

The Gardens of Cocagne

Marianne Enckell

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For some 12 years a group of market gardeners and consumers have run a vegetable co-operative in Geneva. Started on a modest basis, it today numbers 220 members and is operated in a semi-professional way. Here is a picture of it, as I remember it and from current debates.

Why create a producer/consumer co-operative of alimentary products, when large distribution networks exist and provide you, every day, with all the fruit and vegetables available on earth, at a reasonable price?

Why cultivate 25-metre beds when machines are built to cultivate on kilometres?

Because we like doing it!

Then, from the consumer's point of view, if you buy your vegetables at the market you don't know where they come from or how they were grown.

- How much do banana pickers earn a day?
- Why do beans come from Egypt?
- Why is a fish five or ten times more expensive in Geneva than where the fisherman lives?
- Why have lorry loads of calves stuck in the Mont Blanc tunnel?
- Why are tons of vegetables thrown away every month in Geneva?

You want to cultivate your own garden and see the food you eat grow, but that takes too much of your time, you haven't the space, you don't want to isolate yourself every Sunday, you go away on holiday at the time it is necessary to water and weed.

You go to your office, you wish the spring will not be like autumn, you want to feel the seasons even in your mouth, our seasons and not Acapulco's...

You would like to share a piece of land in the country, to extend the walls of your flat. You are interested in country matters, here or elsewhere; maybe you have heard of milk prices or quotas; you are fed up buying tasteless vegetables wrapped in cling-film; you think it's important to eat healthy, natural vegetables in which you can have confidence.

Farmers are not the only ones concerned with agricultural problems; if we disturb our ecological balance is it not also because of current agricultural methods?

From the producer's point of view

- If you are your own boss you are quickly brought to one sole preoccupation: to make the enterprise turn over, sell each kilogram at the highest price, regardless of quality, you become specialised and you use any means to combat pests.
- If you cater for the market, you run the risk of not selling or having to sell to a retailer at a lower price; you must get to be known to 'break through'.
- If you are the sole owner of the business you take on all the responsibilities and risks. You cannot follow through new methods you are isolated in your work, you have difficulty raising loans. If you take on employees you become dependent on them. You are tied down to your land, you have difficulty finding somebody to take over in an emergency or when you want to go on holidays or attend courses, etc. (*Bulletin*, November 1978)

The Gardens of Cocagne were founded in 1978 in Geneva. According to their legal status they are a co-operative, the aim of which is to provide its members with foodstuffs by the collective cultivation of the land, as well as by the development of all social, economic and scientific activities related to it.

In fact today 220 members hire three gardeners, paid monthly, to grow vegetables on some two hectares. The vegetables are the property of the consumers – they are harvested once a week, put into 220 bags (from two to ten kg depending on the season), and distributed in town at 35 pick-up points. Members pay a yearly quota and help in the garden three half-days a year. In return, they receive organic seasonal vegetables for nine months of the year. They cannot choose their vegetables each week but at the general meeting they decide on the plan as to what will be grown.

The Beginnings

It is first of all the story of an agricultural scientist who thinks that everything could be very much simpler, who would like to farm but has neither capital nor land; it is the story of active friends who may have grand-children, all living together; the story of a town where finding accommodation and moving about is difficult, and of a nearby countryside inhabited by wealthy vine growers, of greenhouses by the square kilometre, and villas with large neglected gardens.

In the first summer there were 40 of us in the collective with one gardener who worked bits of land in several corners of the canton. It was after the first season that we set up the co-operative and started to keep accounts seriously.

Budget Forecast for the 1979 Season (Amounts in Swiss francs) ^a			
Annual expenses			
Rent of land		2,200	
Ploughing		800	
Manure, compost		3,000	
Seeds, plants		2,500	
Water		1,500	
Machinery maintenance		1,500	
Transport		2,500	
Wages and expenses		29,000	
Depreciation		5,000	
Sundries		2,000	
	Total		50,000
			= 125 shares of 400 franc

^a Editor's note: the present exchange rate is 2.6SF to the £Sterling. We have not been able to ascertain as whether it was different in 1979.

Fixed Charges (to be paid off in 5 years):			
Rotavator		4,000	
Cultivator		3,000	
Accessories		1,000	
Seed drills – wheels		1,000	
Additional tools		2,000	
Tunnels and frames		4,000	
Water rates, hoses		5,000	
Stakes, poles		1,000	
Wire, stakes		3,000	
Sundries		1,000	
	Total		25,000

Funded by 125 quotas at 50 frs.			6,250
Amortisation		5,000	
Loans		3,750	
		15,000	

Outstanding balance 10,000 fr. in supplementary quotas or loans. Reserve plus sundries and supplementary labour for installations, sheds and chicken coops – 10,000 to be raised in the form of gifts.

One Gardener, August 1980: Our cooperative must not stop halfway. For me, the co-op's aims remain as follows:

- i. A change in relationship between producers and consumers.

We do not grow for unknown customers, but we can discuss our work with them, not just the vegetables and the price. Members of the co-op can see the garden, help in the production, see how the vegetables grow and observe for themselves what attention they need.

- ii. It is a plot of land the city for co-operative members – this land can be used for leisure as well as production – there few places left where adults, children and handicapped people have chance to realise what agricultural production involves.

For those who are especially interested in gardening this is a communal garden instead of a private one; or simply a place where they can camp or light a fire.

- iii. It is an alternative to the large distribution centres for at least a part of our consumer needs; a chance to eat organically grown vegetables which have flavour and are seasonal; to learn about old (or new) vegetables and to swap recipes.
- iv. To information and the possibility to write about the conditions of agricultural production, its link With the Third World etc.

“The financial difficulties of Cocagne often make us forget all those things which are, and which remain, the basis of our co-operative. With all the problems of everyday life little time is left for discussing the true problems, the nature of things as well as individual Wishes and needs...” ‘Reto’

The Economy

To join the co-operative, each member makes a financial contribution. This starting capital makes possible basic equipment (machinery, greenhouses, water layout). The annual budget obviously covers the paying off and renewal of installations. The general meeting decides on the amount of annual quota (the ‘price’ of vegetables and the gardener’s wages. The value of the vegetables is based on the average non-organic wholesale market’s prices in Geneva. The amount of goods delivered varies according to the weather conditions, but the individual share-out remains the same. In the last few years, however, members have contributed slightly different amounts according to their income and family size; each participant works out what he owes based on a scale of charges. The gardeners, who were poorly paid at the beginning now earn a salary nearer to that of the average co-op member’s.

Therefore, if ‘prices’ and ‘wages’ are based on the local market, the network functions outside the market; all the vegetables are distributed — and hopefully, eaten — and the gardeners are paid their wages irrespective of what they provide (such is our trust in them...)

In fact, a few wholesale deliveries are made to other collectives and represent about 10% of the budget.

More or less regular contacts exist with other producers to complete deliveries of winter vegetables, fruit, bread, eggs, but only if their own production is comparable with Cocagne’s and, that they are co-operatives, or at least non-profit and organic.

Letter from a Cocagnard (the first) April 1981:

“I very much liked the latest bulletin from Cocagne. However, the article headed ‘Know how to Feed Yourself’ irritated me a little. Biogenic, bioactive, biostatic, bioacid; I am probably in agreement... but. But it is not only food that engenders, activates or slows down or destroys life. Social relationships (producer-consumer, for example); the environment can also be biostuff or biothing. I fear that ecology is becoming too self-orientated and being used to evade social problems. Let us not give absolute priority to the navels crowning our bellies!” ‘Nicolas’

At the very beginning the participants were probably more interested in the experimental and self-regulating aspects of the venture. On the day of distribution of the bags of vegetables in the districts people met to exchange recipes, dreams, to talk about gardens and life, sometimes to change the world. The bulletin was edited by a district group or a ‘commission’ who knew how to fill it with projects and considerations of great import. But soon new co-operators started to give more importance to what they eat and give their children to eat, and are not always keen to widen their horizons. During the last general meeting it was suggested that the week’s harvest in October, which coincided with the school holidays, be delivered to the Peugeot Factory, then on strike in Mulhouse. One person rose to ask what link existed between the Cocagne co-operative and the support for a workers’ strike. At the beginning, the idea was to create co-operative networks of many shapes and colours. It was a time of numerous communities and more varied ways of life.

This idea is still dear to the gardeners and to those members who live in communes, who set up more or less successful or lasting workplaces. But the bulk of the 'Cocagnards' is made up of families or employees such as teachers, social workers, civil servants, and only a fraction their leisure is devoted to this kind of organised movement. Indeed, there is no obvious connection with more 'alternative' or radical groups — the freedom to squat, barter, to refuse salaried work or money, to live the itinerant life, is not compatible with the annual payment quota in return for the weekly collection of a bag of vegetables.

Nevertheless, since the beginning at Cocagne there has been some progress in the thinking about the market gardening situation in Geneva and elsewhere, about food distribution on international trade. The co-operative has participated at discussions and projects with farming associations, Third World groups, ecologists, etc.

Of course, the gardeners are the most eager to make contacts and join more producers' associations. "All members of a co-op," writes a former gardener, "have a common interest with all these people — to have healthier food, improve our relationships, exercise control over our work and what we eat, avoid 'sweetening middle-men to help distribution and selling directly, organise oneself independently in the districts..." But here also there is a choice between different associations, notably with organic growers or militant peasants, according to the ethic they defend, the solidarity they practise.

In the last few years, one of the gardeners has been working on a project of self-development for a village in Senegal, and he is appealing to the solidarity of co-op members to support his project. The garden is also a meeting place. Trainees are working there, or friends trying to launch a similar project somewhere else. Teachers bring their classes, or handicapped children. There are picnics, fetes frequently. And in the vegetable bag there is always room for a news bulletin or pamphlets or requests for help.

Production

Production is obviously the central aspect of the co-operative. How does it rate compared with a conventional enterprise? From March to August, 1989, the volume of vegetables delivered has been 30% more than anticipated and this will continue till December. The bags contain more mixed vegetables but some crops (leeks, salads, tomatoes) are more prolific than others (beans, peas) the harvest of which is less predictable.

The working hour is paid at 17 Swiss francs. Its real cost for Cocagne is 52.50 fr., inclusive of social and administrative charge as well as seeds, water, compost, tools and machinery, maintenance, ground rent costs.

Here is the price and value of the vegetables as based on the average price of the market:

SALADS 100m², about 1000 plants
Work: planting and care 10 hours
 harvesting 8 hours
 Total 18 hrs. x 52.50 fr. 945.
 NEW POTATOES 1000m²
Work: planting and care 32 hours
 harvesting 80 hours.
 Total 112hrs x 52.50 fr. 5880
Crop: 2500 kg. x 1.80 fr. 4500.
 TOMATOES 400m² (tunnels), about 900 plants
Work: planting 12 hours
 Cultivation and care 84 hours.
 Harvesting 24 hours.
 Total 120hrs. x 52.50 fr. 6300
Crop: 300 kg. x 2.80 fr. 8400.
 GREEN BEANS 200m²
Work: planting and care 10 hours
 Harvesting 30 hours
 Total 40 hours x 52.50 fr. = 2100 fr.
Crop: 200 kg x 5 fr. = 1000 fr.

Thanks to new grounds better suited to the cultivation of some vegetables; thanks also to investments in machinery, tunnels and water installations, we are working the same hours while increasing our production by 45 per cent. It is good, but obliges us to increase total production.

This increase, in turn, should help pay off investments and increase wages. It means deurerquota-shares (10 percent) and more deliveries on order.

Until now what we wanted to do, first and foremost was to produce cheap vegetables. But, today, things are different: it could be that our needs change, our age, our thinking, our desire not to give in completely to over-production in farming or vegetable growing which, alas, organic growing cannot prevent. In the long run, we cannot increase our wages by just growing more. Would it be better to increase the present scale, based on ordinary market prices, with a 5 to 10 per cent mark-up for the organic label and acceptable long-term working conditions (oh, my back!)? This would still leave the price of Cocagne vegetables well below those at organic markets or health food shops. (*Bulletin*, October 1989).

Accounts 1988–98:			
Annual expenses		Francs	
Ground rent and sheds		1600	
Manure: compost		4700	
Seeds		12700	
Vegetables		6100	
Water		3500	
Machinery maintenance		8000	
Tools – material		4000	
Transport – cars		13000	
Social charges		16500	
Depreciation		16000	
General Expenses, Administration		8000	
Bulletin		1800	
	Total		168.000

Produce			
Vegetable quota – shares (220 shares at 675 Frs on average)		145000	
Sales and orders		13000	
Loss:		10000	
	Total		168000

Budget 1989–90			
Overhead charges (basis 1988–89)		168000	
Wages increases		32000	
	Total		200000

Produce			
Quota (220 shares at 750 fr.)		165000	
Sale of bread and eggs		5000	
Sale of tomatoes and potatoes		5000	
Joint orders		200000	
Indemnity for missing half working days		5000	
	Total		200000

And now?

The Gardens of Cocagne would have wished to be the forerunners of the Land of Cocagne. But the world is such that our ways of life are not always in harmony with our values. If the gardeners were not the driving force behind the co-operative, it would wither away. The members who owe three half-days of work a year do not go there willingly, some want to go on such and such a day, at such and such an hour. The development one hoped for never took place.

For example, in the wake of the Gardens of Cocagne, groups of people started collective purchase of groceries such as cereals, dried fruit or detergents, but they were only interested in the quality of the products (organic, ecological, cheap) not in how they were produced. And yet the experiment is rich and powerful. Think about it — we have different relationships at work (at least for the gardeners but even for those who want to participate) at the market, with nature, the consumer's world, the world, be it the first or the third. There is a genuine camaraderie between co-operative members of the districts and their children. Is it possible to expect more from a co-operative?

But above all, the experiment could be repeated everywhere. Conditions would certainly be different in a big city (one would have to give more importance to the district and to the distribution, that is, transport from the gardens) and in other climates. The season is a short one in Stockholm; the soil is poor in Canberra; in Palermo there will be oranges and organic lemons.

The sharing of tasks between producers and consumers can be negotiated and all sorts of combinations are possible in the farm yard, with fruit trees, a bakery, a sweet shop. (Are you looking for recipes for vegetable bon-bons?)

Cocagne, in Geneva, welcomes any visitors or learners, if you are tempted.

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