



A one-sided love affair? On the potential for a coalition between degrowth and community-supported agriculture in Germany

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Abstract

Community-supported agriculture (CSA) is a grassroots response to the threat the global industrial agri-food system poses to smallholders. The degrowth community, calling for a radical transformation away from the environmentally destructive and socially unjust primacy of economic growth in current societies, has started to pay tribute to CSA, commonly considering it an embodiment of degrowth ideas. However, the CSA movement does not reciprocate the interest of the degrowth community. This article therefore undertakes a systematic analysis of the potential for a coalition between CSA and degrowth in Germany. We draw on social movement theories to compare both movements' ideological and strategic alignment, as well as the conducive and/or hindering factors for coalition building. We find that the ideologies and political strategies of the two movements are not aligned, which manifests in their main frames and action repertoires, among other areas, which are articulated at different levels of abstraction; CSA has a practical focus on the safeguarding of smallholder agriculture, while degrowth more abstractly centres on the growth-dependent economy. Scarce resources, differing forms of internal organisation, and a lack of knowledge about degrowth on the side of CSA represent further obstacles to entering a coalition. At the same time, our analysis shows existing social ties and an initial ideological alignment between the CSA movement and sufficiency-oriented degrowth. We conclude that, despite prevailing differences, the two movements seem complementary, and that entering a coalition would bring with it the benefits of combining practice- and discourse-driven social change.

Keywords Social movement · Post-growth · Postcapitalism · CSA network · Agri-food system transformation

Abbreviations

AbL	Arbeitsgemeinschaft bäuerliche Landwirtschaft e. V.; German association of peasant farmers, member of La Via Campesina	NOW	Netzwerk Oekonomischer Wandel (economic transformation network)
CSA	Community-supported agriculture	SMT	Social movement theory
EJ	Environmental justice	Solawi network	Netzwerk Solidarische Landwirtschaft e. V.; German community-supported agriculture network

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Introduction

Community-supported agriculture (CSA) is a grassroots response to the threat the industrial agri-food system poses to smallholders (Netzwerk Solidarische Landwirtschaft n.d.(a)) who find themselves forced to choose between growing and industrialising or being squeezed out of the market. While isolating small-scale producers from the pressures of the global market, CSA connects producers with consumers within their region, who commit to collectively bearing the costs and risks of agriculture in return for a share of the harvest (Bonfert 2022; Rommel et al. 2022). In many CSA initiatives, at least in Germany, consumers practise solidarity not

only with producers (the German name of CSA is *Solidarische Landwirtschaft [Solawi]*—solidarity agriculture) but also among consumers, making the financial contributions dependent on a member's budget (through so-called “contribution rounds”) (Blättel-Mink et al. 2017). The distance between producers and consumers is shortened not only physically but culturally as well, with interactions ranging from few farm visits per year to the frequent participation of consumers in the agricultural work or administration of the initiative. Since the first CSA initiatives emerged in the late 1980s in Germany, CSA has grown into a social movement (Diekmann and Theuvsen 2019), largely organised via a formalised network, the *Netzwerk Solidarische Landwirtschaft* (hereafter the *Solawi* network), which was founded in 2011 by CSA farmers and activists. With the foundation of the *Solawi* network, the movement grew considerably from 12 initiatives to 434 CSAs today, with an additional 99 currently in the process of foundation (Netzwerk Solidarische Landwirtschaft n.d(b)).¹ The network brings together an array of diverse types of CSA initiatives, from producer-led to consumer-led ones, gardening collectives to family farms, and anarchist to anthroposophic groups.

In its resistance against the growth-pressures within the global food economy through its enactment of a communal, ecological and market-independent way of small-scale food production, CSA has attracted attention from the degrowth community who is engaged in its own fight against an economy focused on continuous growth. Degrowth represents the call for a “radical reorganisation and resizing of [...] economies” (Gerber 2020, p. 237f.) as a response to the fundamental ecological unsustainability and socio-economic injustice of societies based on the primacy of economic growth, aiming at achieving wellbeing and the “good life for all” (Muraca 2020). While degrowth has a broad conceptual base and there is lively debate about its contours (Kallis et al. 2020; Schmelzer and Vetter 2019; Petridis et al. 2015), degrowth scholars typically call out the inherent contradiction between the pursuit of environmental sustainability and social justice on the one hand, and capitalist growth on the other (Asara et al. 2015). In the endless pursuit of capital accumulation, capitalist growth depletes resources and biophysical conditions on which it depends and undermines social justice notably by the creation of public and private debt which fuels and legitimates growth (Asara et al. 2015). Yet, degrowth cannot be reduced to a call for negative GDP growth (D’Alisa Demaria Kallis 2014). As a response to the current ecological and societal crises, it envisions a holistic reorganisation of societies in the Global North (Kallis et al. 2020, p. 18; van den Bergh and Kallis 2012): the decentering of the dominant logics of endless growth, commodification, competition, acceleration and exploitation, and,

instead, the reorientation of societies around the principles of conviviality, sufficiency, commoning, care, community and democracy, amongst others (D’Alisa Demaria Kallis 2014; Petridis et al. 2015). While often perceived as a purely academic concept, rooted in a long history of academic critiques to economic growth (Petridis et al. 2015), degrowth has recently started to be spoken of as a movement (Demaria et al. 2013, see elaboration on degrowth as a movement below). The movement members, degrowth scholars and activists, have debated and pursued a variety of strategies to bring about their vision for a radical transformation: from activism to research, and from bottom-up grassroots initiatives to concrete top-down policy proposals (Petridis et al. 2015). The latter include work-sharing and the reduction of the working week, a basic and maximum income, the reduction of advertising, environmental caps and bans, the withdrawal of subsidies for polluting activities and a green tax reform (Kallis 2015; Mastini et al. 2021).

In the context of the former—degrowthers’ interest in bottom-up initiatives—they have, in recent years, frequently referred to and reached out to CSA, both in their publications and their actions. For many degrowthers, CSA is included among those grassroots initiatives that prefigure a transformation in line with the principles of degrowth (Nelson and Edwards 2021; Kallis et al. 2020; Schmid 2019) and degrowthers are frequently themselves members of CSA initiatives or invite these to join degrowth gatherings (own data²). So far, however, this interest has not been mutual. The German *Solawi* network does not have a formal position towards, nor a partnership with degrowth. Apart from few advertisements for degrowth-related events (Netzwerk Solidarische Landwirtschaft n.d.(c and d)), the CSA network’s official webpage does not make references to the degrowth movement, let alone a formal endorsement. In a screening of all webpages of CSA initiatives listed on the webpage of the *Solawi* network (solidarische-landwirtschaft.org) in 2020, we identified no initiative that explicitly embraced degrowth.

This unilateral interest is, to an extent, the consequence of the transformation trajectory imagined by degrowthers. They often envision a degrowth transformation as occurring through a combination of grassroots practices and larger-scale institutional reforms (Kallis et al. 2020, see above), thereby considering relevant all those grassroots initiatives which embody core ideas of degrowth (see above) and thus “prefigur[e] degrowth transitions” (Kallis et al. 2020, p. 62). The contribution of grassroots initiatives to societal transformations is thereby hypothesised to lie in their experimentation with alternative forms of production, consumption and

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² This initial observation was based on our ongoing research on the German CSA movement and our engagement with the international degrowth community. This observation was confirmed by interviewees DM2 and DM3.

ownership, as well as in their consolidation of degrowth-aligned “common senses” that prepare “conducive environments for change” (Kallis et al. 2020, p. 52) from the individual to wider societal levels. Often, and thus in the case of CSA, “[m]ost of the[se] initiatives are not pursued in the name of degrowth” (Kallis et al. 2020, p. 62) and this is acknowledged by degrowth scholars, including Kallis et al. (2020).

However, the lack of mutual interest, much less a coalition, might be more than a mere formality after all. Why is there no *political* connection between CSA and degrowth, if the values of the futures that CSA and degrowth aspire to seem very much aligned? Coalitions are a key political strategy of social movements in bringing about societal change. Abundant research has shown that coalitions support social mobilisation via mobilising large(r) numbers of people and resources, broadening the collective identity and choice of tactical repertoires of movements and instigating external social and political change (van Dyke and Amos 2017; Wang et al. 2018). At first sight thus, a coalition would make strategic sense for both CSA and degrowth in their struggle for more desirable futures.

Accordingly, Hickel et al. (2022) have called for the investigation of political movements which are aligned with degrowth. And in terms of other movements, most notably in the case of environmental justice (EJ), degrowthers have explored a potential coalition, thus going beyond the examination of a discursive and practical alignment by also reflecting on social movement politics and political strategies, as well as their potential mismatches (Rodríguez-Labajos et al. 2019; Akbulut et al. 2019). This deeper examination is still lacking for the CSA movement. CSA has mainly been considered through the lens of single CSA initiatives, highlighting examples for their alignment with degrowth values (Bloemmen et al. 2015; Tschumi et al. 2019; Cristiano et al. 2021). These studies did not provide insights into why this alignment has not led to any form of political collaboration or mutual interest. We are thus in line with Gerber’s (2020, p. 256) observation regarding agricultural grassroots movements more broadly: that there is a need to study *how and if* they concretely act as “allies of the degrowth movement”.

Therefore, this study undertakes a systematic analysis of the potential for a coalition between CSA and degrowth in Germany, including the benefits and risks of such a coalition. We chose to study the CSA and degrowth movements in Germany, as Germany is one of the few countries where both the CSA and degrowth movements are comparatively well established. Notably, we thereby do not a priori assume that a coalition between CSA and degrowth is indeed desirable; rather we investigate the empirical lack of what, from a degrowth perspective, appears to be an obvious coalition. Why is there, in spite of evident alignment between the values

and practices of CSA and degrowth, no coalition between the two movements in Germany? Which reasons keep them from becoming formal allies? Then, building on this, we ask what the potential for a coalition in the future is, and, consequently, what the concomitant benefits and risks of such a coalition would be.

In order to answer these questions, we use social movement theory (SMT) on coalitions as the basis of our conceptual framework. SMT defines coalitions as “organisations [...] or networks that animate [...] collective action [and act as] structuring mechanisms that bridge political organisations and the looser, more permeable, social movements” (Brooker and Meyer 2019, p. 253). SMTs, by focusing on political strategy and ideology, as well as context factors such as social ties, resources or existing coalitions, offer alternative perspectives to the currently dominant focus on values and practices and are thus perfectly suited to engage with our research question. Both CSA and degrowth exhibit characteristics of social movements (see below, e.g. Bonfert 2022 on CSA, and Demaria et al. 2013 on degrowth), which is why we conceptualise them as social movements, making use of the analytical strength of SMT.

This paper is structured as follows: we begin with a review of studies on the alignment of the CSA and degrowth movements in discourse and practice. After introducing our conceptual framework, we present our analysis as a comparison of both movements’ political strategies and ideologies as well as the conducive and hindering factors for coalition building. Our analysis mainly explores CSA and degrowth on the network level, but we use four CSA initiatives as case studies to illustrate the diversity of political ideologies and strategies embraced within the CSA movement. The paper ends on a reflection on the desirability of a potential coalition, based on the findings of this study, highlighting both the benefits and risks. We find that the benefits of entering a coalition consist of harnessing the synergies between practice- and discourse-driven change. The CSA movement can benefit from degrowth’s structural perspective which denounces the inherent flaws of capitalist society, many of which impede the CSA movement to flourish. In turn, the degrowth movement can learn from the criticisms voiced by the CSA movement regarding the abstract and at times highly academic discourses of degrowth and critically self-reflect on how they can better support practice-driven movements. However, entering a coalition may risk aggravating already perceptible tensions between different factions within the CSA movement, reinforcing both movements’ shared exposure to right-wing co-optation, as well as mispending limited resources on an alliance across difference.

The alignment between degrowth and CSA

Degrowth scholarship has described an alignment of CSA and degrowth based on similar principles and values, as expressed in discourse and/or practice. Tschumi et al. (2019), for instance, depict CSA initiatives as unknowingly practising a degrowth business model. They identify a CSA initiative in a Swiss mountain region as a “growth-independent” initiative; a quality rooted in the initiative’s (1) transformation of consumers into prosumers and (2) establishment of short supply chains with strong ties between all the involved actors, allowing for (i) low shares of, or interest-free, borrowed capital, (ii) the possibility of replacing high capital input costs with manual labour, and (iii) a “purchase” guarantee for the produced, “decommercialized” goods (Tschumi et al. 2019).

Bloemmen et al. (2015) similarly identify a CSA initiative as a model for microeconomic degrowth. To counter the neoclassic model of *homo oeconomicus*, they use the case of a Belgian CSA initiative to develop an alternative, “holistic microeconomic agent” (p. 113), based on the characteristics of a CSA member (consumers and producers). This alternative agent represents several degrowth principles and values: they do not seek to maximise utility or profits, but rather value quality over quantity, seek conviviality, trust, cooperation, community participation, and sympathy in social relations and assume responsibility towards nature.

Other authors have transcended a purely microeconomic understanding of degrowth and considered how CSA initiatives challenge wider capitalist relations beyond the economic sphere. This is particularly the case for multiple publications in Nelson and Edwards’s (2021) edited volume *Food for Degrowth*, which includes a series of chapters on CSA. Amongst these, Edwards and Espelt (2021) make a more extensive case for the relevance of CSA for degrowth, specifying CSA³ as “sharing a degrowth philosophy in terms of supporting quality human relationships [...] democracy, sustainability and justice” (p. 129), as “nurtur[ing] good intentions between country and city, promoting an ethical, local, degrowth lifestyle” (p. 130) and as being political in the sense of “stimulat[ing] goals of the social and solidarity economy” (p. 131).

Cristiano et al.’s (2021) contribution to *Food for Degrowth*, then, sets a limit to the alignment between CSA and degrowth. Conceiving of degrowth as essentially embracing decolonisation and deconstruction and as a “transformation [away] from an unjust and unsustainable economic growth imaginary” (p. 90), the authors specify that not all CSA initiatives are in line with this

understanding. They argue that only those initiatives with strong “prosumer relations” are transformative as they simultaneously instigate societal, economic and environmental change towards a degrowth economy. They give the example of the CSA Veneto (Italy), which is characterised by strong producer–consumer relationships, a redistribution mutualism between all members, participatory internal organisation, self-governed democracy, the transformation of means of production into common ownership, a “collective degrowth consciousness” (p. 97), and the consequent decommodification of food, the latter of which represents, for the authors, the epitome of “degrowth food”.

Conceptual framework: social movement coalitions

In this publication, we go beyond an understanding of degrowth and CSA as the discursive or practical performance of values, as shown in the literature review above, and conceptualise them as social movements. Social movements are “collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside of institutional or organizational channels for the purpose of challenging or defending extant authority, whether it is institutionally or culturally based, in the group, organization, society, culture, or world order of which they are a part” (Snow et al. 2019, p. 10). Thus, in movements, individuals engage in collective action to bring about societal change (Millward and Takhar 2019).

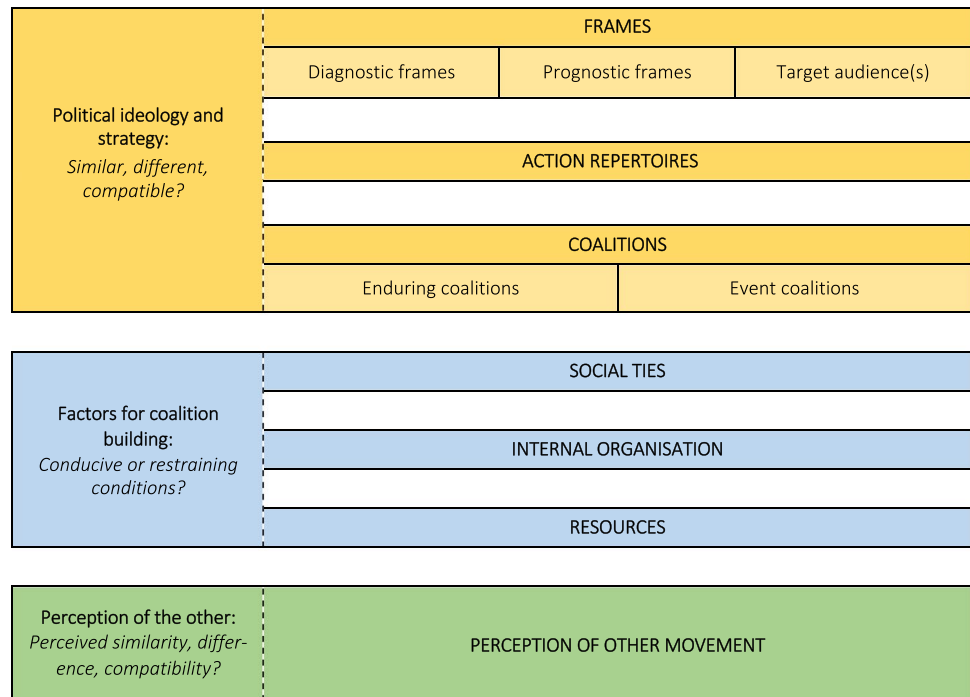
CSA networks can be fruitfully analysed through a social movement lens as individual CSA initiatives organise in networks, where common goals and identities are negotiated and collective action is undertaken (see also Bonfert 2022 on the political agency of CSA networks). In Germany, CSAs organise through the *Solawi* network, which self-identifies as a movement,⁴ with the formulated collective goal of the “conservation and promotion of sustainable peasant farming” and “a paradigm change in agriculture” (Netzwerk Solidarische Landwirtschaft n.d.(e)).

The definition of degrowth as a movement is more contested. Degrowth, as an “activist slogan”, emerged more than 20 years ago “in France[,]Italy [...] Catalonia and Spain” (Demaria et al. 2013, p. 195), and has also begun to be taken up by activist circles and citizen initiatives in Germany. There, in the first decade of the 2000s, the confluence of mobilisations of the anti-globalisation and ecological movements paved the way for German degrowth debates (Brand 2014). Further milestones of degrowth in Germany

³ The definition of CSA used by Edwards and Espelt (2021) is broader than the definition we adopt; it includes initiatives that make use of weekly food purchases via digital platforms.

⁴ On their webpage, the CSA network writes: „the [CSA] network considers itself equally as a movement, grassroots democratic organisation and association” (Netzwerk Solidarische Landwirtschaft n.d.(e)).

Fig. 1 Conceptual framework with three dimensions (left: Political ideology and strategy, Factors for coalition building, Perception of the other) and respective features (such as frames) to compare the two social movements. The questions in italics are investigating the potential for a coalition



included the Attac⁵ congress “Beyond Growth” in 2011 and the degrowth conference in Leipzig in 2014, which connected researchers, practitioners and activists from diverse backgrounds. These events, and in particular the degrowth conference, exhibited initial signs of turning the German degrowth debate and discourse into an actual social movement (Eversberg and Schmelzer 2018; Brand 2014). Thus, while the existence or status of a degrowth movement is still debated—both internationally and in Germany—many scholars have started to speak of a “degrowth movement” (e.g. Akbulut et al. 2019; Gerber 2020; Heikkurinen et al. 2019), with Demaria et al. (2013) making an elaborate case for this analytical frame (see also the concepts “degrowth spectrum” (Eversberg and Schmelzer 2018, p.250), and “degrowth *in* movement” (Burkhart et al. 2017, p. 2)).

Against this background, we agree with Demaria et al.’s (2013) attestation of the “relevance of social movement theory for degrowth” (p. 193): applying SMT equips us with the theoretical apparatus for assessing the current absence and potential of a political coalition between CSA and degrowth. It illuminates to-date not or little considered aspects of the two actors, regardless of the empirical ambiguity of degrowth as a social movement.

The conceptual framework applied in this paper combines several key concepts of SMT. These concepts were selected

in an iterative process that led from exploratory fieldwork, engagement with SMT, data collection and analysis to the refining of final concepts. After exploratory research in the German CSA movement, the authors defined the research question of this paper and identified SMT as most promising theoretical lens. The authors used their insights from exploratory fieldwork, as well as their engagement with the degrowth community, to pre-select those strands of SMT that were most adequate to apply to the empirical case at hand, including considering some additional aspects not covered directly by these perspectives. After the majority of data was collected, they finalised the choice of concepts after a first round of data analysis, picking those most relevant for investigating the research question.

The resulting conceptual framework (Fig. 1) compares the social movements on the basis of three dimensions and their respective features: (1) a movement’s political ideology and strategy (expressed in frames, action repertoires and coalitions), (2) (internal) factors that facilitate or hinder a movement in entering into coalitions (social ties, resources and internal organisation), (3) a movement’s perception of the other movement. As shown in Fig. 1, this comparison explores the likelihood of a coalition between the movements: Are their ideologies and strategies compatible? Are the movements’ internal situations conducive or hindering coalition building? How do they perceive each other?

We briefly outline the relevance of these three dimensions.

⁵ Attac is a globalisation-critical movement, which emerged during the 1990s in France and subsequently spread globally (Rätz and Paternoga 2017).

Compatibility of political ideology and strategy

The first dimension of our framework concerns social movements' "political ideology and strategy". The alignment of political ideology is an important determinant of coalition formation (Van Dyke and Amos 2017; Brooker and Meyer 2019). Political ideology is a "system of meaning that couples assertions and theories about the nature of social life with values and norms relevant to promoting or resisting social change" (Oliver and Johnston 2000, p. 43). These values, beliefs and meanings shape social movements and their activities (Zald 2000), and thus their choice of coalition partners. In contrast, political strategy—the purposeful mobilisation towards achieving a movement's goals—does not necessarily need to be similar in order to forge a coalition. Since "a fundamental means-ends relationship underpins strategy" (Smithey 2009, p. 660), a coalition can form when movements with different strategies view it as likely that the coalition will assist them in fulfilling their own goals and objectives (Maney 2012).

Here, we conceptualise a movements' political ideology and strategy as expressed through framing, its repertoires of collective action, and the coalitions which it has previously entered. We do so for several reasons: First, as the political ideology shapes the framing work of social movements (Benford and Snow 2000), framing processes are often used as a proxy for ideological alignment (Brooker and Meyer 2019). The same is applicable to action repertoires, as these are, second, influenced both by a movement's inner logic, i.e. political ideology and associated interpretative processes (Ennis 1987; Carmin and Balser 2002; Zald 2000), and a movement's strategy (Doherty and Hayes 2019). Third, the types of coalitions that have been established reflect the political strategy of a movement (Obach 2010). Finally, as explained above, these indicators were also deemed relevant based on first data analysis findings.

Framing is the process of producing ideas and assigning meaning to interpret reality (Travaglini 2014). Framing involves the collective negotiation and construction of a shared understanding of problems and solutions, commonly referred to as *diagnostic* and *prognostic framing* (Benford and Snow 2000). These two framing activities are core to social movements, as they typically "seek to remedy or alter some problematic situation or issue" (Benford and Snow 2000, p. 616). A movement's diagnostic and prognostic framing intends to mobilise its internal and external *target audience*—its participants, supporters, and sympathisers, and demobilise its opponents (Snow and Benford 1988; Travaglini 2014). As such they constitute a vital part of the political strategy of movements: while frames are shaped by a movement's political ideology, they are also tailored to suit the targeted audience(s) a movement seeks to engage (Benford 1993; Benford and Snow 2000). To facilitate coalition

formation, frames can then be extended beyond the original problem and solution definition to embrace issues of prospective adherents or related movements (Snow et al. 2019; Rootes 2004). As shown by Haydu (2012) regarding the "Pure Food Movement" in the United States, ideological differences can be transcended with a more inclusive master frame, enabling a broader coalition. Beyond this, once a coalition is established, the cohesion of frames can "thwart potential conflict and ease coalition work" (Brooker and Meyer 2019, p. 259).

Action repertoires, in turn, are the "arrays of performances that are currently known and available" (McAdam and Tarrow 2019, p. 23). Social movements employ a variety of activities and tactics that they consider effective to achieve their goals (Soule and Roggeband 2019). The choice of action repertoires reflects "a strategic sense of how the social world works, which differs substantially in different movements, even within the same polity" (Doherty and Hayes 2019, p. 282). Repertoires of collective action can be viewed as an expression of the ideology of a movement and consequently lay the foundation for a coalition; if two movements use similar clusters of collective action, this may signify their similarity (Wang et al. 2018; Carmin and Balser 2002). At the same time, coalition formation may broaden the tactical diversity of the movements, which, in turn, likely enables the mobilisation of a wider range of people and the ability to reach a "greater number of institutional niches" (Brooker and Meyer 2019, p. 257; see also Haydu 2012).

Coalitions can be distinguished in two types: event and enduring coalitions. The former are "short-lived, created for a particular protest or lobbying event" (Levi and Murphy 2006, p. 655) and tend to be spontaneous and informal. The latter, i.e. enduring or issue-based coalitions, signify a "long-term cooperation with chosen partners" (Levi and Murphy 2006, p. 655) and tend to involve formalised agreements on resources and means of coordination (Brooker and Meyer 2019; Wang et al. 2018). Typically, enduring coalitions require a greater degree of ideological and cultural fit than event coalitions (Van Dyke and Amos 2017).

It is important to note that, contrary to the predominant social movement scholars' focus on ideological alignment as the basis for coalition building, degrowthers investigating coalitions with other social movements have considered different motivations for coalition building. Martínez-Alier (2012) and Akbulut et al. (2019), for instance, assessing the connection between the EJ and degrowth movements, discuss the opportunity of a coalition based not only on aligning values, struggles and objectives, but also on complementarity. They find that degrowth's broad theoretical roadmap could strengthen the EJ movement, while the latter could provide its rootedness in localised but connected struggles, which in contrast is lacking in the still largely intellectual degrowth movement. In a similar

Table 1 Overview of CSA initiatives used as case studies

	CSA “Biodynamic”	CSA “Large”	CSA “Small”	CSA “Radical”
Type	Biodynamic farm, producer-led	Vegetable farm, consumer-led cooperative	Vegetable garden, consumer-led	Collectivised vegetable farm, producer-led
Size	Approx. 100 harvest shares	More than 1000 harvest shares	Approx. 30 harvest shares	Approx. 200 harvest shares
Rural/urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Peri-urban
Political self-representation	Proximity to biodynamic movement	Ambitious actor in socio-ecological transformation on municipal level	No political self-representation; focus on local food	Openly radical left, autonomist movement

manner, Rodríguez-Labajos et al. (2019) suggest that the cement of a coalition between EJ and degrowth may be found not in commonalities, but in analogies, which facilitate “cross-cultural encounters, since they promote learning without losing the essence of plurality” (Rodríguez-Labajos et al. 2019, p. 179). Writing on coalitions between degrowth and social movements more broadly, Burkhart et al. (2017; see also Treu et al. 2020) also argue that while there are many overlaps and connections, there are important and justified distinctions. Building on Kothari et al. (2014), among others, they suggest the metaphor of the mosaic as a way to bring together diverse movements (Burkhart et al. 2017).

Factors for coalition building

The second dimension of our framework concerns internal “factors for coalition building”, i.e. contextual and movement-specific characteristics that increase or limit a movement’s ability to enter into coalitions (rather than the overall “match” between two movements). We focus on three factors—social ties, internal organisation and resources. We do so both due to their key role in SMT on coalitions, and due to their relevance in our findings.

Social ties are connections between individuals across, as well as pre-existing formal organisational ties between, social movement organisations. Social ties have been shown to facilitate coalition formation and longevity (e.g. Van Dyke and Amos 2017). Individuals that are engaged in multiple movements, so-called “brokers” or “bridge-builders”, can play a significant role in forming coalitions by pointing out shared struggles and interests (Brooker and Meyer 2019; Van Dyke and Amos 2017). Moreover, overlapping adherence to movements can establish trust and contribute to a better comprehension of the respective other (Arnold 2011).

The *internal organisation* of a movement is crucial because the presence of professional leaders and/or leaders with rich human and cultural capital, as well as the ability to divide labour (within or across coalition partners), facilitates coalition formation and longevity (Wang et al. 2018).

Lastly, coalitions require significant *resources*, both financial and temporal, and are therefore unlikely when either of these are scarce (Van Dyke and Amos 2017).

Perception of the other

The last dimension of our framework is the “perception of the other”: how a movement perceives the respective other movement. This dimension is not based on an established concept in SMT, but emerged from the exploratory fieldwork of the two first authors, when they noted strongly varying perceptions within the CSA community with regards to degrowth. The dimension is based on the premise that cultural and ideological similarities between movements, for instance, are not sufficient if they are not recognised as such by the movements themselves. Similarly, matching political strategies may not be perceived as such if the movements do not know enough about each other (Burkhart et al. 2017). The movements may have different knowledge about each other than the information we obtained as researchers, drawing, most likely, on their public representation and/or social ties.

Research design

Our research focuses on the CSA and degrowth movements in Germany, where both are, compared to other European countries, relatively well established. Nonetheless, neither of the two movements are *completely* contained within a bounded institution in Germany. As the CSA movement is still largely represented by the *Solawi* network (of which the majority of CSA initiatives are members), we collected data about the CSA movement by treating the *Solawi* network as the representative of the movement. At the same time, we also collected data on the level of the CSA initiative. While the network most directly represents the CSA movement in Germany, it is important to pay attention to the diversity of initiatives gathered in the network, particularly with regard to their differing proximity to degrowth. We selected four CSA initiatives which illustrate the diversity

of the CSA landscape in Germany (Table 1). The initiatives were selected based on a screening of all CSA initiatives listed on the webpage of the *Solawi* network (295 in 2020, codebook in Appendix I).

The German degrowth movement is very diverse and is not represented by one central organisation or platform. It includes both groups that revolve around the German term for degrowth, “*Postwachstum*”—either as a deliberate reference to its English equivalent (*Postwachstum* translates to the less challenging English notion of post-growth⁶), or as a mere custom of using the German terminology⁷—and groups that deliberately use the more radical English term “degrowth”. In this publication, we choose “degrowth” as an overarching term that includes perspectives that could also be framed as “post-growth”. According to Schmelzer (2015), five distinct discourses can be distinguished, namely (1) conservative, (2) social reformer, (3) sufficiency-oriented, (4) critiques-to-capitalism, and (5) feminist types. Here, we decided to cluster these discourses in two groups within the German degrowth movement: the “sufficiency cluster”, a loose group of researchers connected to the sufficiency-oriented degrowth scholar Niko Paech, and the “international cluster”, a loose group of researchers who actively engage in the international degrowth debate and its feminist, critiques-to-capitalism currents, such as researchers affiliated with the *Konzeptwerk* in Leipzig or the University of Jena. We defined these two clusters due to the differences identified by Schmelzer (2015), as well as their level of visibility in Germany; the sufficiency-oriented variety is most known. We collected data for these two clusters through semi-structured interviews with degrowth scholars and activists who have a broad overview of the degrowth community.

The data collection took place between October 2020 and March 2022 following standard research ethics procedures. In total, we conducted 19 interviews, five on the level of the degrowth movement⁸ (with researchers and activists from the “international” and the “sufficiency” cluster), five on the level of the CSA movement,⁹ and nine on the level of individual CSA initiatives.¹⁰ The interviews lasted on average 1h07min (see Appendix II for a detailed description of the role of each interviewee, the date, duration and location of the interviews, as well as the interview guides and

questions). On the level of the CSA network, we complemented these interviews with background knowledge from participant observation during the network’s working groups on “organisational development” (1.5 years) and “against the far-right” (one year), participant observation during four network conferences, in addition to the analysis of official documentation and publications such as the network’s vision and core principles (Netzwerk Solidarische Landwirtschaft n.d.(b)). On the level of the CSA initiative, we complemented the interviews on CSA “Small” and “Radical” with contextual information from further interviews¹¹ and participant observation at the CSAs for another research project. On the level of the degrowth movement, we used German degrowth literature (e.g. Schmelzer and Vetter 2019; Muraca 2020) to contextualise our findings.

We analysed all interviews with NVivo, using categorical codes deduced from our conceptual framework (example codes: diagnostic frame, prognostic frame, target audience, etc.). We subsequently synthesised the results for each category per movement and initiative in several cycles of analysis. We thereby coded the data on individual CSA initiatives through the same categories as data on the movement level. As CSA *initiatives* do not classify as movements, we interpret our findings on individual CSA initiatives as complementary to the findings on the level of the CSA movement: as illustrating, and illuminating, the wide diversity of frames, action repertoires, social ties, and perceptions of degrowth, amongst others, that are held within the CSA movement and that may not be captured by the dominant positions held by the CSA network.

Findings

In the following, we outline, first, why, from the perspective of SMT, the movements have not yet entered into a coalition, and, second, how and why this may change in the future. We present the findings for the four CSA initiative case studies in tables throughout the text.

Why there is no coalition between CSA and degrowth in Germany

We see several reasons why the two movements are currently not further engaged in a political partnership or coalition, both in terms of mis-matching political ideology and strategy, and in terms of hindering internal factors against coalition building.

⁶ For a discussion of the terminological difference between degrowth and post-growth, see Schmelzer et al. (2022).

⁷ There is no established direct translation of de-growth into German; as Schmelzer et al. (2022, p. 29) point out, *Ent-wachstum* or *De-wachstum* would be “awkward” words.

⁸ Referred to in this text as DM1–5.

⁹ Referred to in this text as CM1–5.

¹⁰ Referred to in this text as B1, L1–3, S1–2, R1–3.

¹¹ 12 further interviews for CSA “Small”, and 11 further interviews for CSA “Radical”.

Differences in political ideology and strategy

While the movements' values seem aligned at a superficial level, their ideologies and political strategies, as expressed through their diagnostic and prognostic frames as well as their action repertoires, differ in several regards. The degrowth movement's diagnostic and prognostic frames are relatively abstract: the core problem is defined as the overarching growth-dependent economy, and the core solution as a structural transformation away from this economic system. More concretely, one interviewee from the sufficiency cluster (DM3) proposed the solution of degrowth enterprises—the promotion of growth-independent businesses. In this context, they consider CSA a model for achieving growth-independent farms. The international cluster, while particularly strong in their calls for the *systemic* dismantling of growth-based capitalism, also celebrates more practical solutions. Our interview partners, in line with an abundance of degrowth publications, considered grassroots initiatives, such as CSA, to be key actors in a radical societal transformation.

The main action repertoires of both degrowth clusters in Germany are academic research and external communication. Degrowth is mostly spread discursively, within academic communities and the wider public, while many non-academic degrowth publications cater to niche intellectual audiences with prior interest in related topics. Notwithstanding this, degrowth researchers are often activist scholars, maintaining a strong relationship with the communities they study, with some of them engaging in participatory action research. Several members of the sufficiency cluster (including Niko Paech), for instance, lead the research project *nascent*¹² which collaborates with the *Solawi* network and also provides practical input on the basis of their findings (and sufficiency degrowth theory) to CSA initiatives. Members of both clusters, as expressed by interviewee DM2 and DM3, are often themselves engaged in grassroots initiatives, thus locally realising degrowth values in the present. Strengthening degrowth-aligned initiatives can be considered a key form of political action chosen by the degrowth movement. In addition, members of the international cluster go beyond supporting prefigurative politics (prioritised by the sufficiency cluster) and similarly engage in contentious politics, most prominently the climate movement (DM5). They thus engage in strategies of resistance against structural injustices, choosing, amongst others, disruptive actions such as blockades.

In contrast, the CSA movement focuses in its main problem frame on a pressing, more palpable reality: the loss of smallholder agriculture in Germany. The members propose

both a more systemic and very concrete solution: a “paradigm change in the food system” on the one hand, and the strengthening and spreading of CSA initiatives on the other. Their political actions focus mostly on the latter solution, nurturing the CSA movement in Germany. The network invests its energy into connecting CSA initiatives, facilitating their mutual exchange, learning and support, as well as supporting their foundation, providing information and consultation services. To a limited degree, and mostly depending on the individual initiative, the CSA movement also voices its political interests with political parties, and forms enduring and event coalitions with other social movements. These movement coalitions have so far only been forged with agri-food movements, such as the German smallholder association (AbL) or the movements joining the annual “*Wir haben es satt!*” (“We are fed up with it!”) demonstrations for the transformation of the agri-food system. External communication with the wider public is mostly neglected as an action repertoire.

This prioritisation of concrete actions over systemic advocacy and resistance implies that the CSA movement understands CSA not only as an alternative to, but also *within*, the current (food) system: as a way to preserve smallholder agriculture by shielding it from the pressures of the capitalist agri-food system. The same is true for the wider positioning of the movement within the capitalist growth economy. While the movement clearly does not desire the continuation of the current economic system, it does not put its strategic focus on its discursive rejection. Instead, epitomising prefigurative politics, it puts forward an initiative that practises difference within the capitalist present, a peri-capitalist solution (Tsing 2017, differing from Gibson-Graham's (2006) more optimistic term “postcapitalism”). As one interview partner explained, for degrowthers, who emphasise a structuralist critique to capitalism, this focus on postcapitalist prefiguration limits the transformative capacity of CSA and thus its “usefulness” for degrowth: for them, CSA, like other community economy initiatives, unintendedly maintains the status quo by providing the services the state currently fails to provide and not advocating for structural reforms and/or radical disruptions of a fundamentally flawed system (DM4). In contrast to this, some members of the CSA movement view their prioritisation as a question of urgency. They perceive abstract debates about the economic system as too time-consuming and ineffective in the face of the speed with which peasant agriculture is foundering in Germany. When asked about degrowth, several interviewees of the CSA network described the movement as abstract and academic, as well as not being of particular use for the pressing task at hand: “it is not our main focus to [...] take a certain stand on economic politics [...] Our main focus is [...] to achieve that as many peasant farms as possible—every day another one closes down—remain, and that new ones emerge” (CM1).

¹² <https://www.nascent-transformativ.de>

Table 2 CSA “Radical”

CSA “RADICAL”	
Framing	<p>Problem: capitalist society and capitalist model of market gardening, including low wages, dire working conditions, separation of natural protection and agricultural production, deskilling, the alienation of citizens from food production and a lack of ownership of the means of production</p> <p>Solution: vegetable farming in the form of CSA, following principles of workers’ self-management, the collective ownership of means of production and the integration of natural protection in farming practice</p>
Action repertoires & organisation of CSA	<p>Emphasis on member self-organisation and participation (e.g. food distribution points are self-organised, members self-organise their assistance on the farm)</p> <p>Contribution rounds for economic accessibility and grassroots democratic decision-making via consensus (including questions of salary), but constrained by the culture of low food prices and expectations of the (traditionally) low wages of gardeners in Germany</p> <p>Tensions between ideology and pragmatism: from romanticisation of old machinery to technological professionalisation; from originally mostly contentious and prefigurative politics to including civic forms of politics as a way to integrate in a village</p>
Social ties	<p>With anarchist, eco-activist and antifascist faction of the political left; alternative food initiatives in the region, including other CSA initiatives; the global food sovereignty movement (La Via Campesina)</p> <p>Some individual links, and event coalition, with degrowth</p>
Perception of/relation to degrowth	<p>Knowledge about degrowth, but no interest in deepening the connection to degrowth</p> <p>Some members with critical stance towards degrowth: (1) degrowth (including the international cluster) is not sufficiently critical about capitalism and established power structures; (2) degrowth does not offer any advantage to CSA, instead of another theory, they want to see actions</p>

Table 3 CSA “Large”

CSA “LARGE”	
Framing	<p>Problem: the urgent environmental crisis, putting the future of younger generations at risk; rooted in the current economic system</p> <p>Solution: immediate actions with considerable impact, such as setting up a resilient, community-based basic food supply system in their city; thereby contributing to societal unlearning of the values and practices that perpetuate the current system—“unlearning capitalism” (L3)</p>
Action repertoires & organisation of CSA	<p>Strategy of growth (hectares, members) of the CSA initiative: (1) to be attractive to various consumer groups, little effort is expected from the members; (2) to be agile and efficient, the initiative is run by a small leadership group, without much space for grassroots participation</p> <p>Growth and visibility facilitated the collective acquisition of more farmland, employment of relatively large number of staff with comparatively high wages</p> <p>Active engagement in local politics on the topics of food and environmental change</p> <p>Tensions: (1) reproach from within the CSA network: CSA “Large” promotes the capitalist co-optation of CSA; (2) struggle with the question of adequate size: which size in harvest shares is still compatible with the principles of CSA? To which degree can consumers still become “prosumers”?</p>
Social ties	<p>With food and environmental citizen initiatives and networks in their city-region</p> <p>Some individuals with connections to degrowth, notably to Niko Paech (the CSA is a project partner of <i>nascent</i>); departure of one founding member somewhat loosened intentional link to degrowth movement</p>
Perception of/relation to degrowth	<p>Perception of concordance between the principles of degrowth and the CSA initiative, agreement with the need for a degrowth transformation; association temporarily defined a “degrowth-proof basic supply system” as their goal</p> <p>New leadership team identifies less strongly with degrowth, instead perceive alignment with the economy for the common good and have a preference for pragmatic, down-to-earth solutions without the need of an “overarching masterplan”</p> <p>Degrowth is perceived as a theoretical discourse on the meta-level without practical relevance</p>

This disinterest in an additional theory—such as degrowth—was also noted by two of our individual case studies, namely CSA “Large” and CSA “Radical”. Neither initiative avoids naming capitalism as the root problem to be dismantled. While both of them are appreciative of academic knowledge production, and thus of academic critiques

of the capitalist political economy, they ask if the lacking ingredient for societal change truly is a new academic concept—or rather an increase in actions implementing existing concepts. (Tables 2, 3). One of the founders of CSA “Large” commented: “[the society we need in the future], if we call it post-fossil [...] or degrowth society [...] oh well, that is

such an ivory tower discussion!” (L2). Instead, as a founding member of CSA “Radical” stated: “It is more useful if one of [these degrowthers] makes a move and co-founds a concrete organisation, organises themselves [or] works the soil, since [...] the problem in changing the world is less the knowledge than ourselves” (R2).

At the same time, we also understand the abstinence from an openly anti-capitalist stance as a strategic choice of the CSA movement, considering its target audience: the movement wants to be in conversation with a diverse group of prospective and existing members in order to spread CSA in Germany—from traditional family farms to leftist gardening collectives and middle-class urban consumer groups. The collectively held diagnostic and prognostic frames thus need to integrate a range of ideologies. A discursive focus on the faults of capitalism could scare away potential members whose habitus differs from that of the radical left but who otherwise share the values of the movement (although, as described in CSA “Radical”, an anti-capitalist stance is certainly attractive to some). This might be particularly relevant for the movement’s declared goal of persuading traditional agricultural farms to transition to CSA—currently a rather unsuccessful endeavour—as we observe the existing framing difference to be particularly evident for the original founders of the CSA movement: agricultural family farms. These CSA initiatives focus much more on traditional agricultural themes and the discourse of peasant struggles than newer generations of CSA. The newer generations, mostly represented by vegetable CSAs which now make up the majority of initiatives in the network, often identify more with the language around community economies and the commons. Some interviewees described these differences as a tension—between initiatives that are “young [...] and left and far away from the reality of agriculture” (CM5) and “patriarchal, hierarchical [farms] [...] embracing a Christian work ethic” (CM3). This tension recently played out in a conflict in 2019 about the identification of CSA with “peasant agriculture” (German: *bäuerliche Landwirtschaft*). For some members of the CSA movement with an intellectual, urban background, peasant farming reminds them of poverty and the past; at the same time, traditional smallholder farms strongly identify with the term, and would feel further alienated should it be removed from the self-description of the CSA movement. The network resolved this tension by explicitly referring to both “peasant holdings” and “community-supported enterprises” when referring to CSA initiatives in its documents and on its webpage.

Factors that inhibit coalition building

On top of these differences in the movements’ ideologies and political strategies, we find that the movements’ resources, as well as their internal organisation, limited mobilisation

of social ties and lack of knowledge about the other movements, do not form conducive factors for coalition building. First, the movements differ in their degree of formalisation. While the *Solawi* network is a formalised association, with paid staff and a clear organisational structure, the German degrowth movement, contrary to other European countries such as Italy (*Associazione per la decrescita*: www.decrecita.it and *Movimento per la decrescita felice*: www.decrecitafelice.it) or the Netherlands (*Ontgroei*: www.ontgroei.degrowth.net), does not have an encompassing organisation or network. The organisation of the emergent movement occurs via communication platforms and networking events, as well as via several smaller degrowth hubs. Due to this difference, members of the CSA movement struggle with perceiving degrowth as a movement on equal standing: “I do not know any real representatives of degrowth, or their organisation. I mean, which organisation represents degrowth thought [...] is this only a discourse on the meta-level?” (CM4). Evidently, not knowing who to connect to does not facilitate coalition building.

More generally, there is also little knowledge about degrowth on the side of CSA. Some of the strongest social ties of the CSA network are within the rural agri-food realm, such as to organic farming associations, and thus do not overlap with the rather urban-centred agricultural social ties of the degrowth movement. Even those few people who are simultaneously connected to the CSA and the degrowth movements have so far not acted as bridge-builders between the two movements, nor are all of them equally involved in or knowledgeable about both movements. In addition, the personnel fluctuation in the CSA movement hinders the establishment of long-term coalitions on the basis of social ties, which currently depend on select individuals. Table 3 illustrates how initiatives’ ideologies and political strategies, including their interests in coalitions with other movements, change with the moving on of individual members. One founding member of CSA “Large” had an explicit interest in degrowth. While, after their departure, the remaining leadership team still agrees with the idea of degrowth, they now prioritise other concepts and movements.

Degrowth has never been discussed at the network level of the CSA movement, and has rarely been treated as a principal topic in other formats. Similarly, many initiatives, even those whose practices and values appear to perfectly align with, or even embody, degrowth, do not know about the concept of degrowth, nor are they part of related alternative economy movements. This is well illustrated by CSA “Biodynamic” (Table 4): while directly practising several key values of degrowth (e.g. farming within the ecological limits of the territory, decommodification of food), the initiative does not have any connections nor knowledge about degrowth.

Table 4 CSA “Biodynamic”

CSA “BIODYNAMIC”	
Framing	Problem: risks and economic constraints that (peasant) farmers face inhibit production according to own ideals Solution: CSA model via risk-sharing ensures “farming in freedom” from consumer and market constraints, enabling a coherent, diverse biodynamic production
Action rep- ertoires & organisation of CSA	Holistic biodynamic farming, combining horticulture, agriculture and livestock: preserving old varieties, soil regeneration, production determined by the limits and characteristics of available land Attempt to decommodify food and land discursively and practically, such as via collective property ownership or via abstaining from fixed quantities of harvest shares (members can decide how much they need); slogan: “food loses its price and thereby regains its value” Enhancement of accessibility via contribution rounds Limited on-farm engagement of members expected, but distribution groups are self-organised and consumers are framed as “non-active” farmers Tensions: not all members share the farm’s values to the same extent, which has repeatedly been a source of conflict
Social ties	With local agricultural actors (notably the biodynamic community) and the municipality No ties to degrowth
Perception of/ relation to degrowth	No awareness of degrowth, yet an intuitive critique in line with degrowth thought: qualitative instead of quantitative growth is needed Own CSA is viewed as an “island”: a concrete, already existing example of exiting growth-driven and consumer society

Even the *nascent* project focuses in its collaboration with the CSA network on practical input that is disconnected from larger theories of degrowth. Consequently, many members of the CSA movement know mostly the version of degrowth as shared by *nascent*, perceiving connections between CSA and degrowth on the basis of growth independence and anti-globalisation sentiments. None seemed to be aware of the international degrowth cluster, or their engagement in prefigurative initiatives or coalitions with the German climate and anti-coal movement. As the sufficiency cluster is not known to be particularly engaged in movement politics (but rather works on the level of microeconomics), this exclusive connection between CSA and *nascent* did not facilitate any advances towards a movement coalition between CSA and degrowth. As one member of the international cluster states: “[Paech, member of *nascent*] is not an actor who partakes in the building of a movement or who tries to act strategically on the level of social movements” (DM5).

Lastly, neither of the two movements currently have sufficient financial, personnel or time resources to engage in activities at the margins of their fields of action, including the establishment of coalitions with movements engaged in related, but not identical, struggles. The agricultural practitioners in the CSA network in particular, whose movement participation occurs after long days of manual work, do not have time to read articles about degrowth, or they might set different priorities for their leisure time. As shown in the case of the CSA “Radical” (Table 2), this means that even initiatives that know about degrowth, including the international cluster, have entered event coalitions and share several links in related anti-capitalist communities, do not engage in, nor are they interested in, establishing longer-term coalitions

with the degrowth movement, as they do not perceive added value in doing so.

On what basis could a coalition be established in the future?

While to date there is no coalition between the CSA and degrowth movements, there are several possibilities for a potential coalition. Besides promising social ties, a careful analysis of the framing of both movements shows instances of ideological alignment when abstracting from core issues and listening to the voices of subgroups within both movements.

Alignment and complementarity of political ideology and strategy

First, with regard to the diagnostic framing, the CSA movement views the loss of peasant agriculture as embedded in the bigger problem of “market pressures” that permeate the current agri-food system. To survive, farms are obliged to specialise and seek economies of scale, a concept captured by the slogan “grow or perish”. Consequently, one degrowther from the sufficiency cluster argued that degrowth ideas are core to the *Solawi* network and its efforts to bring about a paradigm change in agriculture (DM3). At the same time, the problematisation of international trade articulated by the international degrowth cluster aligns with the critique of the globalised market within the *Solawi* network. This alignment can be traced back to the origins of both movements; members of the anti-globalisation movement were heavily involved in the emergence phase of both the *Solawi*

Table 5 CSA “Small”

CSA “SMALL”	
Framing	Problem: unsustainability of food production Solution: CSA provides access to locally produced, healthy vegetables
Action repertoires & organisation of CSA	Member size is kept deliberately small, thereby enabling a strong sense of community Collective gardening is instructed by a gardener: large share of the gardening work conducted by members (including self-harvest) No unified political vision (intentionally “unpolitical”), although discussions about societal challenges (e.g. neoliberalisation) occur informally during collective gardening work
Social ties	With associations and cultural infrastructure in surrounding villages and small towns and with anthroposophic institutions in the region Attendance of conference on alternative economies
Perception of/ relation to degrowth	Degrowth is not discussed at the group level Different degrees of interest in/knowledge about growth criticism: (1) most members are not familiar with degrowth; (2) one board member mentioned degrowth, referring to sufficiency, market independence and a stronger dependence on the natural environment; (3) some members feel torn between the “blessings” and “disadvantages” of the capitalist economy

network and the degrowth movement. A closer examination of the diversity of problem *sub*-framings reveals further similarities, such as critiques of deskilling (Table 2), or the precarious perspectives for future generations (Table 3) in addition to continuous technologisation.

Second, the prognostic framing of the *Solawi* movement resonates with perspectives often held by sufficiency degrowthers. CSA, which assures the survival of smallholder farms by shielding them from market pressures, echoes the idea of overcoming growth pressures at the micro-level via growth-independent enterprises (DM3). Some members of the *Solawi* network therefore suggest an ideological alignment with degrowth, arguing that agricultural production in CSA is not growth-driven but need-driven: what and how much is produced is decided collectively by the members of a CSA and not dictated by the expected revenue of production (CM1, CM3, CM4). In line with this, many members commented on the sufficiency-based *nascent* project as being enriching and useful (CM1, CM4). CSA “Large” also illustrates the alignment between CSA and sufficiency degrowth well (Table 3): reflecting on the question regarding the adequate size of their impact-driven initiative, they sought advice from Niko Paech. Paech legitimised the initiative’s growth as furthering a degrowth transformation.

Beyond an alignment with the sufficiency cluster, CSA initiatives organised as vegetable gardening collectives often embrace and uplift degrowth values that also the international cluster espouses, such as autonomy, self-determination, and collective engagement (CSA “Radical”, Table 2). The prognostic and diagnostic frames of the newer CSA initiatives, in comparison to the discourse by older generations of CSA, come closer to a discursive dismissal of the growth economy, and may thus make a future movement coalition on the basis of alignment of frames more likely. This newer

generation of CSA has recently started to shape the politics of the CSA network, as illustrated by a recent frame broadening: CSA is no longer exclusively portrayed as a peasant struggle fighting for the survival of smallholder agriculture, but now also features as a “key-figure in social-ecological transformation processes” (Netzwerk Solidarische Landwirtschaft n.d.(f)).

Third, an analysis of the action repertoires of both movements for complementarity, rather than similarities, exhibits further scope for coalition building. On the one hand, degrowthers can—and, in some instances, already do—strengthen the CSA movement via research and communication. (Participatory action) research on and with CSA initiatives can provide concrete insights when investigating topics and questions that are of relevance for the movement, but are not taken up due to a lack of resources. Additionally, according to one interviewee, the degrowth movement’s emphasis on and expertise with external communication could compensate for the current lack of capacity for external communication on the part of the *Solawi* network, for instance in the form of newspaper articles or blogposts that raise awareness about the CSA model (DM2). Furthermore, a member of the CSA network hopes that degrowth could shift the broader societal discourse towards the urgency of the multiple unfolding crises which are rooted in the growth paradigm (CM4). Juxtaposing these crises with the CSA model would then legitimise the work of CSA initiatives and portray them as viable alternatives to the status quo.

In turn, CSA practices prefigure, in the present, a post-capitalist society. In line with the perspectives of degrowth scholars summarised earlier in this article, some of our interview partners referred to the value of CSA initiatives’ (unknowing) translation of abstract degrowth theory for broader society (DM2, DM5). In this way, CSA initiatives

are also appealing to degrowthers who join initiatives to practise the values they embrace (DM2). CSA can also speak to people that do not yet feel attracted to degrowth and introduce them step by step to new topics and ideas and provide a space for unlearning growthism. The founder of CSA “Large” (L3) explicated how their CSA can serve as a “Trojan horse” of transformation: consumers join for a mere vegetable box, not expecting a radical political project behind it, but their participation slowly unlocks a process towards putting things more fundamentally into question.

CSA “Small” illustrates this Trojan horse idea very well (Table 5). When the initiative was founded, most of the members were primarily interested in access to local, healthy food. Self-identifying as mere “normal people”, the initiative’s mostly rural member base did not have many ties to typical “leftist or environmentalist bubbles” and thus did not strive to have a larger societal impact with CSA. When the group underwent a crisis—membership was halved in size and they were in want of a farmer—members experienced a process of collective (un)learning: forced to do the gardening work themselves, they temporarily had to unlearn their role as consumers. They developed a strong sense of community and established, after finding a farmer, a commitment to weekly participation in farming work of all members. Beyond this crisis, the members perceive their participation in CSA as a learning process, including, for some, the unlearning of certainties about the growth-based economy. As a CSA initiative, members were invited to join a conference on alternative economies. There, they were confronted with critical perspectives on capitalism and its pending crash due to the impossibility of further growth. Several members remember this event as a disconcerting experience: they currently do not see a (possible) alternative to the capitalist economy; its pending crash thus symbolises a rather bleak future.

Factors that enable coalition building

Existing coalitions and social ties provide fertile ground for a future coalition between degrowth and CSA in Germany. The existence of individuals who are active within both movements, or at least knowledgeable of the respective other, has led to one enduring coalition in form of the research project *nascent*, and several event coalitions in the form of workshops (e.g. on CSA at the degrowth conference in Leipzig), panel discussions, and the co-authorship of one book chapter in the publication *Degrowth in Movement(s)* (Burkhart et al. 2017). Starting from concrete and practical links, event coalitions can lay the foundation for an enduring coalition (Rodríguez-Labajos et al. 2019), while requiring a relatively low amount of time and capital, which seems key in light of the limited resources of both movements. Furthermore, event coalitions resonate with the idea of polycentric

organisation that some members of the CSA network embrace. Polycentric organisation advocates for informal, spontaneous exchange across movements on common topics without formal or hierarchical organising (CM3).

Members of the degrowth and CSA movements also meet in other common spaces and movements, notably the anti-globalisation movement (Attac) and the commons movement (including housing projects, workers’ collectives, and autonomous movements), as well as initiatives and movements around the community and solidarity economy. The commons movement, strongly represented in Germany by the Commons Institute,¹³ may even function as a further prospective bridge-builder. Degrowth and commons are ideologically very close; in fact, some scholars have argued that both movements “in some way contain each other” (Euler and Gauditz 2017, p. 101) or that there is a commons-oriented current within the degrowth movement (Schmelzer and Vetter 2019). Simultaneously, there is a relatively high degree of identification with and visibility of commons-related ideas in the CSA network.

The relaunch of the *Netzwerk Oekonomischer Wandel*¹⁴ (economic transformation network, NOW) potentially provides the most tangible opening for an enduring coalition between CSA and the international degrowth cluster. Once a purely intellectual thinktank uniting different strands within the alternative economies movement (including degrowthers from the international cluster), it has now opened its doors to practitioners, including individuals from the *Solawi* network. In the eyes of a member of the latter, the value of NOW lies in its potential to “give a voice to the alternative economies movement as a whole [...] contribute to its diffusion and visibility [...] and potentially initiate lobbying and advocacy work” (personal communication). This statement shows once more how the need for an alternative economic system is recognised within the CSA movement, yet also how little importance is given to whether these ideas run under the banner of the degrowth, commons, solidarity economy movement, or another one.

Discussion

In what follows, we connect these insights to degrowth debates on coalitions and to SMT on coalitions, by drawing out both the benefits and risks of a potential coalition between CSA and degrowth. These benefits and risks do not “sum up” to a recommendation in favour of, or against, a coalition; it is the movements themselves who will ultimately do this evaluation.

¹³ <https://commons-institut.org/>.

¹⁴ <https://netzwerk-oekonomischer-wandel.org/>.

The benefits of a coalition (and their limitations)

Social movement scholars typically stress that ideological alignment forms the base for entering a coalition (e.g. Brooker and Meyer 2019; Van Dyke and Amos 2017). Our results show that such commonalities or overlaps exist, particularly between CSA and the sufficiency cluster within degrowth. While it is certainly true that commonalities render coalition work easier, we find it limiting to think about a potential coalition only in terms of alignment. After all, coalitions across differences, while challenging to build, can be enriching and hold strategic value, since new perspectives and experiences are shared (Gawerc 2020, 2021). We find inspiration in the metaphor of a “mosaic of alternatives” as cited above: a mosaic implies heterogeneity and, as a vision for building a plural world, combines diverse struggles and strategies (Burkhart et al. 2017). In line with degrowth scholars who explored a potential coalition with the EJ movement, we ask: How could the movements benefit from each other’s struggles? What could they learn from each other (Burkhart et al. 2017)? In other words, how could degrowth assist the CSA movement in fulfilling their own objectives, and vice versa (Maney 2012)?

In our view, the benefits of a coalition between CSA and degrowth in Germany would lie in the complementarity between practice- and discourse-driven social change; in the synergy between a movement focusing on practices of prefiguration and survival, and one concentrating on discourses of structural transformation. In the beginning of this publication, we summarised how degrowth scholars have engaged with and identified the relevance of CSA for degrowth, particularly as a way of practising degrowth values in the present. Our research confirmed these reflections, also from the viewpoint of CSA, as one interview partner from the CSA movement proposed the metaphor of the Trojan horse. However, our research warns against viewing CSA as a grassroots practice that can simply be “claimed” by degrowth as a “mosaic” of its movement, or performance of its principles. Instead, it shows how degrowth can, and should, learn from the CSA community. CSA practitioners challenge degrowth’s theory of change by contrasting it with the urgency and reality of smallholder survival in the present. They call degrowth out as “an ivory tower discussion”, and thus pose clear demands on the degrowth movement to practise critical self-reflection: how can degrowth, and the international degrowth cluster in particular, better connect with practitioners on the ground who might not have the time nor the desire to engage in complex, and sometimes seemingly futile, academic thinking? How can the degrowth movement, beyond summarising all the existing struggles and practices of alternative futures, become a useful ally to practice-driven movements such as CSA? What can it offer to them?

Theoretically, degrowth can offer something to CSA: As outlined in our findings, CSA initiatives, and the movement, do not strategically focus on bringing about structural change, especially beyond the agri-food system, but invest their energies into surviving within the capitalist market, which is difficult enough. This is crucial, especially as their daily work entails the prefiguration (and preservation) of postcapitalist alternatives. Complementary to that, critique-to-capitalism currents within the international degrowth cluster point out the caveat that prefigurative initiatives, while necessary for societal transformation, are not sufficient: they ought to be accompanied by structural changes such as the reorganisation and redistribution of work and wealth, as well as the dismantling of social and cultural hierarchies (Schmelzer and Vetter 2019). Contrary to the sufficiency cluster’s tendency towards reformist strategies and vagueness regarding capitalism, the international degrowth cluster holds a clear position against capitalist forms of thinking, doing, and valuing. It exposes power and domination in capitalist society and points out who currently benefits from the growth imperative and capitalist modes of accumulation.

CSA initiatives find themselves embedded in this capitalist society and its cross-sectoral constraints (Guerrero Lara et al. 2023). While shielding food producers from the pressures of the food market, CSA does not represent an impermeable postcapitalist bubble, but rather peri-capitalist survival (Tsing 2015). For instance, while many CSA initiatives enhance accessibility through contribution rounds, these are limited to the possibilities within a structurally unequal society: while enabling the participation of less financially secure members, contribution rounds do so only at the mercy of affluent “patrons”, risking turning CSA into a neoliberal charity that liberates the state from its obligations (Cropp 2022, 2015). Initiatives which are located in economically weak regions may struggle to pay adequate wages to their farmers (Cropp 2022, 2015). Lastly, almost all initiatives struggle with the low time resources most of their members can offer to support farm and administrative work—the consequence of a socially normalised 40-h-work week, and an economy in which five days of work per week are necessary to earn (or not even earn) a decent living (see also Pole and Gray (2013), who report on the circumscription of member participation in CSA in New York, albeit without reference to peri-capitalism).

As these examples illustrate, strengthening a structural perspective—as promoted by the international degrowth cluster—in the CSA movement’s ideology and strategy would eventually shift the focus of the CSA movement from assuring that smallholder agriculture *survives* in Germany, to ensuring that it *thrives*. It would eventually mean sharpening the CSA movement’s self-image as a political actor, with

political demands for a radical, structural transformation of the economy.

Clearly, for neither CSA nor degrowth is the respective other the only opportunity for such a bridge between structural change and refigurative survival. For the degrowth movement, there are other refigurative initiatives that exist independently of degrowth but practice values and ideas in line with its vision, such as urban gardening (Anguelovski 2014), back-to-the-landers (Calvário and Otero 2014), and ecovillages (ann 2017), to name a few. At the same time, however, neither of these initiatives are mutually exclusive. Considering degrowth's vision of a "mosaic of alternatives", relations to all forms of grassroots movements prefiguring futures in line with the broad visions of degrowth are valuable. For the CSA movement, the food sovereignty movement can similarly provide impulses for demands for structural change. However, this is currently not the case. While, in its transnational movement, food sovereignty represents a radical and holistic call for the abolition of all forms of structural oppression, exploitation and inequality of power, condemning the power of transnational corporations and international trade (Nyéléni Forum 2007), the German CSA movement has, despite its enduring coalition with the German member of La Via Campesina, AbL, not taken up this radical discourse. In addition, as Salzer and Fehlinger (2017) explicate in their analysis of the relationship between food sovereignty and degrowth, the two communities have different strengths regarding systemic critiques of the economy. While the food sovereignty movement focuses on calling out the destructiveness of market mechanisms and profit logics, the degrowth movement can still complement this structural critique with a bigger picture of the general workings of capitalism: what are the structural roots of the primacy of profit and growth in capitalism and what would it mean to unmake these roots and the power relations that underly them (Salzer and Fehlinger 2017)?

The risks of a coalition (and how to overcome them)

On the other hand, we perceive several risks of a potential coalition. First, we fear that a coalition with degrowth, informal or formal, might aggravate the already perceptible tensions around the CSA movement's identity that exist between the different cultural-political backgrounds within the *Solawi* network. Contrary to newer generations of CSA that view CSA as a form of alternative economy, members with a strong peasant identity may find the language of degrowth too distant from their own struggles. Moreover, as the links to the degrowth movement are currently largely held by select individuals within the CSA network (particularly so for the case of the international degrowth cluster), the building of a coalition may be (wrongly or rightly) perceived as the pursuit of these personalities' individual

agendas, rather than the pursuit of the general objective of the movement. This resonates with observations from social movement scholars who have pointed out that coalition work can make "conflicts between different associated groups more salient" (Wang et al. 2018, p. 179).

To overcome this risk, degrowth would need to connect with the realities and identities of its potential allies (Rodríguez-Labajos et al. 2019). While parts of the CSA movement, as shown in our analysis, are already close to the degrowth movement in terms of political ideology, other members may indeed need time to connect with degrowth ideas. These differences in pace should be recognised and not obscured by arguments of urgency of societal change, as put forward by some newer members of the CSA movement. Entering a coalition without addressing the above-named issue will likely bear consequences for the type of members that the network seeks to attract. In the worst case, a coalition would further work against the project of making CSA attractive to traditional family farms, whose transition to CSA might be one of the few ways of saving them from the false choice of "growing or perishing".

A second risk of a coalition lies in reinforcing the weaknesses that both movements share. One point in case is the risk of far-right co-optation. The CSA movement has experienced these attempts in several ways, leading them to establish a working group that develops political strategies against far-right co-optation.¹⁵ Similarly, degrowth scholars have noted how localist positions within degrowth thought appeal to right-wing ideologies. Here, again, a coalition with the degrowth movement as a whole, rather than a reduction of degrowth to sufficiency, could limit this risk. While the sufficiency cluster has so far not tried to establish a clear position against the far-right (Muraca 2020; Eversberg 2018), the international cluster has started to problematise structural racism and practise reflectivity (Eversberg 2016, 2018; Habermann and Humburg 2017).

A last risk lies in the above-stated mismatch between the political ideologies and strategies of the two movements. While we have dwelled on the potential benefits of an alliance based on complementarity, we similarly see risks. The academic, abstract discourse of the degrowth movement, as criticised by members of the CSA movement, may not only act as a day-to-day barrier in collaboration and subsequently

¹⁵ The threat of far-right cooptation became apparent for the first time in 2013, when the network discovered a person with far-right ideologies in their midst and initiated an exclusion process (for a more detailed description of the history of far-right cooptation in the context of CSA in Germany and concomitant boundary work of the CSA network see Guerrero Lara et al. under review; and Ahlert 2022 on action strategies against far-right co-optation). For further information on the activities and statements of the working group visit: www.solidarische-landwirtschaft.org/das-netzwerk/arbeitsgruppen/rechte-tendenzen.

lead to alienation between the two movements, but also, to put it bluntly, not help the CSA movement in achieving its goals. In the worst case, it may even have adverse effects: if the CSA movement were to take on an adjusted “master frame” that aligns with degrowth, a movement with marginal political power in Germany, the similarly marginal CSA movement may not only not increase, but possibly even limit its appeal to more dominant political forces. Moreover, as stated by a member of the CSA network, an increased engagement of the CSA movement in intellectual debates on capitalism may demand important time and personnel resources from the already underfunded and understaffed network; it may take up resources urgently needed to work towards the primary collective goals of the movement.

Yet, coalitions can take manifold forms. The movements could take this latter risk into account when developing the concrete arrangement of their alliance. While coalitions can involve forging a common agenda including adjusted master frames (e.g. Gawerc 2020) and the coordination of repertoires of action (e.g. Polanska and Piotrowski 2015), they do not need to be this extensive. Rodríguez-Labajos et al. (2019) conclude in their analysis of a potential coalition between degrowth and the environmental justice movement that coalitions characterised by plurality ought to start small; these coalitions should necessarily first develop “specific alliances on concrete projects” rather than attempting to forge an overall coalition (Rodríguez-Labajos et al., p. 182). In this sense, a coalition between CSA and degrowth could build on topics on which both movements are already converging, such as commoning, collective ownership, alternative democratic practices or sufficiency, and thus harness the advantage of an extended audience in the mobilisation of a critical mass. This could entail collaborating for, or coordinating the dates of specific events, or giving visibility to each other in the communication with their member base. Moreover, before considering a formal or more enduring alliance, the two movements may simply engage in a non-public process of mutual learning: consulting the expertise of the respective other to the extent that the movements themselves consider enriching.

Conclusion

This study provided a first comprehensive assessment of a potential coalition between CSA and degrowth in the context of Germany. Drawing on SMT, we find that the current absence of a coalition can be explained by (1) ideological and strategic differences which are expressed in differing diagnostic and prognostic framings as well as action repertoires, (2) a lack of conducive factors for coalition building due to differing forms of internal organisation, scarce resources, and the limited mobilisation of existing social

ties, and (3) a lack of knowledge about degrowth on the side of CSA.

At the same time, we identify several openings for a future coalition. First, there are subtle alignments in subframings, most notably in critiques of growth pressures in the food system. Second, we find that the divergent action repertoires of the two movements are complementary: the CSA movement largely focuses on practice-driven social change, while degrowth mainly pursues discourse-driven change. Third, our analysis shows the presence of potential “bridge-builders” in the form of individuals who are engaged in both movements, as well as in other networks or movements which are closely related to degrowth and CSA. Until recently, such connections were largely limited to sufficiency degrowthers (such as the *nascent* team). The relaunch of NOW provides an avenue for similarly deepening the engagement of CSA with the international degrowth cluster.

Our study identified several potential benefits and risks of a coalition. Considering the advantages, we expect that entering a coalition would bring with it the benefits of complementarity: The international degrowth cluster can promote and strengthen a structural perspective that calls out the inherent flaws of the capitalist society within which the *Solawi* network is based. In turn, rather than being “used” to prefigure a degrowth society in the here and now, the CSA movement can challenge the abstract and at times seemingly disconnected academic discourses of degrowth and thereby (hopefully) instigate a critical self-reflection in the degrowth movement on how to support practice-driven movements.

On the other hand, we see several risks of a potential coalition: first, an aggravation of already existing tensions within the CSA movement’s diverse membership—further alienating those members identifying with traditional peasant politics rather than gardening and solidarity economies; second, an exacerbation of weaknesses that both movements share (notably the risk of far-right co-optation); and, third, a misallocation of sparse resources for the CSA movement, which may not see sufficient benefits in a coalition with degrowth.

While these findings might offer starting points for similar inquiries into political collaborations between CSA and degrowth movements in other countries and transnationally, we would like to stress the specificity of our analysis to the context of Germany, and the associated difficulty of drawing general lessons for a coalition between degrowth and CSA on a global level. Further studies may continue this inquiry into CSA as an explicitly political movement and degrowth as a usefully self-critical ally in the fight for a radical transformation towards societies centred around the good life for all; societies where not only the survival, but the actual flourishing of smallholder agriculture becomes both a desirable and realistic political horizon.

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Declarations

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Informed consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. The participants have consented to their (anonymised) data being used in this publication.

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