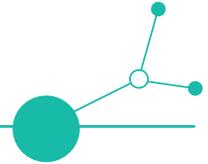


D3.1.3 Regional Action Plans for AFNs support in Austria



Working Document

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Food4CE

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www.interreg-central.eu/food4ce/



1. The Food4CE Project in a nutshell

Food4CE is a European project funded by the INTERREG Central Europe Programme, aimed at supporting Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) in their efforts to create sustainable and resilient food supply systems. AFNs are essential for promoting short food supply chains and reducing the carbon footprint of food distribution. However, they face challenges such as lack of knowledge on logistics collaboration, digitalisation and distribution/delivery systems, which are exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Food4CE seeks to address these challenges by establishing 5 local and 1 Transnational Innovation Hub (IH), bringing together actors from different sectors including researchers, business experts, food producers, logistic and transport operators, and policy makers. These hubs will focus on advancing AFNs logistics efficiency through the development of innovative tools and solutions.

Two innovative tools are being jointly developed within the project: the Knowledge Transfer Platform and the Matchmaking Platform. The former is intended for sharing logistics best practices and solutions, while the latter is intended for creating new B2B and B2C logistics solutions and services. The aim is to facilitate knowledge transfer and exchange between different regions and actors, and to create a unique mutual support network for AFNs in Central Europe.

Food4CE will also provide jointly developed regional action plans for each participating region and transnational (CE) policy guidelines for AFN support. The project aims to establish a sustainable and lasting AFN support mechanism, which will continue working even after the project end. This will be achieved through the integration of the Transnational Innovation Hub into the existing European Network of Logistics competence centres.

Food4CE is a vital initiative that seeks to support AFNs in their efforts to create sustainable and resilient food supply systems. By establishing local and transnational Innovation Hubs and developing innovative tools and solutions, the project aims to facilitate knowledge exchange and cooperation between different actors and regions, leading to a sustainable and lasting AFN support mechanism.



2. Purpose of the document

The purpose of the regional action plan, titled "*D.3.1.3 Regional Action Plans for AFNs Support in Participating Regions*," is to outline concrete strategies and steps for enhancing Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) within each participating Central European region. Each regional action plan serves as a targeted roadmap for implementing specific activities and interventions that respond to the unique needs, challenges, and opportunities identified in that region. The objectives of the deliverable include defining clear policy recommendations, proposing actionable measures, and identifying key stakeholders necessary for effective implementation.

These plans aim to ensure that Innovation Hub activities are translated into region-specific actions that promote sustainable, resilient, and inclusive food systems. Through detailed tasks, timelines, and milestones, the action plans will foster stakeholder collaboration, increase support for AFNs, and facilitate tangible policy and systemic changes to strengthen local and regional food systems.

3. General Information

3.1. Overview of the Region

Geographical Features

Austria, located in the heart of Central Europe, covers an area of approximately 84,000 square kilometres. It shares borders with eight countries: Germany, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Italy, Switzerland, and Liechtenstein. The country's topography is predominantly mountainous due to the presence of the Alps, which occupy more than 60% of its territory. Austria is traditionally divided into five major regions, namely the Eastern Alps, the Alpine Foreland, the Carpathian Foreland, the Vienna Basin, and the Pannonian Plain.

The Alps dominate western and southern Austria, featuring major ranges such as the Northern Limestone Alps, the Central Alps, and the Southern Limestone Alps. In contrast, the eastern region, including the Vienna Basin and the Pannonian Plain, is characterized by rolling hills and lowland plains. The Danube River, Europe's second-longest river, traverses Austria from west to east and plays a vital role in transport, agriculture, and hydroelectric power generation.

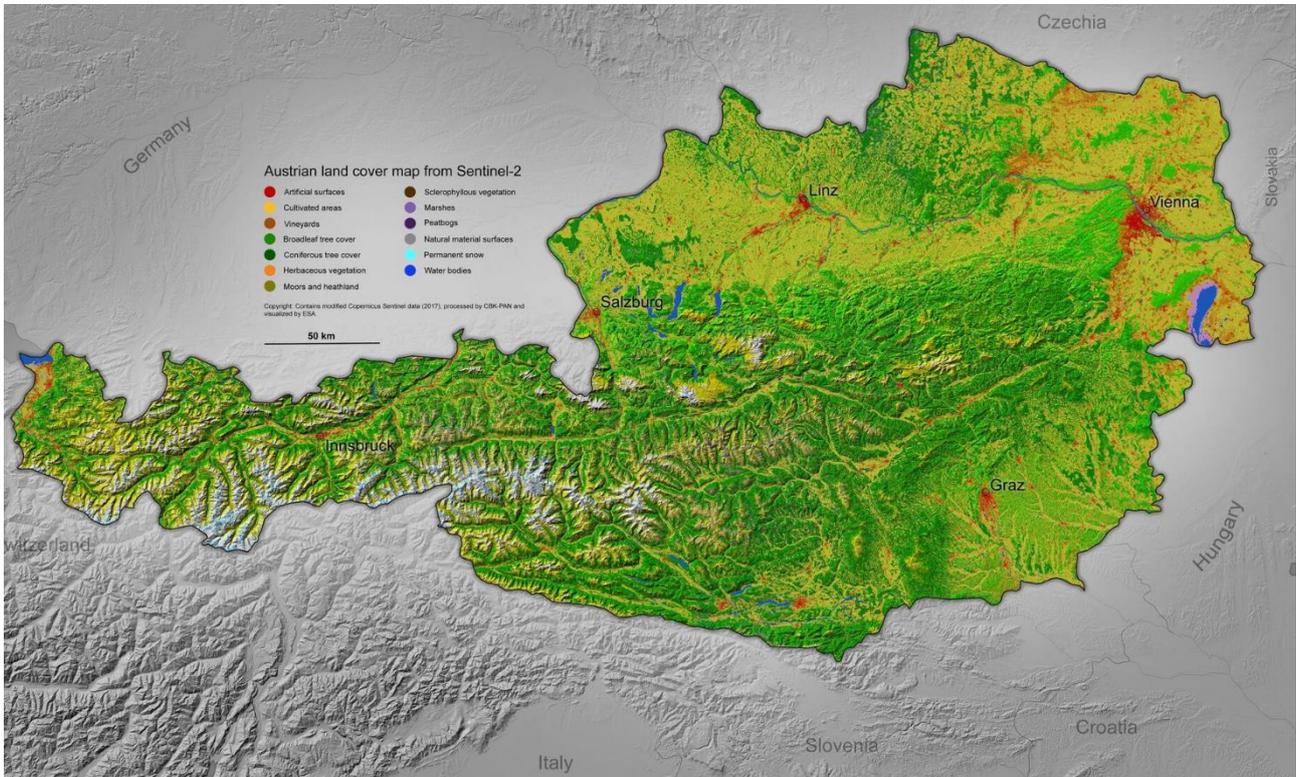
Resources

Austria benefits from abundant freshwater resources, largely sourced from alpine glaciers, rivers, and lakes. The country experiences relatively high precipitation levels, particularly in the western and southern alpine areas, ensuring a consistent supply of surface and groundwater. However, the management of these water resources is becoming increasingly crucial given the pressures from climate change, which lead to rising temperatures and fluctuating precipitation patterns.

Austria's soil quality varies considerably by region. The alluvial soils of the Danube basin are particularly fertile and support intensive agriculture, while the mountainous regions offer poorer and more erosion-prone soils. Forests cover about 47% of Austria's land area, whereas agriculture claims approximately 38%. Although sealed land due to urbanization remains relatively low, it is increasing, particularly around major cities such as Vienna, Graz, and Linz.



Figure 1 Austria land cover map



Source: https://www.esa.int/ESA_Multimedia/Images/2020/03/Austria_land_cover

Biodiversity

Austria is recognized for its rich biodiversity, hosting approximately 45,000 animal species and 3,000 plant species. The country maintains seven National Parks, more than 48 Nature Parks, and numerous Natura 2000 protected areas, which together cover roughly 30% of its territory. Nonetheless, threats to biodiversity arise from habitat fragmentation, land consumption, intensive agriculture, and climate change.

Climate Change

Austria is experiencing climate change impacts more intensely than the global average, with temperature increases approximately twice as high as the global mean. The consequences include glacier retreat, altered precipitation patterns leading to droughts and floods, and shifts in ecosystem composition. Agricultural practices, especially in water-intensive sectors such as fruit and wine production, are becoming increasingly vulnerable to these changes.

Demographics

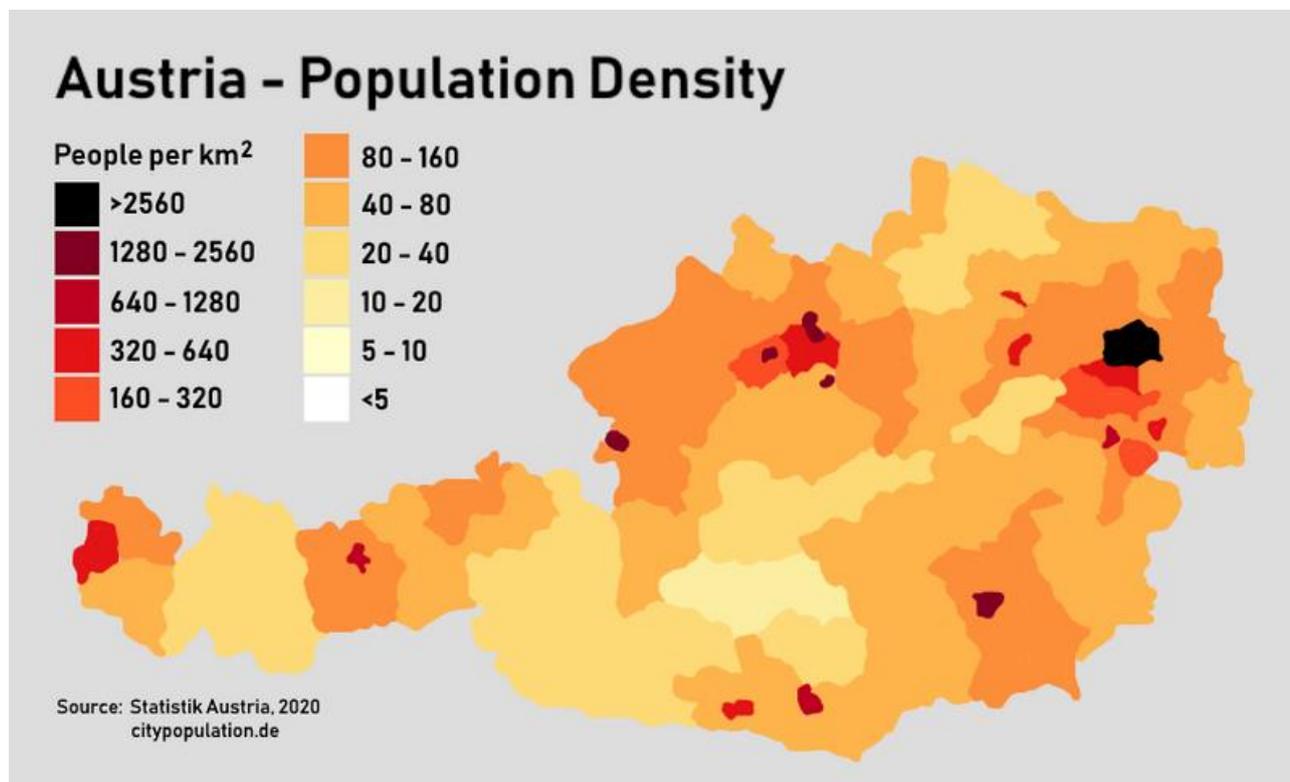
As of January 1, 2024, Austria has a population of approximately 9.2 million people, with an average population density of about 110 inhabitants per square kilometre. Major urban centres such as Vienna, Graz, Linz, Salzburg, and Innsbruck are experiencing growth, whereas many rural and alpine regions are facing depopulation, which impacts local economies and traditional agricultural practices.

Urban areas generally enjoy higher incomes and better infrastructure compared to rural regions, and access to markets and services is significantly easier in and around major cities. Additionally, approximately 20%



of Austria's population consists of foreign nationals, contributing to a dynamic and multicultural society and influencing food demand, particularly in urban areas.

Figure 2 Population density Austria



Source: nerdy maps in: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Population_Density_-_Austria.png

Agricultural Practices and Economic Indicators

Agriculture plays a vital but comparatively small role in Austria's economy, accounting for around 1.3% of GDP in 2023. Nevertheless, it remains crucial for rural livelihoods, landscape conservation, and food security. Austria specializes in high-value products such as organic produce, dairy products, and wines. The country holds one of the highest shares of organic farming in the EU.

Austrian farms are predominantly small-scale and family-run, with the average farm size being about 20 hectares, although mountain farms are typically much smaller. The Austrian agri-food sector is highly export-oriented, particularly in niche markets such as organic foods, dairy, meat, and specialty products like Styrian pumpkin seed oil and regional wines. Food exports in 2023 reached approximately €12 billion, reflecting a stable and competitive agri-food sector.

Environmental Impact and Climate Change

Agricultural activities in Austria contribute to greenhouse gas emissions, primarily through livestock farming and soil management. However, the extensive use of organic farming methods helps to mitigate some negative environmental impacts. Challenges related to climate change include the increased frequency of droughts affecting crop yields, particularly in eastern Austria, soil erosion in alpine and hilly regions exacerbated by intense rainfall and improper land management and decreasing snow cover impacting alpine



agriculture and water storage. Policies promoting sustainable farming practices, agroforestry, and renewable energy use in rural areas are being prioritized to address these issues.

Social and Cultural Dynamics

Food and agriculture are deeply embedded in Austrian culture, with traditions closely linked to regional identities and landscapes. Farmers' markets, local food cooperatives, and community-supported agriculture initiatives are increasingly popular, particularly among urban consumers seeking sustainable and regional food options.

Austria has a vibrant ecosystem of Alternative Food Networks (AFNs), including initiatives like food cooperatives ("Foodcoops"), Solidarity Agriculture ("Solidarische Landwirtschaft"), and organic farmer networks. Culinary traditions such as the Viennese coffee house culture, wine taverns (Heurigen), and local food festivals reflect the nation's strong relationship with food and agricultural landscapes.

Supply Chain and Distribution Networks

Austria's food supply chain is highly developed and diversified. Supermarkets and discount chains dominate food retail. Alongside these dominant retail chains, a robust network of farmers' markets, organic shops, and direct sales models such as "Hofladen" supports local producers.

Urban regions benefit from greater access to diverse and sustainable food options, while rural and alpine communities often depend on fewer, larger retail chains. Alternative Food Networks and short supply chains are increasingly recognized in Austrian policy as vital components for enhancing rural development, food security, and sustainability. National and regional programs actively support these networks through funding and infrastructure development.

3.2. Stakeholder analysis

Building on Austria's rich regional context, the success of the Austrian Innovation Hub Future food connective is intrinsically linked to its ability to engage a wide range of stakeholders effectively. Austria's agri-food landscape is marked by a dense network of Alternative Food Networks (AFNs), small-scale producers, NGOs, academic institutions, and governmental actors—all contributing in unique ways to the sustainability and innovation capacity of short food supply chains (SFSCs).

The stakeholder landscape within the Austrian food system is both diverse and dynamic. Stakeholders identified during the initial phase of the project include AFN members, local producers, higher education and research institutions (e.g., University of Applied Sciences sector), business support organisations (e.g., Vienna Chamber of Commerce - WKW), local and regional public authorities (e.g., Stadtwerke), and national policy-makers (e.g., Federal Ministry for Climate Action, Environment, Energy, Mobility, Innovation and Technology - BMK). Each of these actors plays a vital and differentiated role in alternative food systems. Their inclusion ensures that regional innovation efforts are anchored in real-world challenges, practical experiences, and forward-thinking policy agendas. The availability and suitability of these stakeholders have been decisive in shaping the scope and function of the Austrian IH.

Despite their innovative capacity and often long-standing experience, AFNs operate in a highly competitive market alongside conventional food producers. This competition places pressure on their operations and highlights the importance of cooperation, information sharing, and joint innovation efforts. Through structured engagement and networking, stakeholders can create shared spaces and new opportunities for collaboration—an essential strategy for thriving in a dense and competitive agri-food sector.



Table 1 Stakeholders matrix and Monitoring of Austrian Future Food Connective Innovation Hub

Stakeholder [organisation, name and surname]	Power/Interest	Involvement in IH (co-creation session, interview etc.)
WKW Wirtschaftskammer Wien, Andrea Faast	High power / high interest	Advisory Board, co-creation session, SSS
Federal Ministry Republic of Austria - Climate Action, Environment, Energy, Mobility, Innovation and Technology (BMK), Franz Schwammenhöfer	High power / high interest	Advisory Board, co-creation session
UAS BFI Wien, Logistik & Transportmanagement, Forschungskoordination	High power / high interest	Advisory Board, co-creation session, Workshops, Publications, MRS, SSS
ECONSULT	Medium power / high interest	Advisory Board, co-creation session, Workshops, MRS, SSS
Biohof Adamah	Medium power / low interest	AFN, Best Practice
Hausbrot, Thomas Simon	Low power / medium interest	Workshop (Webinar), AFN, Best Practice
Brandhof Fruchtsaft Manufaktur, Roman Brandhofer	Low power / medium interest	Workshop (Webinar), AFN, Best Practice
Sonnentor	Medium power / low interest	AFN, Best Practice
Rosy's, Thomas Huber	Medium power / medium interest	Co-Creation-Session (Last Mile Logistics, Food Logistics, Parcel Locker Delivery)
Heavy pedals, Florian Weber	Medium power / medium interest	Co-Creation-Session (Last Mile Logistics, Food Logistics, Sustainable Delivery)
WienBox / NextBox	Low power / low interest	Last Mile Logistic
Austrian Competence Centre for Feed and Food Quality, Safety & Innovation (FFoQSI)	Medium power / medium interest	Workshop (Food Innovation Forum 2024)
BVL Bundesvereinigung Logistik	High power / high interest	Workshop (BVL Logistic Dialog 2024 & 2025; Sommernachtsadele + 15. NÖ Logistik Tag)
Landwirtschaftskammer, CORENet, Christian Jochum	High power / low interest	Co-Creation-Session (Sustainable Food Systems in Austria, Historical View, Food Logistics, Parcel Locker Delivery)
Lebensmittel Cluster - Oberösterreich, Heidrun Hochreiter	Medium power / low interest	Co-Creation-Session (Sustainable Food Systems in Austria, Problems & Solutions, LCOÖ)
AGES - Stelle für „Sustainable Food Systems“, Katharina Fister (Lebensmitteltechnologie), Martina Helmlinger (EU-Themen), Florian Kuntz	High power / low interest	Co-Creation-Session (Sustainable Food Systems in Austria)
aws “sustainable food systems initiative”	Medium power / high interest	Workshop (“Nachhaltige Lebensmittelsysteme? Gemeinsam Gestalten!”)

Source: Matrix of Consultation Techniques (In: Neil, J.: Stakeholder Engagement: A Road Map to Meaningful Engagement; Doughty Centre, Cranfield School of Management, July 2009).



3.3. Innovation Hub overview

Preparatory Activities and Strategic Orientation

The establishment of the Austrian Innovation Hub (IH) was preceded by a series of coordinated preparatory activities aimed at capturing the specific dynamics of Austria's system of AFNs. These activities included the development of a comprehensive stakeholder database, the initiation of contact with key stakeholders, the formation of an advisory board, and the implementation of targeted stakeholder surveys. Collectively, these measures were designed to ensure that the IH reflects the unique characteristics of Austria's food ecosystem and is tailored to meet the concrete needs of its target groups. Austria is internationally recognized for its high-quality local food production, often driven by advanced agricultural techniques and a strong tradition of organic farming. Nevertheless, AFNs—despite their innovation capacity and deep-rooted sustainability principles—face challenges that mirror those of mainstream food producers, particularly in the areas of logistics and market competition. The creation of a resilient and future-proof food system thus requires the structured integration of diverse stakeholder expertise and the promotion of collaborative, cross-sectoral solutions.

Location, Operation, and Services

The Austrian Innovation Hub is hosted by the University of Applied Sciences BFI Vienna, located at Wohlmutstraße 22, 1020 Vienna. The Hub operates digitally via email, with office hours from Monday to Thursday, 10:00 to 16:00. This online structure was deliberately chosen to accommodate the geographical dispersion of AFNs across Austria, especially in rural and peripheral areas. By operating through digital channels, the Hub ensures broad accessibility and continuous engagement with all relevant actors, regardless of location. In line with the Food4CE project's Innovation Hub and Living Lab framework, the Austrian IH is dedicated to facilitating structured knowledge exchange, fostering meaningful connections among stakeholders, and promoting shared innovation. Its key mission is to act as a central point for aggregating and disseminating knowledge relevant to short food supply chains (SFSCs) while catalysing collaborative initiatives. The field of activity reflects a deliberate alignment between academic expertise, policy frameworks, and grassroots innovation within the food sector. The Hub serves as a bridge between institutional knowledge and practical, field-based experience—particularly that of AFNs—ensuring that research insights translate into applicable, real-world solutions.

Objectives and Collaborative Approach

The overarching objective of the Innovation Hub is to deliver targeted, actionable knowledge to a broad stakeholder base, while fostering sustainable collaboration and mutual learning. Through iterative consultation formats and continuous stakeholder feedback loops, the IH identifies existing challenges and facilitates the development of practical responses that resonate with regional needs. Citizen engagement is supported through the outreach and dissemination activities of academic and civil society partners, who actively involve their stakeholder networks in the process. The IH's fully digital operation model has proven particularly effective in this regard, enabling engagement even in regions where physical participation is limited. Central to the Innovation Hub's method is a multi-stakeholder approach. Rather than operating as a closed or top-down initiative, the IH functions as a participatory platform. It brings together AFNs, logistics providers, policymakers, business support actors, and research institutions in a structured co-creation process. Through workshops, surveys, and co-design sessions, stakeholders jointly assess regional conditions, exchange perspectives, and define opportunities for collaboration and innovation.



Functionality and Long-Term Impact

The Austrian Innovation Hub operates as a dynamic node of knowledge and innovation, specifically geared toward supporting the evolution of short food supply chains. It provides a platform for meaningful dialogue, peer learning, and practical problem-solving. By matching stakeholder needs with relevant expertise and facilitating ongoing collaboration, the IH contributes to the creation of a sustainable, inclusive, and resilient support structure for AFNs. Looking ahead, the Innovation Hub is not only envisioned as a temporary project outcome but as a lasting institutional mechanism, embedded within broader European knowledge networks. Its continued role in knowledge transfer and stakeholder coordination will remain vital for reinforcing sustainable food practices in Austria and beyond.

3.4. Identification and prioritisation of regional needs

Understanding and responding to regional needs has been a central goal of the Innovation Hub's establishment. To achieve this, extensive stakeholder dialogues were conducted, including workshops, which helped surface operational barriers, policy gaps, and logistical challenges experienced by AFNs and associated actors. These activities also served to identify overlaps and opportunities for joint problem-solving.

In a saturated and highly competitive food market, creating opportunities and open spaces for dialogue is essential. Stakeholder connection is not merely an added value—it is a foundational necessity. By bringing together logistics providers, SMEs, AFNs, researchers, and public institutions, the IH enables the identification of shared priorities and supports the development of targeted, co-designed solutions.

This multi-stakeholder engagement process has led to the identification of several key regional needs:

- Tailored logistics support for AFNs, especially for rural and peri-urban areas.
- Policy alignment with sustainability and local food resilience goals, which often means less bureaucracy
- Continuous knowledge exchange to foster innovation among AFNs and logistics providers.
- Digital coordination tools to improve distribution and delivery efficiency.

Each of these needs is being addressed through the core tools of the Food4CE project—the Knowledge Transfer Platform and the Matchmaking Platform—as well as ongoing engagement activities within the Austrian Innovation Hub.



4. Policy Context

4.1. Existing Policy Context

Based on the European Union's common agricultural policy (CAP), which aims to secure the future of agriculture and forestry, as well as achieving the objectives of the European Green Deal, Austria designed its national CAP Strategic Plan (approved by the European Commission in September 2022), that combines funding for income support, rural development, and market measures under consideration of national needs and capabilities.¹ "Austria's strategy is aimed at ensuring the sustainable competitiveness and resilience of farms and securing food safety for the population, while at the same time improving the protection of natural resources and the climate. It contributes substantially to improving vitality and quality of life in rural areas through investments, knowledge transfer and innovation."² The following goals and measures defined in Austria's CAP Strategic Plan can directly affect and influence alternative food networks (AFNs)³.

- Support of producer organizations via quality schemes and support for short and local supply chains, which will improve opportunities for 70% of farms
- Redistribution of money from larger to smaller farms via a so-called redistributive payment and the consideration of special needs and circumstances
- Spending almost 60% of the rural development budget on environmental objectives, such as area-based payments for environmentally friendly practices going beyond the legally required
- Increase of the shares of organic production to 30% of the agricultural land⁴

On the national level the Federal Ministry for Agriculture, Forestry, Regions and Water Management plays a central role in shaping the conditions for AFNs. The ministry promotes and supports organic farming and small-scale local farmers to ensure quality, safety and diversity of food with the following nationwide initiatives:

"Netzwerk Kulinarik": "The Culinary Network is a platform of networking and synergy utilisation for the multitude of different culinary initiatives in the Federal Provinces and regions. Its objective is to pool efforts and to give the initiatives a common direction."⁵

- "Genuss Region": "With the "Regions of Delight", a spotlight is placed on the typical culinary specialities of Austria's regions. They are combined in a uniform quality and traceability system and developed jointly."⁶
- "Das isst Oesterreich": The awareness initiative aims to strengthen awareness in society for the importance of regional food by offering consumer advice and information on quality labels.⁷
- Initiative "Österreich isst regional" and the action plan "Sustainable Procurement" (last change June 2021): The Federal Government wants to set a good example with the aim of providing exclusively

¹ https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/cap-overview/cap-2023-27_en (accessed 11 November 2023)

² https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-08/csp-at-a-glance-austria_en_0.pdf (accessed 11 November 2023)

³ https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-08/csp-at-a-glance-austria_en_0.pdf (accessed 11 November 2023)

⁴ <https://www.bmk.gv.at/en/topics/climate-environment/waste-resource-management/waste-prevention/austria.html> (accessed 11 November 2023)

⁵ <https://info.bml.gv.at/en/topics/food/culinary-network.html> (accessed 11 November 2023)

⁶ <https://info.bml.gv.at/en/topics/food/genuss-region.html> (accessed 11 November 2023)

⁷ <https://info.bml.gv.at/themen/lebensmittel/regionale-lebensmittel-initiativen/das-isst-oesterreich.html> (accessed 11 November 2023)



regional and seasonal food in public institutions, while at the same time increasing the share of organic food.^{8[7]}

- “Bio-Aktionsprogramm 2023+”: The objective of the Organic Farming Action Programme is to promote and develop organic farming. This includes the Austrian Agri-environmental Programme ÖPUL (support for organic farms), the compensatory allowance for less-favored areas, bonus for organic production, as well as aids granted for investments, processing and marketing, education, information, and sales.

A further relevant player on a national level is the “Federal Ministry for Climate Action, Environment, Energy, Mobility, Innovation and Technology”, which does not have a specific focus on food and agriculture but a general approach to sustainable development. A relevant example is the “Food is precious!” initiative, which aims to reduce food waste along the food value chain.⁹

4.2. Policy Gaps and Challenges

Despite the favourable policy landscape that supports sustainable food systems and organic agriculture, several critical policy gaps and structural barriers continue to hinder the development, scalability, and resilience of Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) in Austria. These challenges demand targeted policy responses and regulatory adjustments to create an enabling environment for AFNs and Short Food Supply Chains (SFSCs).

1. Logistics and Infrastructure Regulation

AFNs face significant logistical disadvantages compared to conventional supply chains, especially in rural and peri-urban regions. Current funding schemes and infrastructure investments prioritise large-scale commercial actors, leaving AFNs without access to shared cold-chain infrastructure or coordinated last-mile delivery systems.

Policy Gap: Absence of tailored public funding for small-scale, cooperative, or decentralised logistics solutions.

Challenge: High operational costs and lack of temperature-controlled infrastructure hinder the reliability and scalability of AFN logistics.

2. Public Procurement and legislation (Vergaberecht)

The existing public procurement legislation (Vergaberecht) creates structural barriers to the inclusion of local and sustainable producers in institutional food provisioning. Requirements for non-discrimination and the lowest price criterion limit the ability of public authorities to favour regional or sustainable products.

Policy Gap: Procurement law does not allow prioritisation of regional, seasonal, or organic goods in public tenders.

Challenge: Sustainability criteria are legally constrained, preventing a shift toward more resilient and local food systems in public catering.

⁸ <https://info.bml.gv.at/en/topics/food/here-we-go-superior-quality-on-our-plates.html> (accessed 11 November 2023)

⁹ <https://www.bmk.gv.at/en/topics/climate-environment/waste-resource-management/waste-prevention/austria.html> (accessed 11 November 2023)



3. Food Safety and Hygiene Regulations

Strict and standardised hygiene regulations—while essential for public health—fail to account for the realities of small-scale or decentralised food systems. Particularly in the areas of surplus food redistribution, product traceability, and allergen management, compliance is disproportionately burdensome for AFNs.

Policy Gap: Lack of proportionate, risk-based regulatory frameworks adapted to small-scale food actors.

Challenge: Complex documentation, cold-chain management, and traceability standards limit innovation and inclusion of alternative actors in food redistribution and reuse.

4. Legal Ambiguity Around “Regional” and “Sustainable” Labelling

There is no binding legal definition of terms such as “regional,” “local,” or “sustainable” within the national food labelling system. This opens the door to misleading claims, undermines consumer trust, and places truly regional AFNs at a competitive disadvantage.

Policy Gap: Absence of enforceable, transparent criteria for food origin and sustainability claims.

Challenge: AFNs cannot effectively communicate their added value to consumers or differentiate themselves from conventional market actors.

5. Fragmented Governance and Responsibilities

Despite recent efforts to establish cross-ministerial coordination structures, sustainable food system governance in Austria remains fragmented across agriculture, health, environment, and economic ministries. This limits coherence and slows implementation of integrated food strategies.

Policy Gap: No institutionalised national food policy framework or cross-sectoral governance structure for AFNs.

Challenge: Policy innovations remain isolated and lack the systemic leverage to transform the food system holistically.

6. Digital and Innovation Gaps in AFN Support Schemes

Existing innovation and digitalisation funding often targets industrial-scale actors, with limited accessibility for smallholder farms and community-based food initiatives. Digital logistics tools, traceability systems, and matchmaking services remain underdeveloped for the AFN context.

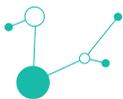
Policy Gap: Lack of inclusive digitalisation strategies and innovation support tailored to AFNs.

Challenge: AFNs struggle to implement or co-develop smart, cost-effective technological solutions that improve efficiency and visibility.

7. Lack of Integrated Education and Awareness Policy

There is no comprehensive education or awareness programme addressing sustainable and regional food systems. Existing campaigns are fragmented and not embedded within formal curricula or long-term public awareness strategies.

Policy Gap: Missing integration of sustainable food literacy into national education and consumer awareness policies.



Challenge: Low public understanding of food system interdependencies and limited engagement with AFNs reduce demand and political support.

5. Regional Policy Recommendations

5.1. Policy objectives

To support the advancement of Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) and address the identified regulatory and structural gaps in Austria, the following SMART policy objectives have been developed. These objectives were derived through the Austrian Innovation Hub’s stakeholder engagement activities, including workshops, co-creation sessions, and expert interviews. They are tailored to the regional context and strategically aligned with relevant policy domains. A cautious and evaluative wording has been deliberately chosen to preserve flexibility for political implementation.

Table 2 Policy Objectives

Policy Objective	Time Horizon	Relevant Policy Areas	Description
Enhance AFN Logistics Infrastructure	Long-term	Regional Development, Agriculture, Infrastructure	It could be considered to establish regional pilot logistics hubs - including cold storage - specifically designed for AFNs. This may help address existing gaps in last-mile distribution and storage of regional food products.
Enable Sustainable Public Procurement	Medium-term	Public Procurement, Sustainability, Food Policy	It should be examined whether public procurement criteria could be revised to better incorporate sustainability, seasonality, and regionality as weighted criteria in public catering tenders.
Create a Proportionate Regulatory Framework	Medium-term	Food Safety, Health, Agriculture	It might be advisable to develop regulatory standards for hygiene and traceability that are more risk-based - particularly for small-scale actors and redistribution initiatives - in order to reduce bureaucratic obstacles.
Strengthen AFN Visibility and Consumer Trust	Short-term	Consumer Protection, Communication, Trade	A national communication initiative could be launched to improve the visibility of “regional” and “sustainable” food systems. A labelling or certification strategy, aligned with EU requirements, may also be helpful in this context.
Institutionalise Food Systems Governance	Medium-term	Governance, Cross-sectoral Coordination, Sustainability	It could be beneficial to establish an inter-ministerial food systems council to integrate AFNs into national climate and sustainability strategies and to facilitate cross-sectoral coordination.



5.2. Proposed policy changes

Regional Logistics Funding Scheme for AFNs

It could be considered to introduce a dedicated funding instrument within regional and national development programmes that explicitly supports collaborative logistics solutions for AFNs.

Rationale: Existing innovation and rural development schemes do not systematically address infrastructure challenges related to decentralised food distribution. A tailored funding framework may help close investment gaps and support scale-appropriate logistics models.

Legal Reform of Procurement Law (Vergaberecht)

It might be advisable to explore legal adjustments to public procurement frameworks in order to enable the inclusion of sustainability, regionality, and environmental impact as weighted criteria alongside price.

Rationale: Current procurement rules tend to privilege cost-based decision-making. A more holistic evaluation model could support the market access of regional and environmentally responsible producers.

Adaptation of Food Safety and Hygiene Legislation

It should be examined whether simplified, risk-based hygiene regulations could be applied to micro and small-scale producers, including food waste valorisation initiatives.

Rationale: Uniform requirements place disproportionate burdens on small-scale actors. Adjusted standards might lower administrative barriers without compromising safety.

Creation of a National AFN Labelling and Transparency Framework

It may be helpful to develop a national labelling and communication system for “regional” and “sustainable” food systems, possibly aligned with European frameworks.

Rationale: Transparent and consistent definitions could reduce greenwashing, improve consumer orientation, and strengthen trust in alternative food networks.

Integration of AFNs into National Food Strategy Platforms

It could be beneficial to institutionalise AFNs within national governance structures—such as through a permanent food policy council or interministerial platform.

Rationale: Long-term coordination across sectors and ministries may be essential to ensure continuity, policy alignment, and visibility of AFNs within Austria’s broader food strategy.

5.3. Policy implementation strategy

The successful realization of the outlined policy directions may require a coordinated and flexible implementation strategy, adapted to the evolving landscape of food system governance and stakeholder priorities in Austria. Rather than prescribing a fixed course of action, the following considerations could serve as guiding principles to support future implementation efforts.



Multi-level Governance Coordination

It might be beneficial to explore coordinated approaches between municipal, regional, and national authorities, particularly in areas such as procurement law, food safety, and logistics infrastructure. Given the cross-sectoral nature of AFN-related policies, establishing interdepartmental communication channels could be taken into consideration to facilitate alignment and reduce regulatory fragmentation.

Phased and Adaptive Implementation

A step-by-step implementation model could be considered, starting with pilot initiatives or test regions. This would allow for gradual learning, stakeholder feedback loops, and iterative policy refinement. It may also be helpful to frame early actions as “exploratory” or “experimental” in nature, thereby lowering institutional entry thresholds.

Stakeholder Involvement and Policy Co-Design

Involving AFNs, local producers, logistics actors, and civil society organizations in co-design processes might strengthen the legitimacy, feasibility, and contextual fit of proposed changes. Policy experimentation could be complemented by consultation formats and advisory boards that help translate practical needs into regulatory proposals.

Capacity Building and Knowledge Support

It could be advisable to embed implementation efforts within broader capacity-building initiatives. Training programmes, toolkits, or technical guidance could support public administration and AFNs in adapting to new frameworks—particularly regarding procurement innovation, hygiene legislation, or logistics collaborations.

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Flexibility

Consideration could be given to establishing light-touch monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track progress and identify adjustment needs. These could include qualitative assessments, stakeholder feedback tools, or case-based evaluation formats rather than rigid performance indicators.

Suggested Implementation Roles (non-exhaustive)

Actor/Institution	Possible Role in Implementation
Federal Ministries (e.g. BMK, BML)	Policy coordination, legal adaptations, funding allocations
Regional and Local Governments	Procurement reform pilots, AFN infrastructure co-financing
AFNs and Civil Society Networks	Policy co-creation, awareness raising, feedback provision
Research Institutions and Universities	Policy evaluation, pilot design, knowledge support



Chambers of Commerce / Business
Platforms

Involvement in standard-setting and capacity-
building activities

This implementation strategy is intentionally framed as a set of non-prescriptive options, allowing policymakers and stakeholders the flexibility to adapt priorities and approaches as needed. Its realisation would likely depend on political will, administrative capacity, and the continued engagement of a broad ecosystem of actors.

6. List of actions

6.1. Action overview

1. Establish Regional AFN Logistics Pilot Hubs
2. Develop Proportional Hygiene and Traceability Guidelines
3. Advocate Procurement Law Reform for Sustainable Food Provisioning
4. Launch a National AFN Quality and Regionality Label
5. Create a National Food Policy Council for Integrated Governance

Each action directly addresses policy gaps, supports logistics efficiency, and fosters cross-sector collaboration derived from the innovation hubs activities as summarized in chapter 5 and its subchapters.

6.2. Detailed action plan

The following actions have been derived from stakeholder consultations and the identified policy objectives. They are presented as non-binding, indicative implementation options that could inform future initiatives. Each action reflects a cautious formulation to leave room for political discretion and adjustment.

Table 3 Detailed action plan

Action	Timeline	Potentially involved Actors	Description	Potential Monitoring Approach
Establish Regional AFN Logistics Pilot Hubs	Medium-term	Regional development agencies, Federal Ministry, AFNs Chamber of agriculture, logistics SMEs	It could be considered to initiate regional pilot hubs for AFNs, including cold storage, routing software, and shared delivery services, to address logistical bottlenecks.	Number of AFNs served, delivery efficiency, cost/km indicators
Develop Proportional Traceability Guidelines	Short to Medium-term	AGES, Federal Ministry, AFN representatives, Chamber of agriculture, legal scholars	It may be helpful to design traceability guidelines for small-scale producers and redistributors, to lower regulatory burdens	Guideline adoption rate, compliance level, feedback from producers
Advocate Procurement Law Reform	Short to Medium-term	Federal Ministry, Food policy NGOs, municipal networks, legal scholars, Chamber of Commerce, Chamber of agriculture	It might be advisable to examine legal options that would allow regional and sustainable criteria to be more effectively weighted in public procurement processes.	Share of regional food in procurement, policy dialogue milestones



Launch National AFN Label & Awareness Campaign	Medium-term	AMA, AFN networks, federal ministries, Chamber of Commerce, Chamber of agriculture	A communication and labelling strategy could be developed to promote transparency and trust in AFN products, supported by a clear definition of sustainability and regionality.	Consumer recognition index, trust levels, label uptake rate
Create National Food Policy Council	Medium to long-term	Federal ministries, research institutions, civil society, Chamber of Commerce, Chamber of agriculture	It could be considered to institutionalise AFN coordination through a cross-sectoral food policy platform or council at the national level.	Meeting frequency, degree of cross-ministerial coordination

6.3. Risk management

Risk	Probability	Impact	Priority	Mitigation Strategy
Resource shortages (Action 1)	Medium	High	High	Secure early multi-source funding (EU/national); phased implementation
Stakeholder disengagement	Medium	Medium	Medium	Ongoing dialogue formats; dedicated stakeholder liaisons
Regulatory delays (Action 3 & 2)	High	High	High	Early engagement with policy-makers; leverage political cycles
Limited consumer trust (Action 4)	Medium	Medium	Medium	Co-create label with trusted civil society; transparent criteria
Political shift at national level	Low	High	Medium	Build bipartisan support; embed in longer-term strategies (e.g., CAP)

Monitoring tools include quarterly reviews, risk dashboards, and stakeholder check-ins.

6.4. Stakeholder engagement

Each of the stakeholders mentioned as having a part in the implementation of the action plan, should be engaged following a power/interest approach as shown in the map below.

On the **Y-axis**, the **Interest** dimension is represented, understood as a combination of the number of actions points the stakeholder contributes to and the level of engagement demonstrated throughout the Innovation Hub activities. On the other hand, the **X-axis** reflects the **Power** dimension, which refers to the stakeholder’s capacity to influence the successful implementation of the action plan.

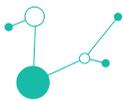
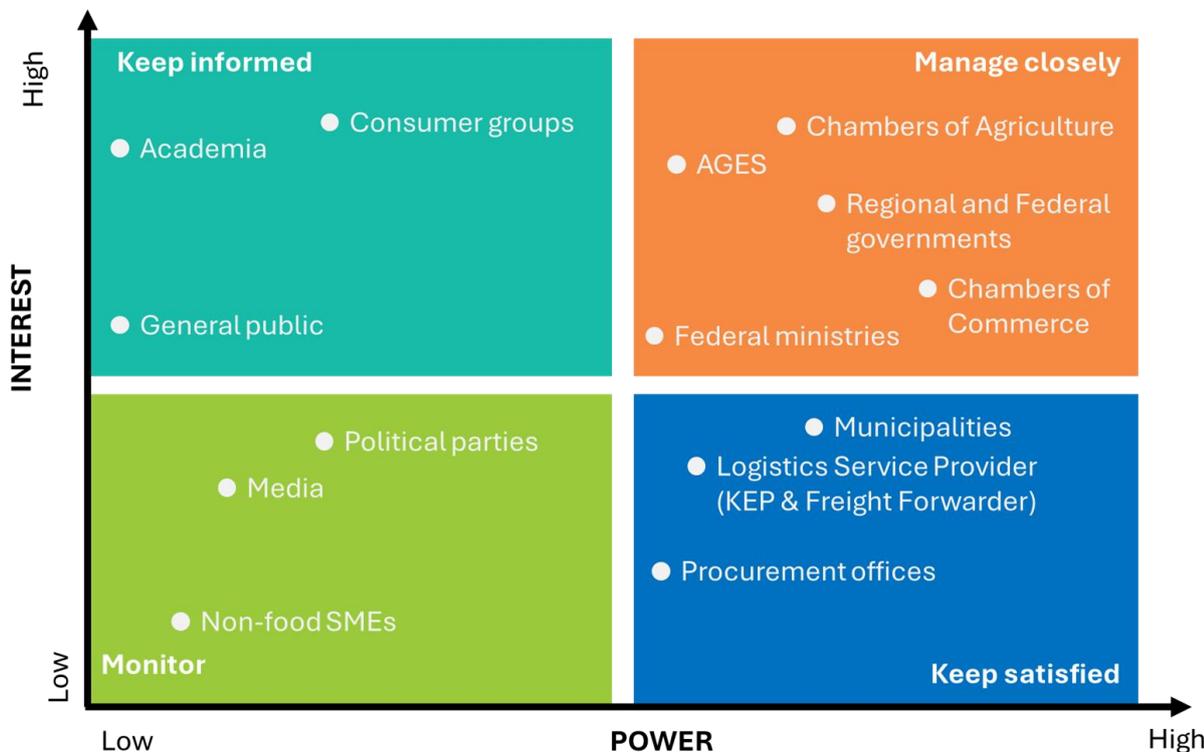


Figure 3 Interest-Power-Graph



Keep informed (maintain regular, transparent updates to keep these stakeholders aware and engaged, as they may offer useful insights or support when needed)

Academia, consumer groups, and the general public hold a strong interest in sustainability and responsible e-commerce but have limited direct power to influence sector-wide decisions. Their perspectives can nonetheless enrich the project’s understanding of societal expectations and emerging behavioural trends. Keeping them informed helps build public trust, encourages knowledge exchange, and supports the wider acceptance of innovative delivery and return solutions.

Monitor (keep an eye on these stakeholders, but engagement can be minimal unless their power or interest levels change)

Political parties, media, and non-food SMEs should be monitored as their influence on e-commerce logistics remains indirect and often issue-driven. While they do not currently shape operational or regulatory decisions, shifts in political priorities, media narratives, or SME lobbying could rapidly alter the context in which zero-emission delivery solutions are deployed. Maintaining awareness of their positions ensures the project can proactively address emerging concerns or capitalize on supportive developments.

Keep satisfied (maintain regular communication with these stakeholders to keep them informed and satisfied, but avoid overburdening them with unnecessary details)

Municipalities, logistics service providers (KEP & freight forwarders), and procurement offices should be kept satisfied due to their operational relevance and moderate influence over local mobility and logistics configurations. They are pivotal for implementing zero-emission options—such as cargo-bike networks, parcel locker placement, or procurement rules—but may not require involvement in every technical



decision. Ensuring they receive timely updates and opportunities for input will secure their continued cooperation and readiness to adapt local systems as the project progresses.

Manage closely (Actively engage these stakeholders through regular communication, involve them in decision-making processes, and ensure their concerns and inputs are addressed)

AGES, federal ministries, regional and federal governments, as well as chambers of agriculture and commerce should be managed closely, as they hold the greatest regulatory and institutional power over transport, consumer protection, and environmental policies. Their support is essential for enabling the systemic changes required for zero-emission e-commerce logistics—whether through regulation, incentives, or standard-setting. Close engagement ensures that proposed solutions align with policy priorities, benefit from institutional backing, and can be scaled beyond pilot regions.

7. Conclusion

The Austrian Regional Action Plan presents a coherent and context-sensitive strategy to strengthen Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) by addressing the structural, regulatory, and logistical challenges that shape Austria's food system. Building on extensive stakeholder engagement, the plan identifies concrete needs - from improved logistics infrastructure to more proportionate hygiene and traceability requirements - and translates them into actionable policy recommendations that reflect both regional realities and national policy frameworks.

The actions proposed in this plan are designed to enhance the resilience, visibility, and operational efficiency of AFNs, while acknowledging the competitive pressures they face within a highly consolidated food market. By engaging key actors including AFNs, public authorities, research institutions, logistics providers, and chambers, this plan lays the groundwork for more coordinated governance and more accessible support structures.

It is important that the plan also places AFNs within the broader context of European food policy, where transparency, sustainability and digitalisation are becoming increasingly important. The introduction of practical and easily accessible digital traceability solutions, based on widely used standards such as GS1 or 2D codes and in anticipation of EU initiatives such as the digital product passport, could help AFNs maintain their competitiveness and meet future requirements. If these solutions are kept simple and cost-effective, even small producers will be able to adopt them without disproportionate burdens.

Overall, this Regional Action Plan provides a realistic and forward-looking roadmap for strengthening AFNs in Austria. Its success will depend on continued policy dialogue, cross-sector cooperation, and flexible implementation approaches that respond to the evolving needs of producers, consumers, and public institutions. By advancing the actions outlined here, Austria can move toward a more sustainable, regionally rooted, and resilient food system that supports local value creation and aligns with long-term European sustainability goals.



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