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Digital community supported agriculture? Exploring a cooperative platform model for fair work and governance

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14763/2026.1.2076>

Published: 6 February 2026

Received: 21 April 2025 **Accepted:** 22 July 2025

Funding: The author did not receive any funding for this research.

Competing Interests: The author has declared that no competing interests exist that have influenced the text.

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Citation: de Cler, A.-P. (2026). Digital community supported agriculture? Exploring a cooperative platform model for fair work and governance . *Internet Policy Review*, 15(1). <https://doi.org/10.14763/2026.1.2076>

Keywords: Cooperative platforms, Community supported agriculture, Work, Alternative food systems, Accessibility

Abstract: This article contributes to the analysis of new forms of community supported agriculture (CSA) that use platform technology, applying a critical lens to how a cooperative model for such platforms can advance solidarity economies. The analysis is based on a case study of a cooperative platform in the United States that enables direct-to-consumer sales of local products. The methodology is ethnographic, combining semi-structured interviews with platform workers, direct observation of the platform's use and documentary research. Drawing on literature from the sociology of labour, that of organisations and food studies, this case study aims to offer insights on the effects of a cooperative platform model on participation in CSA, understood in terms of accessibility, work and governance. Its main findings concern the relation between the cooperative organisation of work and governance and inequalities in the participation of farmers, platform workers and members. They are thus relevant for professionals, communities and policymakers concerned with the case under study and the domains of platforms and community supported agriculture, as well as for practitioners and scholars of digital solidarity economies as a broader movement.

This paper is part of **Digital Solidarity Economies**, a special issue of *Internet Policy Review* guest-edited by Belén Albornoz, Ricard Espelt, Rafael Grohmann, and Denise Kasparian.

1- Introduction

Researchers and practitioners from a wide array of fields frame community supported agriculture (CSA) as a form and part of alternative, diverse, social, and solidarity economies (Raj & Feola, 2025; Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020; Mert-Cakal & Miele, 2020; Hitchman, 2019; Grasseni, 2013; Miller, 2010). As much as criteria for such qualifications differ, CSA is commonly understood as a network of direct support between farmers and communities or consumers, whereby the latter provide an economic contribution to farmers (usually in the form of advance payment and engagement in the long-run, but also sometimes as work on the farm) in exchange for a share of their production (European CSA Research Group, 2016). The CSA model is thus associated with values of agroecology, degrowth, solidarity, care, democracy and food sovereignty (Degens & Lapschies, 2023; Bloemmen et al., 2020; Savarese et al., 2020; Espelt, 2018; Wells & Gradwell, 2001). It is also considered as supporting forms of needs-based economies (Keucheyan, 2022) and civic, engaged consumption (Dubuisson-Quellier et al., 2011). The history and notion of solidarity economies highlight the plural roots and manifestations of CSA, especially in relation to the histories and practices of marginalised groups (Hossein & Pearson, 2023). In a context of global crises, marked by increasing social inequalities and various forms of precarity, including food precarity, CSA has been built and put forward as a desirable alternative. It has also shown certain limits, particularly in terms of economic accessibility and inclusivity. Emerging models of digital technologies for CSA are presented with promises of overcoming these limits, yet little fieldwork-based research is available to confirm, nuance, or contradict these hypotheses.

Indeed, since the mid-2010s, digital technologies have increasingly entered CSA (Edwards & Espelt, 2020; Chiffoleau, 2019), as well as the agriculture and food sectors more broadly (Reisman et al., 2025), reconfiguring work and power relations in agri-food systems on local and global scales. Big technology enterprises and Venture Capital (VC)-backed start-ups have been shown to extend exploitative and extractive relations to work and land by entering and creating markets for digital platforms in the food and agriculture sectors. As some scholars argue, the digitalisation of agriculture and food systems is paving the way for new forms of the corporate food regime (Prause et al., 2021; Tilzey, 2019), where power and profits

are particularly concentrated in the hands of big tech corporations, in addition to those of distribution and agriculture as a whole (ETC Group, 2022). Attention has been drawn to cooperative platforms to counter capitalist platforms and foster fairer and more sustainable economies (Scholz, 2023). While acknowledging the plural definitions and practices that correspond to cooperative platforms (Barbosa et al., 2024), they can be understood as organisations or businesses that use digital platforms and abide by cooperative principles, being collectively owned (by workers and/or members) and with democratic governance. In the realm of CSA, this model has been associated with promoting degrowth and less vertical relationships (Edwards & Espelt, 2020). Yet, little research examines the impact of such a model on the accessibility of CSA, a longstanding challenge of particular importance in a context of growing inequalities.

As such, there is a research gap concerning the relevance and impact of a cooperative platform model to address the accessibility challenge faced by CSA. In particular, given that the cooperative platform model aims to advance fairer forms of work and governance, this research gap can be further problematised by asking how a cooperative platform model affects the accessibility of CSA through work relations and governance. This article aims to address this research gap through the ethnographic study of GrownBy, a case of cooperative digital platform for CSA in the state of New York, United States. This platform, which claims to be the first “free and farmer-owned” digital platform in the US, is of particular interest as it advances accessibility as one of its main objectives (Farm Generations Cooperative, 2024a), pursued through cooperative ownership (for farmers and employees) and partnership with the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) (both for consumers and farmers).

The research question that this case study and article intend to answer can be formulated as such: how does a cooperative platform model affect participation in community supported agriculture? Participation is here understood in three interconnected dimensions:

- 1) accessibility (participation as access to CSA for members and marginalised groups in particular);
- 2) work (participation as work contributed by farmers, members, and platform workers); and
- 3) governance (participation as involvement in decision-making and cooperative ownership).

Accessibility is thus framed as dependent on work and governance. By focusing on GrownBy, this article aims to contribute to understanding how a cooperative platform for CSA impacts its participants in terms of the interrelated dimensions of accessibility, work relations and democratic governance.

The following sections address relevant literature, methodology, and case study findings. The article then discusses findings and concludes on their broader significance for digital solidarity economies.

2- Literature review and theoretical framework

This article's theoretical framework is based on four strands of transdisciplinary literature: CSA as a solidarity economy principle, participation in CSA, work and labour relations in CSA, and cooperative platforms. Drawing from sociology of work and of organisations and critical food studies, I examine the (re)configuration of participation in CSA entailed by the use of cooperative platforms. With a view to contribute to the developing scholarship on digital solidarity economies, this article looks more precisely at how digital and cooperative infrastructures mediate governance and work relations in CSA, and how this may (re)produce inequalities in participation.

2-1 CSA as a solidarity economy practice: Histories, exclusions and marginalised groups

In most of the North-American and European literature, the origins of CSA are traced to Japan in the 1960s (called *teikei*) and to the United States and Europe in the 1990s, with circulations between the East Coast of the United States and France (with the emergence of *associations pour le maintien d'une agriculture paysanne*) in particular (Amemiya, 2011). Direct-to-consumer food chains can nonetheless be found to have earlier origins in rural spaces (Chiffolleau, 2017). Food studies and food justice literature also highlights how solidarity practices of marginalised groups are often overlooked in the histories of alternative food movements at large (Levkoe et al., 2020). Indeed, some economic principles of the CSA model can be found in the practices of Black and Latin American communities rooted in social struggles, such as the invention of "Clientele Membership Club" (Anstreicher, 2021). As with the history of social economy which tends to centre on European and North American practices (Hosseini & Pearson, 2023, p. 9), the use of the term solidarity economies should highlight the plural histories and practices of marginalised groups that support these alternative practices. As such, this inquiry into a cooperative platform model for community supported agriculture will pay

attention to its role in (re)producing such power dynamics with regard to marginalised groups.

Moreover, in line with Black feminist literature on solidarity economies (Hossein & Pearson, 2023), I draw my attention to groups that are unlikely to interact with the state, private corporate actors, or the market in general, due to systemic exclusion. One such group is Black, indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) farmers, having been systematically discriminated against by United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) policy. I thereby question the role that a cooperative platform, such as GrownBy, plays with respect to such excluded or marginalised groups, as an intermediary (space) (Roulleau-Berger, 2003), echoing debates on legitimate exclusions (of certain groups, movements, networks, the state or the market) within solidarity economy as a political movement (Miller, 2010, p.11).

In the case of the United States and state involvement in social assistance and food access, the SNAP program is of interest. Funded by the USDA at the federal level and administered at the level of states, this program, initially elaborated as the Food Stamps program in 1939 and expanded under the Nixon administration in 1964 (André, 2024), consists in transferring monetary resources to eligible participants (based on revenue and employment criteria) to purchase food in eligible outlets (based on evolving criteria and with constraints on products, but traditionally food aid organisations and recently farmers markets, CSA and other direct-marketing outlets for fresh produce). Eligibility to the SNAP program requires going through an administrative procedure with the USDA and related state agencies, both on the side of retail outlets (involving farmers for instance) and so-called “beneficiaries” (corresponding to what I call marginalised groups). Such administrative procedures are sometimes externalised to intermediary organisations, such as civil society actors in food aid and also, as in the case of GrownBy, intermediaries between farmers and consumers. Resources for successfully filing such applications to the USDA are unequally distributed. As the *Pigford v. Glickman* case shows, Black farmers have been historically discriminated against in the application and attribution process of USDA grants (Bustillo, 2023). We can also argue that the unequal distribution of such resources in administrative work towards getting financial resources contributes to reproducing systematic inequalities based on race and class (Paddeu, 2021). Historically marginalised groups indeed tend to have less capacities to speak the institutional language and navigate the codes of administrative application processes. They also usually lack the temporal resources to undertake such work. This is shown in the case of non-profits that support racial and gender justice and the needs of marginalised groups in different

ways (Cardoso, 2023, p. 40; Paddeu, 2021). With no known research existing on how digital cooperative platforms reconfigure participation in social assistance programmes and thereby food accessibility for marginalised groups, the case study of GrownBy provides novel and concrete insights on the topic.

2-2 Participation to CSA as a question of member accessibility: determinants, barriers and capacities

As much as it sheds light on the plural histories of CSA and the role marginalised communities play in them, literature in food studies and food justice also shows that CSA, like many alternative food initiatives, are predominantly accessed and supported by white, middle-class, and highly educated groups (Horst et al., 2021; Slocum, 2007). These exclusions take root in the colonial history of agriculture and food systems as well as in the systemic class and racial relations that structure them (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011). In addition, a large body of literature from various disciplines (economic sociology, rural, agriculture and sustainability studies) investigate the determinants of member participation in CSA. Participation has been linked to market risk and uncertainty (Zhao & Yue, 2020), attachment to community and social capital (Brehm & Eisenhauer, 2008), and values (Hvitsand, 2016). Particularly focusing on low-income groups, some scholars identify, in addition to cost barriers, the following factors as influencing participation in CSA: gender; familiarity with the model; education; efficacy in food preparation; the content, variety, size and choice relative to CSA share; acceptance of social benefits as payments; location of pick-up; delivery options; communication; sense of belonging and trust; and educational support (Hanson et al., 2024). Sociologists such as Montrieux (2023) show the dynamics that hinder the inclusion of marginalised groups in CSA initiatives, despite efforts to include them. These dynamics include the initial exclusion of such groups from foundational circles, decision-making processes, and the definition of challenges and objectives. Practitioners as well who contribute to longstanding efforts of greater social inclusion in CSA propose a number of practical tools related to educational resources, financial accessibility, democratic decision-making, common culture and partnerships with social actors (MIRAMAP, 2023).

As such, participation in CSA can be framed as a question of accessibility, and of access for consumer-members in particular, from more structural to individual factors and group related perspectives. My contribution, based on the sociology of labour and of organisations, is to consider the role of the organisational model (i.e. a cooperative platform) for CSA participation. This original focus allows for the appreciation of possibilities and difficulties that a digital and cooperative organisa-

tional model, which remains under-researched in the domain of CSA, allows in terms of participation in this form of solidarity economy. The focus is thus not only on access or possibilities of access *per se*, but on the way access, as well as participation, are embedded in an organisational model. This perspective helps address a related research gap concerning the actual role digital platforms can play in improving access to CSA, particularly for marginalised groups (Chiffolleau et al., 2018, p. 46). This is especially relevant as digital platforms (cooperative ones in particular) are associated with promises of greater convenience, generalisability, and practicability (Gobbo et al., 2022).

2-3 Participation in CSA as a question of work: Capacities of farmers, operators and members

Participation in CSA extends to work, whether that of farmers who organise the production and distribution of CSA shares, consumers who are active in the organisation of distribution, and that of operators who intermediate such exchanges, in this case the platform workers of GrownBy. Research in the sociology of work and of consumption has described CSA as a site of “prosumption”, where members contribute to production, in the form of work or labour, in their consumption practices (Podda et al., 2021; Espelt, 2020).

Similar contributions are made from the perspective of digital labour and sharing or collaborative economy practices enabled by digital platforms (Schor, 2021; Dujarier, 2015). CSA requires an active involvement by members (which can be qualified as non-remunerated work), corresponding to the mobilisation of temporal, organisational and physical resources. As such, asking what impedes or facilitates such work contributions allows for reflection on access determinants. Some authors identify dynamics of self-exploitation (e.g. Galt, 2013) among volunteers but also farmers participating in CSA. Indeed, not only considering that groups with less economic resources have less temporal resources to volunteer, a strand of marxist and materialist feminist literature considers the free work (in the sense of an unremunerated productive or reproductive activity) that is at play in volunteering work (Simonet, 2018). This work predominantly concerns women, particularly in the spheres of food and agriculture more generally. On CSA specifically, the gendered dimension of work has been explored to show CSA as a caring practice (Wells & Gradwell, 2001) and a movement particularly supported by women (DeLind & Ferguson, 2007). At the same time, research also shows how working in CSA, from members’ perspective, counteracts alienation in capitalist production and opens possibilities for transforming the organisation of work in the food system overall (Watson, 2019).

2-4 Participation to CSA as a question of governance: insights from digital and cooperative studies

In addition to accessibility and work, the notion of participation can be tackled from the angle of governance, as I do in this article based on literature on cooperatives and cooperative platforms in particular. Indeed, participation has long been explored by studies on cooperatives, concerning the participation of workers in the capital of their enterprise as well as their participation in its democratic decision processes, management and governance. Mannan and Pek (2024) examine the determinants of worker-member participation in the governance of cooperative platforms, a field still underexplored despite its specificities compared to traditional cooperatives. They identify four features that influence participation in the governance of digital platforms: “the facilitation of multihoming, the physically untethered nature of work, the relatively high importance of scale as a strategic imperative, and the relatively low importance of initial platform worker-member investment” (Mannan & Pek, 2024, p. 221). In addition, scholars on cooperative platforms such as Bunders (2023) show that participation in the governance of such platforms can be unequal, depending on members’ affective commitment towards the cooperative and their level of social capital. He shows nonetheless that participation in decision-making does not depend on cooperative size and human capital.

As a cooperative platform, GrownBy allows farmers and employees to own the platform and participate in its governance. It is relevant to ask what determines such participation. More precisely, since farmers’ member-ownership conditions their use of the platform, these categories help think of how concretely this governance model impacts farmers and in particular their work and livelihoods. Indeed, capitalist platforms will tend to set and increase their prices regardless of farmers’ interests and livelihoods, as opposed to a cooperative model where ownership and participation in the management of the platform by farmers limits such exploitation. For instance, if small farms are brought to participate in the platform’s governance, they can influence its cost structure in a way that is advantageous for them. On that note, having workers of the platform become member-owners can also help ensure fair remuneration for their work. Moreover, for such VC-funded businesses to be profitable often involves scaling or attempting to reach a wider consumer base by diverting from the CSA model towards a more flexible, convenient and consumerist one, ultimately demeaning the provision of economic security and support to farmers. We can observe such trends in the CSA market overall, such as in the state of New York (Higgins, 2019, p. 23), as the arrival of new corporate actors made the CSA field more competitive.

3- Methodology

3-1 Research design

This article draws on ethnographic and comparative research conducted as part of a PhD thesis in sociology on alternative platforms in the food and agriculture sectors of the United States and France. Centered on a case study in the United States, this article sets the geographical comparison with France aside. It nonetheless accounts for the transnational and global dimension of the food justice and alternative food movements, well established and circulating between these two countries. The research design is qualitative and case-based, drawing on the sociology of labour and of organisations, as well as critical food studies. Ethnography was chosen as it allows for close attention to practices, values, and tensions within organisations that present themselves as “alternatives” to dominant agri-food models. Here, the “alternative” criterion is understood mostly in terms of practices, values, organisational arrangements and economic models based on cooperative and commons principles.

3-2 Criteria for case selection

The case of GrownBy was selected based on several criteria. First, it represents a cooperative platform model in the agriculture and food sector, which is both a recent phenomenon and a growing field of interest for policy and research in cross-cutting domains, including digital solidarity economies. Second, it particularly emphasised scaling as an objective of the platform, an issue of interest within this research and the field in general. The platform presents itself as enabling “regenerative agriculture, food access and farm viability” (Farm Generations, 2024), which are all criteria of interest based on this research’s focus on alternative economies. I came to know about this platform through my fellowship at the Institute for the Cooperative Digital Economy, the research organ of the Platform Cooperativism Consortium, which ran a series of courses on farming and platform cooperatives (Platform Cooperativism Consortium, 2023). That connection also facilitated contact with the field and the organisation of interviews. Lastly, the case was chosen for its geographical location, as I limited the scope of my research for feasibility purposes to cases in the city and state of New York.

3-3 Data collection methods

Data for this case study was collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation and documentary research. Interviews were conducted in June and July 2024 in New York City, all by video or phone call, lasting between

one and two hours. Interview data was anonymized and transcribed, majorly by hand and with the support of two softwares (Trint and Whisper). Five interviews were conducted with members of the business team. With the chief executive officer (CEO), who is also co-founder¹, these five individuals comprised the entire business team. Conducting interviews with a significant number of members of the same organisation allows for insight into, from a sociology of organisations perspective, the various action strategies and work relations that exist within a singular organisational configuration. A sixth interview was conducted with the program manager of a partner of GrownBy that facilitates payments through the SNAP program. This research also draws on primary material such as written exchanges (emails) with interviewees, before and after the interviews.

As for non-participant observation, one visit was made to a distribution of a CSA share in the city of New York in June 2024. This observation was chosen based on feasibility and time-related considerations. It allowed for observing the use of the platform during a distribution and for informal exchanges with CSA members and users of GrownBy. Documentary research includes online documentation such as blog posts by members of the cooperative, publications on GrownBy's website and newsletter. The same was done for partners of GrownBy. Some digital ethnography was also conducted through social media monitoring (of GrownBy's Instagram and social media of farms and workers), using the platform to place an order myself, and reading reviews of CSA members on the platform. This triangulation of sources enabled me to capture both the internal perspectives of workers of the platform as well as some external dimensions concerning farmers, members and the platform's position within a wider policy and alternative platform and food ecosystem.

3-4 Data analysis methods

The data analysis followed a qualitative, inductive approach. Interview grids were constructed based on the "strategic analysis" developed by Friedberg and Crozier (1977) in the sociology of organisation. Themes and associated open-ended questions concerned: work conditions, work relations, governance, and socio-professional trajectories. The aim was to obtain both an objective and subjective understanding of practices and lived experiences within but also outside the workplace, by multiplying viewpoints within the same organisation. It also helps to explain

1. At this stage of the research, I did not interview the CEO. Given her limited availability, the co-founder I exchanged with suggested preserving her time before I interviewed other stakeholders. Results can thus be considered partial but nonetheless reflect an important proportion of the workers of the platform.

how different logics of action explain different trajectories and experiences within an organisation with supposedly shared values and principles.

Interview transcripts, observation notes as well as excerpts from documentary research and digital ethnography notes were all manually coded. Categories were inductively generated and triangulated across data sources. They include: principles, models of reference and values; work conditions (sub-categories: employment status; work rhythm); content of work (sub-categories: operational work; recruitment work; institutional work; political work; platform work); organisation of work; division of work; work relations; meaning and recognition of work; participation to governance (sub-categories: ownership; decision-making); difficulties, tensions and conflicts; economic model (sub-categories: economic viability; competition; relation to the market; relation to public institution); partnerships; history and trajectory of the platform; relation to policy; professional, social and personal trajectories. Additional research to complete the socio-professional profiles of interviewees was conducted based on social media and online research.

3-5 Researcher positionality and ethical considerations

As an ethnographic inquiry, this research acknowledges the positionality of the researcher and the power relations embedded in fieldwork. My approach was informed by a commitment to solidarity economy principles: centring the voices and lived experiences (Hosseini & Pearson, 2023, p. 11) of workers, farmers and members, and attempting to build meaningful and transformative relationships with them. At the same time, I noted the difficulties of adequately meeting such objectives within the material conditions of a PhD research, the academic field being increasingly shaped by neoliberal logics (that is precarious work conditions, competition and austerity logics, and quantitative performance pressures). While centring the lived experiences of those concerned by the research and reflexively engaging with power relations at play in fieldwork is essential, it remains insufficient without also creating the material conditions for transformative work and relations. This article is therefore written with the intention to serve the practitioners, communities and research in the field, while acknowledging some limits in doing so.

4- Case study findings

4-1 Presentation of the case: history, governance, goals, funding and platform technology

Founded in 2019, GrownBy is a multi-stakeholder cooperative (owned by farmer member-owners and employees) and is built to organise local farm sales (accord-

ing to the CSA model). GrownBy is a software or platform that allows farmers to sell their products directly to consumers, including in the form of CSA, that is, through pre-order and subscription to a share of the farm's production for a defined period of time. It is an online marketplace which has the particularity of being owned by farmers who sell through it, in the sense that they can become member-owners of the platform, enabling them to buy equity in it (and thereby having a stake in the platform-company²'s profits, when it becomes profitable). As of 2024, GrownBy is used by over 900 farmers (across the US, Puerto Rico and Canada) (GrownBy Team, 2025a).

In terms of governance, membership implies voting on its decisions, on an equal basis, with democratic elections to appoint farmer-members to the board of directors (GrownBy Team, 2024a; Shute, 2020). The platform was developed as a project of a farmer cooperative (the Farms Generation Cooperative, founded in 2018), which makes all its members owners of the platform. As stated on their website and as mentioned in an interview, GrownBy is the first marketplace software for farmers, owned by farmers, in the United States. This claim is confirmed by my cartography of direct-to-consumer platforms for farmers in the United States, built from online desk research and triangulating different inventories of such platforms (Noor, 2024; Galle, 2025): while some were created before GrownBy, such as Local Harvest, none appear to be farmer-owned cooperatives. It is however not the only farmer-owned software in the world, with similar cases existing in Europe for instance (CoopCircuits is an example of a cooperative platform in that field in France, see below). In 2023, GrownBy became a multi-stakeholder cooperative, with the possibility for employees of the platform (who are not necessarily farmers nor users of the platform) to become member-owners of it, as "minority stakeholders", under certain conditions (of number of hours worked notably) (Farm Generations Cooperative, 2024b). At the time of conducting this research, two out of the five employees interviewed were in the process of becoming member-owners of GrownBy. 16 farms (corresponding to a majority of individual farmers, three couples and a community farm) are member-owners of GrownBy (Farm Generations Cooperative, 2024c). All are small to mid-sized farms, most of which are certified organic or naturally grown and using regenerative agriculture techniques.

The goals of GrownBy, as stated on their website (Farm Generations Cooperative,

2. The hyphenated term platform-company is used here to highlight the company dimension of the platform, particularly relevant to a discussion on ownership and equity in the company. While a platform is always incorporated, in the sense of being framed by an enterprise or organisation and is thus never "just" a neutral or disembodied technology, we usually use the term platform on its own for conciseness.

2024a) are regenerative agriculture, food access and farm viability. It also abides to the seven cooperative principles³. One of the initiatives highlighted in terms of food access is the possibility to accept “SNAP payments” or monetary transfers from the SNAP program through the platform. GrownBy played a pivotal role making SNAP payments to farmers online possible and was the first app to do so, with the River Queen Greens farm being the first to accept SNAP payments online (Johnston, 2023; GrownBy Team, 2024b). This device allows, on the one hand, to make food more affordable for customers but also, on the other hand, to increase revenue shares for farmers.

The conception and business plan of GrownBy was initially funded through a USDA grant awarded to the National Young Farmers Coalition, a non-profit where the two co-founders of GrownBy previously worked. Once the prototype was built, funding was taken on by the Novo Foundation, run by Peter Buffett, who also funded some of the work of the National Young Farmers’ coalition and thereby knew one of the co-founders. This funding allowed, as per the co-founder, to hire the engineering team and “get some market traction” (interview, June 2024) for a few years. While foundation grants are typically reserved for non-profits, GrownBy’s mission alignment facilitated this early-stage support. As per the co-founder, this gave GrownBy several advantages in terms of economic viability and competitiveness in that market at the start, especially compared to platforms funded by venture capital (VC). Today, GrownBy still gets some funding from the USDA but also from a nonprofit (American Heart Association), a venture fund and venture hub funding startups in the Hudson Valley⁴, cooperative loans, “individual impact investors” (such as an asset manager), and crowdfunding (GrownBy Team 2025b). GrownBy also gets funded by the 250 US dollar co-op share that farmers pay if they decide to become member-owners of the co-op (without obligation) and a 2% fee on payments made through the platform, which customers, instead of farmers, are encouraged to cover⁵(Farm Generations Cooperative, 2025a).

Allowing for collaborative software development, the platform’s code is stored on Github. It has a single interface in the form of an app available on web, iOS and

3. Autonomy and independence, democratic member control, open and voluntary membership, cooperation among cooperatives, member economic participation, concern for community, and education and training.
4. While some significant differences remain, notably in the fact that farmers and employees remain the only owners of GrownBy, this slightly contradicts or at least renders ambivalent the discourse of the co-founder on GrownBy being distinctive with regards to VC-funded startups (Shute, 2024), the subtlety here being that, I suppose, the venture funds are directed towards GrownBy’s capital.
5. As per GrownBy’s 2024 report (GrownBy Team, 2025a), 60% of customers cover this fee.

Android (Farm Generations Cooperative, 2025b). In terms of design, the platform features a customisable farm store interface (including product displays, photos, certification labels and storytelling space) and includes tools for managing subscriptions, pre-orders, deliveries, harvest lists, and flexible CSA functions such as vacations and reschedules. Recently, a map that allows users to interactively visualise different farms on GrownBy was developed. GrownBy partners with Stripe for credit card payments, and with MarketLink for SNAP payments. A customisation feature that uses a “smart algorithm” based on customer and farmer data (respectively preferences and buying patterns and CSA offerings) is also currently available in a beta version (Shute, 2024c).

The following sub-sections delve deeper into the case study findings, structured around the participation of farmers, that of platform workers and that of members, looking at the cooperative platform model’s implications in terms of work and governance for each of these CSA participant categories. Results highlight some tensions, both between discourses and realities observed in the field, as well as between and within these different categories of actors.

4-2 GrownBy, a cooperative platform model in the interest and for the fair participation of farmers

The cooperative platform model of GrownBy serves the interests of farmers in numerous ways. First, it contributes to the livelihoods of farmers and to the economic viability of their activity in ways that are consistent with their own interests and not that of external stakeholders. GrownBy provides a service to farmers that is intended to serve their sales management and organisation needs in ways that are not extractive nor volatile as in a venture capitalist model. As a platform worker recalls about her own and other farmers’ use of other platforms:

I knew people who, as farmers, used other platforms and then had some problems. Either the platforms started aggregating and selling their own CSA shares alongside or very close to drop-offs that some of their farmers had, or it went under. [...] It’s just, there’s never a good time to have something that you depend on fail. Like just never. Never helpful. (Interview with GrownBy worker, June 2024)

In opposition, the following extract shows some reasons farmers decide to use GrownBy:

Either they already have a platform and they want to switch to something better, sometimes because it's cooperative, sometimes because they're burnt by their old platform. Like, say their old platform is sold to a new platform and they're no longer... giving the support that the farmers were used to or something like that. Or they've just been doing it like with spreadsheets this whole time and they're tired of it and they want to find an easier way to do it. (Interview with GrownBy worker, June 2024)

The failure of such services can cause revenue loss, cessation of activity, and letting down CSA members. Evidence shows that cooperative businesses are indeed more economically viable and have higher survival rates than startups, among other enterprises (Confédération générale des Scop et des Scic, 2024; Democracy at Work Institute & U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives, 2020; Parkin-Kelly, 2019), which ultimately makes the GrownBy model one on which farmers can rely with stability and in the long-run.

Having farmers on the board of GrownBy also ensures that the costs of using the platform will be aligned and minimally fair for them. In an interview, the co-founder of GrownBy mentions the “mess” that VC-funded platforms created by installing predatory and competitive dynamics within the CSA market. He gives two examples, based on what happened to the other co-founder : that a platform doubles its prices in a year, and that it starts competing with her farm by aggregating food from other farms itself and opening a CSA distribution site right across hers. Perceived unacceptable by the co-founder, the effects of local platform-induced competition among farmers coincide with two challenges CSA farmers generally face (Sulistyowati et al., 2023): competition with other marketing channels, and the difficulty of member retention and maintaining an optimally sized client base (rather than attempting to expand it). A cooperative model, however, may help mitigate these dynamics, with farmers having a collective say and take in the platform, and with the platform possibly being a place to build collective bargaining power.

If somebody is like myself and my partner, we have a nursery and we both have other jobs. So GrownBy is a good fit for us because it helps us not have to do that basic level thing. And so some people who are backyard gardeners who are just selling some extra produce, it's easier for them to take orders this way and organise it. Because it doesn't really cost them anything to get started. (Interview with GrownBy worker and farmer, June 2024)

This quote by a GrownBy worker and farmer captures how GrownBy supports farmers: not only by facilitating sales, but by easing the logistical and financial burdens of running a small-scale operation. At GrownBy, work is organised and divided so as to take charge of setting up the platform and assisting farmers in using it. First off by guiding them through the process of using the platform, tailoring it to their needs, keeping costs low, and accompanying them to accept SNAP payments for instance (cf. section 4-4). These efforts are grounded in the principles of cooperative governance, where service provision can be shaped by farmers' and platform workers' own participation and priorities.

While the participation of farmers in the governance of the platform ensures that the platform responds to and is designed for their needs, the use of the platform nevertheless implies some work that is not always recognised nor valued as such. Indeed, as per a farmer and GrownBy worker, the time spent by farmers on spreadsheets, emails, or social media is rarely valued economically. "I think farmers in general... myself included, have issues with valuing their own time. [...] But they're not like valuing the three hours a week they're spending at the computer." (Interview with GrownBy worker and farmer, June 2024)

The time spent on the computer corresponds to managing the sales that are made on the platform, which, according to that GrownBy worker and farmer, "is at least as much work" as the production. GrownBy can nevertheless represent an economy of that time, by providing a technical and sales service. To put it otherwise, the on-line sales management service is outsourced to GrownBy, which is particularly helpful for small-scale farms that usually do not have the work capacity for one person or more to do that.

"Grownby is really helpful for farms in that situation. [It] provides [the] technical support so that [farmers] can do what they need to do or spend more time in the field growing stuff and not have to be like... I mean copying and pasting stuff from spreadsheets or Facebook messages." (Interview with GrownBy worker and farmer, June 2024)

Highlighting some contrasting positions among farmers and workers of GrownBy, another worker insists on the work that is implied in using a platform and translating farm data into the platform (for instance by filling out inventories, building a catalogue, etc.):

“It’s software and it doesn’t know anything about your farm. You have to tell it things about your farm so that it can help you. [...] So it’s like, GrownBy needs to know where you sell and when you sell and what you sell. That’s the basic information that they need to provide the software [with], so that their store can function for their customers.” (Interview with GrownBy worker, June 2024)

While not framed as such by the worker, this quote reflects the digital labour involved in using a platform, whether cooperative or not. Its difficulty depends on farmers’ digital literacy and availability amid other farming work.

4-3 Platform workers’ work conditions and participation to governance

The work content of the platform workers includes all activities that ensure the platform functions efficiently for farmers, enabling them to sell their products seamlessly and with minimal time investment. This includes onboarding, setting up the store and payment processing, customer support, such as responding to inquiries by phone, and various forms of guidance on the platform. In addition, since GrownBy became a multistakeholder cooperative, workers of the platform can now also have a “seat on the board” and participate in the cooperative decision-making as minority stakeholders. Due to the recent implementation of employee membership at the time of my research, little is known about what it implies (e.g. in terms of assemblies, how much time it will take, etc.).

“I don’t know where [having employees more involved in the governance] will go. [...] And I also have a lot of other things going on, and so it’s also a question for me of how much energy I have to put towards [democratic governance], beyond being an employee here.” (Interview with GrownBy farmer and worker, June 2024)

Despite uncertainties, this worker anticipates that cooperative membership will demand additional “energy” and time. Another worker indicates that this extra work is unlikely to fit easily into their current schedules, especially when childcare is involved. While working at GrownBy can be “flexible” regarding other activities, as she considers, it also leaves little time for “cooperative leadership”. According to her, priority is not necessarily given to “spending time with coworkers” and “figuring out the work of work”, which she would find “helpful”⁶. My interview with her

6. All quotes from this paragraph come from an interview with a GrownBy worker conducted in June 2024.

reveals an ambivalence that may characterise work in cooperative platforms more generally, where workers may find some satisfaction in simply carrying out their tasks, while also demanding more cooperation and time to participate in cooperative decision-making. As such, the division of work among employees and the organisational structure of the platform may not necessarily lead to equal opportunities for participation, even if cooperative. Gendered responsibility for care work can emerge as a differentiating factor in this regard. Working multiple jobs (poly-activity), also appears to shape governance participation. This is particularly relevant for GrownBy employees who work part-time for the platform while also farming, an activity which typically exceeds a standard 40 hour workweek.

I also note that the engineering team seems less involved in the governance of GrownBy. There is some homogeneity within the business team, in terms of social characteristics and professional trajectories. The engineer team differs in several respects, notably because some engineers are not based in the United States, and their pay as much as social protection rights likely⁷ differ from that of the business team. As per the information available at the time of my research, none of the engineers were member-owners of the platform. Despite their key role in running and developing the platform, engineers seem to have little space for decisions regarding how the platform is run as a business. A worker from the business team notes that there might be some differences in the governance of the business and the engineer team, which would represent an incoherence to her.

“Our engineering team is like, they're not farmers, they're like coding people. [...] I don't even know what their work structure is like. We don't have a lot of interaction with them from a business team perspective. Those of us who have farming experience and the coding team are sort of really separate and they would like it that way because they don't want to get bogged down with our stupid questions and they just want to do their jobs. But I think that it would be unfair and weird if we had on the business team side this like cooperative decision-making process in place and they were still working under some sort of hierarchical work chart.”
(Interview with GrownBy worker, June 2024)

Some members of the business team thus note that interactions with the engineering team can be limited. However, the business team does have a space to discuss platform features, as well as access to a GitHub repository, managed by an intermediary who bridges the business and engineering teams. While some interview-

7. While salaries are not known, interview data indicates that a contract engineer in the team was paid a lower rate because based outside of the U.S.

wees acknowledge some value in this type of work, others point to limitations, in particular the lack of time available to fully participate. These considerations draw me to view that constraints on participation in governance and democratic decision-making are rooted primarily in the organisational structure of work, a point that will be further developed in the discussion section.

4-4 The SNAP program and facilitating access to CSA for marginalised groups

Since 2020, GrownBy has become eligible to receive SNAP benefits payments through the SNAP program. GrownBy played a significant role in making online SNAP payments possible, although Walmart and Amazon were the first companies approved to process them. However, GrownBy was the first platform to enable online SNAP payments specifically for farms and CSA programmes. The cooperative also secured a grant, through a partnership with MarketLink, a nonprofit primarily funded by the USDA, that temporarily covers the fees farmers would typically incur for accepting SNAP payments online via the app. They partner to onboard and guide farmers through the process of becoming eligible to receive SNAP payments, which represents opportunities for them to increase market shares and to make their food more affordable for certain communities.

As per an interview with a worker of GrownBy, many farmers actually join GrownBy because they are interested in becoming eligible to process online SNAP payments. As expressed by a GrownBy employee, these administrative processes can be cumbersome to farmers and GrownBy provides support to go through it:

“They’re trying to figure out how to correctly configure their CSA shares for people to purchase with SNAP. And, you know, it’s kind of complicated and annoying because we’re working with the policies of the US government. Farmers have to set things up in a specific way in order to adhere to the regulations. [...] There are a lot of organisations involved and there are a lot of names and acronyms and people are just like what the heck is all this and so i think that it’s inherently confusing. Also, it’s new for us [and for farmers, especially small scale, to accept SNAP online].”
(Interview with GrownBy farmer and worker, June 2024)

As such, GrownBy offers farmers greater convenience by allowing them to outsource institutional work to GrownBy. Similarly, GrownBy also provides resources to support young, first-generation farmers in applying to USDA loans.

5- Discussion

5-1 A cooperative competitive advantage?

GrownBy offers certain advantages in support of farmers' livelihoods, notably through their participation in the platform's governance. This speaks directly to the question of how cooperative governance shapes participation in CSA, by aligning platform design and economic model with farmers' needs and interests. Questions remain as to what extent a cooperative platform protects farmers from the structural predatory dynamics of platform capitalism, as explored in the literature on "agrarian platform capitalism" (Reisman et al., 2025). In the 2010s, digital platforms or "apps" entered the CSA space, often launched by graduates from Master's of business administration marketing online sales websites to farmers. These tech products were often misaligned with farmers' needs, as these graduates had little understanding of farming work and life practices, and would often "disappear after a year" (interview with GrownBy co-founder, June 2024). They also diverged in economic incentives. While tech startups sought profit, farmers sought affordable services. This misalignment underscores barriers to participation in CSA when mediated by profit-driven platforms, as they prevent a viable, needs-based and fair support of the farmers' work.

GrownBy can be interpreted as a defensive⁸ initiative against capitalist platforms, aiming to protect farmers, communities, and agroecological practices from extraction and exploitation. This aligns with research framing solidarity economies as spaces of contestation and social transformation (Hosseini & Pearson 2023). However, since GrownBy's development began before capitalist platforms entered the sector, GrownBy can also be considered as a prefigurative and affirmative initiative for building solidarity economies. Such strategic considerations invite complementary analysis of GrownBy within the broader economic, competitive and market-based context in which it evolves, such as in the food regimes scholarship (Prause et al., 2021; Tilzey, 2019).

Lastly, compared to "traditional" cooperatives, platform ones also have the advantage of avoiding free riding problems, since the marginal cost of adding members is minimal (or "zero"), as noted by one platform worker. This relates to questions about the scalability of platform-based economies (Schor, 2021), and how easily platform cooperatives can host members and have them participate in their gover-

8. This is my interpretation from the discourses held by the co-founder of GrownBy and other of its workers (cf. section 4-2), in which the platform, as a co-operative, is positioned as an alternative to protect farmers from VC-funded platforms, considered predatory and exploitative.

nance (Mannan & Pek, 2024). A GrownBy worker noted that scaling cooperative membership could help provide benefits, such as health insurance for workers. I would add that additional membership implies additional sources of funding for the cooperative, to consider as an additional benefit of the digital cooperative model. However, findings suggest that onboarding new members increases the workload for business and engineering teams. This underscores a tension in scaling platform cooperatives: it can enhance economic and social protection, but also strain working conditions for platform workers.

5-2 Negotiating fairer access to food for marginalised groups with the state?

GrownBy's reliance on government funding requires workers to undertake institutional work, such as responding to grant applications. This directly shapes participation in CSA, since time and resources spent on institutional work affect both farmers' and workers' capacity to engage in cooperative governance. In addition, this "workfare" (André, 2024) programme is thriving on the low paid or unpaid labour of communities, non-profits and other organisations of the solidarity economy, on whom the state rests to implement the programme. The SNAP program can thus be considered a typical example of the "disengagement" of the state (Cottin-Marx et al., 2017) with regards to its responsibility of ensuring that everyone is fed with dignity, which is common in the social and solidarity economy.

This institutional work reflects a reconfiguration of the relationship between the state and digital solidarity initiatives. Platform workers now shoulder this institutional work, with an attempt to alleviate the burden on farmers. In this division of work, one could see a potential for transferring resources between more and less privileged groups, which suggests one way cooperative platforms might expand participation by supporting disadvantaged farmers and consumers. This raises questions about how justice principles can be operationalised, whether by creating space for marginalised groups or by reallocating resources. GrownBy members, with relatively high institutional capacities, could support those deprived from capacities to do so. Such platforms can leverage relational resources to access alternative funding streams, including from foundations. Though support networks exist for Black farmers, there is no explicit link among these and the cooperative network of GrownBy, aside from the fight for racial justice that is one of the guiding principles of the National Young Farmers Coalition.

Moreover, Black farmers are systematically disadvantaged by USDA policies (Bustillo, 2023), and GrownBy appears to offer no targeted material support. This

points to some limits of treating “young farmers” as a homogenous group in grant support, overlooking racial and class-based inequalities. SNAP remains exclusionary, especially for Black farmers and migrant workers who do not have US citizenship. As such, structural inequalities can be seen as an important factor in limiting participation in CSA despite the cooperative model’s inclusive potential. More specifically, these considerations show the contradictory position in which cooperative platforms like GrownBy can find themselves, between facilitating participation and reinforcing exclusionary state logics.

Lastly, the SNAP program’s digital dimension can also be criticised for its biopolitical aspects, with the control of the state over what people eat now inscribed in code. In other words, the power and control that the state exerts over vulnerable groups’ bodies, through constraints on their food practices and choices with the SNAP program, is further extended through the digital platform. As power structures are encoded in digital technologies (Benjamin, 2019), combining them with social assistance programmes is likely to reinforce racial discrimination. This links to the adversity that the state more generally represents for certain minorities, thereby calling for a concept and practice of the digital solidarity economy that acknowledges and supports initiatives outside the state-market complex (Hosseini & Pearson, 2023). GrownBy does rely on funding from the state and runs some of its programmes, such as the SNAP program but also some education programmes on CSA. These considerations contribute to the debate on the autonomy of cooperatives versus their pragmatic reliance on available funding to develop and be viable. It also echoes the literature on food sovereignty and right to food (Patel, 2009), which shows the constraints imposed by state and corporate interventions.

5-3 A gender and racial divide in the participation in governance?

First, findings suggest some tension between the digital cooperative model and the care practices otherwise found in CSA (Wells & Gradwell, 2001). Remote work may be insufficient for the formation of care- and trust-based relationships, challenging some limits to the “digital” cooperative ideal. This provides nuance to literature on the relations and social link enabled by digital platforms and online interactions, especially in the realm of CSA and food alternatives (Gobbo et al., 2022). This article extends existing research on the gendered dimension and division of work in alternatives (Rozencwajg, 2021; Pruvost, 2013), by examining how these dynamics unfold within a digital platform, contributing to digital solidarity economies research.

Furthermore, participation capacity appears shaped by organisation position, se-

niority, working conditions, and socio-professional characteristics. Findings show that workers of GrownBy have differing perspectives on their respective participation in the democratic and cooperative governance of the platform. The experience of a GrownBy worker with childcare can also add nuance to the literature showing that participation depends on affective attachment to the cooperative (Bunders, 2023). A male worker expresses that he considers the cooperative to “walk the talk”, that is, to function in line with its cooperative values. Another one expresses appreciation for the flexibility of the work, for working alongside farmers who understand farmers, allowing him to organise his time between working for the platform and for his farm optimally. In his case, job responsibilities at GrownBy include going to conferences and farmers markets, meeting with farmers to communicate about GrownBy. Contrasted with the previous testimony, his case shows how balancing platform work and other, paid and unpaid, farming work and care work, depends on additional income sources or household arrangements. This raises questions about inequalities in capacities to combine these roles and thus participate in cooperative governance. This also indicates that flexibility and remote work, valued differently across workers, can either enable or restrict participation, depending on working conditions and gender. While precautions can be taken before generalising from a case study, my results point towards showing that a digital cooperative model affects participation in CSA not only through governance rules but also through everyday labour arrangements that intersect with gendered and racialised inequalities.

6- Conclusion

This article has examined how a cooperative platform model shapes participation in CSA, analysed in terms of accessibility, work and governance through the case of GrownBy. Findings show that while GrownBy can improve accessibility of CSA by integrating SNAP payments and simplifying software management and sales for farmers, structural inequalities and constraints remain. The article also highlights that a cooperative platform model can reshape farmers’ work by externalising some services and institutional work to platform workers, while also creating new digital tasks that not all farmers wish nor are able to take on. A cooperative platform can safeguard farmers interests and enable some democratic decision-making through farmer ownership and worker participation. However, capacity for participation is differentiated along lines of gender and position in the division of labour, echoing broader patterns of inequality observed in solidarity economies.

Theoretically, the case contributes to debates on agroecology, digital justice, and

transformative infrastructures. First, findings confirm research on CSA's support to diverse and solidarity economies, with the nuance that their embeddedness in digital infrastructures reconfigures who participates and how, both in terms of work and governance. Second, it aligns with platform cooperative literature by showing that a cooperative model can provide farmers with a competitive advantage against VC-backed platforms, with technological and business developments coinciding with farmers' interests rather than investors' imperatives. Third, it expands digital justice scholarship by showing how cooperative platforms may redistribute administrative burdens and resources, but also risk reproducing state-mediated and structural inequalities if they fail to account for intersectional exclusions, particularly of Black, Indigenous, and migrant farm workers and communities.

Politically, the case can help discuss the prefigurative potential of cooperative platforms in building digital infrastructures for solidarity economies. It also invites looking at the limits of such initiatives when they remain insufficiently connected to broader movements. From a labour and work perspective, the case of GrownBy shows that such infrastructures can support fairer work relations, but also that participation in governance is shaped by positionality within relations of gender, class, and professional status. This underscores the importance of analysing digital solidarity economies as work-based and relational.

The case also resonates beyond the US, with relevance to European contexts and other regions where digital commons and agri-food sector cooperatives are being built. Transformative work and research also implies looking at the articulation of local initiatives at a global scale.

Future research could further investigate how cooperative platforms, including GrownBy, affect more precisely the work of farmers and members, and how governance practices evolve as these initiatives develop and eventually scale. For now, this case shows both the possibilities and limits of cooperative platforms: they are neither neutral tools nor guaranteed solutions, but infrastructures of struggle whose outcomes depend on how work and governance is organised.

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