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## THE ROLE OF SMALL FARMS IN LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS

Key words: small farms, local food systems, short supply chains, stakeholders, foresight

**ABSTRACT.** The goal of this paper is to recognize the desired prospective role of small farms in local food systems as well as identify the directions of future-oriented activity for its implementation. The empirical data for the study was provided as a result of workshops hosted in the Rzeszowski subregion in 2019, attended by the stakeholders of the local food system. The methodology of the studies was based on the concept of foresight research, using the backcasting technique. For the purpose of formulating the visions of the desired prospective role of small farms in local food systems, the workshops participants determined their potential future roles in the subsystem of production, processing and consumption of food in the subregion, while, above all, recognizing them in reference to production, processing and providing the consumer with food of the highest quality. The aforementioned roles have been determined as being under-implemented. The recommended areas of activities for increasing the share of small farms in local food systems were identified as: legislation, institutional conditions, consultancy, financial support and farm cooperation, food quality and safety control, promotion of local food products and consumer education.

## INTRODUCTION

The food system includes the flow of materials and food products from suppliers of materials for agricultural production and farms, through food industry enterprises and distribution companies, to final consumers. Individual segments of these systems are interrelated with the physical flow of products as well as display relationships of institutional nature in the form of various contracts, standards and arrangements [Gołębiewski 2019]. The growing criticism of industrial food systems is causing a systematic increase of interest in alternative food systems, involving various networks of producers, consumers and other entities involved in the food economy [La Trobe, Acott 2000; Lutz, Schachinger 2012]. They embody a mode of production and food supply distinct from the industrial one, differing from it in terms of spatial location, applied agricultural systems, organisational structures or food supply chains [Matysik-Pejas et al. 2017]. These both include more traditional initiatives, based on well-established forms of production and consumption, as well as innovative action attributed to new types of consumer behaviour [Goszczyński et al. 2018]. Their development should be perceived in view of a number of fundamental changes that have taken place and are taking place along particular links

in the agri-food chain. Among others, they point to a change in the consumer perception of food and agriculture or an attempt by agricultural producers to regain a share of the added value of production [Renting et. al. 2003]. They seek to redefine the place and role of agriculture, aiming to re-establish agricultural production and processing in the region, bringing producers and consumers closer and promoting values such as sustainability, equality, fairer distribution of values, security and health [Sánchez-Hernández 2009].

One example of an alternative system are local food systems, providing food which is being produced, sold and consumed within a defined geographical area. Local food production and distribution has, for many years, been present in rural areas, however, recently, there has been a steady rise in local food production and distribution in all Member States of the European Union as a result of consumer demand for local products of good quality from a reliable source. This is also facilitated by the evolution of priorities of the Common Agricultural Policy tending towards the support of high quality food production, the protection of cultural and natural heritage of rural areas and recently also by the growing attention paid to food safety [Knieć, Goszczyński 2010]. On the part of production, small farms should constitute an essential link of such a system as, due to their local nature, they guarantee that local demand for fresh and low-regulated food can be met to a significant extent. Moreover, they increase the diversity of the agri-food market, thus giving consumers the opportunity to choose among more goods [Gruchelski 2016]. However, exploiting their potential requires significant effort to mobilise and promote efficient alternatives to the deep-rooted longer supply chains.

The main purpose of this study is, therefore, to find a desired prospective role of small farms in local food systems as well as identify the directions of future-oriented activity for its implementation. The research results provided in the empirical part of the paper are an interim effect of the “SALSA. Small farms, small food businesses and sustainable food and nutrition security” research project, implemented under the Horizon 2020 Programme (grant contract No. 677363).

## RESEARCH MATERIAL AND METHODS

The empirical material for the study was obtained during regional workshops hosted in February 2019 in one of the Polish reference regions covered by the SALSA project - the Rzeszowski subregion. The selection of the research spatial scope was based on the NUTS 3 classification in a targeted manner, in view of the entire SALSA project objective, which is to assess the importance of small farms and small agri-food businesses in ensuring food security in Europe and selected African regions. In line with the NUTS 3 classification, the Rzeszowski subregion includes the following poviats: urban and rural Rzeszowski, Strzyżowski, Ropczycko-Sędziszowski, Łańcucki and Kolbuszowski, and is considerably fragmented in terms of agrarian structure. According to the definition adopted for the SALSA project, a small agricultural holding is defined as a holding with an area of up to 5 hectares of UAA or an economic size of less than 8 ESU.

The research was of a qualitative nature and was implemented in compliance with the uniform research methodology adopted in each of the research regions covered by the SALSA project. The workshops organized were based on the idea of foresight research.

Foresight is increasingly used by international organizations, authorities at a central and regional level as well as enterprises and research institutes to create socially desirable visions of the future of countries, regions, sectors of the economy, technologies, or problem areas. In recent years, foresight studies have also been conducted to different extents in relation to agriculture and its environment [Mirkowska 2017]. The complexity and specificity of foresight makes it a useful tool not only for predicting, but also for shaping and even managing the future [Kononiuk 2012].

In these foresight studies, the technique of backcasting was applied, firstly based on defining the prospective desired conditions (desired vision), and then defining the actions leading to the achievement of these conditions [Holmberg, Robèrt 2000, Bibri 2018]. Workshops were divided into two stages. The first phase included developing a vision of a potential (desirable) role to be played in 2030 by small farms in local food production, processing and consumption, in the Rzeszowski subregion. This stage was also conducted to identify a set of objectives to be achieved in order to accomplish the conditions in the formerly stated vision. The second stage, based on the method of backcasting, involved the development of plans with activities arranged in chronological order (from 2030 to the present) facilitating the achievement of selected goals found in stage one.

The study is based on expert research. On the basis of recommendations found in reference literature on stakeholder interactions [Slunge et al. 2017], the stakeholders of the local food system in the Rzeszowski subregion, i.e., representatives of the public sector, business and science, were invited to participate in the workshops. The workshop participants were farmers, input suppliers, advisers from the Podkarpackie Agricultural Advisory Center in Boguchwała, a scientist from the University of Rzeszów (dietician), representatives of the Podkarpackie Chamber of Agriculture, the Podkarpackie Voivodship Office in Rzeszów, the Marshal's Office of the Podkarpackie Voivodship, the Provincial Union of Farmers and Agricultural Organizations in Rzeszów and the Voivodship Sanitary and Epidemiological Station. The workshop was attended by a total of 24 participants (hereinafter referred to as experts), who were divided into discussion groups. The discussion groups were established with attention paid to their diversity, which enabled the authors to observe confrontations of different opinions expressed by food system stakeholders.

## THE NATURE AND SPECIFICITY OF LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS IN VIEW OF THE PARTICIPATION OF SMALL FARMS

There is no single definition of the local food system. The Committee of Regions suggests a definition stating that the local food system is a business-to-consumer system, covering products manufactured locally in the region of origin, or region belonging to the cooperative of origin regions. This system may also be considered as a set of interrelated processes linking manufacturers with consumers and the society, i.e., the environment and the regional economy. The elements of the system can be analysed at different levels – from a single farm to an interregional level. The areas covered include food production and processing, food marketing and promotion, branding and labelling, food distribution and transport, as well as the extent to which consumers and the society are involved in

the processes, the supply of accompanying public goods and activities relating to health and food safety, waste management, as well as elements involving energy, training and education [EC 2011]. It, therefore, consists of a whole range of entities and a chain of interlinked activities [FAO 2018]. Under a given local food system, food is sold and produced in a defined geographical area in respect to the specificity of that area and the constraints related to the seasonality of products [EC 2015].

The reference to the area as well as its traditions or values is an important detail impacting the framework of the formulated definitions. Please note that the adjective “local” can sometimes have different specificity. A local area is defined as a relatively small geographical sector, defined in terms of the distance between the place of production and the point of sale, but this distance may vary considerably depending on the specificity of the territory [EC 2013]. Local is predominantly identified with a direct relationship between the consumer and the food manufacturer or, at least, with the fact that the consumer knows where the food is produced. There is also no clear or simple way of defining “local food”. Generally, the term is considered to refer to food manufactured in the vicinity of the place of consumption based on a certain geographical distance (between the farmer and the consumer) or the number of kilometres that the food has to cover from the location it is manufactured to the final delivery destination [Matysik-Pejas et al. 2017].

A fundamental concept of the local food system is to shorten the distance between the food producer, i.e. the farmer, and the final consumer, and therefore these systems are based on short supply chains. The distance defined here does not only refer to the physical remoteness of production and sales sites, but also to the number of links in the food supply chain. The objective of a short supply chain is to maximally reduce the number of intermediaries needed to supply the final product to the consumer, the optimum option being direct sales by the farmer. The nature of the relationship between the entities forming the chain is also important – reducing the length of the supply chain should bring beneficial results for the environment, the economy and society. The important issue, therefore, is its transparency (thus, an easy identification of all participants in the chain and information on the origin of the food or the method of its production) and its construction, ensuring that the producer retains a greater part of income from the sale of food [Kawecka, Gębarowski 2015]. Such chains should, therefore, be based on a better flow of information and mutual trust. In practice, there are different types of short food supply chains based on direct sales on farms or local markets, direct sales based on collective marketing mechanisms (including online sales), mass catering or distribution to local shops or supermarkets [Szymańska et al. 2018].

The specific characteristics of local food systems and short supply chains lead to the conclusion that they should be based on cooperation and the collective action of small farms and many small or even micro businesses with strong links to the local economy. Small farms form the foundation of the agrarian structure of Polish agriculture, especially dominating in the southern and eastern part of the country [Żmija 2016, Musiał, Musiał 2016, Zegar 2012]. Despite their generally low ability to produce goods and the fact that they face many problems and cannot compete on global markets, there are many advantages of small farms, especially on a local and regional scale [Żakowska-Biemans 2012]. Small agricultural producers are most often involved in the production of local, niche products.

The fundamental characteristics of these foods include their non-industrial, non-mass nature and the fact that they are produced from local materials or by local production methods. Local products are often marketed to consumers as products with unique qualities such as taste, freshness, high quality, nutritional value, a cultural background and local tradition, or the fact that they are produced in a sustainable way while respecting animal welfare [Fundacja AgriNatura 2019]. A large group of small farms do not produce for the market, but often have a surplus of products that can be sold [D. Żmija, K. Żmija 2018]. Therefore, it is important to create conditions for their activity and enable their participation in local food markets.

## STUDY RESULTS

For the purpose of formulating a vision of the desired role of small farms in the local food system, their potential roles in food production, processing and consumption, in the subregion, in 2030, were defined. The results were grouped into clusters (Figure 1). Above all, it should be stressed that all the experts drew attention to the need for small farms to be preserved. However, the fundamental expectation that was formulated stated that they should serve their basic purpose, i.e., the production function, to a greater extent than before. The workshop participants provided four clusters of responses with regard to the role of small farms in food production in the subregion, emphasizing various aspects of the production function of small farms.

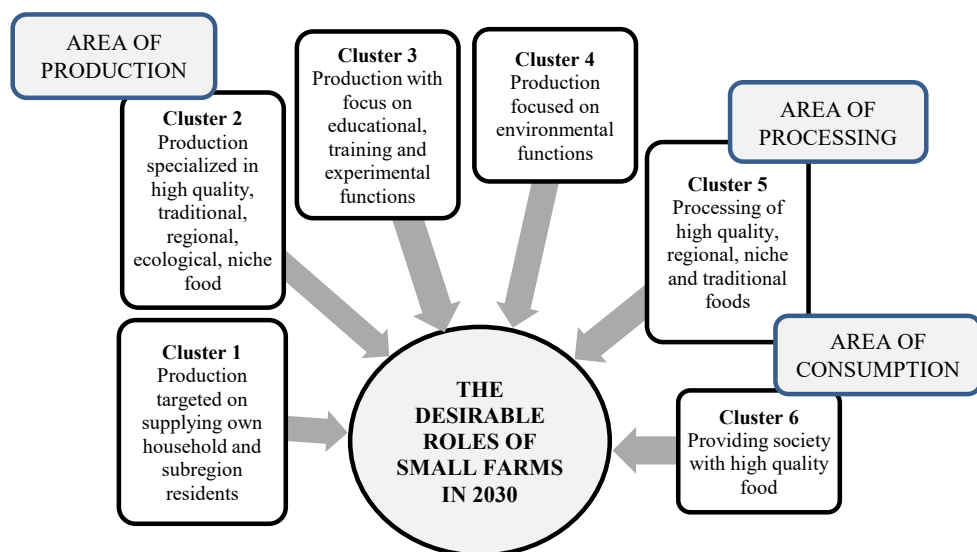


Figure 1. The desirable roles of small farms in food production, processing and consumption in the subregion in 2030

Source: own work on the basis of research

The first cluster responses referred to the traditional perception of a small farm as a place to produce diverse types of food. Please note that such a prospective role was primarily attributed to small households operating diversified production on a small scale, where the vast majority of produced food is dedicated to own consumption (self-supply) of the household, and only possible surpluses are sold on the market. The dominant form of sales for such small farms has been specified primarily as direct sales conducted on a farm or local markets, thus the most traditional sales channels. The role of small farms therefore highlights the potential strategic importance of small farms in securing the food and life needs of farming families and local residents, being an important element in ensuring food security at a local level. However, experts participating in the study were aware that such a role would require financial support from public funds for at least some of these farms due to the low profitability of activities based on diversified agricultural production.

The second of the proposed desirable roles referred to the group of farms operating a specialized agricultural production, while the main directions of specialization of this group of farms were recommended to be as follows:

- the production of quality food, including organic food;
- the production of regional products, i.e. those with a high quality and reputation of which are linked to the subregion in which they are produced;
- traditional products manufactured using traditional methods and traditional materials, with an emphasis on the possibility of rearing traditional indigenous cattle or old varieties of fruit and vegetables;
- the production of niche products (such as honey, local cheeses, herbs, wine, etc.)

Experts estimated that greater specialization of agricultural production of small farms would enable them to increase their share of total agricultural production in the subregion to a level of 50%, whereas currently this share is estimated to be at a level of 10-12%. In this regard, the role of food certification schemes was stressed as a tool for promoting products through the possibility of using a recognisable mark or logo certifying the place of origin of a food or the traditional character of a product. It was also emphasized that effective participation in the local food system requires the reconstruction of relationships between small farms in the subregion and local small food processing, trade and gastronomy. Experts believe that founding their production on the aforementioned, small farms will not only promote sustainability, but also strengthen their competitiveness on the market, thereby increasing farmer income. It will also promote the preservation of local culture, culinary traditions as well as appeal to tourists visiting the region.

The third group of responses referred closely to the previously discussed role. The workshop participants stressed that by specialising in the production of regional, traditional, niche or organic products, farms could simultaneously serve as educational, training or experimental facilities, promoting their food production methods, but also shaping and promoting new nutritional models among the population. It has been highlighted here that, in a world where more and more people have a false idea of food sources and production, educational farms are an opportunity to create a better understanding of rural areas and agriculture and develop ecological attitudes and desirable consumption habits. They also provide an opportunity to promote local products and build new relationships with consumers. Through dedicated trainings, small farms could also support the education



process of various groups of participants – other farmers, representatives of professional groups related to the food economy, pupils or students of agricultural schools, constituting an element complementary to a specific school education or vocational training programme. These farms could also play an experimental and service role, e.g., with regard to scientific institutions. The fourth of these roles was also connected with the productive function of farms, however, stressing the environmental importance of their functioning, i.e., the important role of maintaining land in good agricultural condition, shaping the local landscape, preserving biodiversity and providing agri-environmental services, conducive to maintaining the agricultural usefulness of land.

In terms of food processing, the desirable prospective role of small farms is perceived primarily in relation to the production of high quality, regional, traditional and niche food. However, it is necessary to significantly increase the scale and scope of processing. Please note here that currently, in the opinion of experts, most food processing takes place in an unofficial manner. Further legislative changes and the approach of public services, in particular veterinary and sanitary services (additional simplification of legislation, better adaptation to the needs and capacities of small farm food processors and improved access to services), should help to exit the grey market.

In the area of consumption, the role of small farms as food producers and processors should be to provide food of high quality, while high quality is identified primarily with an ecological way of food production, not necessarily attested by certificates. High quality food is, however, inseparably linked to a price, which is higher than of food of industrial origin. Two fundamental issues must be introduced here to ensure demand for this specific food: the need to create a high level of consumer awareness in terms of high quality of food from small farms and create conditions in which consumers have confidence in the actual quality of such food. Building public awareness and trust is a long-term process based on preventing food fraud through appropriately selected institutional solutions and a gradual increase of society's knowledge on the advantages of food produced in small farms. Another essential element is to develop attitudes of local patriotism by encouraging consumers to buy food produced locally from local materials.

The discussion on the desirable prospective roles of small farmers resulted in the development of key objectives, the achievement of which would contribute most to implementing the vision of small farmers functioning in the local food system and the subsequent preparation of framework action plans, the application of which would contribute to the achievement of the objectives. Table 1 presents a framework action plan for the implementation of the selected objective contributing to an increase of small farm roles in subregional food production.

A significant barrier to the operation of small farms is constituted by legal regulations, both EU and national. The expert group confirmed that this issue is a major problem in terms of developing greater production, food processing and marketing on small farms, with health and safety rules for the manufacturing of products identified as the main problem to be addressed. Despite the changes already made to existing legislation, complying to and observing regulations poses a great challenge for small manufacturers operating in traditional food production systems and continues to represent an additional barrier to short supply chains. An important element to focus on is also the need for appropriate



Table 1. Framework action plan

OBJECTIVE: Increase the share of small farms in local food production through greater farm specialisation and high consumer awareness		
Area of operation and proposals for necessary action (responsible parties)		
2030	<b>COOPERATION</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– encouraging cooperation between farmers (horizontal integration) and between farmers and agribusiness sector entities (vertical integration)</li> <li>– supporting the organisation and development of various forms of cooperation</li> <li>– reconstructing local agricultural markets by creating relationships between local agricultural producers and processors and other entities of the food sector (public administration at various levels, producer organizations, agricultural organizations, local leaders)</li> </ul>	<b>CONTINUOUS OPERATIONS:</b> <p>Educating consumers on the principles of a healthy diet and the value of local food (public administration at various levels, educational institutions, consumer organisations, NGOs)</p> <p>Promoting local food products (public administration at various levels, producer organisations, agricultural organisations, consumer organisations)</p>
	<b>FINANCIAL SUPPORT</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– implementing additional (national/regional) instruments of support for small farms (e.g. for the co-financing of the production of niche products)</li> <li>– continuing measures providing non-repayable financial support for small farmers setting up or developing their businesses</li> <li>– increasing farmer access to preferential repayable financing of activities (e.g. through guarantees and sureties under government programmes) (public administration at various levels, financial institutions, including the banking sector)</li> </ul>	
	<b>CONSULTANCY</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– expanding professional consultancy services (such as specialist consultations in the area of agriculture, law, finance, marketing, management)</li> <li>– encouraging good practices through practical trainings, study visits to exchange experiences, transfer of knowledge and practice and developing cooperation (public administration at various levels, producer organisations, agricultural organisations)</li> </ul>	
	<b>INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– reviewing and amending the tasks entrusted to institutions supporting and controlling the food sector</li> <li>– ensuring better coordination between institutions supporting and controlling the food sector and consulting bodies</li> <li>– developing an integrated food safety and quality control system (public administration at various levels)</li> </ul>	
CURRENTLY	<b>LEGISLATION</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– reviewing and amending existing national and EU legislation – introducing additional simplification of procedures for food production and processing on small farms (e.g. hygiene and sanitary conditions and inspections, animal identification, plant protection, etc.)</li> <li>– promoting locally produced food through appropriate legal solutions, e.g. preferences for local producers in public procurements for mass catering facilities</li> <li>– introducing changes in the direct payments system towards production subsidies for small farms referring to the amount of production and not farm area (public administration at an EU level and at different national levels)</li> </ul>	<b>Quality control of local food</b> (public administration at various levels, consumer organisations, producer organisations)

Source: own elaboration on the basis of research

legal solutions with preferences for locally produced food. Public sector bodies are faced with the need not only to identify new ways of supporting the development of small-scale agriculture and food processing, but also to take a more proactive approach to supporting these issues.

To be more active on the market, entities are expected to have a variety of skills, not only in agriculture, but also in business planning, marketing, accounting, production planning, logistics, IT, etc. Therefore, emphasis should be placed on the sphere of agricultural advisory, such as comprehensive care for farmers, the provision of professional training and the development of a platform for the exchange of knowledge and experience among farmers. As regards financial support, existing measures for small farms were recommended to be continued and additional support instruments (national or regional) were advised to be implemented. Despite the fact that short supply chains are able to provide the producer with a greater share of profits due to the smaller number of intermediaries, food processing is often perceived by banks as a high-risk industry, which, as a result, makes it difficult to obtain financing. Therefore, particular attention was also drawn to the need to ensure access to preferential financing for farmers who want to introduce new solutions to increase their access to the market.

The majority of successful short supply chains rely on new forms of management and networks needed to support them. The expert group confirmed that the fact that small farmers have limited awareness of the benefits of cooperation and are unwilling to cooperate was a major barrier to the development of efficient short supply chains. It is important to build trust for other businesses previously regarded as competitive and develop relationships with different food sector actors, including the public sector and social organisations, which takes a lot of time and effort. It should also be borne in mind that knowledge, skills and cooperation are important throughout the entire food supply chain and do not only concern producers. Food processors, distributors or restaurants also need to have a better understanding of small farmer operating principles and constraints, e.g., in terms of product quantities and deadlines for orders.

The challenges in terms of small farm participation in local food systems also affect the consumer. A fundamental problem in this respect is the development of a system, whereby consumers are supplied not only with a local product, but also with information encouraging them to purchase it. The real challenge is, therefore, to develop effective marketing systems to promote local food products. Another important issue is to make consumers aware of the place the food on their plates came from and that while shopping they should pay attention to the quality and origin of food.

## CONCLUSIONS

Small farms are a very heterogeneous group. It includes several types of farms, which differ in their logic, ways and mechanisms of operation, production objectives, as well as principles and extent to which they are integrated with the local economy and society. The concept of a local food system based on short supply chains focuses on exploiting the strengths of the region as well as those of small farmers and small businesses. It is an

opportunity to improve their competitiveness by exploiting their economic, social and natural potential. The paper presents the views of stakeholders of the local food system on the desirable role that small farms should play in the future in the local food system. The developed action plan has highlighted the factors that currently hinder or insufficiently support the effective participation of small farms in this system.

The presented study was based on a strong interaction with stakeholders of the local food system. The views cited were a direct result of knowledge and first-hand experience that experts have gained in their work to date. The interaction among the participants of the meeting enabled them to jointly create and exchange information, not only between stakeholders and academics, but also between stakeholders themselves. Please note, however, that the authors are aware the research results obtained are not a set of ready-made solutions, but rather a starting point for further discussion on the importance of small farms in local food systems and the concept of systemic solutions enabling the implementation of the roles they should play in this system.

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## ROLA DROBNYCH GOSPODARSTW ROLNYCH W LOKALNYCH SYSTEMACH ŻYWNOŚCIOWYCH

Słowa kluczowe: drobne gospodarstwa rolne, lokalne systemy żywnościowe, krótkie łańcuchy dostaw, interesariusze, foresight

### ABSTRAKT

Celem artykułu jest wskazanie pożądaney przyszłej roli drobnych gospodarstw rolnych w lokalnych systemach żywnościowych oraz kierunków perspektywicznych działań na rzecz jej realizacji. Materiał empiryczny do badań stanowiły wyniki warsztatów zorganizowanych w 2019 roku w podregionie rzeszowskim, których uczestnikami byli interesariusze lokalnego systemu żywnościowego. Metodyka badań bazowała na koncepcji badań foresightowych, przy zastosowaniu techniki planowania wstecznego. Dla potrzeb sformułowania wizji pożądaney roli drobnych gospodarstw rolnych w lokalnych systemach żywnościowych określono ich potencjalne perspektywiczne role w podsystemie produkcji, przetwórstwa oraz konsumpcji żywności w podregionie, dostrzegając je przede wszystkim w odniesieniu do produkcji, przetwórstwa i dostarczania konsumentowi żywności wysokiej jakości. Zwrócono uwagę na to, że role te aktualnie są realizowane w niewystarczającym zakresie. Jako rekomendowane obszary działań na rzecz zwiększenia udziału drobnych gospodarstw rolnych w lokalnych systemach żywnościowych wskazano działania w zakresie legislacji, uwarunkowań instytucjonalnych, doradztwa, wsparcia finansowego i współpracy gospodarstw, kontroli jakości i bezpieczeństwa żywności, promowania lokalnych produktów żywnościowych oraz edukacji konsumentów.

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