped to correct misinterpretations that I would have made only relying on my field notes and field reflection. For example, during my participant observation in March, I could not fully experience the effects of collaborations, largely due to the timing. Most kindergartens receive deliveries later in the season, when the farm produces vegetables that can be eaten raw, and school class visits also begin later in the year. In addition, my participant observation mainly took place in the fields, while related discussion and organization of collaboration also occurred through emails, phone calls, or in meetings not happening on the farm. As I participated primarily in the role of an intern gardener, I had limited exposure to interactions outside of the farm.

What I observed much more directly was member participation and how their support shaped the CSA farm's practices, since members were highly present in the fields during my time there. Had I relied only on my field notes, I likely would have underestimated the role of collaborations. However, the recorded interviews, in which the importance of collaborations was explicitly emphasised, helped mitigate this underrepresentation, as I could read in the transcripts that their importance of the collaborations were mentioned and explained several times.

Overall, the combination of participant observation and interviews helped to mitigate the influence of my preconceptions. Each method compensated for the limitations of the other, resulting in a more differentiated understanding of the research context. Participant observation helped me to understand the role of materials to enable collaborations, and interviews helped me to understand the role of collaborations for the CSA farm.

7. Limitations and Further Research

The following chapter summarizes the methodological and theoretical limitations of this study and implications for further research.

7.1 Methodological Limitations

In an optimal research design, data collection and reflection would continue iteratively, allowing insights from initial analysis to inform further data gathering until no substantially new findings emerge; this is referred to as the saturation point (Döring & Bortz, 2016). However, in this study, the point of saturation was not possible to fully reach. The main phase of reflection and analysis took place only after the completion of data collection. Due to time constraints, the period for participant observation had been predetermined and could not be extended. Consequently, although it would have been beneficial to revisit the farm and conduct follow-up inquiries after an initial round of analysis, this was not possible within the given timeframe. Therefore, some questions which emerged only after reviewing the data, such as to what extent the CSA would let collaborations shape their practice, did not get fully answered.

Having more time to return to the farm and discuss the extent to which they are willing to let collaborations shape their practice, as well as to examine more closely how collaborations have shaped the farm in the past, could have helped to determine more clearly both how collaborations influence the farm's practices and how willing the CSA farm is to adapt to them.

The findings indicate that CSA farms are reluctant to engage in collaborations that would undermine their core principle of producing for their members and collectively sharing production costs, rather than producing for the market and assigning individual prices to vegetables. Furthermore, they are not willing to fundamentally alter key elements of their practice, such as materials, competences, and meanings, to facilitate collaboration.

At the same time, the results show that CSA farms do make adjustments to support collaborations they consider aligned with their values. For example, they may invest in additional materials, such as transport boxes, to improve logistical coordination. They also value collaboration partners who contribute complementary competences, such as delivery services that the farms themselves typically do not provide. Understanding better to what extent the CSA farm would adapt to collaborations is important in assessing whether collaborations only create potential for CSA farms, or whether they also carry the risk of CSA farms losing their alterity through collaboration, as farms may be more willing to adapt than this study initially assumed.

Further research would therefore be valuable, particularly longitudinal studies that examine the development of such collaborations on the practice of CSA farms over time.

Another limitation concerns the timing of the participant observation. Conducted in mid-March, the period represented a relatively inactive phase in the gardening season, during which collaborative activities were limited. As a result, key collaborations such as visits by school classes could only be talked about but not observed. This timing was determined by the schedule of the master's thesis course. A later period in the season might have provided richer insight because there would have been more to observe.

Additionally, it is important to mention that the results of this study might not be transferable to other CSA models. CSAs vary considerably in their organizational forms, ranging from highly participatory systems with strong member involvement to more service-oriented models (Spijker et al. 2020; Schmidt et al. 2023). They also differ in their structural foundations, as some are built upon existing farms while others are newly established (Schmidt et al. 2023).

These variations lead to significant differences in practices, resources, and levels of self-reliance, as well as in their resemblance with conventional food systems (Spijker et al., 2020). For example, differences in infrastructure, machinery and competences, such as access to washing facilities or delivery systems, may shape how CSAs operate and collaborate. Consequently, the findings identified in this case may not be directly transferable to other CSA models.

Further research could compare how the role of collaborations varies across different types of CSA farms.

Lastly, the potential of collaborations to benefit the meanings of CSA farms could not be found in extant research. This might be due to the fact that collaborations in food supply chains have not been examined with the lens of practice theory. Therefore, it could be interesting to have more studies analysing collaborations with a practice lens to have more to compare on.

7.2 Theoretical Limitations

While the framework by Shove et al. (2012) was helpful for structuring the analysis of collaborative practices by distinguishing between meanings, materials, and competences, its application in this thesis revealed certain limitations. In particular, the framework guided the analysis toward identifying whether practices exist or not (compare links are not made for Proto-practice and Ex-practice vs. links are made for practice exists), which made it less suited to capturing variations in how well collaborations function in practice. The empirical data, however, indicate that collaborations exist along a continuum—from less effective to more refined forms. For example, changes in logistics, a more formalized structure of the educational program, and small investments in materials (such as new transport boxes)

improved collaboration between the CSA farm and kindergartens. This was reflected in an increase in the number of participating kindergartens.

However, even before these changes, the practice of collaborating with kindergartens already existed, and the subsequent adaptations did not fundamentally alter the underlying competences, materials, or meanings. This illustrates what is meant by a space between non-practice and established practice—a nuance that the theoretical framework struggles to fully capture. As a result, these gradual developments remain difficult to articulate within the framework.

A similar challenge arose while analysing the extent to which collaborations shape practices or lead to new ones. Although the study suggests that collaborations contributed to modifications in practices rather than creating entirely new practices, the framework did not provide clear criteria for determining when changes in meanings, materials, or competences are substantial enough to constitute a new practice and when you can talk about only a modification of a practice.

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Appendix 1: Interview guideline

About: Your task/role, background, motivation

- What is the CSA farm for you? AND how would you like the CSA would develop?
- What role do partnerships play for the farm?
- How does the farm differ from other CSA projects?

Meaning:	Material:	Competence:
Why do you have collaborations? - motivation - Goal - How are they established? With whom and why? - Who initiates this? - Selection? - Decision: how and who decides?	Organization: - Communication? - Responsibility - decisions What role does the field play in the collaborations (location, vegetables, infrastructure...?) Resources: - Payment, impact on financial stability and why/how? - Other resource gains as a result?	Who is cooperating with whom? - Who is how involved? Who is behind the sister association? What role do the gardeners play?

Links of the elements:	To be observed:
Cooperation with canteens – what's the problem? - Raw food platters even without INTERREG? - What are the outcomes/learnings so far? How do new collaborations come about? How are they selected?	- How do collaborations influence the partners' practices? - How do collaborations affect material, competences and meaning? - Is there a strategy?

Appendix 2: Code System

Codes	Coded Segments
Integrated practice	20
Meaning	
Quotes	13
Synergies /Share resources	3
Advocacy and Shape	17
Public relations	6
Economic motivation	9
Community	8
Competences	
Quotes	10
Relationships /	6
Personal skills /Interest	4
Knowledge / skills	4
Structures / Stability	15
Material	
Quotes	9
Material / tools	8
Vegetables	4
Location	3
Space	7
Money / Income	3
Working time	1

Appendix 3: Popular Science Summary

Growing Change Through Collaboration: How Community Supported Agriculture can reach beyond their fields

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms can create a bigger impact when they work together with others. This study shows that collaborations help CSA farms strengthen their daily work and spread their ideas for a fairer and more sustainable food system — without losing the close community relationships that make them unique.

CSA is a farming model where consumers directly support a farm by sharing the costs and risks of food production. In return, they receive a share of the harvest. This helps small farms survive while creating stronger links between farmers and consumers. CSA farms are known to encourage healthier eating, increase biodiversity, and reduce dependence on industrial farming methods.

My research explored a new question: **How do collaborations shape what CSA farms actually do?**

The key finding is that collaborations do not replace or fundamentally change how CSA farms operate. Instead, they expand what farms can already do by adding new resources, skills, and opportunities.

For example, partnerships with schools and adult education centres allowed the farm to offer educational activities, helping people learn where food comes from through direct experience. In another case, cooperation with the local municipality enabled weekly vegetable deliveries to kindergartens, giving children access to fresh seasonal food.

These collaborations create practical benefits for farms: they provide extra income, improve access to resources, and strengthen knowledge and skills. But their wider social value is even more important.

The research shows that collaborations allow CSA farms to share their way of farming with people beyond their members. Instead of simply talking about alternatives to the industrial food system, they allow others to experience these alternatives directly — by growing, handling, and eating food differently.

This matters because it offers a realistic way for small-scale sustainable farming to grow its influence. Rather than becoming larger and risking the loss of personal relationships, CSA farms can expand their impact through partnerships. Collaboration may therefore be a key pathway for building a sustainable food system.