

Topic 3 - Sustainable Food Systems in Central-Eastern Europe: Exploring the Role of Intermediaries

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Topic description

The transition to sustainable food systems in Central-Eastern Europe (CEE) is in the take-off stage (coalition building). Many authors highlight that underdeveloped intermediation is one of the reasons for delays in these transformation processes. Intermediaries are organizations or bodies that act as agents or brokers in any aspect of the innovation processes between two or more parties (Howels, 2006), facilitating transitions by bridging multiple actors and their processes. Thus, the role of intermediaries and intermediation have received increased research attention in transitions studies in the last years, which resulted in a better understanding of the types, roles, mechanisms, influence, and evolution of intermediaries. However, this mainly applies to the Western/Southern/Northern European countries and less to the CEEC. Synthesized knowledge on intermediaries in the Western/Southern/Northern Europe food system transformation could help accelerate CEEC food system transformation.

Intermediaries have been categorised depending on their structure, context, spatial scope, as well as in relation to the stage or level of the system they act upon. Categories such as systemic, regime-based, niche, process, and user intermediaries are distinguished, each differing in terms of their level of action, emergence, interests, and position relative to the niche. Intermediaries also differ based on their goals. For example, systemic intermediation is set on a system level to disrupt it, while regime-based intermediation is realised through incremental solutions or political aims. Moreover, niche intermediation is pursued from an innovation niche perspective. Process intermediaries implement context-specific priorities, whereas user intermediaries act as facilitators, representatives, or end-users.

This call topic seeks to advance the knowledge base on the role of intermediaries in the food systems transition, particularly in the different spatial contexts (especially between countries of Western/Southern/Northern and Central-Eastern Europe), on the importance of representatives from different sectors, on the nature of links and cooperation, as well as the legislative context. This evaluation should be done by comparing the structure and context of intermediation in CEE and Western/Southern/Northern European countries. Building on learnings from Western/Southern/Northern European national efforts and assessing their relevance for CEEC could accelerate the transformation processes in this region. Expert

knowledge on similar efforts from other European regions is considered valuable for comparison and cross-learning.

The working group of the knowledge hub that will be established under this call will develop guidance and policy recommendations for shaping effective intermediaries in CEEC. Specifically, the call benefits the initiation of the Polish Food System Lab, also organised under the FoSSNet project. The aim of the Lab is to give recommendations that contribute to supporting national policy and strategic approaches for transforming the Polish food system. It seeks to enhance knowledge exchange within Central-Eastern European networks, but also with the rest of the European community, promote business innovation, and strengthen research and development. Therefore, a better understanding of the role of intermediaries in this process is considered crucial, as was identified by the Lab's action.

Related research questions

- What are the main differences in functioning intermediaries in Western/Southern/Northern and Central-Eastern Europe regarding structure, context, spatial scope, levels of the system or phases of the transition?
- What are the main success factors in both regions? Do they differ?
- Are there conflicts, self-interests and power struggles based on e.g. divergent values, visions among intermediaries in Central-Eastern Europe that slow down transition processes?
- How can intermediaries accelerate the transition? What are the leverage points?
- Under what circumstances do intermediaries in the region hamper the transition? Under which contexts and cases do they hinder transitions?
- How could European intermediaries join efforts and bridge actors, networks, networks of networks, and institutions in food system transition?

Methods to be considered (e.g. Theory of Change)

Proposals should adopt food system perspective. They may draw on:

- Literature review (academic and grey literature)
- Secondary data analysis, to map and document experiences with intermediation in Western/Southern/Northern and Central-Eastern Europe
- Comparative case study analysis, which can combine qualitative and quantitative approaches, to identify common success factors and challenges
- Fieldwork in selected case studies (participant observation, interviews, surveys, etc.)
- Proposal for the indicators to assess the impact of the intermediation on level of FS development
- Theory of Change to map expected pathways and leverage points for intermediation development in Central Eastern Europe

Documents & materials to be used

- Literature on intermediation, food systems transformation, and development processes convergence
- Case study documentation and reports
- Policy documents and food strategy plans at municipal, regional, and EU levels
- Quantitative and qualitative data from existing evaluations or public databases
- Fieldwork materials
- Additional literature (see below)

Expected outcomes (content-related)

- A comparative analysis of successful intermediation in Western/Southern/Northern and Central-Eastern Europe
- Identification of key success factors and challenges
- A set of indicators for evaluating the social and environmental impacts of intermediation initiatives
- Policy recommendations based on empirical evidence to support sustainable food systems transition
- A systematization methodology for intermediation impact assessment applicable in other regions

Expected outcomes (material)

- Research reports on each case study
- Set of indicators for evaluating the social, economic and environmental impacts of intermediation initiatives
- Methodological guide for assessing and systematizing intermediation initiatives, adaptable to other territories
- Comparative synthesis report highlighting cross-cutting success factors and challenges across the case studies
- Visual summary materials (e.g., infographics or policy briefs) to communicate findings to non-academic audiences

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