

SHORT FOOD SUPPLY CHAINS IN THE LOCAL AGRI-FOOD SYSTEM OF THE NORTH-EAST DEVELOPMENT REGION

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Abstract. *Due to their implications within the regional agri-food system, short food supply chains are playing an increasingly significant role in local supply networks, offering a viable and sustainable alternative to conventional agri-food chains. These chains are considered innovative and have numerous economic, social, environmental, health, and cultural implications for local communities and producers in the North-East Region. This article briefly presents these implications through a review of the relevant literature. The contribution of short food supply chains to the resilience of food systems has become increasingly evident over the past decade. In our view, the philosophy of local agro-economic development needs to evolve: conventional and alternative agriculture must coexist harmoniously without negatively impacting each other. The chains that interconnect producers and final consumers should be integrated into a socio-economic ecosystem based on sustainable and durable principles, and the local agri-food market must adapt to these new demands.*

Keywords: short food supply chains, local food systems, Nord-East Development Region

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1. Introduction

Local agri-food systems play a crucial role in the architecture of food security, not only by ensuring consistent access to fresh and high-quality products but also by supporting the local economy and strengthening community cohesion. These systems have the significant advantage of reducing reliance on global/conventional supply chains, thereby decreasing vulnerability to external disruptions such as economic, pandemic, or climate crises. At the same time, local agri-food systems support local producers and promote cultural and gastronomic diversity (local identity), offering a conducive environment for sustainable entrepreneurial innovations and the development of vibrant rural economies that are harmoniously integrated into broader regional development strategies.

In a societal context characterized by continuous transformation and adaptation to community needs, where healthy food, the resilience of actors throughout the agri-food ecosystem, environmental protection, and sustainability are becoming

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priorities, the promotion of short food supply chains (SFSCs) emerges as an equitable alternative solution for supporting local producers and developing a resilient, fair, and sustainable local agri-food system.

SFSCs are closely linked to circularity and environmental sustainability (transportation, production methods, carbon emissions), health, food quality, consumer behaviour, the direct producer-consumer relationship, and the local economy. However, these factors cannot be generalized across all types of SFSCs. Economic circularity and sustainability characteristics heavily depend on spatial location, the type of SFSC, and the individual attitudes of consumers and small local producers involved in the chain.

2. Materials and methods

Regarding the research methodology, the indirect research technique was primarily employed, also the existing articles and specialized studies in the field being consulted. In the specialized literature addressing short supply chains, statistical data can mostly be found within individual case studies, the majority of the articles and studies containing predominantly qualitative data. More recently, through Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe research projects, in-depth studies on the typology of short supply chains have been conducted, both qualitative and quantitative, their results made available through open access via final and progress reports. Best practice examples of local agricultural systems and functional short supply chains from the North-East Development Region were gathered through fieldwork conducted by the author (direct research) or through discussions with various local actors.

3. Results and discussions

3.1. The agri-food sector and functional short food supply chains (SFSCs) in the North-East Development Region

The agri-food sector in Romania's North-East Development Region represents an essential pillar of the regional economy [31], characterized by the cultural and agricultural diversity specific to the area. This region, which includes Bacău, Botoșani, Iași, Neamț, Suceava and Vaslui counties, benefits from favourable natural conditions for agricultural practices, with fertile soils and a varied climate that supports the cultivation of a wide range of crops. The region is dominated by hilly and plateau areas, which are ideal for the cultivation of cereals, vineyards, and fruit orchards, as well as for pastures and meadows used for raising livestock (cattle, sheep, goats) in the mountainous areas.

The agricultural landscape of the region is dominated by two main sectors: crop cultivation and zootechnics. In terms of crop cultivation, cereals such as wheat,

corn, and barley are staple crops, with significant production in the counties of Vaslui, Botoșani, Iași, and Neamț. Additionally, oilseeds, particularly sunflower and rapeseed, are widely grown, contributing substantially to the production of vegetable oils. The region is also noted for its rich orchards, particularly apple and plum orchards in Fălticeni - Rădășeni fruit-growing basin, alongside cherry orchards in Iași county, as well as for vegetables cultivated both in open fields and greenhouses, exemplified by Târgu-Frumos vegetable-growing basin. Furthermore, viticulture holds a prominent position, with renowned vineyards in Cotnari, Huși, Strunga, and Averești areas, which have received numerous international awards for their wines, becoming a regional symbol. Animal husbandry focuses on cattle farming for both meat and milk in Suceava, Botoșani, and Neamț counties, where there are both significant producers and milk processors. Pork and poultry production is also well-represented in farms located in Bacău, Iași, and Neamț. In the mountainous and hilly areas, sheep and goat farming is a traditional activity, with a recent trend towards an increase in livestock numbers in the hilly areas, rather than in the mountainous zones.

The regional food processing industry is well-represented, with significant capacities in the processing of meat, dairy products, cereals, fruits, and vegetables. For instance, major players in the meat and meat products sector include Agricola International SA Bacău, Kosarom SA and Avi Top SA Iași, Vanbet SRL Vaslui, as well as Sagrod SRL and Doly Com SRL Botoșani. The dairy sector is dynamic, with numerous milk and cheese factories operating in the counties of Suceava, Botoșani, Neamț, and Bacău. Notable regional brands include Rarăul, Five Continents, Solomonescu, TCE 3 Brazi, Almera, Laktotrio, Tudia, and Huzur. Suceava County remains the dairy capital of the region even after the closure of two Lactalis Group units (La Dorna). In the bakery and pastry sector, Pambac SA and Panimon SA Bacău, Panifcom SRL Iași, Mopan Suceava SA, and Casa Pâinii SRL Botoșani are notable examples of established local producers. In viticulture, Cotnari SA stands out as one of the most esteemed companies nationwide.

Traditional agricultural activities, such as the cultivation of cereals, vegetables, fruit trees, and vineyards, alongside livestock farming (swine, sheep, cattle, etc.), predominate in the region. The significance of the agri-food sector is also reflected in the large number of small farmers and family enterprises (subsistence farms) that dominate the rural landscape, preserving traditional production methods and contributing to the maintenance of local biodiversity. In the past decade, the region has witnessed a rise in organic and sustainable production initiatives, driven by the growing demand for healthy, high-quality food. However, logistical and transport infrastructure remains a challenge, affecting the efficiency of distribution and the competitiveness of local products on national and international markets. Despite these challenges, the agri-food sector is evolving through modernization efforts (including the growing presence of large

agricultural farms and corporate groups), supported by European funds (PNDR 2021-2027), and increasingly frequent collaborations between authorities, large and small producers, and non-governmental organizations. These initiatives share the common goal of fostering the sustainable and durable growth of this vital sector for the region.

The functional short food supply chains in the North-East Development Region play an important role in promoting local economic development, supporting sustainable agriculture, healthy eating, and preserving cultural and gastronomic heritage. These short chains typically involve direct links between producers and consumers, reducing the number of intermediaries and, consequently, the costs and carbon emissions associated with long-distance transportation. The region, known for its fertile soils and cultural diversity, benefits from a varied agricultural landscape stretching from east to west (plain vs. mountainous areas), where small farmers and local processors strive to market their products as efficiently and profitably as possible, in a highly competitive environment.

The North-East Development Region is home to some of the largest and most influential agricultural holdings in the country, playing a significant role in both regional and national agricultural economies. While these large entities are often associated with conventional logistical chains, it is noteworthy that some of them also leverage their production through the principles of SFSCs. Here are a few notable examples:

- Agricola International SA – Bacău County (integrated system): one of the largest poultry meat and meat product producers in Romania, with extensive activities in processing and distribution. The company operates several own stores regionally and has strong collaborations with the retail market.
- TCE 3 Brazi Group SA – Neamț County (integrated system): known for its production of cereals, oilseeds, and other crops, this group is also active in livestock farming and forestry. Its products are mainly marketed through retail chains and partner stores in the region.
- Kosarom Group SA – Iași County (integrated system): specialized in pork production and meat products, Kosarom is one of the largest companies in this sector in the region, operating several producer-owned stores while maintaining a strong relationship with the retail market.
- Pambac SA – Bacău County (integrated system): with operations in the bakery sector, Pambac is a major player in the bread and pastry market, operating its own stores and maintaining close ties with the local retail sector.
- Șerban Holding Group – Bacău County (integrated system): this company is a major producer and processor of cereals and other crops, also active in the

livestock sector. In recent years, it has become an increasingly dynamic presence in the local and regional markets, operating several own stores locally.

- Vanbet SRL – Vaslui County: a key player in the regional market, Vanbet has implemented an integrated system of crop and poultry production, along with meat and dairy processing, to enhance sustainability and control over factors affecting product quality and environmental protection. Regionally, the company owns a network of 14 stores but also collaborates with the retail market and partner stores.

- Five Continents Group and Lacto Solomonescu – Botoșani County: these are the leading producers and processors in the dairy and dairy product industry in Botoșani County. They have a local network of their own stores, regional partner stores, and a strong collaboration with the retail market.

- Moldova Farming SRL – Bacău County: specialized in the production of cereals and oilseeds, this company operates a vast area of agricultural land and manages several logistics warehouses at the regional and national levels. It is also involved in the trade of agricultural inputs.

- Orgapic SRL and Agro Iulia SRL – Iași County: these two economic operators manage the largest areas of organic farming in the county, with activities in the production of cereals, oilseeds, fodder, and more. Unfortunately, a significant portion of their output is exported as raw material.

- Băcănia Boierească SRL – Suceava County (integrated system): one of the most dynamic companies in the livestock sector in Suceava, Băcănia Boierească serves as a model of an integrated logistics chain. The company is implementing a project under sub-measure 16.4 dedicated to the development of SFSCs and the local market, and operates its own stores in Suceava and Bucharest, along with activities in the HoReCa sector.

These farms and agricultural holdings play a significant role in the agricultural development of the North-East Development Region, with some managing over 10,000 hectares. They make a substantial contribution to the local and national economy through food production and processing, job creation, and the promotion of sustainable agricultural practices. In the future, it is expected that these entities will evolve into fully integrated operations along the entire value chain (particularly in the cereal sector), including processing raw materials and producing finished goods, gradually reducing their reliance on raw material exports. On the other hand, market access for small local producers remains one of the greatest challenges for the regional economy.

In recent years, an increasing number of local producers and processors offering high-quality products have emerged, primarily utilizing the principles of short food supply chains. Brands such as Băcănia Boierească, Magazia Morăriței,

Fergus Farm, Ținutul Călimani, Strunga, Codrul Boieresc, Carmangeria cu Gust, Averești, Legumele de acasă (Hoșliag family), Elexius, Deluț, Afumătoria Noastră, Scufița din Homița, Panere, La Izvorul Dornei, and Huzur are just a few examples that have built a strong reputation and a responsible community of consumers over time. Their products are often marketed based on the principles of SFSC. Some of the products from these brands are certified as mountain, traditionally attested, or organic products, ensuring their quality [5].

At the same time, modernized neighborhood food markets (e.g., Piața Traian in Vaslui, Piața Centrală in Piatra-Neamț) and open-air markets (Piața Păcurari in Iași, the open-air market in Suceava), producer fairs and gastronomic events (such as Iașul în Bucate, Piața Verde de Weekend Iași, Târgul ApiMoldova, Aliment Expo Bacău), brunch events (Brunch în Țara Fagilor, Eco Brunch in Ținutul Zimbrului, or Brunch Boieresc), farm-gate sales (Fergus Farm in Poiana Largului, Mărul de Aur in Crasna, La Cimpoeș, Marcel in Răchiteni), and sales along roadways (Păstrăvăria Cheița in Bicaz, Strunga, La Cimpoeș – Doi Lei, La Baci – Câmpulung Moldovenesc), producer-owned shops (Magazia Morăriței, Băcănia Boierească, Lacto Solomonescu, Compan, Kosarom, Pambac), grocers (Băcănia Nouă, Degustarium, AER, Eco Băcănia Happy, Șerban), food hubs (Nord Natural Hub in Câmpulung Moldovenesc), online platforms, and social media promoting local producers and processors (such as the Gust de Iași platform, Iașul vrea produse locale and Produse locale Suceava communities) as well as agricultural associations/cooperatives (Asociația Producătorilor Locali ”Produs în Iași,” Asociația ”Produs în Bucovina,” Asociația Producătorilor ”Cașcavalul de Săveni,” Cooperativa Agricolă Agrolact Moldova, Cooperativa Nucul de Aur, or Unirea Gospodarilor) are just a few concrete examples of functional SFSCs. These initiatives contribute to strengthening the local and regional economy and promoting the consumption of healthy food. They enable farmers to achieve better prices for their products, thereby increasing local income and the economic sustainability of rural communities.

The growing interest in short food supply chains is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, situated at the intersection of agriculture, economics, environmental protection, culture, and public health, highlighting the importance of an integrated approach to the intelligent management of resources.

A key aspect of SFSCs in this region is educating and raising consumer awareness about the benefits of consuming local and seasonal products. Additionally, these chains encourage organic farming practices, reducing the use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers, and support biodiversity conservation by promoting traditional varieties and environmentally friendly production methods. European funding programs and government initiatives play an essential role in the development of these chains, providing resources for the modernization of

agricultural infrastructure, the creation of efficient distribution networks, and the promotion of local products in national and international markets. Therefore, SFSCs in the North-East Development Region can serve as a best-practice model for sustainable development, combining economic, social, and environmental benefits in an integrated and cohesive framework.

Connecting to the specialized literature, it is evident that there is still no universally accepted definition of the concept of SFSC, leading to ambiguities in its understanding. Some researchers who have studied this topic define SFSCs through various methods of marketing agri-food products, considering the reduction in the number of intermediaries in the agri-food supply chain and/or the shortening of the physical, geographical distance between the place of production and the actual point of consumption [40].

In this context, it is important to emphasize that reducing the number of intermediaries in SFSCs does not necessarily equate to direct delivery (in the sense of the complete absence of intermediaries). These systems can also include forms of trade where at most one intermediary is involved [3, 23, 40]. With the removal of intermediaries from the distribution chain, their responsibilities must be assumed either by the producer, who may adopt various marketing and management strategies (such as direct sales at the farm, roadside sales, traveling "to places", own stores, agricultural markets, online platforms, or participation in fairs and festivals), or by the final consumer, who may travel to the farm, prearranged locations, the producer's store/agricultural market, or place online orders.

Regulation No. 1305/2013, which establishes the framework for rural development policy for the 2014-2020 period, explicitly mentions measures dedicated to organizing the food supply chain, including the SFSC. This is described as "a supply chain involving a limited number of economic operators committed to cooperation, local economic development, and close geographical and social relationships between producers, processors, and consumers" [7].

SFSCs are often perceived as "networks of connected and interdependent actors who cooperate to control, manage, and improve the flow of products, services, resources, and information from farm to fork, aiming to reduce intermediaries and the physical distance between producers and final consumers" [10, 27], and they can also be used as an umbrella concept [19, 26].

Thus, local agri-food systems and SFSCs are currently topics of interest, reflecting community trends toward more sustainable and resilient practices in the agri-food sector, fully aligned with the European Strategy From Farm to Fork and the European Green Deal.

3.2. Implications of SFSCs in the regional agri-food system

The literature emphasizes that SFSCs are characterized within local agri-food systems by a direct connection between local producers and final consumers, involving a minimal number of intermediaries (at most one intermediary). This direct relationship facilitates greater transparency, clear traceability, and accountability throughout the entire value chain, from farm to fork. Due to their capacity to enhance the sustainability and resilience of local agri-food systems, SFSCs have become a topic of significant interest, offering multiple benefits. Research highlights that SFSCs provide considerable advantages in economic, social, environmental protection, cultural, and community health aspects (Figure 1).

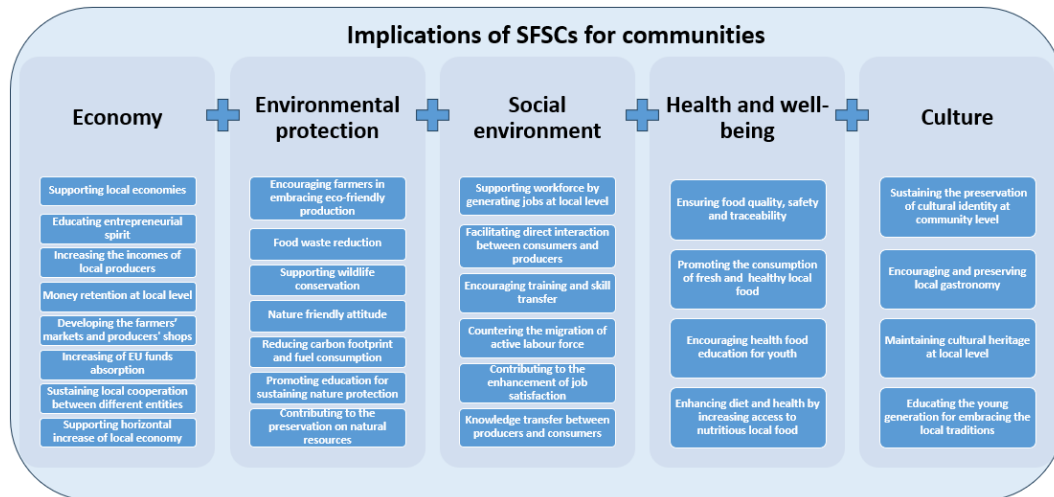


Fig. 1. Implications of SFSCs for communities in the North-East Development Region
Source: adapted after [38].

Short food supply chains have the capacity to maintain existing jobs and create new employment opportunities locally [4, 9, 29], combat external migration and gentrification [13], stimulate information exchange and knowledge transfer, and help protect local biodiversity [6, 9]. They also motivate local producers and processors to implement environmentally friendly production and processing methods [34, 40], contribute to increasing producer incomes and reducing certain types of expenses [28], and, in some cases, even mitigate economic uncertainties and risks [19]. The involvement of the entire community-local producers and processors, entrepreneurs, consumers, authorities, and other decision-makers-in promoting SFSCs significantly strengthens the local economy [9, 15, 35]. It supports local services and suppliers by endorsing producer shops and farmers' markets or organizing fairs and gastronomic events. These networks enhance synergies with other sectors [19], while also supporting the conservation of cultural and gastronomic heritage and local identity, as well as the development of

tourism [2] and local gastronomy (the Horeca sector). Improving public health through access to more balanced and nutritionally rich food is another noted positive aspect [1, 22], as well as the encouragement and benefits of cooperation and collaboration among local producers and processors [8], and the social interactions and knowledge transfer between producers and consumers [16, 36].

SFSCs can play a crucial role in ensuring food quality and security, both through direct communication between producers and consumers and by guaranteeing product traceability. However, product quality largely depends on the fact that these goods originate from more sustainable agricultural practices, characteristic to the post-productivist model [39]. These chains are considered the most suitable for promoting high-quality, nutritionally rich food products, as they encourage sustainable and efficient practices, while also addressing issues such as reducing food waste and promoting responsible consumption of healthier, more sustainable, and ethical food. Responsible consumers are increasingly interested in fresh, nutritious, seasonal, and safe foods [21], and short supply chains can significantly influence preferences for healthier and more sustainable products. They contribute to reducing food waste, promote ethical considerations, and provide more information about food and its origin.

Last but not least, several experts have highlighted the multifunctional and cultural role of short food supply chains in promoting social inclusion, environmentally friendly behaviours, and health and well-being, both in urban and rural communities [11, 30, 37, 44, 45]. Circular economy, urban agroecology, and urban metabolism focus on strengthening rural-urban food networks, reinforcing connections between producers and consumers. These concepts aim, among other things, to reduce carbon emissions and fuel consumption while promoting more efficient management of resources and food waste [32, 41, 43].

The sustainable development of rural areas in emerging regions, including the North-East Development Region, is an essential condition for overall societal sustainable development, as a significant portion of the population remains rural, more vulnerable, and less resilient. Although agriculture in emerging regions seems to be following a favourable trend, it has not yet become the main driver of improved well-being in rural areas or the eradication of poverty. For this reason, recent studies have focused on identifying solutions that promote the sustainable development of agriculture and rural spaces in all their complexity. To develop sustainable agriculture within the rural economy, a shift from the scale economy model to one based on sustainable local economies is needed, among other things. This transition also involves the reconfiguration of food supply chains, influenced by socio-economic and environmental concerns [12, 14, 17, 25, 42]. The transformation of conventional agricultural systems requires the development of new alternative forms that contrast mass production, such as local agri-food

systems, SFSCs, rural networks interconnected with urban ones, or integrated models like CRFS—City Region Food Systems [18, 24, 33]. Additionally, the shift to alternative systems of local food production and supply is a highly complex issue that remains unresolved, as the conventional production system appears to be more democratic and accessible to consumers with diverse income levels. For these reasons, the two systems must coexist and be complementary.

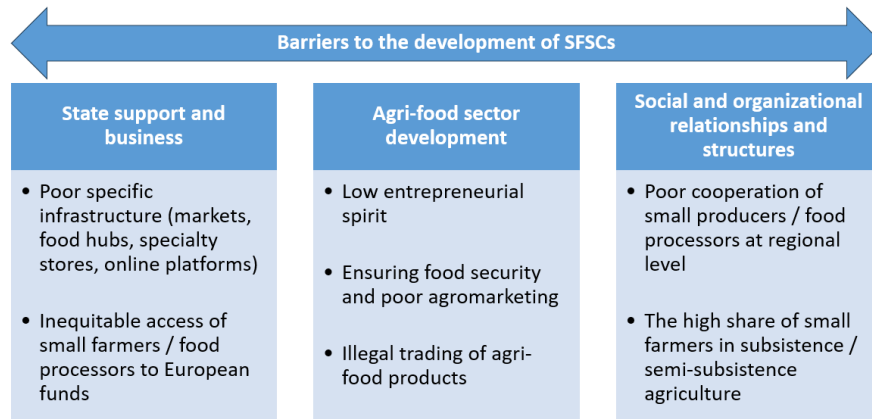


Fig. 2. Barriers to the development of SFSCs in the North-East Development Region
Source: adapted after [20].

However, the development of short food supply chains in the North-East Development Region is constrained by several barriers specific to Eastern European states [20], schematically presented in Figure 2: the still extremely high proportion of small farmers engaged in non-taxable subsistence/semi-subsistence agriculture, weak cooperation among producers/processors, poor specialized infrastructure, inequitable access of small producers/processors to European funds, ensuring food safety and security, lower entrepreneurial spirit in the agri-food sector, deficient digitalization and agromarketing, and the persistence of the black market in the agri-food sector.

Conclusions

(1) At the regional level, conventional food supply chains do not appear sufficient to achieve sustainable development goals. Complementarily, it is essential to also develop alternative agricultural systems that support short local/regional supply chains and contribute to promoting local identity in the food sector. Therefore, a paradigm shift is necessary in the regional agri-food system: conventional and alternative agriculture must coexist harmoniously, without either side suffering, to ensure the sustainable development of local agri-food systems in the medium and long term.

(2) Short food supply chains (SFSC) represent an alternative and viable solution for the efficient functioning of local agri-food systems, fully aligned with the European strategies such as From Farm to Fork and The European Green Deal. These chains are better connected to circularity, local economic development, environmental protection, public health, food quality, consumer behaviour, the direct producer-consumer relationship, and rural-urban connections (CRFS – City Region Food Systems). Most of the benefits and implications of SFSCs discussed throughout the article can be extrapolated to the North-East Development Region.

(3) The agri-food sector in the North-East Development Region represents a key pillar in supporting the regional economy, with significant potential for growth and particularly for diversification, both through the sustainable development of large agricultural farms and by promoting the artisanal products of small local producers. The coexistence of these two categories of producers is vital for the region's economy. The promotion of SFSCs and the active support of local producers and processors can significantly contribute to increasing the sustainability, diversity, and economic resilience of the region.

(4) The examples of good practice in local agri-food systems from the North-East Development Region, briefly mentioned in the article, demonstrate the harmonious coexistence of large and small producers, supported by various types of SFSCs: producer-owned shops networks or direct retail collaborators, farm-gate shops or sales along roadways, grocers, butcheries, permanent and open-air farmers' markets, direct home deliveries, milk automatic dispensers, mobile sales points or food trucks, association/ cooperative stores, online platforms, social media groups, and the organization of gastronomic events such as brunches or fairs. These initiatives lead us to believe that the regional agri-food system is largely functional, sustainable, and resilient enough. However, the future of these systems depends on the ability of local producers to adapt to the competitive market and on the solidarity and support of the local community.

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