



FISSH Project Newsletter

Insights from TFA1 – Sustainable Business Strategies and New Business Models for Food Industry SMEs

March-August 2025

Welcome to the 2nd Edition of the FISSH Newsletter!

As Europe's food systems face growing pressure to become more sustainable, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are at the heart of this transformation. In this second edition of the FISSH newsletter, we take you deeper into the work carried out under **Thematic Focus Area 1 (TFA1)** – exploring **sustainable business strategies and new business models for food industry SMEs**.

What does sustainability look like in practice? How are regions like East Flanders, South Ostrobothnia or Coimbra supporting food entrepreneurs to go green, stay competitive, and think long-term? What real-life tools, policies, and initiatives are already delivering impact?

This issue brings you:

- A behind-the-scenes look at our recent study visit to Belgium
- A spotlight on officially approved **Interreg Europe good practices**
- Key findings from the **Joint Report** on sustainability in food SMEs
- **Regional stakeholder meetings** held across all partner regions to engage local voices in shaping future policies
- And a look ahead to what's next in Finland

We invite you to dive in, get inspired, and share these stories across your networks. The sustainable shift in Europe's food sector is well underway – and every SME, policymaker, and practitioner has a role to play.

TFA1: A Common Goal for European Food SMEs

The Thematic Focus Area 1 (TFA1) of the FISSH project focuses on strengthening the sustainability transition in the food industry across Europe. It emphasizes the need to equip **small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)** with the tools, knowledge, and strategies required to meet the environmental, social, and economic challenges facing the sector.

The TFA1 work consolidates findings from five partner regions: **East Flanders (Belgium), Central Macedonia (Greece), South Ostrobothnia (Finland), Kujawsko-Pomorskie (Poland), and Coimbra Region (Portugal)**. Despite differences in geography and context, food SMEs across these regions share common issues: limited resources, lack of clarity in regulations, difficulty accessing funding, and insufficient awareness of sustainable technologies.

Nevertheless, the study conducted in the partner regions also reveals a growing commitment among SMEs to shift toward sustainability, motivated by long-term viability, brand value, and increasing consumer expectations. By identifying development needs and regional gaps, TFA1 offers a roadmap for policy interventions and business support systems aimed at fostering innovation, resilience, and competitiveness in food value chains.

Study Visit to East Flanders, Belgium: A Showcase of Circular and Sustainable Innovation



The first **Interregional Learning Event** of the FISSH project took place on **11–12 February 2025** in **Ghent**, East Flanders. The two-day event featured study visits to local frontrunners in sustainable entrepreneurship, demonstrating how business innovation can align with ecological and social goals.

Participants visited the **Food Pilot**, a state-of-the-art testing and innovation facility supporting SMEs with product development, shelf-life testing, allergen management, and circular solutions. The emphasis on **alternative proteins** and **valorisation of by-products** shows the region's leadership in sustainable food technology.

Further examples included:

- **DJAR**, a circular catering company offering meals in reusable jars, focusing on short supply chains and zero waste.
- **Vandekerckhove Coffee Roastery**, which incorporates fair sourcing, cargo bike delivery, waste recycling, and solar energy into its operations.
- **Greenway**, a meat alternative producer reducing CO₂ emissions by 94% per burger and promoting plant-based diets with local ingredients and sustainable packaging.

The visits highlighted how **strategic thinking and practical solutions** can drive sustainability across production, logistics, packaging, and company culture – even in small businesses.

📷 A full recap and photo coverage from the event is available here:

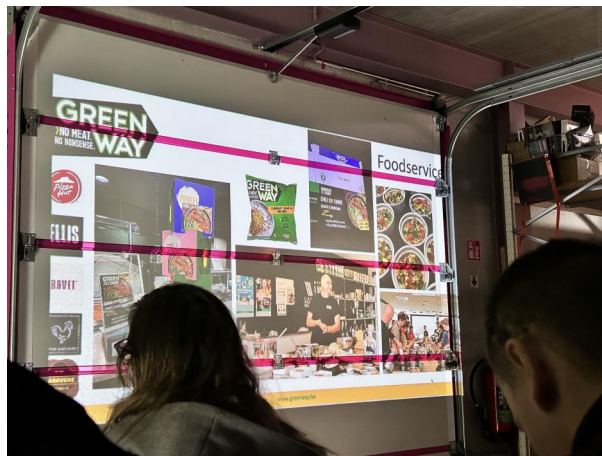
🔗 <https://www.interregeurope.eu/fissh/news-and-events/news/how-is-sustainability-shaping-future-of-food-sector>



1 - FISSH_Partner meeting

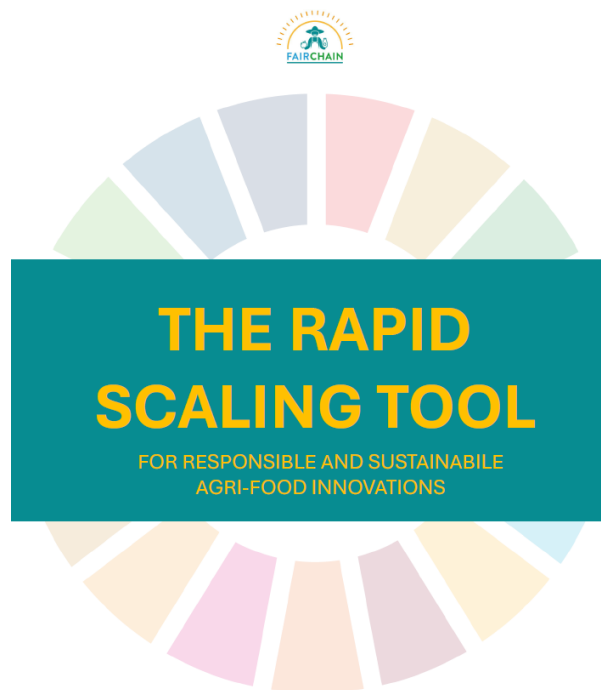


2 - Food Pilot_study visit



3 - Greenway_study visit

Scaling Ambition and the Future of Sustainable Food: The Algae Farming Case



Day two featured a practical workshop using the **Rapid Scaling Tool**, developed under the EU's FAIRCHAIN project. The case study – **Hoeve Heirbaut**, an algae farm near Lokeren – exemplified how sustainability, innovation, and social value can intersect.

Participants explored how microalgae, particularly *chlorella*, can serve as a future-proof source of protein. The company's scaling ambition is to grow from one to **ten small producers by 2027**, establishing a cooperative system that brings **local, healthy, and climate-friendly food** to Belgian consumers.

This case offered a unique opportunity to **evaluate business growth through the lens of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**. Through group work, participants assessed environmental, social, and economic impacts of upscaling the algae project, identifying positive outcomes and risk mitigation strategies.

The session showed how tools like the Rapid Scaling Tool can **support strategic planning** in SMEs and align innovation with broader sustainability goals.

Recognised Good Practices Supporting TFA1: Real-World Solutions for Sustainable Food SMEs




The FISSH project showcases **seven best-practice initiatives**—all approved by the **Joint Secretariat of Interreg Europe**—designed to support SMEs in sustainable transformation. These practices exemplify innovation across different stages of the food value chain and can be adapted in diverse regional contexts.

Here's a quick overview of each:

1. **Route of Food Municipal Markets in the Coimbra Region** (Portugal) Promotes local food markets and fairs across all 19 municipalities, fostering shorter food supply chains, strengthening local economies, and increasing consumer awareness.
2. **The Rapid Scaling Tool** (Belgium) A practical instrument that uses SDGs and bespoke sustainability indicators to map and guide the scaling of agri-food innovations—ideal for SMEs planning to grow sustainably.
3. **Gent en Garde – Sustainable Food Strategy of Ghent** (Belgium) A municipal-level policy fostering a resilient, inclusive, and ecologically sound food system that respects people, animals, and the planet.
4. **Innovations of Green Economy – Boosting Cooperation of Public & Private Sector (VITALI)** (Finland) Supports public–private collaboration to develop sustainable innovations in South Ostrobothnia, enhancing the region's capacity for green economic transformation.
5. **Towards Resilience in Short Food Chains through Business Collaboration and Digitalisation – YDIRE** (Finland) Strengthens local food businesses by promoting collaborative digital tools and models for resilient, fast-response short food supply chains.

6. **Innovation Broker in Kujawsko-Pomorskie Voivodeship** (Poland) A facilitation role connecting farmers, scientists, businesses, and advisors to support agricultural innovation and the development of short food chains.
7. **Innovative Model of Agricultural Producers' Cooperation in Short Food Supply Chains** (Poland) A digital platform enabling consumers to buy directly from multiple local producers, increasing producer margins by reducing intermediaries.

Each entry includes details on its **implementation, impact, funding mechanisms**, and **transfer potential**—making them valuable resources for policymakers, business support organisations, and SMEs looking to adopt similar models.

 Explore the full profiles and resources of these practices here:

<https://www.interregeurope.eu/fissh/good-practices>

These case studies form a dynamic **knowledge hub**—demonstrating that sustainable business innovation is not just aspirational, but **tangible and replicable**. We encourage practitioners and regional stakeholders to explore and apply these proven solutions in their own environments.

Findings from the Joint Report: Challenges, Gaps and the Way Forward



The Joint Report on TFA1 provides a comprehensive analysis of the state of sustainable business strategies in regional food SMEs. Among the **key findings**:

- Many SMEs still struggle to **access clear guidance** on sustainability standards and incentives.
- There is a significant **technological and digital divide**, especially among micro-enterprises.
- **Environmental actions** are often limited in scale due to funding or know-how gaps.
- **Social sustainability** is gaining recognition but lacks strategic integration.
- **Upskilling** opportunities exist but are underused due to time constraints or lack of relevance.

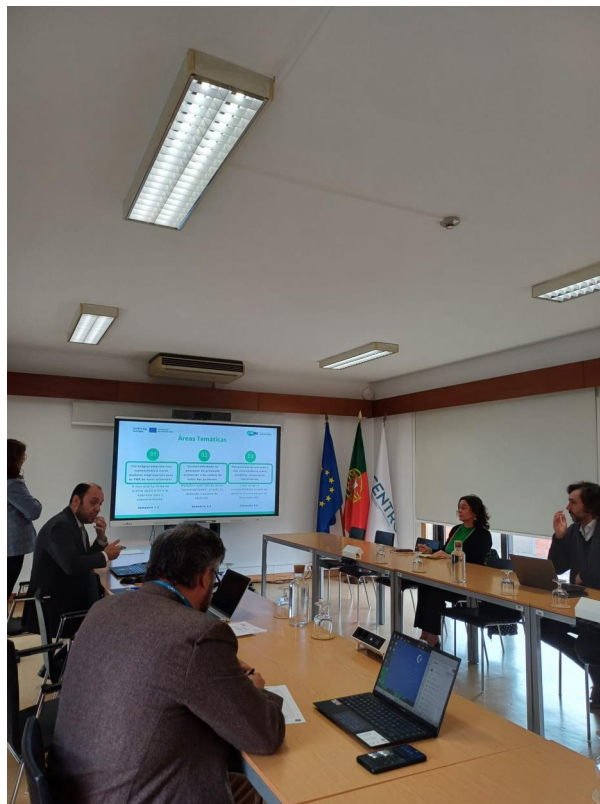
The report also recommends concrete actions, such as simplifying funding access, improving policy implementation, expanding training tailored to SME needs, and **building better regional data systems** to monitor progress.

As SMEs face growing pressure to meet sustainability demands from consumers, regulators, and markets, the report underlines that **support mechanisms must be flexible, targeted, and practical** to succeed.

 The full Joint Report is available online:

 <https://www.interregeurope.eu/fissh/news-and-events/news/joint-report-tfa-1>

Regional Stakeholder Meetings: Local Dialogue Driving Sustainable Change



While international events and reports provide a strategic overview, the true strength of the FISSH project lies in the **regional connections built on the ground**. Throughout early 2025, each project partner has actively engaged with local stakeholders—bringing together SMEs, policymakers, researchers, support agencies, and civil society to discuss how sustainability can be translated into concrete action for the food sector.

From Poland to Portugal, and from Greece to Finland, these **regional stakeholder meetings** have become essential spaces for mutual learning, trust-building, and aligning local realities with the project's broader goals under Thematic Focus Area 1 (TFA1).

Highlights include:

- **In Kujawsko-Pomorskie (Poland)**, stakeholders explored the barriers SMEs face in accessing support for sustainable innovation and discussed ways to improve intersectoral collaboration.
- **In Central Macedonia (Greece)**, meetings focused on how EU and national funding programmes can better serve small agri-food businesses navigating sustainability regulations.
- **In East Flanders (Belgium)**, dialogues centred on how to strengthen the link between ecological practices and economic resilience.
- **In South Ostrobothnia (Finland)**, the emphasis was on strategic coaching and digital tools to empower SMEs within the food value chain.
- **In the Coimbra Region (Portugal)**, stakeholders contributed to discussions around local product valorisation, climate-smart food systems, and sustainable rural development.

These exchanges do more than inform regional action plans — they build **regional ownership** of the sustainability transition. Each partner’s insights contribute to the **collective FISSH roadmap**, ensuring that local voices shape how food SMEs move forward.

📌 For a full summary, see the project website:

🔗 [FISSH stakeholder meetings at regional partners](#)

What’s Next: Food Days in South Ostrobothnia, Finland



The FISSH partnership is looking ahead to its next major event: **an international learning visit in South Ostrobothnia**, Finland, scheduled for **September 2025**. This region, recognized

as **Finland's most food-dependent economy**, offers a unique perspective on how food SMEs can be supported in building more sustainable, circular, and resilient models.

The visit will focus on **Sustainable Food Production and the Product Value Chain of Food SMEs**, allowing project partners to explore sustainability across the **entire life cycle of food products** – from sourcing and processing to marketing, packaging, and logistics. A particular emphasis will be placed on practical regional strategies and cooperation between public and private actors in support of agri-food innovation.

The visit will also coincide with participation in the **internationally renowned Food Days in Seinäjoki**


 intoseinajoki.fi/fooddays

This dynamic event offers an ideal platform for FISSH partners to **network, exchange, and discover innovative food sector solutions** alongside businesses, researchers, and institutions from across Europe.

Through this continued interregional collaboration, the FISSH project moves one step closer to its goal: enabling food SMEs to become **drivers of sustainable change** in their regions and beyond.

Find Us Online!

Stay connected and keep up with all the exciting developments of the FISSH project! We're dedicated to sharing valuable insights, updates, and engaging content about sustainable practices and interregional cooperation.

 **Visit our website:** [FISSH - Food Industry SMEs Sustainability Support and Help | Interreg Europe - Sharing solutions for better policy](#)

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