

## **SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH ORGANIC PRODUCTION AND COMMUNITY-SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE IN BULGARIA**

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### **Abstract**

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Considering the priorities of sustainable development in the context of assurance food quality and safety and rural development, the paper underlines the importance of agri-food sector and the elaboration and the implementation of new methods and instruments in management of small and medium agricultural holdings. The study addresses organic production as an overall systematic approach having a great potential for assuring sustainable growth in rural areas, and it is discussed in terms of the opportunities provided by alternative food networks, and community supported agriculture in particular. The study presented reveals the most important questions in the development of community supported agriculture (CSA) in Bulgaria and its link to organic production development. The focus in the following discussion is put on the functioning of CSA groups in the country making a proposal for a model of establishment and management underlining the significance of motivation, communication and feedbacks and envisaging the application of the concept of corporate social responsibility.

*Key words:* community-supported agriculture, organic farming, management, sustainability

*Abbreviations:* AFN – Alternative Food Network, CSA – Community Supported Agriculture, CSR – Corporate Social Responsibility

### **Introduction**

In the era of the globalizing world the problems of food safety and security are bigger than ever before as well as the importance of agriculture for sustainable development. Discussing challenges of globalization processes and food and agricultural non-food products' quality and safety, some questions in connection to safe production and international trade are raised taking into account greater risks along with bigger advantages. The competition on international markets is bigger than ever before, as well as requirements regarding environmental protection and human health which impose higher investments and greater concerns. The problems are not only in satisfaction of consumers' demand but of assuring standard of living of producers in rural areas, protection of traditions and culture.

Discussing the challenges before the global food system and recent trends and realities Bruni and Santucci (2016) in the context of corporate social responsibility conclude that all these lead to “*a new scenario, where the long term sustainability will prevail over the short term profits, and where returns and welfare will be fairly shared, for the mutual benefit of all stakeholders*”.

The question of corporate social responsibility (CSR) is of an extreme importance because it introduces the basic positions and limitations from the point of view of the organizations and their roles in the balancing of the three pillars of sustainable development – economic growth, social development and environmental protection (Zahariev, 2013, 232). The corporate social responsibility is accepted as the responsibility and accountability of the organizations for the impacts of their decisions and activities on society

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and environment implemented in conditions of transparency and ethical behavior and contributing to sustainable development, human health and society welfare. Being integrated in the organizations at all the levels and expressed by their inner and outer interactions and relations, it considers the expectations of all the parties and is in correspondence to the legislation concerning social and ecological issues and relevant international norms in the implementation of socially responsible initiatives (Nikolova and Yordanova, 2014). The concept is developing into a successful business strategy for sustainable development supporting organizations in the raise of their influence on the market and also in establishing a positive public image (Nikolova et al., 2014; Bakardjieva, 2009).

Medium and small-scale enterprises have been gathering significance in the past decades concerning entrepreneurship encouraging and competitiveness raising strategies aiming at sustainable growth. In the context of producing subsistence, agriculture practice is now under a transition from large scale commodity enterprises to small scale self-sustaining civic activities. In practice, recent urban development projects emphasized the production of local food within the urban development site to promote a healthy, ecologically and economically sustainable lifestyle (Chen, 2012). In several developed countries most households have secure quantities of food with verifiable attributes, so they increasingly focus on less tangible dimensions such as food safety and health (e.g., absence of pesticide residue), environmental conditions, geographic and social affinity (e.g. locally grown products, support of 'small' producers, fair trade considerations) and animal welfare (Bougheraraa et al., 2009).

Alternative food networks (AFNs) are defined in four major ways: (1) by shorter distances between producers and consumers; (2) by small farm size and scale and organic or holistic farming methods, which are contrasted with large scale, industrial agribusiness; (3) by the existence of food purchasing venues such as food cooperatives, farmers markets, and CSA and local food-to-school linkages; (4) by a commitment to the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable food production, distribution and consumption (Jarosz, 2008).

Community supported agriculture (CSA) is a direct-marketing food network that has the potential to decommo- dify food and support farmers while providing consumers with sustainably raised, seasonal, local food (Hayden and Buck, 2012). Community supported agriculture (CSA) programs have become a viable source of locally produced foods and represent a new way to increase fruit and vegetable consumption among individuals. Because CSAs represent a way for consumers to acquire healthy foods while providing

financial support to local farmers, CSA involvement could reflect, and be related to, greater concern with both health and environmental impact of food choice (MacMillan Uribe et al., 2013).

CSAs provide a variety of food products ranging from fruits and vegetables to meats, poultry, and eggs in a system where a farmer or producer partners with community members to create a sustainable and healthy local food system. In the typical CSA community members pay for a "share" in the farm's production in the fall or spring and are given goods throughout the season, thus allowing the farmer to have access to the financial capital necessary to purchase seeds and other inputs for the upcoming season. In addition, both farmer and CSA members have an investment in the operation and share the risks and benefits associated with the uncertainty of farming (Brehm and Eisenhauer, 2008). CSAs are argued to have multiple community and ecological benefits, including civic renewal and increased collaboration at the community level, improving access to healthy foods, and preserving farmland through sustainable production practices. An important variable in both the conception and application of CSA is a strong and vigorous community (Brehm and Eisenhauer, 2008). Furthermore, the questions discussed above could be related to the multifunctional models of agriculture and development of social farms (Lanfranchi et al., 2015). Although still in initial phase, social entrepreneurship and social farming in Bulgaria are considered in terms of stabilization of social and economic life in rural areas and environmental protection.

The CSA trend continues to grow, but research on producers, consumers, and CSA programs themselves is limited. The current body of literature focuses primarily on describing the typical CSA member and identifying motivations for involvement with local foods or barriers to participation. MacMillan Uribe et al. (2012) evaluated the association of ecological attitudes with behaviors such as recycling and composting, eating out, and family involvement in food preparation. Overall, ecological attitudes among CSA members are a significant predictor of "multiple self-reported sustainability" and food related behaviors. Other analyses reveal that CSA member motivations are similar to those found in past empirical work, with concerns over quality of food being the strongest motivators. The importance of community building and development of social capital are not considered significant motivators for joining a CSA, nor are they perceived to be particularly important benefits of membership. However, the importance of community attachment in enhancing certain motivating factors like a desire to develop a stronger sense of community and a desire to support local growers was found significant (Brehm and Eisenhauer, 2008).

The implications from this issue's discussions are clearly linked to the concept of sustainable development. On one side are consumers and demand, on the other – producers and supply. It is for sure that demand is for safety and health, but the answer of the question how to respond in the supply chain is not so easy. In the process of its development agriculture, as a branch at the very beginning of food and non-food products' chains, reflects historical, cultural and social values of human kind. Recently, the focus is on sustainable agriculture which integrates three main objectives – healthy environment, economic effectiveness and social justice. Nowadays, when the international community is searching for ways of effective use of all the resources (natural, material, financial, human, etc.) the organic production method as a multifunctional system integrating economic and social issues with those of environmental protection, is an appropriate alternative for the operators (producers, processors and traders) to find the best solution for organization, management and development of agricultural holdings, processing or trade companies and to find markets for their produce (Arabska, 2014). In that connection, encouragement and development of organic production and its integration with other economic branches is one of the alternatives for future sustainable development (Yovchevska, 2015). The leading principle in this development is the quality. The choice of consumers is directed towards healthier and tastier food with high nutritional values produced by environmentally friendly methods as it is organic farming in particular. As a whole, consumers now do not search anymore only easily determined facts in relation to quality, safety and hygiene of products but also such that give added value and answer sustainability goals and a market-oriented operator should respond to consumers' demands in order to sell the produce. On the other hand, the motivation for organic farming varies from own health anxiety to planet ecological balance concern in both groups – consumers and operators too (Arabska, 2014).

Current paper presents a study on the opportunities for development of the CSA concept in organic farming in Bulgaria. This follows up another one made by the author in an investigation of organic sector development in the country (Arabska, 2013). Its main conclusions are that organic production is a sector that is in rise in the past few years and it is also dealt with in respect to the three pillars of sustainable development. But besides the opportunities it provides it is not a determining one in the agriculture in Bulgaria because of a number of reasons although the basic prerequisites for organic sector development in the country are favorable. Legislation, strategic documents

and institutional support are elaborated in the country and in accordance to the requirements of the EU. Technology is available and scientific research activities in the field are amongst those with the highest priority and they lead to results that could be really applied in practice. The main problems are connected to the low level of information provided to operators and consumers about organic production, very low incomes in the country, limited variety of organic products on the market, difficult identification of organic products and the lack of trust in consumers, export orientation of local produce (mainly raw materials) and import of organic processed products at higher prices. The main difficulties for organic operators in the country could be summarized as lack of money and markets in the country. So a different and innovative approach should be used considering rural development, agribusiness and entrepreneurship encouragement, green economy, social responsibility and sustainable development and taking into account that reaching sustainable development including elements "People, Planet & Profit" is connected to local cultural development, traditions and identity as well as to consumers demand. Nowadays markets in cities/ towns have special requirements towards products, especially food, which is an opportunity for organic entrepreneurs. CSA has proven itself as a way of reaching a positive economic growth, providing employability and reviving rural areas, providing places for social activities, rising society consciousness, etc. All this complement the provision of fresh, tasty and healthy food, environmental protection and positive economic impact on local business as a whole. Those are the reasons to go further and search for ways of application of this concept into the country.

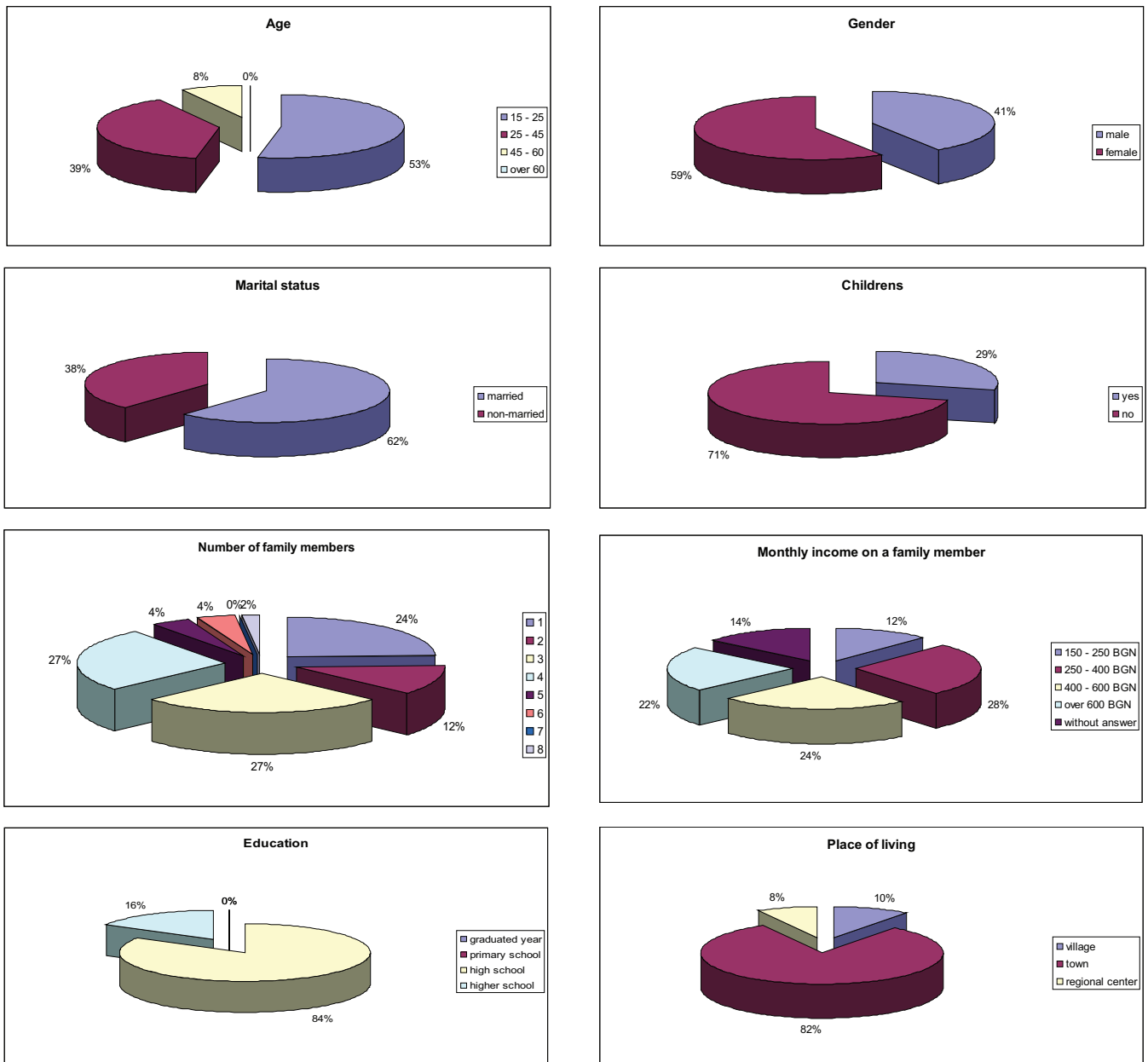
## **Materials and Methods**

The investigation starts with a review of the literature in the studied area – economic and social impacts of alternative food networks and particularly CSA. On the basis of this review and the results of the previous investigation of the author as stated above a questionnaire is prepared for an empirical investigation of the opportunities for development of the CSA concept in organic farming in Bulgaria. It contains questions about the wishes and the readiness to participate in CSA associations and it tries to make clear the reasons for given answers. Because of the specificity and the lack of popularity of this concept in the country, the questionnaire is filled in a small group of university students in the field of agrarian economy and agribusiness management. Additionally, a model for establishing a CSA group is elaborated and proposed.

**Results**

49 persons were interviewed with the following profile (Figure 1): 15-25 years old – 53%; 25-45 years old – 39%; 45-60 years old – 8%; 59% women and 41% men; 62% married; 71% without children. Number of family members: 24% – 1; 27% – 3; 27% – 4. About the monthly

income the distribution is the following: 150–250 BGN – 12%; 250–400 BGN – 28%; 400–600 BGN – 24%; over 600 BGN – 22%; 14% did not answer this question. The data for the interviewees' education: graduates of secondary / vocational schools – 84%; higher education – 16%; 10% live in villages, 82% – in small towns; 8% – in municipal centers.



**Fig. 1. Profile of the interviewees**

The results from the questionnaire show that 65% of the interviewees do not know about the concept of CSA (Figure 2). 41% would participate in a group / association supporting local organic production paying monthly or annual fees and getting seasonable and fresh food. 45% answer with 'maybe' and only 14% negatively (Figure 3).

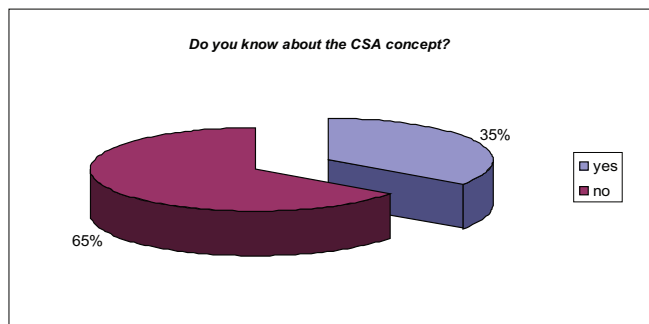


Fig. 2. Awareness about the CSA concept

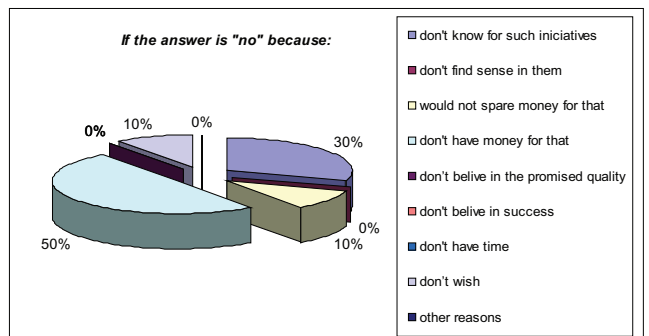
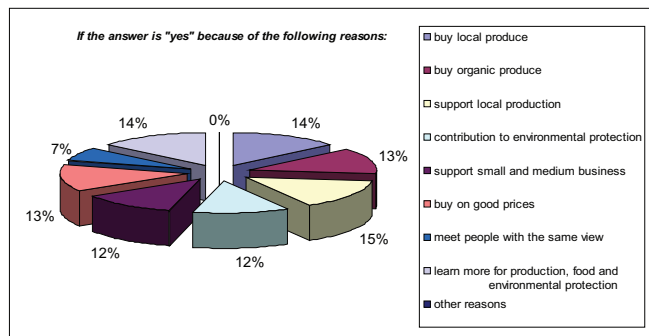
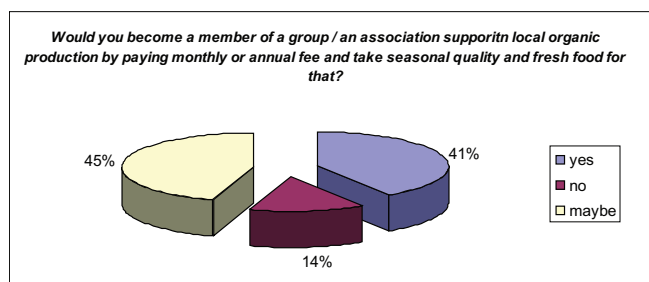


Fig. 3. Interest in membership

The positive and hesitant answers are explained by the following reasons: support to local production (15%); buying local produce (14%) and additional knowledge of production, food and environmental protection (14%); buying organic produce (13%); good prices (13%); contribution to environmental protection (12%) and support for small and medium business (12%). Only 7% have mentioned 'meet people with the same view' (Figure 3).

The negative answers are explained by the following reasons: 50% do not have money for that; 30% do not know about such initiatives; 10% would not spare money for that; 10% do not have any wish. None checked that there is no sense, does not believe in the quality or s/he does not trust in success (Figure 3).

37% of the interviewed would participate as members in the management boards in such associations and activities' organization. 41% have some doubts, 22% answer negatively (Figure 4).

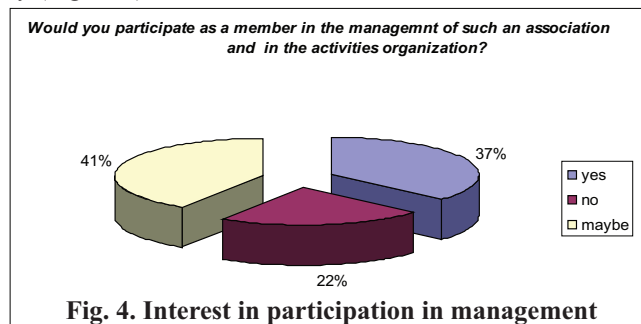


Fig. 4. Interest in participation in management

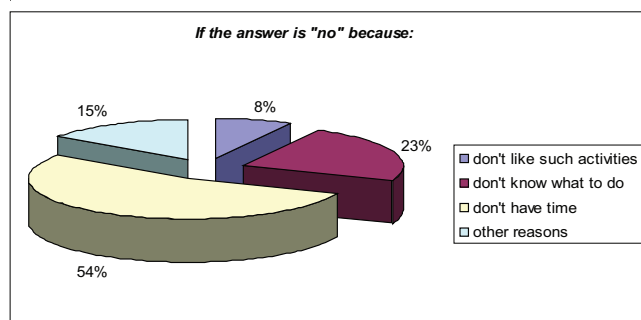
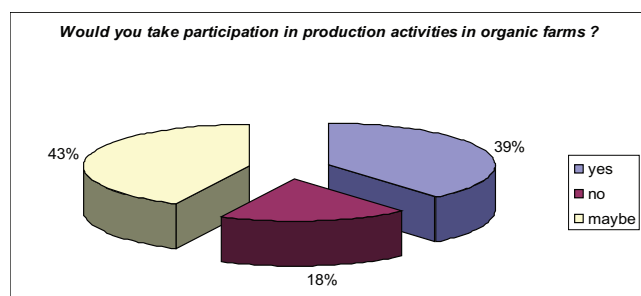


Fig. 5. Interest in participation in production activities

39% would participate in some production activities in organic farms; 43% hesitate, 18% would not. The last ones point the following reasons about their unwillingness: 54% do not have enough time; 23% do not know what to do; 8% do not like such activities; 15% because of other reasons but do not state them (Figure 5).

43% would participate in social activities (meetings, visits, festivals, etc.) in organic farms; 39% answer with 'maybe'. 18% would not do that and point the following reasons: 75% of them are very busy, 17% - other reasons which are not stated, 8% are not interested in such initiatives (Figure 6).

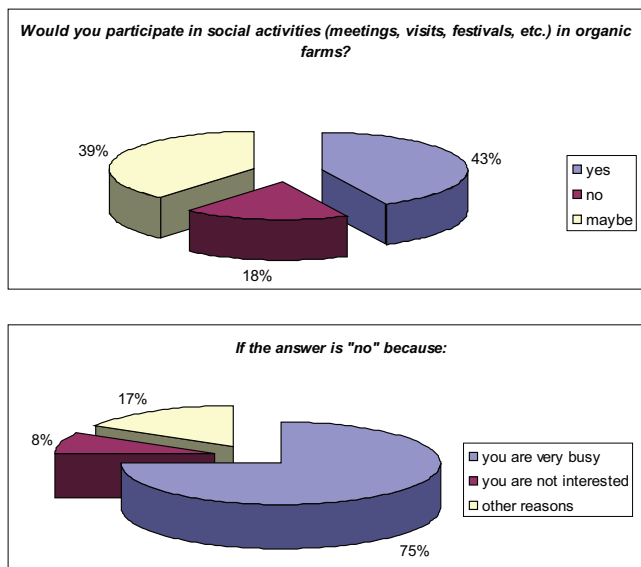


Fig. 6. Interest in participation in social activities

47% would choose an organic farm for rest and tourism; 35% hesitate, 18% answer negatively. Positive answers are explained as follows: curiosity (24%); contact with traditions and values (23%); emotions (20%); stress relief (19%); opportunities for social contacts (14%). The explanations of the negative answers are: 45% do not have time; 33% are not interested; 11% can not afford it; 11% because of other reasons but do not state what they are (Figure 7).

45% would participate (as well as their families' members) in training organized by organic farms; 33% hesitate, 22% would not (Figure 8).

On the question 'If the difference in the prices of organic products and conventional ones is not bigger than 30% would you order organic products from chosen by you farms?' 47% are sure they would, 49% hesitate, and only 4% would not (Figure 9).

The evaluation of the interviewees of the opportunity the CSA concept to be applied in the country is as follows: ac-

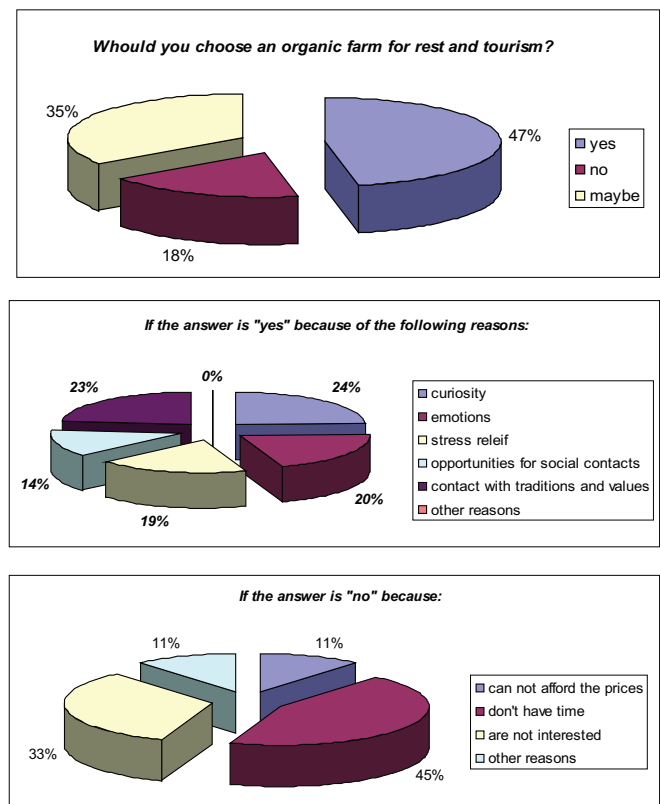


Fig. 7. Interest and motivation for tourism in organic farms

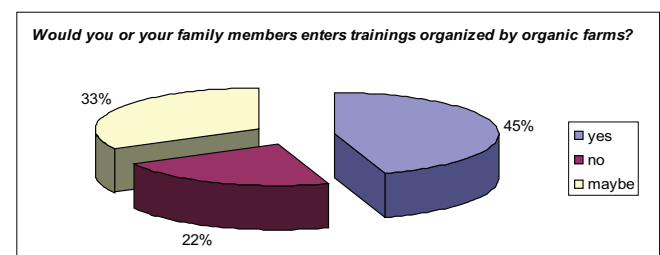


Fig. 8. Interest in trainings

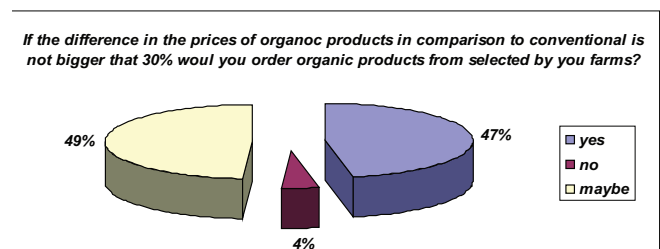
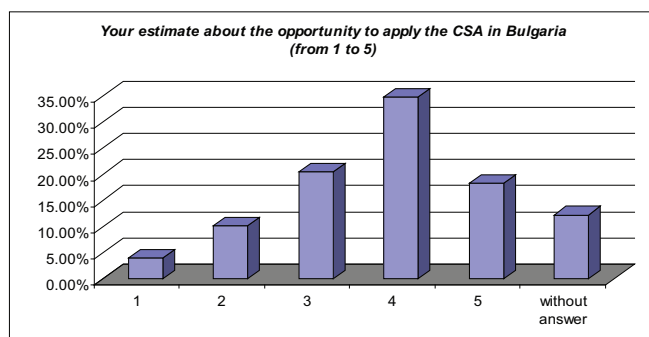


Fig. 9. Significance of prices

ording to 35% – good; 20% – satisfactory; 18 – very good; 10% – low. 6% didn't give an answer (Figure 10).



**Fig. 10. Assessment of the opportunity for application of CSA in Bulgaria**

## Discussion

This empirical investigation embraces a comparatively good sample in respect to age, gender, marital status, monthly income per family member, education and place of living in the studied country. The results show that most interviewed did not have any idea about the CSA concept when they started to fill in the questionnaire. As a whole, the answers of the following questions in the questionnaire show some hesitations but the readiness for support and participation in such initiatives is well-expressed. The lack of money and the lack of time could be mentioned as main reasons for refusals. None have pointed that s/he does not find sense, does not trust in quality or success. A very interesting result is the low number of answers for the opportunities for meeting people with the same views and participation in social activities. On the other hand, amongst the reasons of choice of an organic farm for rest or tourism curiosity, contact with traditions and values and emotions are underlined. There is an emphasized insecurity and doubts about participation in training organized by organic farms. These results confirm the results of the previous investigation of the author on organic sector development in Bulgaria especially the main conclusion about the lack of information and motivation which appear to be the main obstacles for organic sector development in the country. But the answers of the question about the choice of organic over conventional products in connection to decision-taking in the purchase process underscore the opportunities for direct sales in organic farms. As a whole, the interviewees give a good evaluation of the opportunities of CSA concept to be developed in the country.

On the basis of the results of the investigation and the following considerations (Arabska, 2015):

- Agricultural products markets are mainly situated in towns.

- The government and local authorities have no financial resources for supporting agriculture in rural areas.

- Very low production, very low incomes and low life standard in rural regions leading to abandonment and low development.

- Development of “non-formal” production and sales of agricultural produce.

- Big chains advent which do not want to be dependent on local production.

- Consumers have access to sufficient quantities of good food at affordable prices but they are not satisfied – they search for tasty, quality and safe food, preserved nature, landscape, etc.

- Demand in towns combined with export opportunities could become a start point for development of agriculture and processing industry in different ways:

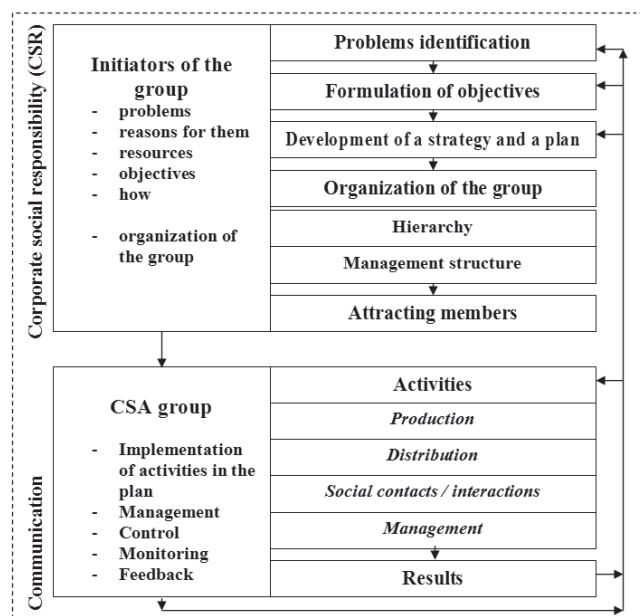
- Increase in production but wise use of resources;

- Creating new market niches (local food chains);

- Diversification – new products and services: alternative tourism, trainings, etc.;

Current study makes a proposal of a model for establishment CSA groups.

Entrepreneurs should develop new business plans based not only on profit but showing how social and ecological aspects are implemented in their activities. CSA, as a kind of alternative food networks, provides opportunities for sustainable urban and rural development and could turn into a successful entrepreneurial initiative. It is important to consider economical, social, cultural and other characteristics of



**Fig. 11. Model for development of CSA**

the region as well as the participants' profile, when applying. The proposed model contains several key points: preliminary analyses, planning, organization, development, management and control. The accent is on the motivation, communication and feedback (Figure 11). The model underlines the importance of the activities of planning on different levels and taking decisions by the CSA members. It imposes the necessity of new skills in farmers and non-farmers concerning the group's management, organizing activities, social contacts and interactions.

Another important requirement in it is the application of the concept of Corporate social responsibility (CSR) from the very beginning of the group – balancing economic, social and ecological goals. In recent years the corporate social responsibility expanded to a multilateral concept embracing all the spheres in life including agricultural production and it turns to be an important issue in AFNs too. It is based on three fundamental concepts: the voluntary nature of the initiatives, awareness and attention to relations with the market and thus with consumers and, finally, the involvement of all stakeholders. This suggests that being socially responsible means paying greater attention to the environment, to employment and to responsible consumers (Viola et al., 2013). That's why it is implicated in the proposed model for development of CSA groups.

In this connection assessment criteria are proposed for application of principles of organic production and social re-

**Table 1**  
**Assessment criteria for application of the principles of organic production and social responsibility in the proposed model**

I.	<i>Management</i>
1	Economic impact
2	Social impact
3	Ecological impact
II.	<i>Environment</i>
1	Monitoring and control system
2	Training programs (incl. external persons)
3	Practices (production and others)
III.	<i>Human resources</i>
1	Recruitment policy
2	Decrease in seasonal employment
3	Internships
IV.	<i>Public relations</i>
1	PR program
2	Participation in associations, networks, events, etc.
3	Organizing events
V.	<i>Business environment</i>
1	Policy for selection of providers
2	System of ethical rules and measures
3	Innovations transfer

sponsibility on the “corporate” (CSA group) level (Table 1). The assessment is assumed to be according to the scale from –5 to +5 (0 – neutral). The assessment is recommended to be two-level and to compare results: in the group (members of the association, workers, volunteers, etc.) and out of the group (trainees, guests, etc.). The estimate will show the effectiveness and purposefulness of the activities in the CSA association. The implementation of periodical assessments and their comparisons will allow following in their dynamics the processes in the group and its development.

## Conclusion

Agriculture is a main economic activity because of providing necessary food and products for human existence. It is a very specific sector being a subject of long historical development but in relation to quality and crucial stages it is distinguished by inertness and conservatism. In contemporary conditions of general globalization conventional production could not succeed to answer real needs and challenges. The changes that are needed should be realized and initiated not only by international communities and states but also by agricultural producers, processors and traders. The negative trend of strengthening its position as an unattractive branch should be scrutinized very concretely for a specific country or a region because of peculiarities in history, culture, traditions, mind and behavior. The implementation of the strategic goals of economic, social and ecological development should start by entrepreneurship encouragement in rural areas for development of agrarian and related activities. The significance of protection of environmental components (soil, water, air, biodiversity, landscape) in global aspect directs the development towards sustainable agriculture, and organic production in particular, and its integration to other activities as tourism development. In that connection the questions of alternative food networks' social and economic impacts, and community-supported agriculture (CSA) in particular, are discussed as alternatives of positive economic growth, employment and revival of rural areas, social activities, raise in social consciousness, etc., along with the provision of fresh, tasty and healthy food, protection of environment and positive economic influence on local business as a whole. The application of the CSA concept in Bulgaria could lead to new directions in organic sector development (and its integration with other sectors, i.e. processing and tourism). This could be an effective entrepreneurial strategy for rural development starting from urban areas demand and embracing not only food or other products but also places for rest, tourism, landscape preservation, protection of nature, culture, infrastructure development, etc.



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