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**EMPOWERING SMALL PRODUCERS IN SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS: LOCAL  
VALUE CHAINS, SHORT FOOD SUPPLY CHAINS AND LESSONS FROM  
EUROPEAN PRACTICE**

**Anila Boshnjaku**

Assoc, Professor, Agricultural University of Tirana

Email anilaboshnjaku00@gmail.com

**Alba Tema**

Faculty of Economics and Management, Slovak University of Agriculture

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**ABSTRACT**

This article examines how local value chains and short food supply chains can support the empowerment of small producers and contribute to more sustainable food systems in the Western Balkans. The analysis is based on qualitative evidence from a participatory approach on sustainable food systems, complemented by selected European practice examples, including the Polish Village e-box model, La Ruche qui dit Oui!/The Food Assembly in France, Campagna Amica in Italy, and the Open Food Network. The article argues that small producers in the Western Balkans often possess products with strong quality, authenticity and territorial identity, but remain constrained by fragmented production, weak bargaining power, limited logistics, insufficient processing capacity, restricted access to finance and weak advisory support. Local value chains and short food supply chains can address these constraints by reducing unnecessary intermediation, strengthening producer-consumer trust, improving market access and retaining more value in rural territories. However, their impact is not automatic. They require cooperation, shared infrastructure, branding, advisory services, proportionate regulation and supportive public policy. The article concludes that sustainable food system transformation in the Western Balkans should place small producers at the centre of policy design as active economic actors and not only as vulnerable beneficiaries.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Food Systems; Local Value Chains; Short Food Supply Chains; Small Producers; Western Balkans; Producer Cooperation; Rural Development.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Sustainable food systems have become a central concern in contemporary agricultural and rural development debates. They are no longer understood only as systems for producing food, but as broader socio-economic and environmental systems that connect production, processing, distribution, consumption, rural livelihoods, public health, territorial identity and ecological responsibility. In this perspective, sustainability depends not only on farm-level productivity or environmental compliance, but also on the way value chains are organized, how value is distributed and how different actors participate in food system governance. The FAO approach to sustainable food value chain development stresses that economic, social and environmental outcomes must be considered together, because a value chain cannot be considered sustainable if it generates economic value while undermining social inclusion or environmental resources (FAO, 2014).

This broader understanding is particularly relevant for the Western Balkans, where agriculture remains closely connected with family farms, rural employment, local food cultures and territorial identity. The region is characterized by rich agricultural traditions, diverse local products and a large number of small-scale producers. These characteristics create opportunities for place-based development, but they do not automatically translate into stronger market positions or higher income for farmers. Many small producers continue to face fragmented production structures, weak bargaining power, limited storage and processing capacities, poor logistics, difficult access to finance and insufficient advisory support. The analyses emphasize that the problem is often not the absence of product quality, but the weakness of the system surrounding small producers and its limited capacity to connect them fairly with markets.

Within this context, local value chains and short food supply chains represent important pathways for strengthening sustainable food systems. Local value chains can transform territorial resources, traditional knowledge and local products into economic opportunities. They allow small producers to compete not only through volume, but also through quality, authenticity, origin, identity and trust. This is especially important for small farmers who are often unable to compete in conventional long supply chains dominated by large-scale production, intermediaries and standardized market requirements. By reinforcing the connection between food, place and consumer trust, local value chains can support rural incomes, strengthen territorial branding and contribute to inclusive rural development.

Short food supply chains are closely linked to this logic. Their main value lies in reducing the distance between producers and consumers, limiting unnecessary intermediation, improving transparency and keeping a greater share of value within local communities. They may take different forms, including farmers' markets, direct sales, farm shops, local food hubs, community-supported agriculture, online platforms, purchasing groups and collective marketing initiatives. However, short food supply chains should not be understood simply as spontaneous or informal forms of selling. To become sustainable and scalable, they require organization, cooperation, logistics, branding, quality assurance, food safety support and enabling public policies.

The policy relevance of this discussion is reinforced by the European framework for sustainable food systems. The EU Farm to Fork Strategy, placed at the heart of the European Green Deal, promotes a fair, healthy and environmentally friendly food system and recognizes the links between food systems, society, health and the planet (European Commission, 2020). For the Western Balkans, the Green Agenda also calls for a transition toward sustainable food systems, improved food safety standards, stronger rural resilience and better alignment with EU priorities (European Commission, 2020). Yet, for small producers, this transition can become either a burden or an opportunity. It becomes a burden if new requirements are introduced without financial support, technical assistance, infrastructure and collective solutions. It becomes an opportunity when sustainability policies are connected with producer cooperation, local value chains, short supply chains, territorial branding and practical investment support.

*Based on these considerations, this article examines how local value chains and short food supply chains can contribute to strengthening sustainable food systems in the Western Balkans. Drawing on evidence from a participatory workshop and comparative insights from selected European examples, the article analyses the barriers faced by small producers, the role of local products in rural development and the potential of short food supply chains to improve market*

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*access, trust and value distribution. The central argument is that sustainable food systems in the Western Balkans cannot be achieved only through environmental standards or general policy commitments. They require practical mechanisms that place small producers at the centre of the transition and enable them to participate more fairly in markets.*

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Local and short chains in sustainable food system debates**

The transition toward sustainable food systems has increased attention to local value chains and short food supply chains as mechanisms for reconnecting producers, consumers, territories and public policy objectives. In European debates, short food supply chains are generally understood as arrangements with a limited number of intermediaries, based on cooperation, local development and closer geographical or social relations between producers, processors and consumers. They are not only about physical distance, but also about transparency, traceability, trust and the ability of consumers to identify the origin, farmer or production method of food.

From a sustainable food systems perspective, local and short chains may contribute to economic, social and environmental objectives. Economically, they can help farmers retain a larger share of value by reducing dependence on intermediaries. Socially, they strengthen producer-consumer relations, rural identity and trust in food quality. Environmentally, they may support seasonal consumption and diversified, place-based farming systems. However, these benefits are not automatic. They depend on governance, logistics, food safety standards, infrastructure, consumer demand and the organizational capacity of producers.

This discussion is closely linked to the FAO sustainable food value chain approach, which emphasizes that value chains should be assessed not only through economic performance, but also through social and environmental outcomes. For small producers, constraints are often related not only to production, but also to weak bargaining power, lack of storage and processing infrastructure, poor access to finance, limited advisory services and weak cooperation. Strengthening local and short value chains can therefore be seen as a form of upgrading that improves both market access and the position of farmers within the food system.

### **2.2 Farmer empowerment and value distribution**

A key argument in the literature is that short food supply chains can empower farmers by improving their market position. In conventional long chains, small producers often sell raw products at low prices and have limited influence over prices, quality requirements or contractual terms. By contrast, local and short chains create opportunities for direct sales, farmers' markets, local procurement, community-supported agriculture, agri-tourism, on-farm processing and collective marketing. These channels may help farmers retain more value, diversify income and reduce dependence on dominant buyers.

However, participation in short chains also requires new capacities. Farmers often need to manage branding, packaging, communication with consumers, food safety compliance, digital visibility, delivery and collective coordination. Therefore, empowerment should not be reduced simply to "selling locally". It should be understood as a process through which producers improve their ability to organize, negotiate, add value and participate more fairly in markets.

This is especially important in the Western Balkans, where many producers have valuable local products but lack the organizational and infrastructural conditions needed to transform them into stable market opportunities.

### **2.3 Evidence from the Western Balkans**

The relevance of local and short chains is particularly strong in the Western Balkans, where agriculture remains important for rural livelihoods, but the sector is characterized by fragmented farms, weak producer organization, insufficient infrastructure and limited market integration. Regional analyses identify small-scale production, weak value chains, high transaction costs and limited access to finance as structural barriers that make the connection between producers and markets difficult.

The region faces common constraints such as micro and fragmented holdings, limited mechanization, insufficient processing and logistics infrastructure, weak producer organizations, informality, gender inequality, youth out-migration and climate vulnerability. These conditions show that local value chains and short food supply chains should be treated as part of a broader value-chain strengthening agenda, rather than only as direct-selling mechanisms.

Evidence from studies on smallholders in the Western Balkans and Turkey shows that short food supply chains can help add value to primary production and improve small farmers' livelihoods, especially when supported by advisory services, targeted investment, access to finance and stronger cooperation. At the same time, the Western Balkan context shows that short and local chains should not be romanticized. Their potential is limited by weak logistics, lack of storage and processing capacity, informality, limited trust in cooperation, insufficient quality infrastructure and uneven market access.

Climate vulnerability further increases the importance of resilient local value chains. Slow productivity growth, rural outmigration, aging populations, fragmented land, weak value chains and limited technology adoption reduce farmers' adaptive capacity. In this context, local and short chains can contribute to resilience only when combined with climate-smart practices, investment support, advisory services and stronger cooperation.

Evidence from specific value chains also confirms that strategies must be adapted to territorial and sectoral realities. Local value chain development cannot follow a single model across the region. It must consider product types, consumer demand, institutional capacities, infrastructure and the level of producer organization. Geographical indications and origin-based quality schemes may support small farms by creating added value and strengthening territorial identity, but legal, institutional and organizational barriers continue to limit their development.

### **2.4 Literature gap and contribution of the article**

Overall, the literature suggests that local value chains and short food supply chains can support sustainable food system transformation, particularly in regions dominated by small farms. Their contribution lies not only in reducing intermediaries, but also in improving food system governance: strengthening farmers' bargaining position, supporting cooperation, building consumer trust, linking food to territory and promoting inclusive rural development.

However, existing studies often recognize the potential of short and local chains without sufficiently explaining how these models can be practically organized in Western Balkan conditions. Small producers frequently lack infrastructure, digital tools, cooperation experience and stable public support. This article addresses that gap by using participatory workshop evidence and European practice examples to discuss how short food supply chains can become more practical, inclusive and policy-relevant for small producers in the region.

### **3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The conceptual framework of this article is based on the idea that local value chains and short food supply chains can empower small producers by improving market access, strengthening bargaining power and helping farmers capture more value from local products. The framework starts from the structural weaknesses faced by many small producers in the Western Balkans, including fragmented production, poor logistics, limited storage and processing capacity, difficult access to finance, weak advisory support and dependence on intermediaries.

Local value chains respond to these challenges by linking agricultural products with territorial identity, quality, authenticity and consumer trust. They allow small producers to compete not through large volumes, but through the specific value of their products and the places from which they originate. Short food supply chains complement this by reducing the distance between producers and consumers, limiting unnecessary intermediation, improving transparency and allowing more value to remain with farmers and local communities.

However, these chains do not function automatically. They require enabling conditions such as producer cooperation, shared infrastructure, logistics, branding, advisory services, finance and supportive public policies. When these conditions are present, local and short chains can contribute to stronger producer empowerment, better market access, higher value capture, consumer trust, resilient rural livelihoods and more inclusive sustainable food systems.

The framework therefore treats local and short chains as pathways rather than stand-alone solutions. Their effectiveness depends on the capacity of small producers to move from fragmented and weakly organized market participation toward more coordinated, territorially rooted and consumer-oriented value chains.

### **4. MATERIAL AND METHODS**

#### **4.1 Research design and data sources**

This article applies a qualitative, exploratory research design. The approach is appropriate because the study is based on workshop discussion insights and practice examples rather than on statistical survey data. The article does not aim to measure the impact of short food supply chains quantitatively. Instead, it seeks to interpret the main challenges, opportunities and policy directions emerging from a participatory discussion on sustainable food systems.

The primary empirical material consists of insights from a participatory workshop and panel discussion on sustainable food systems held in April 2026. The workshop focused on strengthening sustainable food systems through local value chains, short supply chains, local products and support for small producers in the Western Balkans. The material highlights recurring issues such as fragmented production, weak bargaining power, limited storage and

processing capacity, poor logistics, limited access to finance, weak advisory support and the need for stronger market access for small farmers.

A second source of information is the use of selected European practice examples. The Polish Village e-box model is included as the main illustrative example because it demonstrates how short food supply chains can be organized through joint promotion, direct and online sales, sales under a common logo, shared transport, purchasing groups and farm shops. Additional examples from France, Italy and open-source digital food networks are used to enrich the discussion. These cases are not treated as full comparative case studies; they are used only to identify practical mechanisms that may inspire Western Balkan policy and practice.

#### 4.2 Analytical approach

The participatory workshop material was analyzed through qualitative thematic analysis. This method allows the researcher to identify, organize and interpret recurring themes within qualitative material. It is suitable for this study because the material contains policy reflections, stakeholder concerns, practical examples and proposals related to sustainable food systems and small producer empowerment.

The analysis followed five steps. First, the participatory workshop material was read several times to become familiar with the content. Second, key statements were coded according to their meaning. For example, references to weak bargaining power, fragmented production and limited access to markets were coded under producer vulnerability and market exclusion. Third, similar codes were grouped into broader themes. Fourth, the themes were interpreted in relation to local value chains and short food supply chains. Finally, the findings were connected to policy recommendations for the Western Balkans.

The coding process combined deductive and inductive logic. The deductive part was guided by the main concepts of the article: sustainable food systems, local value chains, short food supply chains and small producer empowerment. The inductive part emerged directly from the workshop materials, allowing the analysis to capture the specific concerns raised in the discussion.

**Table 1. Analytical coding framework**

| Analytical theme                        | Main codes identified                                                                                      |
|-----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Structural barriers for small producers | Fragmented production; weak bargaining power; poor logistics; limited storage; limited processing capacity |
| Market access and value distribution    | Dependence on intermediaries; low visibility; limited direct sales; weak negotiation power                 |
| Local value chains                      | Local products; territorial identity; authenticity; quality; trust; rural livelihoods                      |
| Short food supply chains                | Direct sales; farm shops; local markets; online sales; purchasing groups; reduced intermediation           |
| Producer cooperation                    | Joint promotion; collective marketing; shared infrastructure; common branding                              |
| Policy support needs                    | Access to finance; advisory services; small-                                                               |

|                          |                                                                                  |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                          | scale infrastructure; branding support; enabling regulations                     |
| Sustainable food systems | Resilience; inclusion; fairness; environmental responsibility; rural development |

*Source : Author's analyses*

### **4.3 Scope and limitations**

The study is exploratory and qualitative. The findings are based primarily on participatory workshop material and cannot be considered statistically representative of all small producers in the Western Balkans. The analysis reflects the issues, priorities and policy directions emerging from one participatory discussion. Another limitation is that the European examples are illustrative rather than fully developed comparative case studies. The article does not evaluate their performance in quantitative terms. Despite these limitations, the methodology is appropriate because it transforms participatory workshop insights into a structured academic analysis and identifies practical pathways through which local value chains and short food supply chains may empower small producers.

## **5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***5.1 Sustainable food systems as a rural development challenge***

The first finding is that sustainable food systems in the Western Balkans are closely linked to rural development. The participatory workshop material emphasizes that food systems are not only about food production, but also about rural livelihoods, family farms, local economies, public health, environmental responsibility and social inclusion. This reflects a broad understanding of sustainability, where economic, social and environmental dimensions are connected.

In the Western Balkans, this connection is especially important because agriculture remains strongly associated with small family farms, local products, rural identity and employment. However, the workshop discussion suggests that these strengths do not automatically become economic opportunities. Many small producers possess products with quality, tradition and territorial identity, but operate in systems that do not sufficiently support their access to markets. This confirms the literature on sustainable value chains, which argues that sustainability requires not only production capacity, but also better governance of the whole chain (FAO, 2014).

### ***5.2 Structural barriers limiting the position of small producers***

The participatory workshop material identifies several structural barriers affecting small producers: fragmented production, weak bargaining power, limited storage and processing capacity, poor logistics, difficult access to finance and insufficient advisory support. These barriers weaken farmers' market position in several ways. Fragmented production prevents small producers from reaching economies of scale. Weak bargaining power makes them dependent on intermediaries and limits their influence over prices. Poor logistics and lack of storage reduce their ability to sell products at the right time and under better conditions. Limited processing capacity keeps many producers trapped in the sale of raw products, where added value is low.

The key finding is that small producers do not necessarily struggle because their products lack quality. They often struggle because the system around them is not strong enough to help them transform quality into market value. This is a central argument for the article: producer empowerment requires changes in the organization of value chains, not only improvements at farm level. It requires mechanisms that make farmers more visible, better organized and better connected to consumers and institutions.

### **5.3 Local value chains as instruments for territorial value creation**

Local value chains emerge from the workshop evidence as an important pathway for strengthening the position of small producers. Local products are not only part of cultural heritage; they are economic assets that can create identity, trust and differentiation. This is important for small farmers, who usually cannot compete with large producers through volume or low prices. Their comparative advantage is more often linked to product origin, freshness, authenticity, traditional knowledge, quality and proximity to consumers.

From a sustainability perspective, local value chains can support rural economies by keeping more value within the territory. They can also strengthen links between agriculture, food culture, tourism, gastronomy and community identity. However, the workshop findings also suggest that tradition alone is not enough. Local products must be connected to branding, promotion, quality assurance, logistics and market access. Without this coordination, local products may remain informal, under-promoted and economically undervalued.

### **5.4 Short food supply chains as mechanisms for reducing intermediation**

A second major pathway is the development of short food supply chains. The participatory workshop material emphasizes that short chains can reduce the distance between producers and consumers, keep more value in local communities, improve transparency and strengthen trust. They address one of the main weaknesses faced by small producers: dependence on intermediaries. When farmers sell through long chains, they often receive only a small share of the final price and have little control over marketing, product identity or consumer relations. Short supply chains can partially correct this imbalance by creating more direct connections between farmers and consumers.

These chains may include farmers' markets, farm shops, direct farm sales, local food hubs, purchasing groups, community-supported agriculture, online sales platforms, local public procurement and collective marketing initiatives. Yet the discussion also shows that short chains do not function automatically. Direct selling can increase farmers' responsibilities in packaging, communication, delivery, quality standards and customer relations. For small farmers, these tasks can be difficult when performed individually. The real value of short food supply chains therefore lies not only in shortening physical distance, but in creating better organizational conditions for farmers to sell collectively, communicate clearly and retain more value.

### **5.5 Producer cooperation as a condition for empowerment**

One of the strongest findings is that local value chains and short food supply chains require cooperation. Small producers are often weak when they act individually, but they can become stronger when they cooperate in promotion, logistics, branding, storage, processing and sales. Cooperation can reduce costs, increase visibility, improve product diversity and strengthen bargaining power. It may take the form of producer groups, cooperatives, common labels, joint

packaging, shared transport, common online channels, collective participation in farmers' markets and partnerships with restaurants, tourism operators, schools or local shops.

This finding is consistent with the literature, which emphasizes that short chains become viable when producers have the capacity to coordinate supply and create stable relations with consumers (Kneafsey et al., 2013; Djordjević-Milošević et al., 2021). Without cooperation, short food supply chains may remain small, fragmented and dependent on the individual capacity of each farmer. With cooperation, they can become more structured and more capable of supporting sustainable rural development.

### **5.6 The green transition: burden or opportunity?**

The analyses connects the discussion with the European Green Deal, the Farm to Fork Strategy and the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. The key message is that the green transition can be either a burden or an opportunity for small farmers. It becomes a burden when new standards, environmental requirements or food safety rules are introduced without financial support, advisory services, infrastructure and practical guidance. In such cases, small farmers may face higher costs and greater administrative pressure, while larger producers are better positioned to adapt.

However, the green transition can become an opportunity if it is linked with local value chains and short food supply chains. These approaches can help small farmers benefit from growing consumer interest in local, fresh, traceable, seasonal and sustainable products. They can also support rural employment, local economic circulation and stronger consumer-producer relations. Sustainability policies should therefore not be designed only as compliance obligations. They should create enabling conditions through grants, technical assistance, local infrastructure, producer cooperation, territorial branding, food safety support and access to local markets.

## **6. ILLUSTRATIVE EUROPEAN EXAMPLES OF SHORT FOOD SUPPLY CHAIN ORGANIZATION**

European experiences with short food supply chains show that empowering small producers requires more than encouraging them to sell directly. Successful initiatives usually combine producer cooperation, common visibility, logistics, consumer trust, diversified market channels and supportive institutional arrangements. These examples are relevant for the Western Balkans because they demonstrate practical ways of reducing intermediation and strengthening the connection between producers and consumers. In this article, they are used as illustrative examples, while the main empirical evidence remains the Western Balkan workshop.

### **6.1 The Polish Village e-box model**

The Polish Village e-box model provides a useful example of how short food supply chains can be structured through collective organization. The initiative aimed to support farmers and small food producers by creating a platform where consumers could buy local products directly and without intermediaries. The model combined an online sales platform, selected collection points, farm stores and purchasing groups, thereby creating several channels for connecting producers with consumers (Farmwell, n.d.).

The presentation on the Village e-box model shows that the project aimed to limit intermediation between agricultural producers and consumers and improve farm competitiveness through joint promotion, direct and online sales, sales under a common logo, shared transport and other shared

equipment or supplies. It tested three distribution models: an online sales platform, purchasing groups and farm shops. The relevance of this model for the Western Balkans lies in its practical design. It treats short food supply chains not as individual and informal direct sales, but as an organized system that combines farmers, advisory support, common promotion, shared logistics and consumer access.

### **6.2 La Ruche qui dit Oui!/The Food Assembly, France**

Another relevant example is La Ruche qui dit Oui!, known internationally as The Food Assembly. This model connects consumers with farmers and local food producers through online ordering and local collection points. Consumers order products online and collect them through local “hives” or community-based pick-up points. The model has been described as a platform that creates local food-buying hubs and allows people to buy directly from producers while preserving local social interaction around food distribution (Goldapple, 2020).

This example is useful because it combines digital coordination with local proximity. It does not remove the local character of the food chain; rather, it uses online tools to make local products easier to access. For the Western Balkans, the main lesson is that online tools can support short food supply chains only when they are connected to real local distribution mechanisms, such as collection points, delivery systems, product aggregation and regular consumer engagement.

### **6.3 Campagna Amica, Italy**

The Italian Campagna Amica model is another important example. It supports farmers through a direct-sales network that includes farmers’ markets, farm shops, home delivery, on-farm catering, pick-your-own farms and other forms of direct producer-consumer exchange. The University of Macerata describes Campagna Amica as a direct-sales network organized under the same distinctive brand and operating through common rules and quality principles (University of Macerata, n.d.). Fondazione Campagna Amica presents it as a major direct-sales network under a common brand, involving more than 10,000 farms and more than 1,000 direct sales markets (Fondazione Campagna Amica, n.d.).

This example is particularly relevant because it shows the importance of common branding and institutional support. Short food supply chains become stronger when consumers can recognize and trust the network. A common brand helps local products become visible, while farmers’ markets and farm shops provide structured sales channels. In academic literature, Campagna Amica has also been discussed as part of broader Italian efforts to connect agricultural producers, social farming, local food systems and community-based rural development (Moruzzo et al., 2020).

### **6.4 Open Food Network**

The Open Food Network is a different type of example. It is not a single local market or national brand, but an open-source digital platform that supports farmers, food producers and community food hubs. The official platform describes Open Food Network as an open-source e-commerce system for farmers, food producers and community food enterprises, used by more than 2,500 enterprises in more than 15 countries (Open Food Network, n.d.). FAO also presents it as a platform that helps farmers create online stores, collaborate with others, sell collectively, manage food hubs and bring farmers’ markets online (FAO, n.d.).

For the Western Balkans, the Open Food Network example is useful mainly as a support mechanism. It shows that digital platforms can reduce some market access barriers, but only if producers are organized and if logistics, quality control, consumer trust and local delivery systems are also in place. Digital tools are therefore enabling instruments, not substitutes for cooperation and infrastructure.

### **6.5 Lessons for the Western Balkans**

Taken together, these examples show that short food supply chains are not only about reducing geographical distance. They are about creating better organization between producers and consumers. The Polish Village e-box highlights joint promotion, shared logistics, purchasing groups, farm shops and online sales. La Ruche qui dit Oui! shows how online ordering can be combined with local collection points. Campagna Amica demonstrates the value of common branding, farmers' markets and institutional support. Open Food Network shows how digital tools can support producer groups and local food hubs. For the Western Balkans, the key lesson is to adapt these principles rather than copy any model mechanically: short food supply chains need producer cooperation, shared infrastructure, common visibility, diversified sales channels and supportive institutions.

## **7. CONCLUSIONS**

This article examined how local value chains and short food supply chains can contribute to the empowerment of small producers and the development of more sustainable food systems in the Western Balkans. Based on insights from a participatory workshop and supported by illustrative European examples, the analysis shows that the position of small producers cannot be strengthened only through production-oriented measures. Their empowerment also depends on how markets are organized, how value is distributed and how effectively producers are connected with consumers, institutions and local economies.

The findings confirm that small producers in the Western Balkans face several structural barriers, including fragmented production, weak bargaining power, limited storage and processing capacity, poor logistics, difficult access to finance and insufficient advisory support. These barriers reduce their ability to capture value and participate fairly in food systems. In many cases, small producers do not lack quality, tradition or territorial identity; rather, they lack the organizational and institutional support needed to transform these assets into stable economic opportunities.

Local value chains offer one pathway for addressing this challenge by linking products to territory, origin, quality, authenticity and trust. Short food supply chains complement this process by reducing intermediation, improving transparency and creating more direct producer-consumer relations. However, both approaches require cooperation, logistics, infrastructure, branding, food safety support and diversified sales channels. The examples from Poland, France, Italy and the Open Food Network illustrate that successful short chains are organized systems rather than isolated direct sales initiatives.

The article also highlights that the green transition should not become an additional burden for small producers. If sustainability requirements are introduced without finance, advisory services, infrastructure and collective solutions, they may deepen existing inequalities. If they are linked with local value chains, short food supply chains, producer cooperation, territorial branding and

practical investment support, they can become an opportunity for rural development and small producer empowerment.

The main conclusion is that sustainable food system transformation in the Western Balkans should place small producers at the centre of policy design. They should be recognized as active actors in rural development, food quality, territorial identity and the green transition. Strengthening their position through local value chains and short food supply chains can help create food systems that are not only more sustainable, but also fairer, more resilient and more closely connected to local communities.

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