



FISSH Project Newsletter no. 3

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Towards More Sustainable Food Systems in Europe

How can regions support food SMEs in becoming more sustainable while strengthening local food value chains?

These questions are becoming increasingly important as the agri-food sector faces growing environmental, economic and societal challenges. Small and medium-sized food businesses play a crucial role in regional economies, yet they often face barriers when trying to adopt more sustainable production methods, reduce environmental impact or improve the efficiency of their value chains.

Within the **FISSH project**, partners have been exploring these challenges through **Thematic Focus Area 2 (TFA2): Sustainable Food Production and Product Value Chain**. Between April 2025 and March 2026, the partnership worked together to better understand the current situation of the food sector across participating regions and identify solutions that can support the transition towards more sustainable and resilient food systems.

Through regional analyses, stakeholder engagement and interregional exchange, partners examined the key challenges faced by food SMEs and explored practical initiatives that help address them.

This edition of the newsletter presents the main outcomes of this work – from insights identified in the joint analytical report to inspiring good practices and experiences shared during the interregional learning event in Finland.

TFA2 in numbers

- **5 regional State of the Art Reports (SARs)**
- **1 Joint conclusion report**
- **Good Practices identified and analysed**
- **1 Interregional Learning Event** (Finland, September 2025)
- **5 Regional Stakeholder Group meetings**

Together, these activities helped partners better understand how regional policies and cooperation between stakeholders can support sustainable food production and strengthen regional food value chains.

Challenges for Sustainable Food Production in Europe



Insights from the TFA2 Joint Report

The transition towards more sustainable food systems is one of the major challenges facing the European agri-food sector today. While awareness of sustainability is growing across the industry, many food SMEs still struggle to implement concrete solutions that improve environmental performance and strengthen value chains.

To better understand these challenges, partners of the FISSH project jointly prepared a comprehensive analysis of sustainable food production and product value chains across five European regions: Central Macedonia (Greece), South Ostrobothnia (Finland), Kujawsko-Pomorskie (Poland), East Flanders (Belgium) and the Coimbra Region (Portugal). Interreg Europe project partners examined regional conditions, policy frameworks and the needs of food SMEs operating in the sector.

The analysis showed that although SMEs play a crucial role in regional economies and food traditions, they often face structural barriers when trying to adopt sustainable practices. Limited financial resources, lack of specialised knowledge and insufficient access to digital tools frequently slow down the transition towards greener production systems.

Another challenge concerns the **fragmentation of food value chains**. Cooperation between producers, processors, distributors and policymakers is often limited, making it difficult to develop coordinated strategies for sustainability and innovation.

The report also highlights that many companies still lack access to **structured sustainability monitoring tools**, such as life-cycle assessments, traceability systems or carbon footprint measurement methods. As a result, businesses may struggle to assess their environmental impact and identify areas where improvements are needed.

In addition, food SMEs frequently operate under **complex regulatory environments** and administrative procedures that can make it difficult to implement circular economy solutions or innovative production models. Limited time, funding and human resources further constrain their ability to invest in new technologies, sustainable packaging or decarbonisation strategies.

At the same time, the transition towards sustainable food systems requires changes across the entire value chain – from primary production and processing to distribution and consumption. Reducing food loss, improving resource efficiency and strengthening local supply chains are all essential elements of this transformation.

Despite these challenges, the report also highlights significant potential for innovation and cooperation across European regions. By combining regional strengths, policy support and knowledge exchange, food SMEs can play a key role in building more resilient and sustainable food systems.

Building Knowledge and Solutions: Results of the TFA2 Work



Over the past year, partners of the FISSH project have worked together to better understand the challenges of sustainable food production and to identify practical solutions that can support food SMEs across Europe.

Within **Thematic Focus Area 2 – Sustainable Food Production and Product Value Chain**, partners carried out a series of coordinated activities combining regional analysis, stakeholder engagement and interregional learning.

One of the key outcomes of this work was the preparation of **five regional State of the Art Reports (SARs)**. Each report analysed the current situation of the agri-food sector in the partner regions, identifying both the main barriers faced by SMEs and the opportunities for strengthening sustainable production and value chains.

Building on these regional analyses, partners developed a **Joint Conclusion Report**, which synthesised findings from all regions and highlighted common challenges as well as potential policy directions that could support the sustainable transformation of the food sector.

The process also involved strong engagement of regional stakeholders. Through **Regional Stakeholder Group meetings organised in all partner regions**, representatives of food SMEs, research institutions, public authorities and business support organisations contributed their perspectives on the challenges and needs of the sector. These discussions helped partners better understand local conditions and identify relevant policy solutions.

Another important element of the work was **interregional learning and exchange of experiences**. By sharing knowledge across regions, partners were able to explore different policy approaches and identify solutions that could potentially be transferred or adapted in other regional contexts.

As a result of this collaborative process, the partnership identified **six inspiring Good Practices from across Europe** that support sustainable food production, strengthen regional value chains and provide practical tools for food SMEs.

The following sections of this newsletter present these practices in more detail and highlight how regions across Europe are already developing innovative solutions to support the transition towards more sustainable and resilient food systems.

Learning Together: Interregional Exchange in Finland



One of the key milestones of the work carried out within Thematic Focus Area 2 was the **Interregional Learning Event held in South Ostrobothnia, Finland, from 16–18 September 2025**. The meeting brought together partners and stakeholders from across Europe to exchange experiences and explore innovative solutions supporting sustainable food production and resilient value chains.

The event combined policy discussions, thematic workshops and study visits, allowing participants to connect strategic policy perspectives with practical examples from the regional food ecosystem.

Food Days Seinäjoki – a Hub for Food Innovation

The learning event was organised alongside **Food Days Seinäjoki**, an internationally recognised three-day event dedicated to the future of the food sector. The conference brings together entrepreneurs, policymakers, researchers and innovation actors to discuss how the food industry can grow sustainably and adapt to new economic, environmental and technological challenges.

The 2025 edition explored key themes shaping modern food systems, including:

- food export and internationalisation
- urban food strategies
- food technology and innovation
- data and digital tools supporting sustainable food systems
- culinary culture and regional identity

Through keynote speeches, panel discussions and networking sessions, Food Days created an inspiring environment for dialogue between regional stakeholders and international experts. For FISSH partners, participation in the event provided an opportunity to connect their project work with wider European debates on sustainable food systems and SME competitiveness.

Good Practices and Regional Initiatives in Focus

During the event, partners also explored several regional initiatives demonstrating how sustainability, innovation and cooperation can strengthen the food sector.

Among the initiatives presented were:

- **Future Frami Food Lab**, which supports research, product development and innovation in the food sector;
- **Responsible and Low-Carbon Food Products**, a project helping farms and SMEs develop climate-friendly food products;

- **Ruokaprovinsi**, a regional initiative connecting actors across the food system to strengthen cooperation and sustainability;
- **Sustainable Digital Double Shift**, supporting innovation ecosystems and digital experimentation in the region.

These examples illustrated how regional policies, research institutions and businesses can work together to support sustainable food production and help SMEs develop innovative and environmentally responsible solutions.

From Policy to Practice: Study Visits

The programme also included study visits that allowed participants to observe sustainable food innovation in practice. Partners visited **SEAMK Food Labs**, the research and innovation facilities of Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences, as well as **Foodwest**, a food development and testing centre supporting companies in product development and quality assurance.

The visit to **Kyrö Distillery** provided an example of how a regional company can successfully combine local ingredients, strong branding and sustainable production practices to create internationally recognised products.

These visits offered valuable insights into how regional ecosystems support food innovation – from research and testing facilities to collaboration between SMEs, researchers and public authorities.

Building a Shared Vision for Sustainable Food Systems

By combining conference sessions, partner workshops and study visits, the Interregional Learning Event helped deepen partners' understanding of the challenges and opportunities related to sustainable food production and value chains.

The exchange of experiences and good practices strengthened cooperation between regions and provided inspiration for policy improvements that can better support food SMEs in their transition towards more sustainable and resilient business models.





Good Practices Supporting Sustainable Food Systems



Across Europe, regions are exploring new ways to make food production more sustainable while strengthening local value chains and supporting food SMEs.

Within Thematic Focus Area 2, the FISSH partnership analysed a range of initiatives that demonstrate how policy support, innovation and cooperation can help transform regional food systems. From reducing food waste and measuring carbon footprints to strengthening short supply chains and supporting local producers, these practices highlight practical solutions that regions can adopt and adapt.

One example comes from the **Region of Central Macedonia in Greece**, where initiatives supporting the [expansion of organic farming](#) aim to strengthen sustainable food systems at

regional level. Organic agriculture is increasingly recognised as an important pathway towards environmentally responsible food production, helping to protect biodiversity, improve soil health and reduce the use of synthetic inputs. The initiative supports farmers in transitioning to organic production and contributes to the development of a more sustainable agri-food sector while responding to growing consumer demand for environmentally friendly products.

Another example comes from **Portugal**, where the [PROVERE – Collective Efficiency Strategy](#) supports regional cheese producers by promoting cooperation between businesses, research institutions and public authorities. By combining territorial branding, product quality and innovation, the initiative strengthens the regional cheese sector while helping preserve traditional production methods and regional identity.

Sustainability also begins at the farm level. The [Integrated Crop Management \(ICM\)](#) approach promotes environmentally responsible fruit production by combining modern farming techniques with the efficient use of natural resources. By reducing chemical inputs and encouraging more balanced crop management, the initiative helps farmers maintain productivity while improving environmental performance.

Another key challenge addressed by the analysed practices is **food loss along the supply chain**. The [Food Loss Scan](#) tool helps food companies identify where losses occur during production, processing or distribution. By analysing different stages of the production process, businesses can identify inefficiencies and implement targeted measures to reduce waste and improve resource efficiency.

For many small and medium-sized food businesses, sustainability can seem complex and difficult to implement. The [Practical Sustainability Checklist for Food SMEs](#) was developed to address this challenge by offering a simple and accessible framework that helps companies assess their environmental and social impact and identify concrete steps towards more sustainable operations.

Understanding environmental impact is also essential for improving sustainability. The [IKE Carbon Footprint Calculator](#) supports food companies in measuring greenhouse gas emissions linked to their activities. By providing clear data on carbon footprints, the tool helps businesses identify opportunities to reduce emissions and improve the environmental performance of their production processes.

Finally, sustainable food systems also depend on strong connections between producers and consumers. The [NaszeLokalne.pl](#) **initiative from the Kujawsko-Pomorskie region in Poland** supports the development of short food supply chains by connecting local producers directly with consumers through an online platform. By increasing the visibility of regional food products and strengthening local markets, the initiative contributes to both regional economic development and more sustainable food distribution.

Together, these practices demonstrate that the transition towards sustainable food systems can take many forms. Whether through technological tools, new cooperation models or support for local food networks, regions across Europe are developing innovative solutions that help food SMEs become more sustainable and competitive.

Engaging Regional Stakeholders



From Dialogue to Policy Change

Engaging regional stakeholders has been a key element of the work carried out within **Thematic Focus Area 2**. Across partner regions, meetings of **Regional Stakeholder Groups (RSGs)** provided an important platform for discussion, knowledge exchange and reflection on how to support sustainable food production and value chains.

In the **Kujawsko-Pomorskie region (Poland)**, stakeholders met on **7 November 2025** at the Regional Centre for Sustainable Development in Przysiek. The meeting focused on summarising the progress of the FISSH project and identifying directions for further cooperation in developing sustainable food systems at regional level.

Participants – including representatives of regional administration, advisory institutions, research organisations and the agri-food sector – discussed key insights from the interregional exchange in Finland, with particular attention to **short food supply chains, cooperation between producers and the use of digital tools in the food sector**. The

discussion highlighted how such solutions, when adapted to regional conditions, can strengthen local businesses and improve the functioning of food markets.

In the **South Ostrobothnia region (Finland)**, stakeholders met **online on 6 March 2026**, reflecting the region's strong focus on innovation and knowledge exchange. Discussions centred on **cooperation between research institutions, food companies and public authorities**, as well as on the role of innovation, digitalisation and low-carbon solutions in supporting sustainable food production.

In the **Central Macedonia region (Greece)**, stakeholders gathered on **12 March 2026**, with discussions focusing on the **development of sustainable agricultural production**, in particular the expansion of organic farming. The meeting highlighted the importance of supporting farmers in transitioning to environmentally friendly practices and strengthening sustainable regional value chains.

In **East Flanders (Belgium)**, stakeholders gathered on **12 March 2026 in Ghent** as part of the *Lekker Oost-Vlaams* steering group meeting . The session included an update on the FISSH project and focused on sustainable food production and value chains, with particular emphasis on **reducing food loss**.

A key point of discussion was the **Food Loss Scan**, presented as a Good Practice supporting companies in identifying inefficiencies and reducing waste in food production processes. Stakeholders discussed how the tool could be further disseminated among local producers and integrated into regional support activities.

Beyond individual regional examples, all Regional Stakeholder Group meetings were devoted to **sharing and disseminating the results of TFA2 activities**, including findings from regional analyses, insights from the Joint Report and identified Good Practices. At the same time, stakeholders were invited to reflect on how these results could support the **implementation of policy changes at regional level**.

These exchanges ensured that the project remains closely connected to real needs of the sector. By involving stakeholders directly in the process, partners were able to gather practical feedback and strengthen the link between interregional learning and regional policy development.





Looking Ahead: Exploring Marketing and Consumer Perspectives

While the work carried out within **Thematic Focus Area 2** has provided valuable insights into sustainable food production and regional value chains, the FISSH partnership is now moving forward to explore another important dimension of the food sector.

In the coming project semester, partners will focus on **Thematic Focus Area 3 (TFA3): Marketing and Consumer Perspectives of Sustainable Food Products**. This new thematic area will examine how food SMEs communicate sustainability to consumers and how regional policies can better support businesses in promoting sustainable products.

Although many companies are already adopting environmentally responsible practices, communicating these efforts effectively to consumers remains a challenge. SMEs often face difficulties in translating complex sustainability concepts into clear and credible messages that resonate with customers.

Within TFA3, the FISSH partnership will therefore explore the key barriers food SMEs encounter when marketing sustainable products and identify solutions that can help them overcome these challenges.

The next phase of the project will include regional analyses, stakeholder discussions and interregional exchange of experiences aimed at identifying **effective tools, strategies and policy approaches supporting sustainable food marketing**.

By continuing to build knowledge and share experiences across regions, FISSH partners aim to support food SMEs in strengthening both the sustainability of their production processes and their ability to communicate this value to consumers.

More insights from this work will be presented in the next editions of the FISSH newsletter.

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Follow the progress of the FISSH project and discover more good practices supporting innovation and sustainability in the food sector.

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