

Urban Agenda for the EU



Food Partnership

ACTION 3 - R&D

Building bridges and synergies between local authorities and relevant regional strategies

Evidence and Policy brief



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**Evidence
&
Policy Brief**



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EVIDENCE AND POLICY BRIEF

Why this Action matters and how the evidence was produced

The Urban Agenda for the EU Food Partnership examines how cities can influence food-system change beyond their own administrative boundaries. Action 3 focuses mainly on **Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3/RIS3)**: regional or national innovation strategies used to concentrate research and investment around selected priorities. In this brief, a **Managing Authority** means the public body responsible for managing a structural-fund programme; the Entrepreneurial Discovery Process (EDP) is the participatory process through which S3 priorities and projects are identified and refined. **The central policy question is practical: how can municipalities enter these processes early enough to help define problems, prepare projects and access funding, rather than being invited only after the main choices have been made?**

Policy context: [Urban Agenda for the EU Food Partnership](#) and [European Commission Smart Specialisation guidance](#).

The evidence was developed in four stages. First, documentary and policy review covered European, national, regional and municipal strategies, programme material, S3/RIS3 documents, scientific literature and project reports. Second, comparative institutional analysis mapped responsibilities, funding routes, regional programmes, departments and organisations that connect cities with regional innovation. Third, stakeholder evidence tested whether formal arrangements were visible and usable in practice. Fourth, the material was triangulated: official documents were used to establish mandates and programme design, while interviews and written contributions explained practical access, informal dependencies, barriers and continuation after funding.

The final report records 38 interviews or synchronous consultations conducted between 8 October 2025 and 6 July 2026, plus one documentation-and-follow-up contribution, giving 39 substantive entries in total. The synchronous consultations directly represented 12 cities or municipal/metropolitan authorities, alongside regional administrations, national bodies, European institutions, S3 actors, city and food-policy networks, research organisations, civil society and foundations. Written institutional contributions, follow-up clarifications, survey responses and country-portrait validation were analysed separately rather than counted as interviews. The evidence is therefore comparative and qualitative: it identifies recurring mechanisms and limits, not the prevalence of one model across Europe.

Note: 27 country governance portraits have been elaborated as an annex to the final report and will be sent to registered participants.

For Action 3, the research screened all eight Agri-Food Thematic Smart Specialisation Partnerships, examined [Traceability & Big Data](#) and [Food for Positive Health Impact](#) in greater depth, and used city-region cases to test how municipal needs move into strategy, project preparation and funding. Three analytical levels are kept separate throughout: (1) the regional or national S3/RIS3; (2) an interregional thematic partnership between regions and innovation actors; and (3) an individual funded project, pilot or Living Lab. A city can be present at one level without influencing the others.

Why S3 matters for food policy. S3 is not a food-policy instrument in itself: it is an innovation and investment framework. Its relevance arises when regional priorities cover agrifood, health, bioeconomy, logistics, digitalisation, circularity or other themes that intersect with municipal food responsibilities. The research therefore asks not whether a strategy mentions food, but whether local public needs can enter priority-setting, project formation and programme



finance. This distinction prevents a regional innovation label from being treated as evidence of city influence.

Case selection followed this logic. The two focal partnerships were chosen for deeper analysis because they expose different municipal entry questions - one around data and traceability, the other around health and public-service settings. Supporting cases were retained only where they clarified an operating mechanism, a funding route or a governance limit. They are not presented as national models.

What the evidence shows

The core finding is that **thematic relevance does not automatically create municipal influence**. Food may be named in a regional innovation priority, and a city may host a pilot, but neither fact proves that the municipality helped define the challenge, had access to project preparation, influenced a call or retained a lasting public capacity. The report analysis therefore separates three questions: **Was the city able to shape the problem? Did it have a meaningful implementation role and resources? What service, infrastructure, capability, partnership or funding route remained in the territory after the project?**

- Cities are often visible as project partners, test sites or Living Lab hosts, but are less consistently represented in priority-setting, consortium formation and project preparation.
- A food-related S3 priority does not itself create a clear route for municipalities. A named regional contact, recognised participation stage and preparation support are usually needed.
- Municipalities often need resources before a funding call opens: feasibility work, partner search, legal advice, technical expertise, budgeting and co-financing arrangements.
- Project participation is not the same as strategic influence, and project outputs are not the same as institutional continuation. Both have to be demonstrated separately.
- Smaller municipalities face a stronger access problem because staff time, consortium experience and cash-flow capacity are often limited, even where the local food challenge is well understood.

The two focal Agri-Food partnerships

[Traceability & Big Data](#) in the Agrifood Value Chain is coordinated through a mature regional-node model led from Andalusia and has substantial capacity to assemble complex projects around interoperability, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity and traceability. Municipalities can be relevant as public-service users, logistics actors, coordinators of local businesses and sources of territorial demand. However, the evidence does not show a standard municipal governance category or a published route from a local problem to partnership preparation, funding and feedback into future priorities.

[Food for Positive Health Impact](#) is closely related to responsibilities that cities already exercise through schools, care, public health, public kitchens and local food environments. Municipal facilities can offer real-life settings for experimentation and Living Labs. Yet the material reviewed for this report did not document a stable, repeatable route through which municipalities participate in partnership governance, project preparation and funding. The policy gap is therefore not lack of thematic relevance, but lack of a clear institutional route.

The wider scan covered all eight Agri-Food partnerships - biosolutions, positive health, packaging, high-tech farming, bioeconomy ingredients, plant-based food, smart solutions and traceability/data. Possible municipal relevance was recorded, but no equivalent participation claim was inferred for the six partnerships not analysed in depth.

What counts as participation? A municipality is not considered meaningfully involved simply because it appears in a consortium list. Stronger evidence includes a recognised role in defining the public problem, access to the EDP or an equivalent forum, involvement in project preparation, resources for implementation and a mechanism through which results can



influence the next regional strategy or call. The same test applies to Living Labs: the city should help shape the work and retain usable capacity afterwards.

WRITTEN EVIDENCE

South Ostrobothnia/Seinäjoki confirms that development projects must demonstrate a clear link to regional strategies before they can be funded.

Written institutional contribution, June 2026.

This statement illustrates why cities need to understand regional priorities before a call appears. It also shows the asymmetry: if regional alignment is a condition for funding, municipalities need access to the places where those priorities are interpreted and translated into projects.

Evidence limits remain important. The consultation contains more city, network and intermediary evidence than Managing Authority or private value-chain evidence, and Western and Northern European cases are better documented than several Central, Eastern and smaller-state contexts. The cases are therefore used to identify functions and transfer conditions, not to rank regional systems.

How the mechanism works in practice

[South Ostrobothnia](#) and Seinäjoki provide the clearest institution-led example. The Regional Council, the City of Seinäjoki, the city-owned development organisation Into Seinäjoki, universities and food-sector organisations connect regional strategy, business development and project preparation. The City-State Innovation Ecosystem Agreement gives the city a long-term route into innovation work, while ERDF-backed projects provide implementation opportunities. The case is useful because a permanent local organisation can translate municipal and business needs into project concepts. It should not be copied mechanically: South Ostrobothnia has 18 municipalities and roughly 195,000 residents, so direct relationships are easier to sustain than in a region of several million inhabitants. The transferable lesson is the connecting function, not the territorial scale.

Lisbon and [FoodLink](#) show a different route. FoodLink developed metropolitan cooperation across municipalities, research, public health, planning and civic actors before formal programme access became stronger. The Lisbon Metropolitan Area and regional development bodies provide the public connection to territorial planning and ERDF implementation. This is not a direct S3 membership model; it shows how a metropolitan coordinating body can organise territorial demand and make it legible to regional programmes. Brno/South Moravia and Utrecht show the opposite condition: working groups, advisers, Living Labs and programme contacts exist, but the route from local priorities to regional decisions and a shared project portfolio remains less formalised.

[Helsinki-Uusimaa](#) and Vantaa add a project-led example. The regional programme includes a regenerative-food priority and [CIRCULANDIA](#) creates a route for municipalities, regional actors and innovation organisations to work on production, distribution, reusable packaging, municipal farmland and urban-farming demonstrations. The remaining test is institutional: which responsibilities, staff and resources will continue after the project, and how will the evidence change later regional priorities? Turku and Southwest Finland provide a supporting contrast in which municipal public services and regional production strengths are aligned, but the route from local food policy to the formal S3 funding cycle is still not fully institutionalised.

Funding is therefore a sequence, not a final step. ERDF, I3, Interreg, Horizon Europe and EIT-linked opportunities can support projects, infrastructure, research or demonstration, but a city often needs earlier resources for problem definition, technical studies, partner search and co-financing. Managing Authorities and regional bodies can reduce this gap by financing project preparation, offering named contact points and aligning local public demand with programme



cycles. Projects should also state before implementation what the municipality will do, what resources it receives, what data or infrastructure it can use, and what happens after the grant ends.

FROM A MUNICIPAL NEED TO REGIONAL FUNDING AND LASTING LOCAL CAPACITY

Municipal need	→	Local evidence + public responsibility
Regional contact	→	Joint problem definition / EDP
Project preparation	→	Funding decision
Implementation	→	Lasting local capacity / benefit
Evidence from delivery	→	Next S3, programme or call

Source: analytical synthesis of M4 evidence; arrangements vary by Member State and region.

Roles are distinct. European Commission services and the S3 Community of Practice provide guidance and learning; Managing Authorities and regional governments control programme design and funding rules; regional councils, development agencies, clusters and metropolitan bodies can coordinate preparation; municipalities define public-service and territorial needs; research and business actors add technical capacity. City networks and civil society can contribute evidence and representation but do not hold formal programme authority. As the post-2027 funding framework may change the formal status of S3, the underlying governance principle becomes more important: municipal access should be preserved in future regional innovation arrangements.

Selected verified resources: [S3 Community of Practice](#) | [FoodLink - Lisbon Metropolitan Area](#) | [JRC on interregional cooperation and S3](#)



Key findings and proposed policy recommendations for Action 3

Key findings

Cities do not need a permanent seat in every S3 partnership. They do need a transparent and predictable way to enter the stages where problems, projects and funding are defined. A workable city-region connection combines a legitimate municipal role, a named regional coordinating function, early project preparation, accessible funding, clear implementation responsibilities, a lasting local benefit and feedback into the next strategy or call. Participation should be judged by influence and what remains in the territory, not by the presence of a city logo or Living Lab.

PUBLISH A CLEAR MUNICIPAL ACCESS ROUTE

Regional arrangements should state whom municipalities contact, when they can enter the process, what preparation support is available, which funding routes may be relevant and how local evidence can inform future priorities.

Lead: Regional authorities, Managing Authorities and partnership coordinators. **Mechanism:** A concise public access route linked to S3 and programme cycles. **Enabling condition:** A named contact and up-to-date information that smaller municipalities can use without prior S3 expertise.

INVOLVE CITIES IN PROBLEM DEFINITION, ENTREPRENEURIAL DISCOVERY AND PROJECT PREPARATION

Cities should be involved before project concepts and calls are fixed so that public-service, territorial and food-system needs shape the innovation problem rather than being added after technical solutions have been selected.

Lead: Regional S3 authorities, Managing Authorities and municipalities. **Mechanism:** Municipal participation in EDP or equivalent thematic forums plus shared feasibility and preparation support. **Enabling condition:** Participation linked to a real decision, with staff time and resources for municipalities to contribute.

DESIGNATE A REGIONAL COORDINATING OR FACILITATING BODY

An accountable organisation should connect municipal demand with regional strategy, project partners and programme requirements, while keeping decision powers with the competent public authorities.

Lead: Regional council, metropolitan body, development agency, cluster or equivalent mandated organisation. **Mechanism:** Named coordination function with project-development capacity. **Enabling condition:** Clear mandate, public accountability and continuity beyond a single project.

DEFINE THE MUNICIPAL ROLE AND THE LASTING TERRITORIAL BENEFIT

Before funding, projects should state the municipality's role, decision rights, contribution and the service, infrastructure, capability, business opportunity or funding route expected to remain after implementation.

Lead: Programme owners, project consortia and participating municipalities. **Mechanism:** Project and partnership agreements that specify roles, resources, data access and post-project responsibility. **Enabling condition:** Adequate municipal resources and no unfunded local obligations.

CONNECT PROJECT RESULTS TO THE NEXT STRATEGY, PROGRAMME OR CALL

Projects should identify a post-project owner, a continuation or responsible non-adoption decision, and a route through which implementation evidence changes future priorities, programme design or funding calls.

Lead: Managing Authorities, regional programme owners and public project partners. **Mechanism:** Continuation review before closure and formal feedback into the next programming cycle. **Enabling condition:** Named ownership, maintenance responsibilities and a decision point before funding ends.

BROADEN INNOVATION BEYOND TECHNOLOGY

Regional and European programmes should allow technical innovation to be combined with governance, social innovation, regulatory learning, agroecology, public-service innovation and territorial capacity where these determine whether a food-system solution can be adopted and sustained.

Lead: Regional S3 authorities, Managing Authorities and relevant EU programme actors. **Mechanism:** Broader eligibility and assessment criteria tied to public and territorial needs. **Enabling condition:** Transparent public-purpose criteria and evaluation of implementation, not technology alone.

