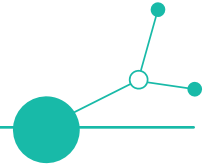


Review of priorities and recommendations for Macro Regional Strategies



02 2026





Food4CE

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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 Review of Macro Regional Strategies

Macroregional strategy is an integrated framework endorsed by the European Council, which may be supported by the European Structural and Investment Funds among others, to address common challenges faced by a defined geographical area relating to member states and third countries located in the same geographical area which thereby benefit from strengthened cooperation contributing to achievement of economic, social and territorial cohesion (EUSALP, 2024). Macro-regional strategies offer a unified framework for collaboration that spans both EU and non-EU borders. These strategies focus on specific geographic areas, known as macro-regions, which are typically defined by prominent physical or environmental features, such as river basins, maritime zones, or a mountain range. Macro-regions consist of territories from multiple countries or regions that share common cross-border challenges and opportunities, necessitating coordinated action. Consequently, macro-regions embody both territorial and functional dimensions (EPRS, 2019).

All adopted macro-regional strategies are also accompanied by a rolling action plan to be regularly updated in light of new, emerging needs and changing contexts.

There have been four macro-regional strategies adopted concerning 19 EU member-states and 8 non-EU countries (European Commission, 2024):

- EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (2009)
- EU Strategy for the Danube Region (2010)
- EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (2014)
- EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (2015)

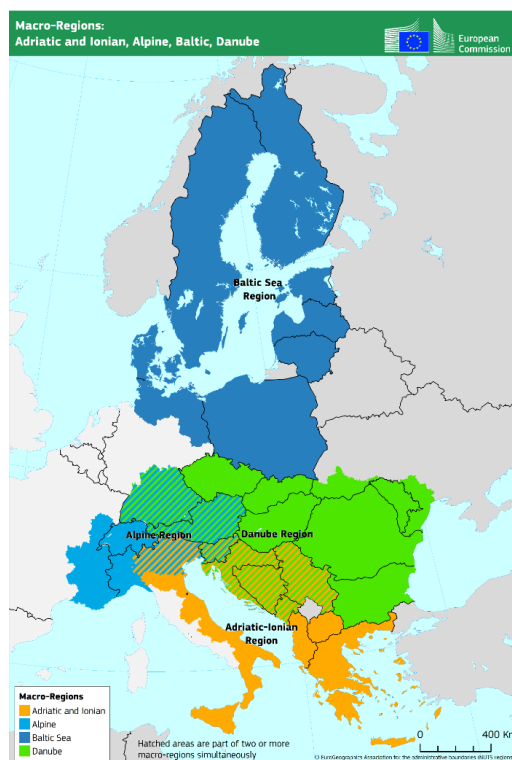


Figure 1: Overview of macro regions

Source: European Commission, 2024.



The implementation of these strategies is shaped by the »three no's rule«: no new EU funds, no additional formal EU structures, and no new EU legislation are introduced. Instead, the emphasis is on optimizing existing resources and aligning policies across EU, national, and regional levels, leveraging established frameworks and structures. Essentially, the goal is to maximize the impact of what is already available. The macro-regional concept rests on five core principles: integration within existing policy frameworks, coordination across sectoral policies, collaboration between countries and sectors, multi-level governance involving actors at various government levels, and fostering partnerships between EU and non-EU countries (EPRS, 2019).

In continuation, Food4CE recommendations all four macro-regional strategies will be presented.



3 EUSDR

3.1 General description

The EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) is a collaborative initiative launched by the European Union to enhance cooperation and development among the countries along the Danube River. Established in 2010, the strategy encompasses 14 countries, including both EU and non-EU members, and aims to address common challenges and opportunities in the region (EUSDR, 2024).

The EUSDR focuses on fostering economic growth, improving environmental sustainability, and enhancing social cohesion. By promoting joint projects and initiatives, the strategy seeks to improve infrastructure, protect natural resources, and boost innovation and competitiveness. Additionally, it aims to strengthen governance and institutional capacities to ensure effective implementation of policies and programs (EUSDR, 2024).

Overall, the EUSDR strives to create a more integrated and prosperous Danube Region through coordinated efforts and shared goals, benefiting the diverse communities and economies within this significant European area.

3.1.1 Geographical scope

The area covered by the EU Strategy for the Danube Region stretches from the Black Forest (Germany) to the Black Sea (Romania-Ukraine-Moldova) and is home to 115 million inhabitants. 14 countries participate to EUSDR, of which 9 EU Member States (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia), 3 accession Countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia) and 2 neighbourhood Countries (Moldova, Ukraine) (EUSALP, 2024).



Figure 2: Overview of the Danube region

Source: European Commission, 2024.



3.2 Recommendations for MRS

AFNs and short food supply chains are gaining importance across Central and Eastern Europe, but many of their challenges cannot be solved by single regions or municipalities. A macro-regional cooperation framework can add value by fostering alignment, exchange, and joint initiatives across borders. Within this scope, several recommendations emerge.

Macro-regional cooperation should facilitate cross-border knowledge exchange and capacity building. AFNs and logistics providers often lack access to best practices or technical expertise available in neighbouring countries. Coordinated programmes, training sessions, and online platforms could help actors learn from successful logistics pilots, digital tools, and governance models elsewhere in the macro-region.

There is a strong role in supporting joint infrastructure initiatives. While individual funding decisions remain national, a macro-regional platform can map existing gaps, identify opportunities for shared cold chain facilities or urban micro-hubs, and coordinate cross-border pilot projects. By doing so, it can mobilise EU cohesion policy instruments or transnational calls more effectively.

Macro-regional strategies can act as a policy voice and advocacy platform. By jointly highlighting the needs of AFNs in European debates on food systems, procurement, and sustainability, countries along the Danube can ensure that the specific challenges of smaller producers and decentralised logistics models are heard at EU level. This includes addressing barriers that arise from fragmented markets or insufficient interoperability.

Cooperation should promote harmonised definitions and communication approaches. Terms like “regional” or “sustainable” are interpreted differently across countries, which creates confusion. While national law defines labelling, macro-regional initiatives can work on voluntary guidelines, shared criteria, or communication campaigns that strengthen consumer trust across borders.

Moreover, macro-regional networks can foster inclusive governance structures. By creating regular dialogue platforms that bring together producers, chambers, research institutions, and NGOs from several countries, the strategy can ensure that AFNs are integrated into broader discussions on sustainable development, rural revitalisation, and climate adaptation.

Finally, cooperation can help accelerate green mobility solutions for food logistics. Coordinated projects for low-emission delivery systems—such as cargo bike networks, electric vehicle pilots, or shared depot models—could be promoted through joint funding applications and knowledge transfer. This is especially relevant in urban nodes along the Danube that share similar challenges.

In sum, while macro-regional frameworks cannot directly change regulations, they are well positioned to coordinate, advocate, and enable. By focusing on knowledge exchange, joint pilot initiatives, common communication, and a collective voice in European debates, they provide the added value needed to strengthen AFNs and short food supply chains across borders.



4 EUSALP

4.1 General description

The European Union Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP), launched in January 2016, represents the fourth and most recent macro-regional strategy by the EU. The aim of EUSALP is to secure sustainable development across the Alpine region, which spans over seven countries and 48 regions. The Alps, a key natural resource for Europe, are rich in biodiversity and serve as a major water reservoir, while also being a popular tourist destination and vital transport corridor for logistics from north to south and vice versa. However, the region faces significant challenges such as climate change, environmental conservation, aging demographics and migration patterns, and the socio-economic divide between urban and rural areas (EUSALP, 2024a).

Therefore, EUSALP seeks to address these challenges by fostering cross-border cooperation and leveraging regional strengths, aiming for territorial cohesion and sustainability. The strategy is unique in combining the needs of highly developed urban centres with rural and mountainous areas, and it highlights the socio-economic interdependence within the region. EUSALP's bottom-up approach ensures strong local involvement, making it an essential platform for co-creating innovative solutions and shaping a sustainable future for the sensitive Alpine ecosystem. Through transnational collaboration, it addresses issues like climate resilience, energy management, competitiveness, and demographic shifts (EPRS, 2019).

4.1.1 Geographical scope

EUSALP covers seven countries and 48 regions at the heart of Europe, which are committed to regional cooperation and sustainable development. The alliance unites five EU Member States – Austria, France, Germany, Italy, and Slovenia – alongside two non-EU countries, Liechtenstein and Switzerland. Together, these countries transcend political borders to foster cooperation, creating a unified front to tackle shared issues such as climate change, economic development, and social inclusion (EUSALP, 2024b).



Figure 3: Geographical area of EUSALP

Source: EPRS, 2019.

EUSALP's strength lies in its diverse network of 48 regions, each playing a critical role in shaping the future of the Alps. By providing an inclusive platform for collaboration, EUSALP ensures that every region's voice is heard, promoting a democratic and participatory approach to policymaking. This cooperation is essential for building a resilient and sustainable Alpine region that balances development with the preservation of its rich natural environment (EUSALP, 2024b).



4.2 Recommendations for MRS

To enhance the development and resilience of AFNs and SFSCs in the EUSALP region, the following recommendations are proposed:

Build regionally adopted logistics systems for sustainable short food supply systems (aligned with **PA2-AG4**)

To strengthen the viability and climate resilience of SFSCs in the Alpine region, public policy must prioritize investment in sustainable, geographically tailored logistics infrastructure. Given the Alpine macro-region's complex terrain, dispersed populations, and rural-urban transport gaps, improving connectivity through appropriate logistics systems is essential.

Key policy actions should depending on the individual situation include:

- Establishing **local consolidation (or micro) hubs**—particularly in peri-urban and rural areas—to enable cost-efficient aggregation, cold storage, and dispatch of local food products.
- Supporting **low-emission delivery infrastructure**, including cargo bikes, electric vehicles, and shared-use delivery schemes adapted to low-volume, high-frequency food distribution.
- Expanding access (including training and knowledge building) to **digital logistics coordination tools** that allow small producers and logistics providers to streamline routing, delivery scheduling, and shared vehicle or cold storage use.

These tools should be interoperable, user-friendly, and adapted to the digital capacities of small producers and rural operators. Public funding and innovation programs should support their development and deployment, ideally through open-source or cooperative digital platforms, and ensure they are accessible across borders in the EUSALP macro-region.

This recommendation directly supports PA2-AG4 objectives by enhancing freight efficiency, reducing road congestion, and enabling energy-efficient transport in ecologically sensitive Alpine areas. Prioritizing logistics investment and interoperability across borders will facilitate sustainable food flows, strengthen rural-urban linkages, and reinforce the macro-regional integration of local food systems.

- Foster digital transformation for AFNs and SFSCs (aligned with PA1-AG2, PA2-AG5)

To strengthen the competitiveness and resilience of AFNs and SFSCs, policies should support the digital transformation of small-scale producers and local food actors. This includes targeted investment in accessible, scalable digital tools designed to meet the operational needs of individual AFNs, logistic operators and farmers.

Key policy actions should include:

- **Supporting the development and uptake of tailored digital tools** that address the everyday operational needs of small producers and local networks. These tools should include:
 - > **Order and customer management systems** to streamline subscriptions, pre-orders, and multi-channel direct sales (e.g. online shops, farmers' markets, CSAs).
 - > **Inventory and product tracking tools** that enable effective stock rotation and reduce spoilage—critical for managing perishable goods.
 - > **E-payment and invoicing solutions** integrated with tax and compliance functions, to reduce administrative burden and support formalisation.



- > **Basic customer engagement (CRM) tools**, allowing producers to build loyalty, personalize communication, and share added-value content (e.g. seasonal updates, sustainable practices).

To ensure equitable uptake, these tools should be open-source or low-cost, mobile-friendly, and designed for ease of use by digitally inexperienced users. Public authorities should provide **training and capacity-building programs**, as well as **financial incentives or vouchers** to support digital adoption, particularly in rural and remote areas.

This recommendation contributes to PA1-AG2 by supporting the digital transition of local agri-food SMEs, enabling them to improve competitiveness, streamline operations, and diversify market access. It also advances PA2-AG5 objectives by promoting digital inclusion, strengthening territorial connectivity, and accelerating the development of regionally adapted digital ecosystems in the Alpine space.

- Strengthen capacity building and digital skills development for AFNs and SFSCs (aligned with PA1- AG3)

To enhance the long-term viability and sustainability of Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) and Short Food Supply Chains (SFSCs), public policies should prioritize targeted capacity building that equips small food producers and processors in SFSCs with the necessary skills to operate effectively in modern agri-food systems.

Key policy actions should include:

- Implementing **cross-regional training and knowledge exchange programs**, focusing on logistics management, digital tools for food supply and coordination, and sustainable transport solutions, cold chain management, reverse logistics, cooperative delivery systems adapted by EUSALP areas.
- Developing **modular and practice-oriented learning formats**, including micro-courses and on-site demonstrations, covering green logistics, digital marketing, customer engagement, circular economy practices, and compliance with food policy and regulation.
- Supporting **lifelong learning and upskilling**, especially for existing producers transitioning into more sustainable or digitalized models of food distribution.
- Promoting **youth-targeted vocational education and dual training systems**, which connect young people to career opportunities in sustainable mountain agriculture, local food logistics, and agri-innovation, while helping to revitalize rural economies.

This recommendation aligns with PA1-AG3 by supporting skills development and education systems that address labour market needs in green and digital transitions, particularly through vocational training, lifelong learning, and dual education models in the agri-food and logistics sectors.

Strengthen sustainable practices in SFSC (aligned with PA3-AG6)

To reduce the environmental footprint and improve the resource efficiency of food systems in the Alpine region, public policy should support the integration of sustainable practices across the **post-harvest stages** of SFSCs—particularly in packaging, warehousing, transportation, and point-of-sale operations. These areas represent significant opportunities to preserve natural resources, reduce waste, and increase climate resilience.



Key policy actions should include:

- **Encouraging the use of eco-designed packaging solutions**, such as compostable, reusable, or recyclable materials, especially tailored to small-scale and regional food distribution needs with competitive pricing.
- **Supporting the development of shared, energy-efficient storage and warehousing facilities**, including cold storage, that minimize energy use and reduce duplication of infrastructure across producers.
- **Promoting clean and low-impact delivery models**, including load optimization, route planning, and the use of electric or cargo-bike-based delivery fleets for urban and rural distribution.
- **Facilitating resource-sharing models** (e.g. logistics cooperatives or local distribution alliances) that optimize the use of transport and storage resources while minimizing environmental impacts.
- **Encouraging the adoption of sustainability standards and environmental management systems** for logistics and retail operations within AFNs, supporting traceability, carbon footprint reduction, and consumer transparency while enhancing consumer appeal of AFNs.
- **Providing financial incentives and technical support** to help small producers and distributors transition to low-carbon, resource-efficient delivery and sales models.

This approach supports the sustainable transformation of the food supply chain beyond production, aligning with AG6's goal of balanced and efficient natural resource use while ensuring the resilience of local food systems in the Alpine region.

- Enhance economic competitiveness and market access for local food producers (aligned with PA1-AG2)

Improving the economic viability of small-scale producers and SMEs within SFSCs requires more than support for production—it demands a strategic focus on modernizing **post-harvest logistics**, including **distribution, packaging, storage, and retail** systems. Strengthening these components is key to reducing operational costs, increasing product visibility, and unlocking access to broader markets.

Key policy actions should include depending on the individual situation:

- **Investing in localized, shared warehousing and cold storage facilities** to extend the shelf life of fresh products and allow producers to store, sort, and dispatch goods flexibly and efficiently.
- **Supporting sustainable and functional packaging solutions** tailored to small producers, enabling compliance with food safety and branding requirements while reducing environmental impact and enhancing consumer appeal.
- **Promoting innovative, regionally adapted delivery systems** such as cooperative transport models, cargo bike networks, and low-emission vehicle fleets that lower distribution costs and improve last-mile delivery performance.
- **Improving digital and physical infrastructure for local sales**, including e-commerce tools, mobile markets, and integration into retail or public procurement systems to expand consumer access.



- **Encouraging the creation of logistics cooperatives or multi-actor platforms** that connect producers with transporters, retailers, and service providers to increase scale and bargaining power while reducing duplication of efforts.
- **Offering financial and technical support** to help SMEs integrate logistics improvements into their operations and access new market channels, both locally and across borders.

By addressing these logistics-related barriers and inefficiencies, Alpine SMEs can improve competitiveness through reduced costs, enhanced product quality, greater brand visibility, and stronger customer trust. This directly contributes to AG2's objectives of building strategic value chains and stimulating sustainable regional economic development.



5 EUSBSR

5.1 General description

The European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) was established in 2009 as the first macro-regional strategy of the European Union. It includes Poland, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and the northern federal states of Germany (inhabited by approximately 80 million people, 16% of the EU population) (EUSBSR, 2024a).

The three main goals pursued through strengthening relations between the countries of the region are: improving the quality of the Baltic Sea ecosystem (Save the Sea), increasing the cohesion of the region (Connect the Region), and enhancing its prosperity (Increase Prosperity) (EUSBSR, 2024a).

Cooperation is implemented at various levels: governmental, regional, and local, with the participation of research and academic centers, regional cooperation structures, non-governmental organizations, and businesses. The implementation of EUSBSR is based on the principle of multi-level governance, transparency, and openness to new stakeholders. The catalog of cooperation forms is open-ended. It includes, among others, projects (single or clustered), processes, networks, and cooperation platforms (EUR-Lex, 2012).

The EUSBSR is based on open and transparent participation, inclusiveness and multi-level governance. The wide thematic coverage of the policy areas provides opportunities for different kinds of stakeholders to participate and propose various kinds of activities.

5.1.1 Geographical scope

The EU member states involved in the Strategy are Sweden, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. The Strategy's implementation is coordinated in close contact with the European Commission and all relevant stakeholders, i.e. other member states, regional and local authorities, inter-governmental and non-governmental bodies. The strategy is also welcoming cooperation with EU neighbouring countries (Iceland and Norway) (EUSBSR, 2024a).



Figure 4: EUSBSR geographical scope

Source: EUSBSR, 2024a

The EUSBSR provides a unique platform for cooperation and coordination between eight EU Member States, including also the neighbouring non-EU countries in the region where relevant and appropriate (Iceland, Norway). The strategy focuses on challenges and opportunities, which are more efficiently addressed when working in a coordinated manner within the region (European Commission, 2021).

5.2 Recommendations for MRS

To enhance the resilience and growth of Short Food Supply Chains (SFSCs) in the Baltic Sea Region, the following policy and operational actions are recommended:

Promote "Baltic-Smart" Logistics for Local Food (aligned with PA Transport)

The Baltic region faces unique logistical challenges due to its vast geography and varying population densities. To address this:

- **Invest in Micro-Hubs and Shared Depots:** Support the development of local consolidation points in rural and peri-urban areas to lower the high costs of transport and storage for small producers.
- **Support Green Last-Mile Delivery:** Encourage the adoption of low-emission transport, such as electric vehicles and cargo bikes, particularly in urban nodes like the northern German federal states and Baltic coastal cities.
- **Digital Integration:** Implement cross-border digital logistics platforms that allow AFNs to share vehicle capacity and optimize delivery routes, reducing the overall carbon footprint of food distribution.

Foster a Circular Bio-economy in Food Systems (aligned with PA Bio-economy)



The Baltic Sea is highly sensitive to nutrient runoff. AFNs can play a pivotal role in protecting the marine ecosystem:

- **Scale Organic and Regenerative Practices:** Provide incentives for AFNs that adopt farming methods reducing pesticide and nutrient leakage into the Baltic Sea catchment area.
- **Circular Packaging Solutions:** Fund transnational pilots for reusable or compostable packaging systems tailored to the needs of small-scale Baltic producers to reduce maritime litter.
- **Resource Efficiency:** Promote models where food waste is redirected into local circular loops (e.g., composting or bio-energy), supporting the goal of a sustainable, resilient growing bio-economy.

Enhance Digital Skills and Knowledge Exchange (aligned with PA Innovation)

Digitalization is a key driver for increasing prosperity and competitiveness in the BSR:

- **Establish a Baltic Knowledge Transfer Platform:** Build on the Food4CE model to create a regional platform for sharing best practices in digital marketing, B2B matchmaking, and inventory management for small-scale food actors.
- **Targeted Capacity Building:** Launch "Digital Vouchers" or training programs specifically for rural producers to help them navigate complex food safety regulations and digital sales tools.
- **Cross-Border Innovation Hubs:** Create a network of Baltic "Innovation Hubs" that bring together researchers, tech SMEs, and food producers to co-create solutions for localized food security.

Strengthen Policy Recognition and Market Access (aligned with Increased Prosperity)

SFSCs often struggle to compete with large-scale agribusinesses in the Baltic market:

- **Harmonize Definitions:** Work toward a shared regional understanding of "local" and "sustainable" labels to increase consumer trust and facilitate easier cross-border trade of artisanal food products.
- **Public Procurement Integration:** Develop guidelines for Baltic municipalities to prioritize local SFSCs in school and hospital catering, creating stable "anchor" markets for small producers.
- **Consumer Awareness Campaigns:** Launch BSR-wide initiatives to educate consumers on the environmental and economic benefits of supporting local food networks, shifting the focus from price to regional value.



6 EUSAIR

6.1 General description

The [EUSAIR \(EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region\)](#) is the macro-regional strategy initiated by the European Union to promote cooperation and development among countries in the Adriatic and Ionian regions. Its primary objective is to foster economic growth, environmental sustainability, and social cohesion through collaboration.

The strategy was **formulated in 2014** by the national and regional authorities of the regions involved, as well as the EU Commission. The strategy outlines very broad objectives and pillars. An **Action Plan** with more specific objectives, targets, and actions for each of the 4 pillars was developed in 2020 to support the implementation of the strategy.

The implementation is carried out at national and regional level by public authorities (engaging with local stakeholders), with the operational support of a strategy governance structure explained in the following paragraphs.

MRS do not come with a dedicated funding, they are rather a political tool for steering existing EU, national and regional funds, including INTERREG, Horizon Europe, ERDF, and so on, toward the strategic objectives listed in the strategy and its Action Plan.

6.1.1 Geographical scope

The strategy involves 4 EU member states (Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, Greece), 5 official candidate states (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, North Macedonia), and San Marino. For Italy only 13 administrative regions are involved, whereas all regions of the other countries are involved.



Figure 5: EUSAIR geographical scope

Source: <https://www.adriatic-ionian.eu/>



6.2 Recommendations for MRS

1. Strengthen the recognition of SFSCs within the Blue Sustainable Economy (aligned with Pillar 1)

To enhance the sustainability and territorial embeddedness of the Blue Sustainable Economy, the EUSAIR strategy should explicitly recognise Short Food Supply Chains (SFSCs) and Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) as relevant components of coastal and maritime food systems. While the Blue Economy pillar currently focuses on fisheries, aquaculture, technologies and governance, it only marginally addresses how seafood and other blue products reach consumers through local, low-impact distribution models. Yet, small-scale fisheries and coastal producers are particularly well positioned to contribute to climate-neutral, resilient and socially embedded food systems.

Key policy actions should include:

- Explicitly acknowledging SFSCs and local value chains within fisheries and aquaculture policy narratives under the Blue Sustainable Economy pillar.
- Promoting knowledge exchange on sustainable, small-scale seafood logistics, including short distribution routes, cooperative transport models and low-impact cold chain solutions.
- Supporting transnational pilot initiatives on innovative, low-emission logistics for coastal and inland-water food systems, building on existing regional experiences.

By integrating SFSCs into the Blue Economy framework, EUSAIR would broaden its approach from resource management and production to include distribution and market access, thereby strengthening the environmental performance, economic viability and social embeddedness of blue food systems across the macro-region.

2. Foster sustainable linkages between tourism, HoReCa and Short Food Supply Chains (aligned with Pillar 4)

To reinforce the sustainability of the tourism ecosystem, EUSAIR should promote stronger connections between the HoReCa sector (hotels, restaurants, catering) and local food networks, with particular attention to the seafood value chain. Tourism is a major economic driver in the Adriatic-Ionian region, yet food supply for hospitality services is often organised through long and standardised chains that limit access for small producers and undermine local economic multipliers.

Key policy actions should include:

- Supporting shared logistics infrastructure and coordination mechanisms (e.g. local consolidation hubs, micro-depots, cooperative delivery schemes) that make small-scale, local sourcing operationally feasible for HoReCa businesses.
- Promoting voluntary guidelines, territorial labels or sustainability frameworks that encourage tourism operators to integrate local sourcing into their business models without imposing regulatory burdens.

Embedding local food supply within sustainable tourism strategies would enhance regional value creation, reduce the carbon footprint of hospitality services, and open stable market opportunities for AFNs—particularly in coastal and island contexts where fisheries remain central to local economies.

3. Position urban nodes as interfaces for territorial diversification and resilient food systems (aligned with Pillar 2 and cross-cutting themes)



EUSAIR should more explicitly frame urban nodes not only as hubs of tourism, transport and services, but as strategic interfaces between cities and surrounding inland, rural and fragile areas. In many Adriatic-Ionian regions, tourism risks becoming a dominant and totalising economic sector, potentially crowding out other productive activities and reducing territorial diversification. Repositioning cities as connectors rather than exclusive destinations can help counter this trend by strengthening functional links with local production systems, including AFNs and SFSCs.

This perspective is consistent with the Smart Specialisation Strategy of Emilia-Romagna, which defines cities as “hubs of intelligent, inclusive and sustainable innovation” and explicitly promotes the role of cities as **interfaces towards internal and fragile areas**, through infrastructure, logistics, services on demand and urban farming. Such an approach emphasises urban resilience, diversified economies and participatory governance.

Key policy actions should include:

- Framing urban nodes within EUSAIR as gateways for local and regional food systems, facilitating market access for AFNs from surrounding rural and coastal areas.
- Supporting logistics, infrastructure and digital services that connect producers in internal and fragile territories with urban markets, including shared hubs, micro-depots and on-demand distribution models.
- Promoting urban-rural innovation ecosystems that integrate food logistics, social innovation and territorial cohesion, ensuring coherence between macro-regional strategies and regional S3 priorities.

By adopting this framing, EUSAIR can help prevent excessive economic dependence on tourism, strengthen the population and capacity of AFNs, and justify greater investment in logistics research and innovation. Urban nodes thus become key leverage points for resilient, diversified and territorially balanced food systems across the Adriatic-Ionian region.



7 Conclusion

The Food4CE project serves to support Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) and Short Food Supply Chains (SFSCs) in their transition toward more sustainable and resilient food systems. By establishing local and transnational Innovation Hubs and developing digital tools like the Knowledge Transfer Platform and Matchmaking Platform, the project directly addresses the logistical, digital, and distribution challenges that currently hinder the efficiency of AFNs across Central Europe.

This report highlights that the objectives of Food4CE are deeply aligned with the four major EU Macro-Regional Strategies:

- EUSDR (Danube Region): The project contributes to all four pillars—connecting the region, protecting the environment, building prosperity, and strengthening governance. Key recommendations focus on leveraging macro-regional platforms for cross-border knowledge exchange and advocating for the needs of small producers at the EU level.
- EUSALP (Alpine Region): Given the region's rugged topography, Food4CE aligns with goals for sustainable mobility and digital transformation. Recommendations emphasize the need for regionally adapted logistics systems, such as local consolidation hubs, and the upskilling of producers to operate in a modern, digitalized agri-food system.
- EUSBSR (Baltic Sea Region): Synergies are strongest in the areas of bio-economy and transport. Strategic recommendations include the promotion of "Baltic-Smart" logistics and the integration of AFNs into circular bio-economy models to protect the sensitive Baltic Sea ecosystem.

EUSAIR (Adriatic and Ionian Region): The project interacts with the Blue Growth and Sustainable Tourism pillars by identifying SFSCs as vital components of coastal food systems. Recommendations suggest positioning urban nodes as strategic interfaces that connect fragile internal areas with broader markets.

The analysis of the macro-regional strategies shows that, although AFNs and SFSCs are embedded in different territorial contexts, the structural challenges they face are highly comparable across regions. Logistical fragmentation, limited digital capacity among small producers, regulatory complexity, weak cross-border coordination, and insufficient consumer awareness repeatedly emerge as shared constraints. These recurring barriers explain why many of the proposed recommendations for macro-regional strategies converge around a small set of strategic intervention areas.

A first common recommendation is the need for **macro-regional platforms** to actively support shared logistics solutions for SFSCs. All regions highlight the value of consolidation hubs, coordinated last-mile delivery systems, and low-emission transport models. The proposed role of MRS is not to build infrastructure directly, but to map gaps, coordinate pilot projects, and mobilise existing EU funding instruments for joint investments. This reflects a shared understanding that logistics inefficiencies are a cross-border issue and benefit from transnational coordination.

A second strongly recurring recommendation concerns **digital transformation**. MRS are expected to act as facilitators of interoperable digital tools that connect producers, logistics providers, and consumers. Proposed actions include supporting open digital platforms, matchmaking systems, and knowledge-sharing hubs that can operate across borders. The emphasis is less on technology itself and more on accessibility: ensuring that small-scale actors can adopt digital tools without high entry costs. While the Baltic and Alpine regions stress digitalisation as a structural necessity due to geographic constraints, the Adriatic-Ionian and Danube regions frame it more as a competitiveness and market integration tool. Despite this nuance, the strategic direction is aligned.

A third shared recommendation is strengthening **knowledge exchange and capacity building**. All macro-regions propose that MRS should function as learning ecosystems where good practices circulate systematically. Training programmes, peer-to-peer exchanges, and innovation hubs are seen as essential to



professionalising AFN logistics and governance. This recommendation reflects the recognition that many SFSC actors lack managerial and technical skills rather than motivation or demand.

A fourth convergence point is the call for **macro-regional advocacy and policy alignment**. Several regions explicitly recommend that MRS act as a collective voice in EU food system debates, particularly around procurement rules, labelling standards, and regulatory burdens on small producers. The objective is not harmonisation through legislation, but soft alignment through voluntary frameworks, shared definitions, and joint communication strategies. This is especially relevant in cross-border regions where regulatory fragmentation directly limits AFN expansion.

Where recommendations begin to diverge is in the sectoral framing of SFSCs. The Adriatic-Ionian strategy connects AFNs strongly with tourism and the blue economy, proposing integration with hospitality and coastal economies. The Baltic strategy embeds SFSCs within circular bioeconomy and environmental protection agendas, prioritising waste reduction and nutrient management. The Alpine region emphasizes territorial cohesion and mountain accessibility, focusing on geographically adapted logistics. The Danube strategy highlights governance capacity and institutional cooperation across uneven development levels. These differences do not contradict each other; rather, they illustrate how macro-regional recommendations adapt to local socio-economic drivers while still aligning around common structural needs.

Taken together, the recommendations position macro-regional strategies as coordination architectures rather than funding programmes. Their added value lies in enabling joint pilots, aligning existing financial instruments, accelerating knowledge transfer, and providing a transnational policy interface. The convergence of challenges and responses suggests that SFSC development is becoming a shared macro-regional agenda. This creates strong potential for mutual learning and coordinated progress, particularly in alignment with EU priorities such as the Green Deal and Farm to Fork strategy.

In summary, the integration of Food4CE's innovative solutions into the existing MRS frameworks will not only enhance the competitiveness of small-scale producers but also accelerate the transition to low-carbon, resource-efficient, and territorially balanced food systems across Europe. Strengthening these cross-border synergies is essential for ensuring that AFNs become an integral part of a resilient and sustainable future for all macro-regions.



8 Abbreviations

EUSDR	EU Strategy for the Danube Region
EUSALP	EU Strategy for the Alpine region
EUSBSR	EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region
EUSAIR	EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region
MRS	Macroregional Strategies
PA	Priority Area
PAC	Priority Area Coordinators
SSS	Smart Specialisation Strategy



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