

Action Plan for the region of Noord-Brabant Interreg EUREGA project

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'European Regions of GAstronomy - building
resilience and creating economic growth'



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better regional policies*



Table of contents

Part I – General information	2
Part II – Policy context	3
Part III – Details of the envisaged activities	6
ACTION 1: The development of a long-term media and influencer strategy for sustainable food	7
Relevance to the project.....	8
Nature of the activity	9
Stakeholders involved.....	10
Time frame	10
Costs	11
Funding sources	11
Monitoring	11
ACTION 2: Encouraging entrepreneurship in sustainable food offer through training	11
Relevance to the project.....	12
Nature of the activity	12
Stakeholders involved.....	13
Time frame	14
Costs	14
Funding sources	14
Monitoring	14
Epilogue	15

Part I – General information

Project: Increasing sustainable food tourism in Noord-Brabant

Partner organisations concerned:

The Province of Noord-Brabant

the Municipality of 's-Hertogenbosch

Country: The Netherlands

Region: Noord-Brabant

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Part II – Policy context

The Action Plan aims to impact:

- The Investment for Growth and Jobs programme
- The European Territorial Cooperation programme
- Other regional development policy instruments

Name of the policy instrument(s) addressed:

Future policy on the Leisure Economy of the Province of Noord-Brabant

The Noord-Brabant application for EUREGA originally focused on changing the policy on the Leisure Economy 2013 – 2020 by implementing new projects. As this policy runs out, the focus is now on influencing the future policy on leisure economy by adapting the destination marketing strategy for Noord-Brabant.

The current policy on Leisure economy expressed the province's ambition to become the Netherlands' most innovative and hospitable region. At that time (2013), the leisure sector represented 9% of total employment and € 5.3 billion of total spending in Noord-Brabant. The instrument acknowledged the important role played by the leisure economy in the quality of life in the province of Noord-Brabant. It also highlighted the need to innovate the leisure industry in order to change its focus from being mainly on the domestic market to more on foreign markets. Policy targets for 2020 were an increase in employment in the leisure sector from 51.700 to 58.400 jobs (+13%), an increase in added value from €1.93 billion to €2.18 billion (+13%) and a contribution to goals in other fields like culture, agrofood, health, sports and creativity. Meeting these employment and expenditure goals would require a larger number of visitors and a higher level of spending per visit.

The 2013-2020 programme detailed in the Leisure Economy policy focused on the following action lines:

- Creating a stronger supply for international visitors;
- Adding value to the regular leisure supply through new crossovers, storytelling and concepts that would lead to more product-market combinations;
- Developing a hospitality sector that stands out;
- Strengthening the foundation in terms of data, partnerships and marketing.

One of the instruments for implementing these action lines was the marketing strategy. The underlying current policy is going to end in 2020. There is no evaluation yet. Luckily, the midterm review from 2017 provides relevant information. This review already indicated some successes of the instrument, like an increase of the number of jobs of 22% compared to 2013. The added value had increased by 25% to €2.42 billion. This shows that the policy targets set for 2020 were already realised in 2017. Besides that, the number of visitors has been rising for several years now.

However, it was also clear that crossovers between agrofood and leisure ¹ required more attention because these had not been developed very well on a structural basis, despite agrofood having huge potential to enrich visitors' experiences. In 2018, this potential was evident from the level of media appreciation of the European Region of Gastronomy programme in Noord-Brabant, in which food was the headliner. Young and sustainability-driven food entrepreneurs attracted a great deal of attention by offering events, locations and dishes.

The reason that these crossovers remained in place until 2018 was the strong focus of the agricultural sector on large-scale food production, combined with the opinion that our own food culture and offering was not very attractive. In addition to this, the policy did not recognise our agrofood and gastronomy as specific quality elements. Besides, other developments also played a role. In the last few years an increasing number of Brabant consumers and visitors have wanted to start eating healthily and to learn about the origins of the food they eat. From an agricultural policy perspective the aim for several years now has been to make agriculture more sustainable, and this is becoming more and more urgent. This ambition can also be found in the latest RIS 3 Strategy (April 2020).

A stronger combination between agrofood and leisure can be significant for several of these ambitions, and then especially through the practices of food and gastronomy SMEs such as farms, restaurants, food designers and festivals that focus on more sustainable food. A more accessible offering is required that can meet the demand of a growing group of visitors. If we achieve this, we will become a more attractive destination in that regard and expenditure on sustainable food will increase. That is why we want to pay more attention to sustainable food supply ² in our marketing strategy and want to strengthen our offer in that area. In addition to higher expenditure, the additional effects are expected to be a change to the image of Noord-Brabant as a destination and an acceleration in the number of visitors and residents of Brabant as well that switch to more sustainable food consumption.

The policy on the Leisure Economy 2013-2020 ends this summer. The future policy for the leisure economy will be developed later this year, but the time frame and contents have not yet been set. By implementing two actions, not specifically as part of the new policy but during the period it applies to, we want to enhance the role of sustainable food as part of our marketing strategy. This marketing strategy is an existing instrument that played an important role in achieving the goals that were listed on the previous page. It is to be expected that the future policy on leisure economy will also involve a marketing strategy as one of the tools. Thus, this future marketing strategy is the policy instrument that will be influenced by the action plans.

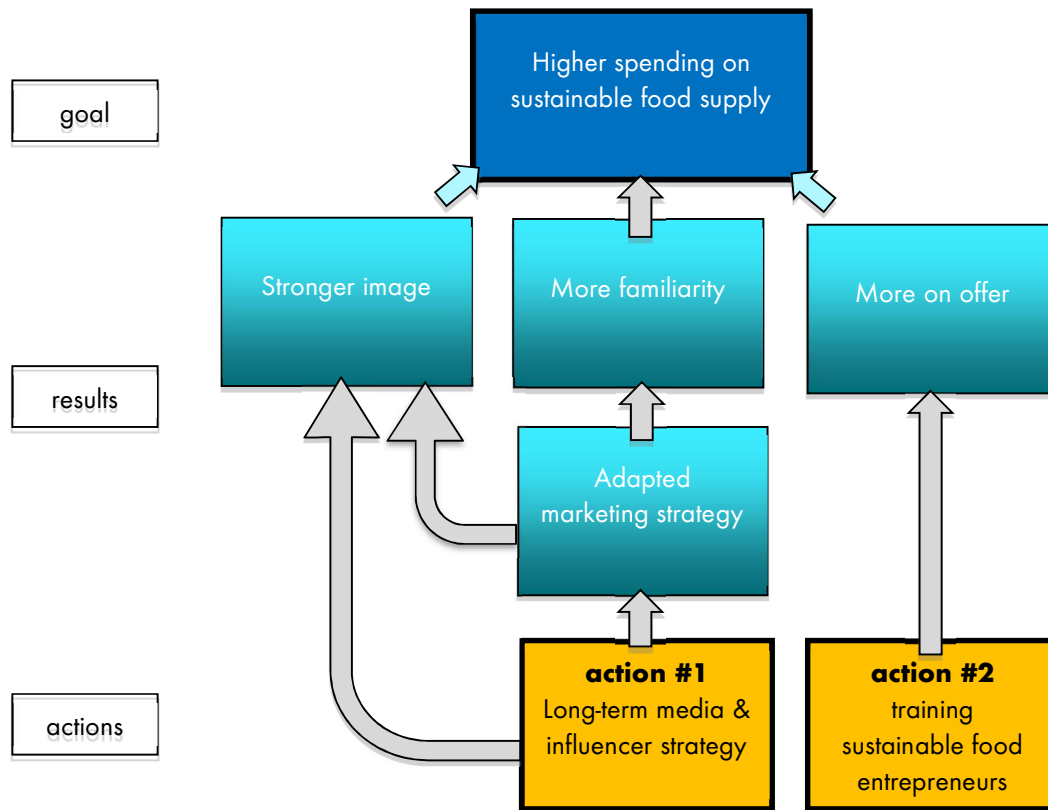
Both the policy development and the actions are to be carried out by, or on the instructions of, the province of Noord-Brabant.

¹ These crossovers are concrete activities that enhance the role of agrofood in the leisure offer of Noord-Brabant

² Our definition of sustainable food supply is the complete range of sustainable food supply for visitors, such as local food festivals, gastronomic routes, farm workshops and farm shops. The term 'sustainability' has not been defined precisely but is expressed primarily by using regional and seasonal produce and by keeping typical Brabant food traditions alive.

With regard to the funding of the action plans there are several possibilities. This year, a new administration was formed in Noord-Brabant. The new visions and policy programs are expected to be ready at the end of this year. Both the future programs for 'Leisure Economy' and 'Agriculture and Food' might offer the funding for the implementation of the action plans.

The image below illustrates the connection between actions, results and the goal.



First, we want to develop a long-term media and influencer strategy to promote our sustainable food and gastronomy more effectively. This strategy will result in increased publicity for sustainable food offerings and a better image for food and gastronomy.

Second, we want to encourage our entrepreneurs to create more sustainable food supply. Businesses will be encouraged by means of a training programme. The publications that result from media and influencer visits will play a major role in this respect. Pride is definitely the right word in this context and we want to increase that sense of pride by showcasing the appreciation expressed by journalists and influencers in their publications.

Part III – Details of the envisaged activities

In short, our goal of the actions is to enhance the role of sustainable food in our marketing strategy. We envisage being able to do this through:

- #1 The development of a long-term media and influencer strategy to promote our sustainable food more effectively. More media attention will lead to an improved image and therefore higher expenditure on sustainable food offerings.
- #2 The development of a training programme for entrepreneurs to create more sustainable food offerings. This will result in better skills and higher self-esteem when it comes to establishing competitive and innovative business models.

Both activities will focus on the Van Gogh National Park, which is located within the Noord-Brabant region. The collaboration on this future park and the specific qualities it offers are an excellent combination. The connection between the activities is shown in the illustration below.



The long-term strategy will lead to regular visits to Noord-Brabant by journalists and influencers. That, in turn, will make visitors more aware of our existence. The publications which result from media visits will be collected and analysed. That will serve as a basis for developing a programme with training and coaching for SMEs to strengthen their range, which can then take centre stage during new media visits. In the long term, this will lead to a stronger image in the field of sustainable food tourism and the corresponding higher spending.

Due to delays caused by the Covid-19 crisis and the shifting priorities among many stakeholders because of that, our stakeholders will be consulted in more detail in the second half of this year. This will lead to more specific approaches of the actions.

ACTION 1: The development of a long-term media and influencer strategy for sustainable food

This activity focuses on developing a long-term strategy for the promotion of our food and gastronomy offerings through media visits to the region in order to increase familiarity among visitors. The inspiration for this were the media visits in 2018 when Noord-Brabant won the European Region of Gastronomy award. The food tours for journalists and influencers resulted in a flow of publications abroad which reflected a sincere appreciation of the events and locations they had visited. It taught us that we should not be so modest about our food offerings.

However, the publicity relating to the gastronomy year was only temporary. The new strategy will be an important structural tool in terms of drawing attention to our sustainable food experiences, which can often be based on traditions and heritage. The resulting media visits will lead to media exposure in the markets our visitors have come from. At the moment, neighbouring regions in Belgium and Germany are our most important markets but, due to the Covid-19 crisis, the focus will shift rapidly to domestic visitors. The increased attention for food will create a better, distinctive image for our region and make it more attractive. This will, in turn, lead to more visitors to sustainable food entrepreneurs and will boost economic development in the region. The media and influencer strategy is part of a broader marketing strategy for Noord-Brabant as destination for short breaks. One of the current highlights in this strategy is Vincent van Gogh.

In order to focus our efforts, specific areas in agriculture and gastronomy will be selected. These areas will also be based on the specific types of visitors we want to attract and we will focus particularly on SMEs that offer promising sustainable concepts for visitors.

After that goals will be set for the media and influencer approach, for instance in terms of numbers of media visits and the image that articles should project. The next step is to select relevant media and influencers (e.g. food bloggers) that can reach the targeted visitor markets. A mix of tailor-made visiting programmes will then be developed and the result will be a very targeted approach.

We will build a network of people, events and locations so we can pick the best range on offer for the media visits. With help from this network an event calendar will be created that will also feature cultural celebrations and activities involving leading figures in the region.

Implementing this strategy will result in several media and influencer visits during which the focus will be on sustainable food. Nevertheless, these visits will include a combination of sustainable food-related elements and other specific highlights in our region. In addition to the publicity that the participants will generate afterwards, we will also arrange our own media coverage during the visits.

Relevance to the project

The following examples from EUREGA partners inspired us to draw up this action plan. For each example we first describe the project and after that the content of our approach.

Cabbage festival in the region of Hajdu Bihar, Hungary

'Cabbage Days' is a culinary festival, held annually at the end of September in the town of Hajdúhadház. The festival focuses on the most famous agricultural produce of the area, namely the 'hadházi flat' type of cabbage. Various programmes take place during the festival, such as concerts, shows, tasting meals made of cabbage, cooking competitions, etc. The popularity of the event is helping to increase the self-esteem of the local community.

This festival inspired us because the focus is on celebrating a culinary tradition. We would label traditions like this as less attractive to tourists at many places in Noord-Brabant. Our activity includes identifying these types of culinary celebrations when putting together our network and annual calendar so that we can assess how they can be combined with other sorts of sustainable activities. Those combinations will increase the authenticity of Noord-Brabant as a destination.

Reko farming platform in Kuopio, Finland

The REKO model helps final consumers reach local producers and their products directly. The REKO model is now basically a Facebook-based market where the local producers can sell their food products to consumers. Once ordered the producer and consumer meet for delivery. Consumer feedback on the service has been positive and it is enabling consumers to get to know producers personally and to buy local, fresh produce in the most direct way.

This initiative inspired our marketing organisation to start promoting initiatives, even during the coronavirus crisis, to help sell farm products from Brabant. Among other things a popular food blogger is being used to post relevant messages on social media. At the same time this group of enterprising businesses is being added to the network that is going to be constructed as part of action #1. The promotion of sustainable food initiatives by bloggers will also be a consistent feature of this activity, based on the REKO project.

Mic Dejun Sibian – Local Breakfast, in Sibiu, Romania

The 'Local Breakfast' programme came about due to the desire to promote the region's cuisine through local, fresh and seasonal ingredients and traditional recipes, artisanship and local culture. The programme's point of departure is the fact that when the majority of visitors to our region book their accommodation, the booking includes breakfast. The programme focuses on a breakfast with regional products and covers hotels, guesthouses or smaller types of accommodation, in both rural and urban areas.

This project has inspired others through the rollout of a joint gastronomy concept, which ensures that tourists come across local providers at numerous locations under the same flag, thereby generating a recognisable image for the region. It also creates more collaboration between suppliers and purchasers and increases the security for suppliers in terms of selling their products. This project has mainly been an indirect source of inspiration for our activity.

Nature of the activity

The approach of media and influencer visits, which is currently developed annually, is going to change into a joint, multi-year media and influence strategy. As a result, a well-thought-out choice will be made for a number of years in terms of promoting the products offered and the way in which this can be implemented. This targeted strategy will focus all our efforts and offer the best chance of increasing familiarity among the visitors we want to reach.

In addition to traditional journalists, the so-called influencers will become more and more important in promotion processes such as these because they are able to reach a different audience via social media.

Step-by-step plan for action #1

- 1.1 **Determine focus segments:** This refers to segments in which the focus is on sustainability and innovation through concepts which visitors can experience. The demand for sustainable food supply will also be substantiated. Various stakeholders may be involved in this choice.
- 1.2 **Record publicity objectives:** the desired results of the long-term media and influencers strategy will be determined, as will the associated indicators. This relates to, among other things, media scope, numbers of media visitors and the collaborating parties in Brabant.
- 1.3 **Determine visits approach:** Based on the integral marketing strategy for the region, the types of media and influencer activities will be determined which are the most likely to succeed and are the most feasible. Variation is possible in terms of group trips or individual visits, complete programmes, or by offering a choice of whether or not to integrate food into visits to Noord-Brabant for other things. Both locals and experts on content will be involved in implementing the programmes.
- 1.4 **Construct network:** Using the stakeholder platform a network of businesses, locations and events will be constructed within the focus segments. Assessments will take place regularly to determine which providers from that network are most suitable for media visits. One example is a herb grower who would offer workshops in combination with a dinner at one of the Michelin restaurants he supplies.
- 1.5 **Draw up annual plan:** An annual basic schedule will inform the media and influencers on time and cultivate interest in new developments and the planned visits. This schedule will consist of a selection of businesses from our network which we will combine with events and highlights in our region. They may also come from outside the sustainable food segment. The schedule can also be supplemented with up-to-date developments at the last minute. This calendar will also be accompanied by an information pack.

1.6 **Carry out the media visits:** a special team will arrange for media visits to be carried out. This will involve combining an attractive collection of visiting locations with an excellent package of transport, catering, accommodation and information. The team knows the visiting location well and knows what they have to offer.

Stakeholders involved

This plan will be developed and implemented in consultation with stakeholders. Some of them are members of the EUREGA Stakeholder Platform which will meet this summer and autumn to discuss the approach. The following is the total overview of stakeholders:

Regional and local government actors

- o Departments of Economics, Leisure and Agriculture of the Province of Noord-Brabant
- o A selection of municipalities in Noord-Brabant

Tourism experts and bodies

- o VisitBrabant
- o City marketeers from the municipalities
- o Experts from regional bodies in Noord-Brabant

Sectoral organisations representing and supporting farmers, suppliers and restaurants

- o ZLTO
- o Koninklijke Horeca Nederland afdeling Noord-Brabant

Entrepreneurs and enterprises in the gastronomy and food sectors

- o SMEs in hospitality and agrofood with a focus on visitors
- o Self-employed concept developers and consultants

Educational institutions involved in improving the quality of food products, tourism and hospitality

- o Koning Willem 1 Cooking Academy
- o Breda University of Applied Science
- o Fontys School for Creative Concepting

Time frame

Step	Time frame
Determine focus segments with stakeholders	2020
Determine publicity objectives	2020
Construct network	2020 - permanent
Determine visits approach	2021
Draw up annual plan	2021*
Carry out media visits	2021 - 2024

* The execution of this step will be a recurring process every year.

Costs

The costs for action #1 amount to approx. € 200,000.

Funding sources

The budget is expected to come from own institutional regional public funding. As a result of a new provincial administration, new policy programmes are being developed in the second half of 2020. The funding for this action might come from the future programme for leisure or the future programme for agriculture and food. Additional funding from other organisations is possible.

Monitoring

Implementing the activities of Action #1 will generate a network of entrepreneurs in sustainable food and a series of media and influencer visits to Noord-Brabant that will generate publicity in the domestic market and abroad.

The plan is to apply the following indicators to measure the success of each activity:

Indicator	Expected value
Number of networks created on sustainable food entrepreneurs	1
Number of media and influencer visits executed	8
Number of journalists and influencers participating in visits	50

When the activity has been completed, a short evaluation report will be compiled on the efforts made and the results achieved.

ACTION 2: Encouraging entrepreneurship in sustainable food offer through training

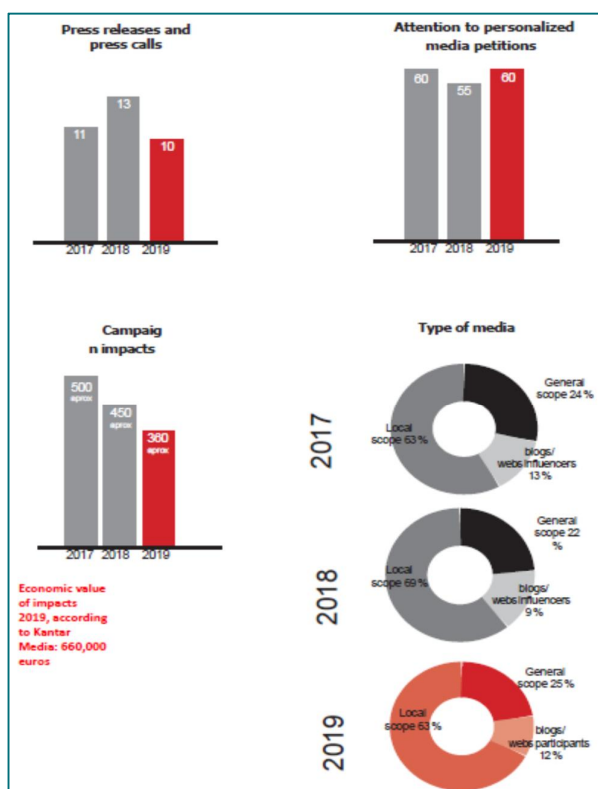
The core of this activity is to implement a training and coaching programme to encourage SMEs to develop more enticing offers in the area of sustainable food. That is important because the demand among visitors is increasing, while there is a lag in supply.

The media publications which resulted from action #1 play a major role in this programme because of their positive vibe. Entrepreneurs can be buoyed by the enthusiasm expressed in the publications and that provides basis for new pride. They now realise there is no reason to be modest about our food traditions or our gastronomy on offer.

The programme will be based on a combination of media reviews, influencers' articles and customers' preferences that result from surveys and market analysis. This combination of inspiration, information and marketing education, will give entrepreneurs new possibilities for innovating their businesses. That will lead to a greater range of sustainable food tourism which, in turn, will lead to increased expenditure. The actual innovation has to come from the SMEs themselves.

Relevance to the project

The following examples from EUREGA partners inspired us to draw up this action plan. For each example we first describe the project and after that the content of our approach.



Benvinguts a pages – Welcome to the farm, Catalonia, Spain

The Benvinguts a Pagès/Welcome to the Farm project is a weekend when farms all over Catalonia open their doors to visitors. Food producers that market under the 'Venda de proximitat' label offer free visits to their farms to show the public what products they make. At the same time restaurants offer a special Welcome to the Farm menu based on local ingredients. Hotels and guesthouses provide special offers and discounts, and special tourist routes are developed.

The illustration alongside shows how the organisation monitors how much publicity the event has generated and the economic value that publicity represents. We will include the registration and analysis of media publications in our approach.

Good practice 'Food Academy', Galway Region Ireland

Food Academy is a training programme aimed at supporting and nurturing start-up food businesses. The Local Enterprise Offices have joined forces with Bord Bia and SuperValu to provide a consistent level of food marketing knowledge to new food business owners. The Food Academy Start Programme is being implemented through workshop style training over 4 days and includes individual mentoring.

From this Irish example we will adopt the idea of developing specific training courses for SMEs so that they can adapt to consumer needs.

Nature of the activity

The core of this activity is a programme for entrepreneurs (gastronomy included) which is intended to encourage them to develop new and exciting sustainable food visitor experiences. This action plan uses the results of action plan #1 and can be partially executed in parallel to that of action plan #1. If fewer restrictions are imposed during the coronavirus crisis, this plan will be developed further with various stakeholders.

Step-by-step plan

- 1.1 **Determine objectives:** measurable results are to be determined for the communication tools, the number of businesses to be reached and the motivation after the training courses.
- 1.2 **Monitoring publications relating to media and influencer visits:** The publications about food offered in Noord-Brabant, which will primarily result from the media visits from action #1, will be collected, translated and saved online in order to make them easily accessible.
- 1.3 **Analysis of publications and feedback on titles:** We analyse the content and tone of the publications collected, in order to get a clear picture of how the range on offer is appreciated. This will enable us to gain an insight into how experienced travellers assess the food range.
- 1.4 **Assemble food inspiration package:** Every semester we will publish a selection of the most striking and relevant publications and views in an attractive digital format. The selection will be accompanied by an analysis of content, the best practices in Brabant and an events calendar.
- 1.5 **Develop training and coaching programme:** The training programme will involve experts and entrepreneurs who are leaders in innovation. Entrepreneurs will be trained in groups on the strengths of suppliers in Brabant, visitor preferences (certainly after the coronavirus crisis) and new marketing and communication techniques. Coaching will focus more on supervising the company innovation and on personal qualities and skills.
- 1.6 **Carry out training and coaching programme:** the expectation is that, as from 2021, groups of entrepreneurs will be created and trained in accordance with the method that has been developed. The number of training courses depends very much on the budget and on how the coronavirus crisis develops.

Stakeholders involved

This activity will also be worked out in consultation with stakeholders, such as:

Regional and implementing bodies

- Departments of Economics (Leisure) and Agriculture and Food of the Province of Noord-Brabant
- VisitBrabant

Local government bodies and destination marketing organisations

- (city) Marketing departments of municipalities and
- Experts of sub regional bodies in Noord-Brabant

Sectoral organisations representing and supporting farmers, suppliers and restaurants

- ZLTO
- Recron
- Koninklijke Horeca Nederland afdeling Noord-Brabant

Entrepreneurs and enterprises of gastronomy and food sectors

- SMEs in hospitality and agrofood with focus on visitors
- Experts: self-employed concept developers and consultants

Universities and other education institutions

- Koning Willem 1 Cooking Academy
- Breda University of Applied Science
- Fontys School for Creative Concepting

Time frame

Step	Time frame
Determine objectives	2020
Monitoring publications	2021 *
Analysis of publications and feedback on titles	2021 *
Assemble food inspiration package	2021 *
Develop training and coaching programme	2021 *
Carry out training courses and coaching	September 2021 – March 2024*

* Except from the first step (Determine objectives) the execution of the steps will be a recurring process that is evaluated and refined every year. The collection and monitoring of publications can start after the first media and influencer visits have taken place in 2021.

Costs

The costs for action #2 amount to approx. € 100,000.

Funding sources

The budget is expected to come from own institutional regional public funding. As a result of a new provincial administration, new policy programmes are being developed in the second half of 2020. The funding for this action might come from the future programme for leisure or the future programme for agriculture and food. Additional funding from other organisations is possible.

Monitoring

Implementing the activities of action #2 focuses on delivering a range of trained and driven entrepreneurs who are eager to develop new and exciting sustainable food supplies.

The plan is to apply the following indicators to measure the success of this action:

Indicator	Expected value
Number of entrepreneurs trained	200
Customer satisfaction of entrepreneurs trained	To be established
Food inspiration packages assembled	6

When the activity has been completed, a short evaluation report will be compiled on the efforts made and the results achieved.

At the end of Phase 2 a final monitoring report (max. 3 pages) will be compiled which will include all the activities completed, the results achieved and the impact on the policies in question.

Epilogue

This action plan was handed in on behalf of The Province of Noord-Brabant and the Municipality of 's-Hertogenbosch. The plan is the final activity from phase 1 of the EUREGA project. The project's objective is to have food, food habits and gastronomy included and recognised in EU, regional and national strategies and policies.

The plan was written after several exchange visits between partner regions in the first phase of the project. The partners are:

- The Municipality of 's-Hertogenbosch (lead partner, Netherlands)
- The Province of Noord-Brabant (Netherlands)
- ProAgria Pohjois-Savo (Finland)
- Northern and Western Regional Assembly (Ireland)
- Development Agency of South Aegean Region -READ S.A. (Greece)
- Sibiu County Council (Romania)
- Hajdú-Bihar County Government (Hungary)
- Prodeca – Government of Catalonia (Catalonia)

Special thanks go to the project managers in these regions for their hospitality and for the sharing of good practices that inspired us for this action plan.

Other compliments go to Justine de Jong from VisitBrabant, regional participants in the EUREGA Stakeholder Platform and colleagues at The Province of Noord-Brabant.

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