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Conference Paper

The role of short food supply chains in the development of small-scale local producers case study: Harghita County

Provided in Cooperation with:

The Research Institute for Agriculture Economy and Rural Development (ICEADR), Bucharest

Suggested Citation: Tanasă, Lucian; Brumă, Ioan-Sebastian; Doboş, Sebastian (2015) : The role of short food supply chains in the development of small-scale local producers case study: Harghita County, In: Agrarian Economy and Rural Development - Realities and Perspectives for Romania. 6th Edition of the International Symposium, November 2015, Bucharest, The Research Institute for Agricultural Economy and Rural Development (ICEADR), Bucharest, pp. 286-293

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/163315>

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THE ROLE OF SHORT FOOD SUPPLY CHAINS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SMALL-SCALE LOCAL PRODUCERS CASE STUDY: HARGHITA COUNTY

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Abstract: *Currently, short food supply chains represent a viable alternative to the conventional globalized supply chains, thus gradually becoming a more and more prominent actor in the global logistics sector. The previously mentioned short food supply chains are in general extremely varied both in terms of nature and practices, benefiting producers as well as consumers from the socio-economic, environmental and health improvement points of view. In most cases, short food supply chains effectively reconnect end consumers, especially the young generations, with local small agri-food producers, thus contributing to the process of educating and/or sometimes reeducating individuals about the importance of adopting a healthy diet. Romania holds, in this respect, a high potential for the development of short food supply chains due to a series of factors such as: the large number of small semi-subsistence agricultural holdings (under 5 hectares); the persistent historical rural-urban link, as evidenced by the methods of obtaining food and groceries; the growing number of local certified producers, and last but not least the great variety of specialized shops. Moreover, short supply chains stand solid chances of development in the near future as a result of sizeable financial support provided by the 2014-2020 National Rural Development Programme, which includes special promotion and development measures for small farmers and the short food supply sector. The present case study, which is based on field research undertaken across the Harghita county, aims to provide evidence of the existence and viability of short food supply chains in the agri food sector. The study identifies new associative forms between local producers and traditional processors and suppliers (butcher`s, meat processors, bakers etc.), specialized shops (groceries, mobile food carts, milk vending machines, on-line shops etc.), as well as new methods of promoting local traditional cuisine (gastronomic routes, food markets, food festivals).*

Key words: *short food supply chains, local food producers, new associative forms*

INTRODUCTION

On a global scale, approximately 80% of the food produced and marketed in 2011 was at the local level. As for the European Union, this figure was estimated at about 20% (Committee of the Regions, 2011). Local food systems are currently regarded as a key issue, not having sufficiently benefited from a thorough analysis. Thus, one can point out the fact that a more comprehensive socio-economic and legal study is needed, with the aim of improving the local food system`s structural, professional and innovative features (Kneafsey et al., 2013; Tanasă, 2014, p.184).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

By reviewing the research literature focused on the short food supply chain topic, one can easily see that most articles and studies are supported mainly by qualitative data to substantiate claims, due to the fact that statistical data of a quantitative nature is only available for individual case studies. An overview of the existing literature has been conducted in relation to short food supply chains and local food systems. Secondly, data and information on currently active economic operators (processing/selling units) registered at the Harghita Sanitary Veterinary and Food Safety Authority (Harghita SVFSA) was used. Available on-line data sources regarding small-scale farmers actively promoting local SFSCs was also included. Thirdly, the article aims to show three case studies representative of Harghita County.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

În authors Fleury and Moustier`s (1999) opinion, short food supply chains (SFSCs) are a major constituent of suburban agriculture, having originated long before 20th Century specific globalized agricultural systems. Furthermore, SFSCs are considered to be an old form of distribution, having been historically documented since ancient times, even though the presence of intermediaries` between farmers/producers and end consumers can be traced back before the expansion of trade (Aubry & Chiffolleau, 2009, p. 55; Tanasă, 2015a, p. 196).

By reviewing the SFSC literature currently available, one can note that an unanimously accepted official definition of the SFSC/LFS concept is not yet available. Thus, uncertainty and confusion arise, especially regarding the direct sales concept. According to several authors, SFSC/LFS are widely understood as the means of selling agri-food sector products on a limited number of intermediary basis, and/or on a limited geographic area, thus shortening as much as possible the distance between the producer and the end consumer. It should also be noted such reduced number of intermediaries (links) are not synonymous with the notion of direct sale (nil number of links). SFSCs are rather to be understood as means of selling through only one single trade intermediary (e.g. cooperative shops, specialist shops, supermarkets, etc.). (Marechal, 2008; Aubry & Chiffolleau, 2009, p. 55; Tanasă, 2015a, p. 197)

For instance, the UK`s Soil Association`s (2001) proposed definition of the SFSC/LFS notion is: “A system of producing, processing and trading, primarily of sustainable and organic forms of food production, where the physical and economic activity is largely contained and controlled within the locality or region where it was produced, which delivers health, economic, environmental and social benefits to the communities in those areas.” (Kneafsey et al., 2013, p. 27)

A noteworthy and often cited economic benefit associated with SFSCs is that regarding producers` increased additional returns. According to Lencucha et al. (1998) (cited in Henneberry et al., 2009, p. 65) an estimated additional return of 40-80% can be obtained by selling through farmers` markets (Lencucha et al., (1998)). According to yet other authors agri-food sector producers can add a sort of “price premium” when selling through SFSCs (Pearson et al., 2011), and are able to receive a greater share of the profits (Sage, 2003). Furthermore, in contrast to spatially extended food systems, farmers/producers operating in LFS have more opportunities of diversifying their businesses. As to opportunities of extra market margin and “price premium”, it is very important to stress that producers have managed to obtain such economic benefits due to the consumers` current general positive perception of the overall attributes of produce marketed through LFS/SFSCs. In this respect one can notice that the additional information offered by farmers themselves is a major contributor to the consumers` perceived perception that produce sold by means of SFSC is of a higher quality in comparison to produce sold by vendors involved in non-SFSCs (Broderick et al., 2011).

By analyzing case studies included in several authors` works, one can note that different marketing strategies used by small holdings were feasible especially when negotiation costs were minimized, particularly those referring to the labor requirements to market the product beyond the farm-gate. Labor costs, in most cases, were very much reduced due to the use of family labor, volunteer labor, apprentice labor, casual labor etc. Furthermore, transaction costs were also minimized by increasing the volume of products sold through selling of bulk packs, attendance at well-frequented farmers` markets and last but not least cost-effective brand promotion.

In the last 20 years, the E.U.`s Western developed economies have reconsidered short food supply chains, which are now regarded as innovative solutions for sustaining local agriculture systems, ensuring rural communities development and also healthy food consumption. In contrast, in a series of emerging economies of the European Union (especially Romania) SFSCs were prior to 1989 effectively a “crisis” solution for the urban population whose access to food was severely limited due to state authorities` decision to massively export. At present, for the same emerging economies, SFSCs are a viable solution to ensure the survival of small agricultural holdings` survival (Tanasă, 2015a, p. 214).

Table 1. Overview of types of LFS/SFSCs in the European Union

SFSC classification	SFSC Sub-classification
1. Sales in proximity	Community Supported Agriculture (CSA – associated members are entitled to a percentage share of total output volume in exchange for financial and labor inputs): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - on farm sales: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - farm shops; - farm based hospitality; - roadside sales; - pick-your-own/ “U-pick” schemes. - off-farm sales – commercial sector: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - farmers’ markets and other types of markets; - farmed owned retail outlet; - food festivals/ tourism events; - sales directly to consumer co-operatives/ buying groups; - sales to retailers who source from local farmers and who make clear the identity of the farmers; - sales to the “HoCaRe” sector as long as the identity of the farmer is made clear to end consumers; - Off Farm Sales – catering sector: sales to hospitals, school units, penitentiaries, orphanages, asylums of elders etc. The catering sector institution in this case is to be understood as the end consumer.
2. Sales at a distance (may be achieved by farmers acting individually or collectively, but produce has to be traceable back to a named farmer)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - farm direct deliveries (delivery schemes); - on-line sales; - speciality retailers.

Despite its considerable agricultural potential (9.4 million hectares of arable land), Romania faces many problems including low labor productivity, underused land potential, fragmented agricultural holdings, lack of storage and processing units, qualified workforce migration etc. While some view the currently estimated 3 million small agricultural holdings classified as having under 5 hectares as a major challenge to the Romanian agri-food sector, for others they are the very premise of the future development of short food supply chains.

By analyzing the current state of facts in Harghita County, one can note that small agricultural farmers are active on the local agri-food sector market, especially Székely community members, who show strong solidarity and entrepreneurial skills in promoting small-scale farmers and producers, SFSCs included.

Harghita County’s agri-food sector is largely appreciated, as a result of:

- The renowned quality of potatoes farmed in the “Giurgeu” Depression and “Ciucul de Jos” microregion;
- The bakery industry products (Székely traditional potato bread, Székely chimney cake (Kürtőskalács), small-scale bakery industry – 44 bakery shops as of 2015;
- The curative properties of its springwaters – brands like *Borsec*, *Tuşnad*, *Stânceni*, *Perla Harghitei*, *Biborţeni*, *Spring Harghita/ Mineral Quantum* are widely appreciated as well as locally/internationally acknowledged by means of awards;
- Edible wild fruit (cranberries, raspberries, red bilberries, blackberries etc) and also forest mushrooms foraging (edible boletus, golden chanterelle/girolle, orange agaric, honey agaric etc) widely found in both mountainous and hillside areas;
- Small agricultural holdings` raising of livestock (milk, dairy and meat production) mostly in the hillside and mountainous areas of *Topliţa*, *Tulgheş*, *Borsec*, *Bilbor*, *Sâncrăieni*, *Valea Strâmbă*;
- Small scale apiculture practices resulting mostly in organic honey for human consumption but also intended for therapeutical products; in this respect it can be noted that beekeeping is an ancient practice in many Harghita areas (numerous beekeepers currently operate as Authorized Individual(s)); at present migratory beekeeping is still widely practiced throughout the year;

Table 2. List of local agri-food sector producers involved in SFSCs in Harghita County (products of non-animal origin)

Nr. crt.	Producer`s/retailer`s name	Place of production/producer or retailer	Range of produce/ Types of SFSCs
1.	Szent Abrahami SRL	Avrămești	Phytotherapeutic products – traditional Székely teas & herbs (on-line shop included)
2.	Piposz Impex SRL	Lunca de Sus	Bakery products - „ <i>Taligakerek</i> ” homebread
3.	Silvimex Srl	Lueta	Bakery products– Székely potato bread
4.	Gall Erszebet II	Gheorgheni	Fruit preserves - jams, jellies, organic syrups etc. (on-line shops & retail outlet)
5.	Portik Sándor II	Miercurea Ciuc	Honeybee & derivatives
6.	Jaky Impex SRL	Tușnad	Bakery products– Székely potato bread
7.	Barabás Rozália II	Sângeorgiu de Pădure	Confectionery products – saltline crackers
8.	Fito-Bau SRL	Atid	Alcoholic beverages – pear brandy & wild fruit based liquors
9.	Szasz Ilyes II	Corund	Honeybee & derivatives
10.	Ioli Mex SRL	Târnovița	Food products of non-animal origin - “Abel” mustard
11.	Fitosic Farm SRL	Cozmeni	Fruit preserves - jams, jellies, organic syrups etc. (on-line shops & retail outlet)
12.	Truffoir SRL	Miercurea Ciuc	Truffle harvesting & processing
13.	Vel Fungo SRL	Siculeni	Forest mushroom harvesting
14.	Asociația Székelygyümölcs - Asociația Pomicultorilor și prelucrătorilor de fructe	Lupeni, Zetea, Odorheiu Secuiesc	Fruit preserves - jams, jellies, organic syrups & juices (on-line shops & retail outlet) Fruit farming and processing – fruit beverages, fruit preserve
15.	Paniprod SRL	Crișeni	Bakery and confectionery products
16.	Pilcoop SRL	Gheorgheni	Bakery and confectionery products
17.	Buzakalasz SRL	Miercurea Ciuc	Bakery and confectionery products
18.	Baby Pan SRL	Dobeni	Bakery and confectionery products
19.	Asociația Davidvara Egyesulet	Șiclod, Cristuru Secuiesc	Phytotherapeutic products - traditional Székely teas
20.	Apele minerale Borsec, Stânceni, Perla Harghitei, Tușnad, Spring Harghita (Mineral Quantum)	Borsec, Stânceni, Tușnad, Sâncrăieni	Springwater bottling – sparkling & non-sparkling

Source: own elaboration based on Harghita “Sanitary Veterinary Food Safety Agency” database (ANSVSA Harghita)

According to statistic data available for 2015 from the Harghita Sanitary Veterinary and Food Safety Agency, out of a total of 1020 officially registered economic operators, 679 were local processing units delivering food products of animal origin, whilst 341 units were specialized in processing/vending products of non-animal origin. Most of these units active in the food retail sector are using selling methods and practices specific to SFSCs. Out of the 679 local units delivering food products of animal origin 21 are butcher`s, 21 meat suppliers, 5 game collecting units, 49 on-farm milk processing plants, 1 off-farm processing plant, 13 raw milk vending machines, 5 aquafarms, 1 fishery, 3 centres specialized in extracting, collecting and supply of honeybee, wax and other similar products, 214 beehives, 1 honey and honeybee derivatives shop, 1 fowl egg collecting centre; 189 are restaurants/fast-foods/fast-food trailers, 11 pizza shops, 71 canteens, 1 pastry & bakery, 2 pastry shops, 17 food cart vendors; 42 tourist accommodation units.

As for the 341 units specialized in processing/vending products of non-animal origin, according to data from the same agency in Harghita County there are 15 breadmakers, 44 bakeries, 153 confectioners, 5 grain millers, 9 pastry shops, 19 fruit and vegetable processing plant, 10 small-scale fruit & vegetable juice plants, 2 potato processing plants, 5 chocolate manufacturers, 6 small-scale pasta producers, 2 small-scale spice processing plants, 33 alcohol processing plants and suppliers, 1 winery, 2 breweries, 7 ice-cream microfactories, 6 beverage plants, 7 springwater bottling plants, 4 commercial mushroom growers, 8 produce packaging factories (www.ansvsa.ro, 2015; Tanasă, 2015b, p. 213).

Table 3. List of local agri-food sector producers involved in SFSCs in Harghita County (products of animal origin)

Nr. crt.	Producer`s/retailer`s name	Place of production/producer or retailer	Range of produce/ Types of SFSCs
1.	Cooperativa Agricolă Produs Secuiesc/ Székely Termek	Miercurea Ciuc	Bakery and pastry products, honeybee & derivatives, dairy products, meat products
2.	Authentic Meat SRL	Gheorgheni, Miercurea Ciuc, Sfântu Gheorghe, Sighișoara, Reghin, Toplița	Meat products & meat specialities (own retail chain named “ <i>Bunătați din Secuime</i> ”/ “ <i>Székelyfalat</i> ”)
3.	Karpaten Milk SRL	Valea Strâmbă, Miercurea Ciuc	Milk and dairy products – retail outlet
4.	Sánta Elemér II	Miercurea Ciuc	Pastry products - chimney cake/ “ <i>kürtös kalács</i> ” (mobile trailer)
5.	Majett Coz SRL	Vlăhița	Pastry products – chimney cake/ “ <i>kürtös kalács</i> ” (mobile trailer)
6.	Country Bakery Prod SRL - Vidéki Pékség	Dealul, Odorheiu Secuiesc	Bakery and pastry products (baker`s shop & pastry-cook's shop)
7.	Gobe Termek	Odorheiu Secuiesc	Bakery and pastry products, honeybee & derivatives, dairy products, meat products/meat specialities - “ <i>Gobe Termek</i> ” umbrella brand (own retail chain)
8.	Gordon Prod SRL	Bisericani	Milk and dairy products – “ <i>Gordon</i> ”, “ <i>Gordon Prime</i> ” brands (own retail outlet)
9.	Lactis SRL	Odorheiu Secuiesc & 10 other cities	Milk and dairy products – <i>Lactis</i> brand (own retail outlet)
10.	Produsele Honor	Izvoare	Game & game specialities (own retail outlet, boarding house)
11.	And Var Mézes SRL	Odorheiu Secuiesc	Pastry & confectionery - <i>turtă dulce tradițională</i>
12.	Arterimpex SRL	Gheorgheni, Miercurea Ciuc, Toplița, Reghin, Sighișoara, Sfântu Gheorghe	Meat products & meat specialities – “ <i>Benedek</i> ” brand (own retail outlets, mobile trailer)
13.	Direcția Silvică Harghita	Miercurea Ciuc	Wild game harvesting/selling, forest mushrooms foraging & edible wild fruit foraging
14.	Strudel Food SRL	Miercurea Ciuc	Bakery & confectionery
15.	Bomilact Mădăraș SRL	Mădăraș-Ciuc	Milk & dairy products – “ <i>Bomilact</i> ” and “ <i>Gobe Termek</i> ” brands
16.	Cooperativa Agricolă Târnavă-Mare	Cristuru Secuiesc	Milk and dairy products – “ <i>Târnalact</i> ” (500 members)

Source: own elaboration based on Harghita “Sanitary Veterinary Food Safety Agency” database (ANSVSA Harghita)

Most small local agri-food sector producers are officially registered as limited liability companies, sole proprietorships and/or partnerships, self-employed/sole traders, state of facts showing a certain degree of adaptability to market requirements.

As a result of a 2013 initiative of both Harghita County Council and the Chamber of Commerce to sustain local/regional producers and agri-food sector products, the “*Székely Termek*” Agricultural Cooperative for Székely Produce was established, comprising 16 small local food cooperatives and 5 sole proprietorships, based on a previous cooperative named “*Hangya/Furnica*” Agricultural Coop. The main goal of “*Székely Termek*” is to market and represent the interests of local small farmers and artisans. Thus, a monthly food festival and market (usually on the 3rd Saturday of the month) is organized in the central food market area of “*Miercurea Ciuc*” aiming to promote local traditional cuisine and produce. A retail outlet was also opened to sell “*Székely Termek*” coop. produce (www.szekelytermek.ro, 2015).

Starting with 2014, a similar food festival is held, called “*Ozosep*”, with the active support of the Hungarian Students` Association In Economics – Bucharest Branch, the “*Balassi*” Institute

(Hungarian Institute in Bucharest), the Harghita County Chamber of Commerce and that of the *Agricultural Cooperative for Székely Produce* (“*Székely Termek*” *Coop.*). Both the food festival and market events are intended to reunite and promote small Székely agricultural holdings` produce from the Harghita and Covasna counties (over 30 farmers). Cultural events and related activities are also a major part of the produce themed festival. Thus, “*Ozosep*” is a good example of a functional SFSC, so that end consumers can choose from a wide range of various produce by means of direct contact with the producers themselves. Food items offered for sale range from local traditional dairy products, meat products (game included), organic syrups and jams, honeybee and honey derivatives, homebaked bread, pastry products (including the well-known “*kürtöskalács*”), traditional alcoholic beverages (e.g. “*palinka*”, home brewed beers) and others.

“*Gobe Termek*” is another noteworthy example of good practices in SFSCs, basically a form of an “umbrella brand” reuniting and effectively representing the interests of several local entrepreneurs in the bakery and the pastry industries (*Interserv Molnár, Country Bakery Prod, Camizo Jack Company, Elekes Pékség, Vánicsa Multiplast, And-Var Mézes and Harmopan*), the milk and dairy industry (*Lactis, Gordon Prod, Bomilact, Karpaten Milk, Lactopan-Kov, Binal Mob*), meat processing industry (*Budvár Húsfeldolgozó, Arterimpex, Primacom – Petry & Bertikris*), poultry farming (*Import-Export Pal-Mar*), fruit farming and the processing industries (Gall Erzsebet), the apiculture industry (Szász Ilyés) and also the beverages industry – mostly of traditional nature (Gall Erzsebet și Carpaticum).

The “*Gobe Termek*” is also an example of an entrepreneurial initiative which resulted due to from the solidarity of the local Székely inhabitants (www.gobetermek.ro, 2012). Members of “*Gobe Termek*” have managed to open retail shops at their own expense in “*Odorheiul Secuiesc*” and also supply under contract the local supermarket chain “*Merkur*” with local food products.

In this context, *Transylvania Authentica* is also worth mentioning: a *Foundation for Partnerships* from M. Ciuc program, an initiative aiming to preserve and promote local traditional agricultural methods, arts and tourism services, especially those specific to Székely communities. *Transylvania Authentica*`s goals are focused on better mutual relationships between small agricultural holdings and artisans of the Harghita region. *Transylvania Authentica*`s has also been officially registered as a brand by state authorities. Its number of trademarks exceeded 800 in 2013. The use of the *Transylvania Authentica* brand is strictly monitored and regulated by the *Foundation for Partnerships* and its criteria compliance is verified upon a yearly basis. Trademark license agreements must be renewed after a 3 year period (www.transylvania-authentica.ro, 2015).

Respected members under the *Transylvania Authentica* brand are *Székelygyümölcs Agricultural Cooperative* - fruit and juice fruit industry, *Szász Ilyés, Bartha Zolt and Lajos Ferenc* - sole proprietorships in the apiculture industry, *And-Var Mezeş Ltd.* – bakery and pastry industry, *Gáll Erzsébet* - sole proprietorship operating in the fruit industry (jams and syrups).

The main benefits of an “umbrella brand” are:

- The opportunity of selling next to other local renowned goods/services;
- An increase in the total volume of produce sold;
- Effective interaction and connection between producers and consumers, thus promoting the development of trust and social capital;
- Labeling is less important because the consumer can better judge the quality of products on the basis of his/her interaction with the producer;
- Monitoring encourages producers to keep up with industry standards and regulations;
- Better market visibility of local agri-food sector products.

A highly efficient method of “reconnecting” end consumers and local small-scale producers is establishing and promoting gastronomic routes. In the last couple of years, tourism in Harghita County has been encouraged and promoted through several dedicated projects: “*Springwater Trail*” – 2 European Union funded projects; “*Salt trail*” – 1 project; “*Fruit trail*” – 1 project (www.rep.f.ro, 2015; www.judetulharghita.ro, 2015). These gastronomic routes are not only intended to promoting the potential of Harghita County`s natural habitat, but also its local customs and culture (including local Székely gastronomy), accommodations and small agricultural holdings part of SFSCs.

CONCLUSIONS

For local food products to really stand a chance, small-scale local producers must resort to collective models like cooperatives, in order to ensure the establishment and development of local food systems, thus securing a substantial reduction of expenditures of its associated members, a wider array of commercial products, and also counter the seasonality problem. By adhering to cooperative structures, potential members can benefit from the advantage of better marketing of their local merchandise in the agri-food sector.

In the general context of endeavours to make young people aware of the benefits of a healthier life style and nutrition, the necessity of “reinventing” traditional food markets arises, firstly by gradually reducing the number of intermediaries (“middlemen”) involved in SFSCs, and secondly by enlarging the overall number of local food systems, which are based on the consumer-producer direct interaction. Thus, it might be noted that the increase in the number of temporary food markets, mainly in larger urban centers, is similar to trends recorded, at a larger scale, in the more developed economies of the E.U.

At Harghita County`s level, the presence of associative forms between local producers and traditional processors and suppliers, specific to short food supply chains (butcher`s, meat processors, bakers etc.), specialized shops (groceries, mobile food carts, milk vending machines, on-line shops etc.), as well as new methods of promoting local traditional cuisine (gastronomic routes, food markets, food festivals) are important economic and agricultural developments. According to data currently available, there is an expansion of SFSCs, both in terms of numbers and geographic spread, a situation which is due to a series of factors like favorable geographic environment, high entrepreneurial spirit and skills, and most importantly, the strong sense of solidarity between Székely community members.

Even on the short term SFSCs stand considerable chances of developing in the next couple of years, especially due to financial incentives provided by the 2014-2020 National Rural Development Programme (final version – May 2015). Specifically, Romania has included several special promotion and development measures for small farmers and the short food supply sector as a whole. Concrete examples are Measure 16 – *Cooperation*, Sub-measure 16.4 - “*Support for horizontal and vertical cooperation among actors in the supply chain for the establishment and development of short supply chains and local markets, and for related promotion activities in a local context*”, and Measure 4 - *Investments in physical assets*, Sub-measure 4.1 – “*Investments in agricultural holdings*”. Support granted by this last sub-measure addresses family owned agricultural holdings, mainly small and mid-sized ones, with a focus on creating new SFSCs and/or increasing the number of existing ones, but also on various associative forms. Activities are to be implemented by means of established *Local Action Groups* (private-public partnerships).

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