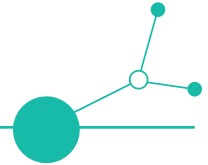


TRANSNATIONAL BENCHMARK OF IDENTIFIED SFSC LOGISTICS CHARACTERISTICS

Food4CE

Short report summary





Food4CE

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AUTHORING, REVISION & QA INFORMATION

Deliverable Contributors		
Type of author	Name and surname	Organisation (short name as in AF)
Main author	Łukasz Brzeziński	Ł-PIT
Contributor	Piotr Nowak	Ł-PIT
Contributor		

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1. Executive summary

Short Food Supply Chains (SFSCs) represent a streamlined approach to food production, processing, distribution, and sales that minimizes intermediaries and reduces geographic distances between producers and consumers. By focusing on local or regional sourcing, SFSCs emphasize transparency, traceability, and direct communication between producers and consumers, fostering a closer connection to the food people consume. This model supports local economies, reduces environmental impacts from long-distance transport, and offers consumers fresher, more diverse food options.

This transnational benchmark compiles insights from regional SFSC reports across Central Europe, specifically in Slovenia, Austria, Italy, Hungary, and Poland, offering an essential overview of market dynamics, customer expectations, and short supply chain practices within these regions. It plays a critical role in the Knowledge Transfer Platform by identifying shared practices and unique differences within Alternative Food Networks (AFNs). This report not only highlights areas for improvement but also showcases best practices, serving as a strategic resource for enhancing and optimizing short food supply chains across Central Europe.

About the Food4CE project:

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. Within Food4CE 5 local and 1 Transnational Innovation Hub (IH) will be established and will focus on advancing AFNs logistics efficiency through the development of innovative tools and solutions.

Two innovative tools, the Knowledge Transfer Platform and the Matchmaking Platform will be developed within the project. The former is intended for sharing logistics best practices and solutions, while the latter is intended for creating new B2B 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.

By establishing local and transnational Innovation Hubs and developing innovative tools and solutions, Food4CE project aims to facilitate knowledge exchange and cooperation between different actors and regions, leading to a sustainable and lasting AFN support mechanism.



2. Short Food Supply Chains (SFSC) characteristics and needs

SFSC refers to a direct and simplified system of producing, processing, distributing, and selling food products that involves a limited number of intermediaries and minimal geographic distances between producers and consumers. In a short food supply chain, the focus is on reducing the number of intermediaries and stages in the production and distribution process, often emphasizing local or regional sourcing and consumption. This concept aims to enhance transparency, traceability, and communication between producers and consumers, thereby promoting a stronger connection between people and the food they consume. Short food supply chains can contribute to supporting local economies, reducing environmental impacts associated with long-distance transportation, and providing consumers with fresher and potentially more diverse food options.

Short food supply chains in **Slovenia** are characterized by **direct relationships** between producers and consumers, intermediaries, hence focusing on **local and sustainable food production**. These characteristics and needs in short food supply chains highlight the importance of efficient logistics solutions that can support direct relationships, handle small-scale production, and facilitate local distribution networks. The primary goal of SFSC is to re-establish a closer connection between food producers and consumers, thereby enhancing transparency, food quality, and economic viability for local producers.

In **Hungary**, short food supply chains are characterized by **direct links** between producers and consumers and therefore focus on **sustainable and local food production**. The primary objective of the SFSC is to restore closer links between food producers and consumers, thereby improving transparency, food quality and the economic viability of local producers.

Short food supply chains in **Poland** have significant development potential, which results from the **growing interest of consumers and the willingness of producers to cooperate**. However, the functioning of AFNs faces a number of challenges, mainly related to logistics, including transport and packaging. Key factors for the further development of AFNs in Poland are education and cooperation between producers and consumers, which can contribute to building a more resilient and sustainable food system.

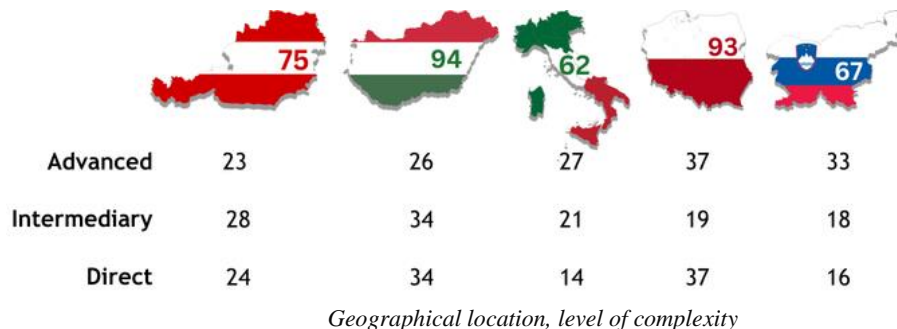
Due to the strong focus of Austrian consumers on organic farming, **Austria** offers a **versatile market for AFNs**. Social and political developments in recent years, such as the Covid pandemic, supply chain problems and international crises, have increased the demand for regional products and the desire for traceability of origin even more. Almost every Austrian has bought organic food at least once in the past six months. Both the frequency and quantity of organic products bought increased continuously. Consequently, it is important that domestic food producers have a high level of logistics knowledge in order to be able to handle the complexities of administration and distribution. Only if consumers' expectations in terms of service quality are met, they continue to support producers' shift towards more sustainable agriculture.

Emilia-Romagna (Italy) presents a favourable market for AFNs due to the **rich gastronomic traditions of the region, characterised by a culture of local and quality food products**. Also, the aspect of a localised food system and short food supply chains has a long tradition in this region, rooted in the peasant culture of its population. Recent social and political changes, have heightened the demand for local and healthy food products, giving rise to a transformation of the agrifood sector. The Covid-19 pandemic provided an extraordinary boost to food delivery and the online marketplaces, which however, from the conducted interviews, seem to have lost some of their appeal and competitiveness in the last couple of years.

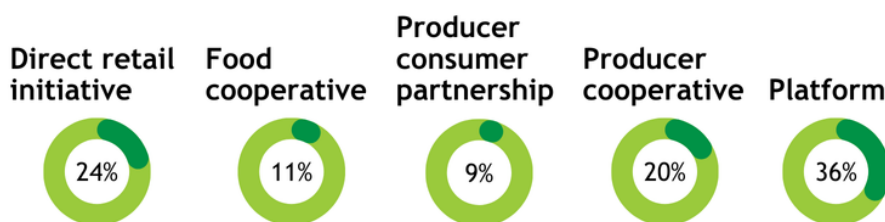


2.1. Research overview

In order to benchmark project regions according to level of complexity, AFNs per country were identified. Within the desk research **391 AFNs were identified**, of which 146 AFNs were considered advanced AFNs. The number of AFNs as well as the share of advanced AFNs differed a lot between countries.



The most common form of AFNs are the **platforms** (36%), followed by **direct retail initiative** (24%), **producer cooperative** (20%), **food cooperative** (11%) and **producer consumer partnership** (9%).



The functioning of SFSC within Alternative Food Networks is characterized by a special specificity, which, on the one hand, results from the focus on direct relations between the producer and the customer. In particular, one can point out the smaller scale of operation in comparison to large crops, but above all, taking care of local food quality, natural or ecological crops. This in turn requires the creation of appropriate conditions for the flow of goods - "from farm to fork". At the same time, recipients have their own specific expectations.

Analyses related to the functioning of short food supply chains in participating region were carried out considering a wide range of logistics aspects, including order processing, warehousing, transport, digital competence, business practices and challenges and opportunities.

The analyses are presented in the continuation.

2.2. An analysis of SFSC logistics characteristics and needs

A total of **70 AFNs** from five countries (Austria, Poland, Hungary, Italy and Slovenia) participated in the surveys. The most AFNs were from Slovenia (16), followed by Austria and Hungary with 15 each and Poland and Italy with 12 each.

2.2.1. Order processing

In analyzed regions a diverse approach to accepting orders was found. Usually, each AFN uses several solutions in parallel. Most frequent, orders are placed via **website or online platform** (68%), by **e-mail** (63%), **by phone** (55%), via **instant messaging** (e.g. Messenger, WhatsApp, Telegram) - 34%, via **social media** and **in-store** (26% each).



Across AFNs online platforms or websites are the most common method for placing orders. However, notable differences exist between countries: in Poland, orders are typically placed via email; in Italy, instant messaging is the preferred method; and in Slovenia, most orders are made by phone.



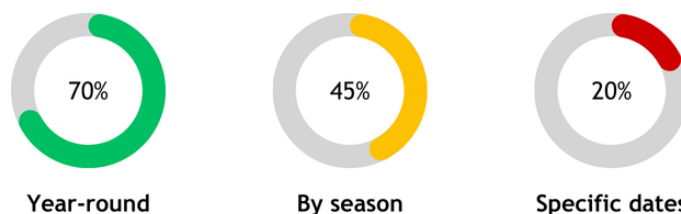
The frequency of order placements varies significantly across AFNs. Daily order acceptance is the most common, reported by 57% of AFNs. Another 21% of AFNs accept orders several times a week, while 15% handle orders on a weekly basis. A smaller portion, 7%, processes orders only a few times per month.



This variation could be addressed through the less frequently used, yet still available, channels such as instant messaging and social media, which provide flexibility for infrequent interactions.

On average, the analyzed AFNs receive **264 orders per week**. With regard to product availability, in particular, these are **year-round (70%)** - indicating that most AFNs provide a steady availability of products year-round. **Seasonal availability is noted by 45% of AFNs**, exhibiting greater variability, which highlights a wider range of seasonal impacts on products. This suggests that a significant number of AFNs adjust their product offerings in response to seasonal changes. **Products available only on specific dates or periods represent the lowest average share - only 20%**, indicating that only a selected AFNs focus on products tied to specific times or events. A similar trend applies to almost all countries - except Italy, where most products are available seasonally.

Given that certain products are available year-round, many surveyed AFNs strategically prioritize relationships with key producers, while others engage with them only seasonally or for specific events. This approach highlights the flexibility of AFNs in adopting diverse market and operational strategies to meet consumer demand and maintain efficiency.



2.2.2. Warehousing

In examining the warehousing strategies of businesses, it is essential to recognize the different types of storage solutions they utilize. **Shelf storage** stands out as the predominant method, favored by 83% of AFNs, probably because of its versatility and effectiveness across various storage situations. **Pallet storage**, employed by 33%, meets the need for accommodating larger or heavier products. **Floor storage**, also preferred by 33%, is selected based on the specific characteristics of the items being stored. Notably, **live storage racks** were not utilized by the AFNs that were analyzed.



Shelf storage
83%



Pallet storage
33%



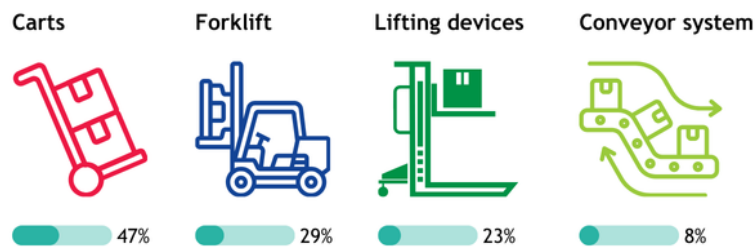
Floor storage
33%



Live storage racks
0%

The majority of analyzed AFNs (73%) primarily use shelf storage, a trend consistent across most countries surveyed. Italian AFNs, however, employ the most varied storage methods, predominantly using shelf and pallet storage, with some also utilizing floor storage for added flexibility.

The range of warehouse or storage equipment solutions utilized by AFNs highlights the diversity in their warehousing operations. Carts are the most frequently used solution (47%), followed by forklifts (29%), lifting devices (23%) and 8% of AFNs use conveyor systems.



Insights into the storage facilities of AFNs reveal that **conventional storage** (without specialized temperature control) is the most commonly used option, with 71% of AFNs indicating they possess such facilities. **Cold storage** is also frequently utilized by 57% of AFNs. **Frozen storage** is used by 18% of AFNs.



71%



57%



18%

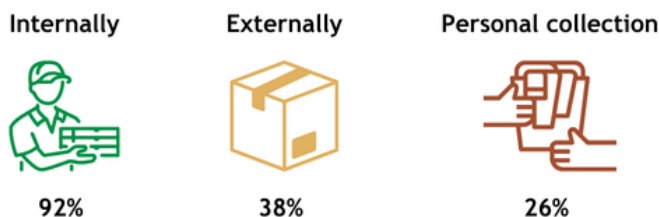
AFNs generally make use of either conventional storage or cold storage, or a mix of the two, demonstrating a customized approach to storage that caters to the particular requirements of their products and the expectations of their market segments.

2.2.3. Transport processing

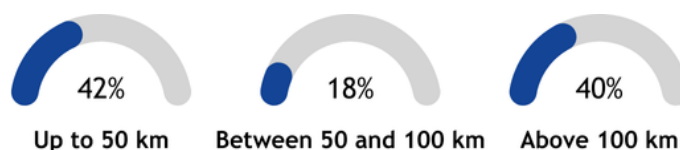
In examining the logistics and supply chain management of AFNs, a crucial element to address is their method of handling transport processes. This aspect is vital as it has a direct effect on the efficiency and effectiveness of product distribution, which in turn affects both operational success and customer satisfaction. The data concerning transport processing provides important insights into how these networks oversee the movement of goods from their source to the final consumer.

The **71% of the surveyed AFNs include transport processes as part of their service offerings**, highlighting the importance of logistics and freight movement as key elements of their operations, including shipping, delivery, and distribution services. Conversely, the other 29% do not offer transport processes.

Regarding delivery management practices, **92% of AFNs manage deliveries internally**, utilizing their own resources, personnel, and infrastructure. **Third-party providers are used by 38% of AFNs**. **Self-collection** is a less frequent practice, reported by **only 26%** of AFNs, which may be due to the specific nature of the products or the preferences of customers.



The analysis of catchment areas reveals intriguing trends regarding customer reach. The largest proportion indicated delivery to up to **50 km (42%)**, followed by 40% of AFNs, which cover distances **above 100 km**. The **distance between 50 and 100 km was indicated by 18% of AFNs**. Overall, the results show that AFNs show diversity in geographic scope, with a strong focus on local markets and a significant proportion operating in a wider area.



In the analyzed regions, the average number of deliveries per week is 270. The number of delivery points per delivery is 178 on average. Austrian AFNs carry out the largest number of deliveries (and therefore also the largest number of delivery points in one delivery). AFNs generally employ a combination of delivery methods, including vans and cars or vans and trucks, depending on the sales volume and the sensitivity of the products.

The fact that 69% of AFNs ensure cold chain continuity underscores the importance of temperature regulation for certain products. On the other hand, the 31% that do not adhere to cold chain standards may indicate a focus on non-perishable goods. This scenario demonstrates the capacity of AFNs to adapt to different types of products and customer demands, presenting both challenges and opportunities to enhance delivery models in order to improve efficiency and customer satisfaction.

2.2.4. Digital competence

IT solutions are of great importance in alternative food networks (AFNs), which is confirmed by analyses of their application in these organizations. IT solutions are most frequently used in processes related to orders, which emphasizes their key role in effective management of this area. Other important processes in which IT technologies are used are **transport management**, **warehouse management** and **demand planning**, which indicates the need to optimize individual stages of the supply chain.

IT solutions are less commonly implemented in areas, such as supply chain visibility, reverse logistics and technologies related to the food passport. The low frequency of their use in these areas may suggest that AFNs still have significant room for development in terms of full integration of IT technologies, which could contribute to increased operational efficiency and improved quality of services.

The use of IT solutions in AFNs is a key element of their functioning, and further investments in modern technologies can help optimize processes and meet consumer needs in the faster changing food market.



2.2.5. Business practices

A strategic approach in **Austria** includes defining the right vehicle based on order volume, delivery area, and drive type, with an emphasis on sustainable options like electric vans. Warehouse cooling is optimized through insulation and energy-saving practices, while managing demand effectively helps balance resource use and scheduling.

Hungarian AFNs leverage data-driven decision-making for real-time logistics adjustments, focusing on metrics like cost per delivery and carrier performance. Eco-friendly practices include using cargo bicycles for urban deliveries, installing food vending machines, and employing backhauling to improve fleet efficiency and reduce environmental impact.

Italy emphasizes collaboration among local producers, logistics operators, and authorities to create sustainable regional food supply chains. Italian AFNs offer flexible delivery options like pick-up and digital lockers and adopt sustainable practices such as electric vehicles. Reusable packaging further supports a circular economy and reduces costs.

Polish AFNs concentrate demand by establishing weekly markets in urban areas, simplifying distribution and customer engagement. They also consolidate orders through third-party platforms, reducing delivery routes and emissions. Multi-producer online shopping platforms streamline orders and provide detailed product information, enhancing consumer access to local goods.

Slovenian AFNs prioritize digitalization to improve order processing and brand visibility, benefiting B2B transactions and environmental sustainability. Municipalities support cooperatives through grants, promotional activities, and shared resources. Local trade emphasizes transparency and traceability, fostering trust between producers and consumers and enhancing sustainability through direct relationships and minimal processing.

2.3. Challenges and opportunities for SFSC

The conclusions regarding the challenges faced by AFNs in analyzed regions indicate that **transportation processes are the most problematic areas**, encountered by 52% of AFNs. It is worth noting that these are key areas that have a direct impact on operational efficiency and customer satisfaction. 31% of AFNs indicated **problems related to the warehouse process**, which suggests that warehouse management also requires attention and optimization. **IT tools** were indicated by 30% of respondents, which may suggest the need for investment in technology and better warehouse space management. **Packaging processes** received 22% of indications, the main aspect is the low level of digitization of these processes. Finally, **reverse logistics processes** were rarely mentioned (19%), which may indicate their lower importance in the current activities of AFNs.



In the continuation challenges and opportunities of SFSC are described according to the participating countries.

2.3.1. Poland

Challenges and opportunities for SFSC in Poland mainly refer to:



- **Cost Reduction and Efficiency:** collaboration among different actors in AFNs leads to economies of scale and consolidation of logistics services, reducing costs for small companies and promoting sustainability.
- **Market Power of Consumers:** growing demand for organic and regional products influences prices and drives changes in agricultural production and food provision, highlighting the importance of consumer preferences.
- **Promotion and Recognition:** many AFNs struggle with limited consumer awareness and recognition, hindering their growth potential. Internal order handling processes, such as labor-intensive methods, may limit membership and market reach.
- **Promotion and Recognition:** low awareness of AFNs in Polish society underscores the need for increased investment in marketing strategies to raise awareness and expand impact. National and local agricultural support centers can play a crucial role in supporting AFN development.
- **Knowledge Extension:** educating both producers and consumers about the benefits and opportunities of AFNs is essential for their sustainable development and expansion.
- **COVID-19 and ESG Targets:** current challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the focus on Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) targets, present opportunities for increased collaboration between businesses, consumers, and policy stakeholders to strengthen AFNs.
- **Consumer Needs:** meeting consumer demands for high-quality and sustainable products creates opportunities for AFNs to expand and thrive within the market.

In conclusion, cooperation, consumer market power, recognition, and knowledge extension are vital for the sustainable development of AFNs in Poland. Addressing current challenges and leveraging opportunities can establish AFNs as integral components of a resilient and sustainable food system for the future.

2.3.2. Slovenia

Challenges and opportunities for SFSC in Slovenia mainly refer to:

- **Diverse Business Models:** AFNs operate with various models, from direct production and supply to consumers to utilizing online platforms for sales and deliveries. Regardless, they all face complex challenges in product distribution and logistics.
- **Customer Buying Habits:** understanding fluctuating buying patterns and order volumes, especially for perishable goods, is crucial. Seasonal demands influence warehouse and fleet management decisions, highlighting the need for adaptable strategies.
- **Delivery Radius:** many AFNs deliver within 50 km, with some extending beyond 100 km, which requires well-organized logistics processes. Compliance with food safety standards amidst stiff competition from larger providers adds complexity.
- **Opportunities in Targeting and Marketing:** defining target groups and refining marketing strategies can enhance customer trust and lead to long-term partnerships. Securing multiannual contracts with institutions provides stability for planning and operations.
- **Collaborative Networks:** AFNs can optimize resources by fostering cooperation among local producers, intermediaries, and logistics providers. Digital solutions for order processing and supply chain visibility can drive growth and efficiency.
- **Sustainability Initiatives:** embracing eco-friendly practices in packaging and farming meets consumer demand for sustainability. These initiatives open new market opportunities and align with evolving consumer preferences.



In conclusion, AFNs in Slovenia face logistical challenges and stiff competition, however, they also have significant opportunities for growth through collaboration, innovation, and sustainability initiatives. This dynamic environment requires adaptive strategies to navigate evolving consumer trends and regulatory landscapes.

2.3.3. Austria

Challenges and opportunities for SFSC in Austria mainly refer to:

- **Cooperation Benefits:** collaborations among AFNs offer economies of scale, pooling financial and human resources, enhancing cost-effectiveness, sustainability, and access to financing. Cooperation also helps mitigate seasonal effects in arable farming.
- **Consumer Market Power:** growing consumer demand for organically grown and regional products drives the evolution of AFNs. Consumer preferences increasingly shape pricing, leading to shifts in agricultural production and food provision.
- **Marketing and Awareness:** AFNs often suffer from low consumer awareness, hindering the recognition of high-quality and sustainable products. Investing in marketing strategies is crucial to increase visibility and consumer engagement.
- **Political Influence:** the COVID-19 pandemic underscores the need for resilient and sustainable food systems, prompting political support for AFNs. EU-level ESG goals emphasize environmental sustainability, social responsibility, and good governance, requiring adjustments and support from political stakeholders.
- **National Policy Role:** national ministries, like the Federal Ministry for Agriculture and the Federal Ministry for Climate Action, play crucial roles in shaping conditions for AFNs. However, compliance with regulations and bureaucratic burdens pose challenges for AFNs' resources and operations.

In summary, collaborations, consumer market power, marketing enhancements, political support, and appropriate infrastructure are critical for the sustainable development of AFNs. Despite challenges posed by COVID-19 and ESG goals, they present opportunities for increased collaboration among businesses, consumers, and political stakeholders to establish resilient and sustainable food systems.

2.3.4. Italy

Challenges and opportunities for SFSC in Italy mainly refer to:

- **Consumer Demand:** the increasing demand for local and healthy food presents a significant growth opportunity for AFNs in Emilia-Romagna.
- **Challenges in Supply Chain:** AFNs face challenges in maintaining supply chain consistency due to seasonal variations and fragmented production.
- **Fragmented Production:** the presence of numerous small-scale producers and lack of cooperation contribute to logistical inefficiencies.
- **Logistics and Distribution:** organizing the distribution of locally sourced food to meet diverse buyer requirements can be complex for AFNs.
- **Opportunities through Collaboration:** collaboration among AFNs, producers, logistics providers, and retailers can streamline supply chains, mitigate seasonal fluctuations, and reduce costs.



- **Technology Integration:** implementing digital platforms and communication tools can enhance coordination and efficiency within AFNs, although cultural resistance and economic viability need consideration.
- **Market Expansion and Marketing:** diversifying end-buyers and adopting innovative marketing strategies can enhance competitiveness and achieve economies of scale.
- **Consumer Awareness and Engagement:** promoting awareness about the benefits of supporting local and sustainable food systems can foster consumer loyalty and community engagement.
- **Government and Policy Support:** advocating for supportive policies, access to funding, grants, and regulatory frameworks at regional and national levels can create an enabling environment for AFN growth and development.

In conclusion, addressing structural challenges through collaboration, technology integration, market expansion, consumer engagement, and government support can help AFNs in Emilia-Romagna thrive in a competitive landscape while meeting the growing demand for local and sustainable food.

2.3.5. Hungary

Challenges and opportunities for SFSC in Hungary mainly refer to:

- **Limited Partnerships:** without the development of partnerships, both modern SFSC types and traditional forms face uncertain sustainability, impacting accessibility for consumers and producers.
- **Difficulty for Small Farms:** small farms, especially those lacking self-competitiveness, struggle to respond to challenges and improvements within SFSCs.
- **Social Acceptance:** strengthening social acceptance requires increasing awareness and recognition of SFSC producers and buyers.
- **Ageing Population and Skills Gap:** on the producer side, an ageing population and inadequate professional skills hinder generational change and marketing-related activities.
- **Shift in Consumer Habits:** demand has shifted towards low-priced products from global supply chains due to changes in consumer habits influenced by economic constraints.
- **Consumer Awareness and Engagement:** boosting SFSCs depends heavily on increasing consumer awareness and engagement; demand drives supply.
- **Financial Support:** financial backing, coupled with a historic investment in the agricultural sector, presents opportunities for SFSC growth.
- **Regulatory and Policy Support:** continued regulatory and policy support can address challenges and facilitate SFSC development.

In conclusion, SFSCs in Hungary face significant challenges related to social acceptance, ageing populations, and changing consumer habits. Overcoming these challenges requires concerted efforts to increase consumer awareness, address skills gaps among producers, and secure financial and policy support from the government. Despite the hurdles, SFSCs hold promise for sustainable food systems in Hungary, provided the necessary support systems are developed to address identified development needs.

2.3.6. Common challenges and opportunities

Across Poland, Slovenia, Austria, Italy, and Hungary, the challenges and opportunities in the Short Food Supply Chains (SFSCs) present a varied yet interconnected landscape that highlights the complexity and potential improvements of SFSC.



Common challenges of participating regions include:

- **Consumer Awareness and Marketing:** A recurring challenge is the low level of consumer awareness and recognition of Alternative Food Networks (AFNs). This lack of visibility hampers growth potential and necessitates significant investment in marketing strategies across all countries to educate and engage consumers about the benefits of supporting local and sustainable food systems.
- **Logistics and Supply Chain Management:** Efficiently managing the supply chain, especially in terms of distribution and logistics, is a notable challenge. Seasonal variations, the delivery radius, and the need for compliance with food safety standards complicate operations, demanding adaptable and innovative logistical solutions.
- **Collaboration and Cooperation:** The need for better collaboration and cooperation among various stakeholders, including producers, consumers, logistics providers, and policymakers, is highlighted as a critical factor for overcoming operational challenges and achieving economies of scale.
- **Regulatory and Policy Support:** Navigating regulatory environments and securing adequate policy support are common challenges. Compliance with evolving regulations, bureaucratic burdens, and the need for financial and infrastructural support are crucial areas requiring further attention.

Alongside the shared challenges, several common opportunities also emerge, including:

- **Growing Consumer Demand:** The increasing consumer demand for organic, regional, and sustainably produced food across these countries represents a significant opportunity for AFNs to expand and thrive.
- **Technological Advancements:** Leveraging digital platforms and technological solutions offers a path to enhance supply chain efficiency, improve coordination among stakeholders, and increase market reach and consumer engagement.
- **Sustainability and ESG Targets:** The global focus on environmental, social, and governance (ESG) targets and the push for more sustainable food production and consumption practices open new avenues for AFNs to innovate and attract support from consumers and policymakers alike.
- **Collaborative Models:** Developing collaborative networks and partnerships can address logistical challenges, reduce costs, and facilitate knowledge sharing and best practices, enhancing the overall resilience and competitiveness of AFNs.

Despite the varied socio-economic landscapes of Poland, Slovenia, Austria, Italy, and Hungary, SFSCs within these countries face a set of shared challenges and opportunities that underscore the importance of targeted interventions and collaborative efforts. Addressing these common issues requires a multifaceted approach that includes enhancing consumer awareness, improving logistics and supply chain management, fostering cooperation among stakeholders, and advocating for supportive policies and regulations. By leveraging these opportunities and overcoming the challenges, SFSCs can contribute significantly to the development of more resilient, sustainable, and equitable food systems in Central Europe.



In summary, the analysis of SFSCs highlights the diverse yet interconnected challenges and opportunities across different regions. From the importance of effective logistics and warehousing to the role of consumer awareness and technological integration, the success of AFNs in Central Europe depends on addressing both region-specific and common obstacles. While transportation, warehouse management, and regulatory compliance pose significant challenges, there is a shared opportunity in rising consumer demand for local, sustainable products, as well as the potential for technology to streamline processes.

Across Poland, Slovenia, Austria, Italy, and Hungary, fostering cooperation among producers, logistics providers, consumers, and policymakers emerges as a critical component of success. Collaborative networks can enhance resource efficiency, meet consumer demand, and increase resilience to external disruptions. Strategic support from governments, alongside investments in marketing and digital tools, will empower AFNs to better meet the demand for high-quality, sustainable food while fostering economic development and sustainability goals in these regions. Through targeted interventions and continued stakeholder collaboration, SFSCs can become central to the development of sustainable, resilient food systems in Central Europe.