



CHANGES IN AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES – CSA CHARTER – THE STRUGGLE AGAINST PESTICIDES

Becoming free from chemical inputs

Feedback on the project carried out with CSA farmers in the Basque Country

INTRO

In April 2016, the Basque Country Inter-CSA organisation (IAPB) published an article titled "CSA Farmers: becoming free from chemical products" (*'Paysans en AMAP : se libérer de l'utilisation de produits chimiques'*). They made a call for finding funding to finance farm assessment visits of volunteer farmers, in order to evaluate their agricultural practices, in line with the CSA Charter. Here is some feedback on the positive results of this 2-year project.

INTERVIEWER : Isabel Capdeville, member and co-chair of the Basque Country CSA network
FARMERS' CONTRIBUTIONS gathered by Isabel
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WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT

Between 2015 and early 2016, IAPB undertook a collective reflection process on agricultural practices with several CSA farms, based on farm evaluations that were carried out within the network at the start of the CSA partnerships over several years. The farm activities were recorded in a detailed assessment document known as a 'CSA farmoscopy'* (i.e. a farm assessment).

"We identified 15 out of 100 CSA farmers who are not certified organic", explains Isabel.

"For certain farmers, there was no proof that they were moving towards practices avoiding chemical inputs. We wanted to question them in a constructive manner, in other words, to identify the constraints". Our aim was to research ways to continuously improve practices in line with the CSA Charter.



There are 33 CSA networks in the Basque Country, involving 1300 families and 110 farmers. Following the creation of the first CSA networks in 2007, in 2011 the **IAPB organisation** was founded with the support of the Farmers' Association APFPB. It is made up of CSA members and farmers.

The Inter-CSA works on two fronts:
- **internally:** creating and developing new CSAs. IAPB advertise its farmers on its webpage, launching call for creating partnership for a new farmers.

- **externally:** promoting the AMAP system. It is a member of the Plenary Assembly of the Lurzaindia-based Association of Agricultural and Rural Development (EHLG), which aims to collectively buy agricultural land, and of the Basque Country Development Council. It



THE OBJECTIVES

An initiative rooted in the search for autonomous decision-making:

Farmers from different sectors (poultry, eggs, goat's cheese, beef cattle, and vegetables) were invited to meet and reflect on the use of agricultural inputs, together with CSA members from IAPB and coordinators from the BLE association. A proposal was made to support these farmers who wish to improve their practices and align with the French CSA charter. "10 farmers showed their interest. We made available the resources to support 10 assessment visits, of which 9 were carried out."

The main goal was for farmers to take the time to look at how to improve their practices, in a financially viable manner.

At the beginning, the proposal was to have an individual visit, but "**we very quickly opted for a collective endeavour**". CIVAM bio staff visited every farm, sometimes with the presence of a CSA member, in order to carry out the pre-assessment. Mid-term review meetings with the farmers, Civam Bio and IAPB members were later organised, enabling them to discuss the analyses of their level of compliance with the basics of organic agriculture, in line with the CSA Charter, and to assess alternative technical proposals.



THE RESULTS

"If they want to change, they will change. We do not decide whether they should change, and it's not up to us to impose them to change, however, it was important to discuss it with them." **Isabel confirms that today 6 farmers are officially converting to organic agriculture as result of this programme. Each farmer was able to opt to convert and to be certified as an organic farmer, if they wished.** "If the farmer requested it, we also worked on the application for an official organic certification"

Other visits to organic farms of similar sizes were organised, which helped them to envisage certain developments.

Farmers became conscious of their situation regarding organic farming practices.

On most farms, some additional steps could easily be undertaken, and changes for progress planned.

The exercise also helped to reveal individual difficulties, to better understand farmers' constraints and to integrate costs.

When a farmer did not want to switch to organic because he considered the inputs to be too expensive, conversations with CSA members enabled the farmer to see how much the eggs should be sold for turning the conversion into organic production economically viable.

"The CSA members took on board the consequences of the initiative and adapted the contracted prices in solidarity".



"How did you find the pre-assessment?" farmers' contributions gathered by Isabel

We found it hard to change our habits, but we felt encouraged by the support we received from the rest of the CSA members. At the beginning we were sceptical but in the end, it was an important step into trying something different.

Fabien (the son who is just starting out) met some people who have professional experiences, and then joined the diversified organic vegetable farmers' group.

Truth is, we are not that far away from chemical-free agriculture, and closer to organic than we initially thought.

Françoise and Fabien (vegetable farmers)



The pre-dialogue gave us time to reflect, all the while discussing with our peers and receiving support from the Civan bio technical staff. On the farm, our practices were totally in line with the Charter, but the challenge was the feed for the animals. By visiting other organic farms, we faced our fears. We met some colleagues who are full of ideas and amazing technical know-how. Now that our son is starting out, we were motivated to give some thought to our every-day work on the farm, and we asked to be converted to organic for our poultry.

The biggest surprise was that after having foreseen and explained that the prices would increase, we got some new contracts. That's because CSA members were supporting us even more after the conversion, because they wanted to have a healthy diet.

Panpi (poultry farmer)



INSIGHT: The farm evaluation: a tool for sharing knowledge on CSA farms

Farmers who are members of the Basque CSA network open the doors to their farms to visitors carrying out a 'CSA farmoscopy'. This farm evaluation comprises a **detailed description of activities on the farm** covering: the farmer's personal path, the agricultural practices, processing and commercialisation practices. **The visit is partly dedicated to assessing the CSA partnership between the producers and the consumers.** The evaluation visits are carried out together with CSA members at the start of a partnership and/or with members of IAPB, usually before the contracts are formalised. **This tool allows members to have clear information about the farms.** The evaluations add a level of understanding of his/her own farm that the farmer did not necessarily had before

These evaluations can also help to identify difficulties and/or needs, and to draft of a 'common goals contract' (i.e. more formalised partnership goals).

KEY MESSAGES

- A collective and participatory initiative of over 2 years
- One consolidated partnership with the BLE association
- A project co-piloted by IAPB, with involvement of CSA members in the monitoring of respective CSA farms
- IAPB raised € 4,800 for this project (half of the total cost - the other half was covered by BLE) thanks to memberships, and a funding pot within the network (€ 1,000 raised). This structure allowed farmers to participate free of cost, dedicating their time and commitment to seriously reflect on their farming practices.
- 9 evaluation visits, 6 conversions to organic
- Increase in number of CSA member contracts
- Emerging collective of poultry farmers

The experience can be replicated and upscaled and partnerships can be created where they don't exist

PERSPECTIVES

Formalise the initiative and further highlight the value of this project

Isabel explains that **this project can be replicated with other farmers**. The collective approach would need to be strengthened and formalised. Full financing would be required, along with a more in-depth analysis of obstacles to changing practices, and a search for collective solutions.



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