



# Action Plan

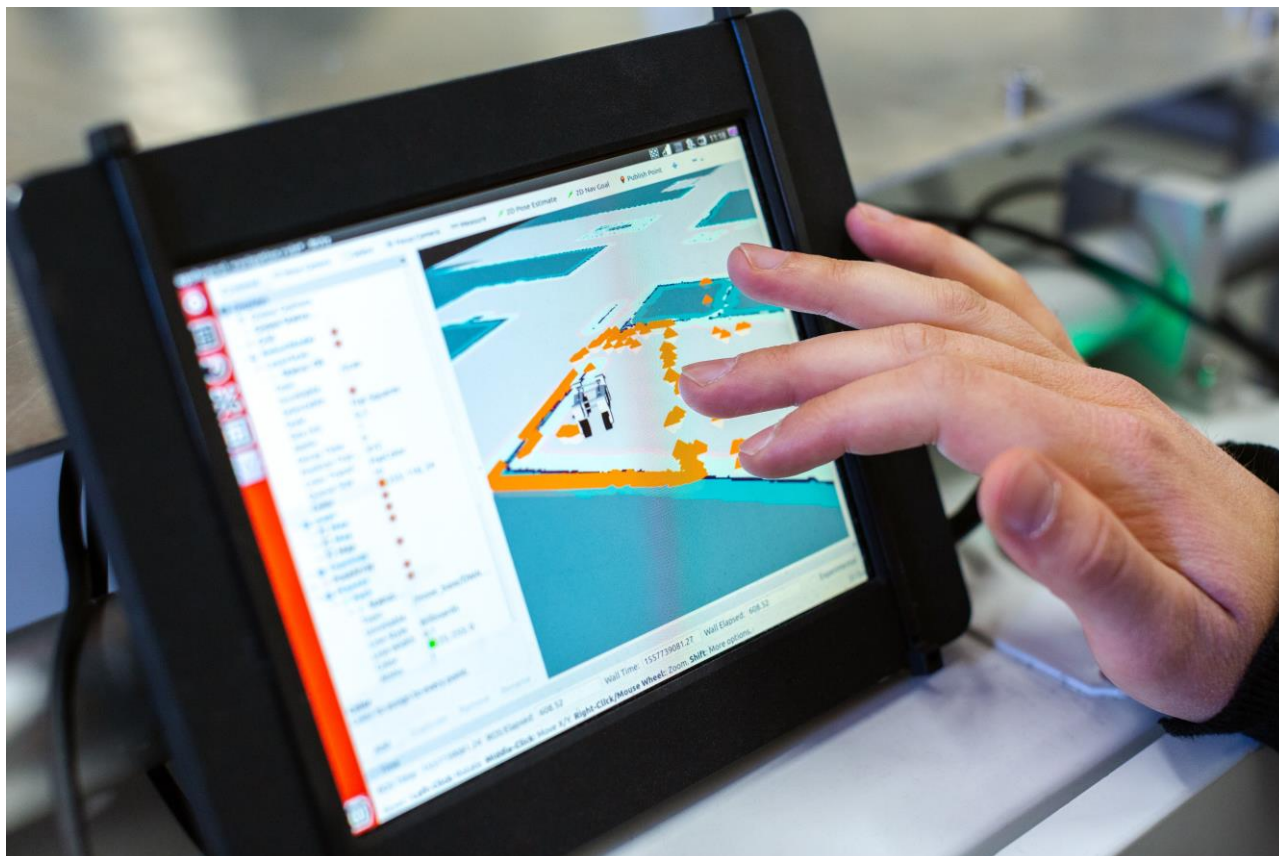
***Pazardzhik Regional Administration***



**REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA**  
Regional Administration  
Pazardzhik

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# PART I – INTRODUCTION

## General information of the Partner

PROJECT	REGIONS 4FOOD
PARTNER ORGANISATION CONCERNED	Pazardzhik Regional Administration
COUNTRY	Bulgaria
NUTS2 REGION	South Central Region
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## REGIONS 4FOOD Project

### Objectives

REGIONS 4FOOD project focuses on maximising the innovative potential of all actors of the agri-food value chain by the means of improving regional policy instruments to promote agri-food sector digitisation and better face new challenges in relation to ICTs.

The project arose as a proposal within the partner regions' Smart Specialisation Strategies (RIS3), where innovation and the ICT sector are key factors, and where the Thematic Partnership in Traceability and Big Data has been framed since 2017

**The aim of REGIONS 4FOOD project is to better exploit ICTs potential and deliver innovation to agri-food industry and hence, smart progress and growth.**

Specific objectives of REGIONS 4FOOD project are:

- To bring together regional authorities / RIS3.
- To involve quadruple helix actors of the agri-food value chain and connect the world of research and agri-food companies.
- To guide future agri-food policies and strategies.



- To generate added-value from R&I and Smart Specialisation to agri-food industry.
- To promote public-private governance mechanisms.

## Outputs and outcomes

For each partner region, the issue of digital innovation in the agri-food sector has been approached in relation to the specific policy instrument addressed.

The lifelong learning process of the project has concluded with the development of seven regional action plans to improve these policy instruments which are the main outcome of the project. In addition, they will be disseminated and will serve as an example for other programmes and regions

Other outcomes to be highlighted which have emerged from the project's learning process are:

- Increasing the professional capacity at all levels: staff, organisational, regional and beyond the project.
- Strengthening cooperation among quadruple helix actors, both at regional and interregional level.
- Contributing to the new programming period by providing strategic recommendations.

To achieve these objectives and results, competent regional public administrations in seven EU countries have worked together to exchange their experiences and share good practices.

The REGIONS 4FOOD partnership consists of a geographically balanced combination of seven regions of varying development levels regarding the innovation of their agri-food ecosystems.

As a result of intensive work over three years and mutual learning, partners have elaborated their regional action plans.



## Overall and specific objectives of Pazardzhik Action Plan

### Overall objective

**-Promote digitalisation in the regional agro-food sector by improving the targeted strategic policy document and contributing to the next policy planning period based on the exchanged experience with the R4F project partners.**

### Specific objectives

- To prove the effectiveness of measures to be included in the future policy document;
- To demonstrate the lessons learned from the exchange of good practices between the partners, through the practices selected by PRA for local implementation;
- To increase the capacity of all participants in the process of creating, implementing and monitoring the action plan;
- Involve a wide platform of stakeholders in the processes of digitalization in agri-food, through institutionalising active participation in the AGRIFocus discussion space within the Regional Development Council of PRA following the example of FORUM S3 of Emilia Romagna;
- Promote digital technologies to small and medium sized farmers and to rural population through demonstration and wide communication activities.

# PART II – POLICY CONTEXT

## The Policy Instrument

The Action Plan aims to impact:

☒ Other regional development policy instrument

Name of the policy instrument (s) addressed:

**Regional Development Strategy of  
Pazardzhik Region 2014-2020**

**Innovation Strategy for Smart  
Specialization of the Republic of Bulgaria  
2021-2027**

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## Background and rationale

- The regional policy context of the agri-food sector

Agriculture has a very important place in the economy of the area, although it constitutes a relatively small share of operating revenues. The relief and the climate of the region predetermine the development of agriculture and mountain breeding. The total area of agricultural land in the Pazardzhik region comes up to 1 474 431 decares, of which the arable land area is 1 175 435 decares (1 dec. =1000 m<sup>2</sup>).

Structural features of agricultural land 2019 (hectares)

	Cereals	Oil crops	Industrial crops	Vegetables	Meadows	Fallow land	Arable land
<b>Bulgaria</b>	<b>2 072 678</b>	<b>947 909</b>	<b>62 727</b>	<b>90 474</b>	<b>138 191</b>	<b>149 636</b>	<b>3 461 615</b>
<b>South Central region</b>	<b>200 157</b>	<b>106 033</b>	<b>12 767</b>	<b>28 821</b>	<b>40 106</b>	<b>31 016</b>	<b>415 298</b>
Kardzhali	983	492	393	2 654	2 163	393	5 702
Pazardzhik	34 036	11 207	830	4 254	8 613	10 792	69 109
Plovdiv	104 708	48 676	6 651	10 481	19 954	10 884	200 245
Smolyan	196	-	-	2 259	-	589	2 652
Haskovo	60 234	45 659	4 892	9 173	9 376	8 357	137 590

	Family gardens	Permanent grassland and meadows	Perennials	Used agricultural area	Agricultural land
<b>Bulgaria</b>	<b>14 636</b>	<b>1 408 481</b>	<b>152 738</b>	<b>5 037 470</b>	<b>5 222 925</b>
<b>South Central region</b>	<b>3 297</b>	<b>324 311</b>	<b>41 720</b>	<b>784 625</b>	<b>815 893</b>
Kardzhali	1 376	86 318	1 573	94 969	95 362
Pazardzhik	519	41 818	7 368	118 814	127 842
Plovdiv	907	74 676	19 752	295 580	308 077
Smolyan	393	45 569	491	49 105	49 793
Haskovo	102	75 929	12 536	226 157	234 820

Source: Ministry of agriculture, food and forestry. Department of Agrostatics.

Thanks to the abundant water resources in the area irrigated agriculture is fairly well developed. Constructed irrigated area using state water sources is 502 698 decares, of which 215 256 decares are fully irrigated. The remaining irrigation constructions can be used after restoring the interconnecting pipelines and this is now a priority measure. Rice fields have been established on an area of 52 000 decares, of which approximately 40 000 decares are currently still fit for rice production - a traditionally strong subsector in the region.



According National Statistical Institute data for 2017 there are a total of 1608 enterprises in the sectors of agriculture, forestry and fisheries in Pazardzhik region. Their total production again for the year 2017 is approximately BGN 145 million (1EUR =2BGN). 3 676 people are employed in the sector. The largest shares of this production have the following distribution:

- Grain and leguminous plants and oilseeds;
- Rice (1/3 of production in Bulgaria is in Pazardzhik region);
- Vegetables, melons and watermelons, roots and tubers;
- Nuts, berries and other fruits;
- Cattle for milk;
- Poultry breeding;
- Wood industry.

According to 2017 data from the National Statistical Institute there are a total of 219 food producing companies in Pazardzhik region.

The total production again for 2017 comes up to approximately 232 million BGN (1EUR = 2 BGN). The number of people employed in the sector is 2,818. The largest shares of the production belong to the following sub-sectors:

Meat production and processing; Processing and preserving of fruit and vegetables, non-prepared meals; Manufacture of milk and dairy products, not including ice cream; Bread, bakery and confectionery, pastry, biscuits and dry confectionery; Production of feed for farm animals.

The prevailing number of the food producing companies (163) is micro companies (up to 9 employees), and 44 are small enterprises (10-49 employees) while there are only a couple of medium-sized (50-150 employees) and large (above 250) ones.

On the other hand, the total number of enterprises active in the agricultural sector (incl. forestry and in-land fisheries) in our region is 1,608. The micro enterprises (up to 9 employees) are 1551, 52 are small enterprises (10-49 employees), 5 are medium-sized (50-150 employees) but there are no large ones (above 250).

Above figures represent approx. 3 to 4% of the total number of companies of different sizes for the country as a whole, in both sectors (food production and agriculture). This is an expected average correlation in view of the fact that there are a total of 28 regions in the country.

A further comparison of the Pazardzhik regional share of the national total of companies specializing in individual subsectoral economic activities (division according to National Statistical Institute) in food production and agriculture for 2017 shows that the region has 31% of the national rice-producing companies; 29% of producers of vegetables, melons/watermelons and root/tuber plants (potatoes); 13,5% of essential oil plants and herbs producers; 10% of seed/stone fruit producers (apples and cherries); 13% of pig

breeders; 12% of sheep and goat breeders; 11,6% of dairy cow breeders and 10.7% of breeders of cows for meat and breeding.

However, in terms of produce value and sales returns the region's vegetable producing companies have only a 10% share; fruit producing - only 2% share; oil plants producers - only 5% share; cow breeders - only 2,5%-3% share; sheep and goats breeders - only 5% share; and pig breeders - only 3-4% share of the national totals.

### ***Current situation with Digital Infrastructure for Communications and Connectivity***

In the Rural Development Program of the Republic of Bulgaria 2014-2020 it is stated that access to standard broadband network is available for almost all households in rural areas (99%), but in sparsely populated rural areas only 60% of households have access to a fixed broadband network, compared to 90% on average for the country. Only 10% of rural households have access to next generation networks. Broadband penetration in rural areas has increased significantly in recent years, but remains low - only 37% of households in predominantly rural areas have an Internet subscription. The use of the Internet by businesses and households for e-commerce, internet banking, information and training is far from what is potentially possible.

### ***Investments in modernization and technologies for precision agriculture***

At present, investments in digital solutions and technologies for precision agriculture are of predominantly private nature and depend on the economic capabilities of the individual farm or entrepreneur. For this reason, at the regional level, there is a lack of comprehensive information on the investments made so far and the level of digitalization achieved, as well as on the available technologies for precision agriculture.

### ***Digital networks and use of software applications in business management and decision making***

At present, there are companies occupied in the development of software products and applications aimed at the agricultural sector at national but not at regional level. Most of them are targeted at specific customers and develop custom-made applications according to clients' assignments. The services they provide for such products are mostly related to uploading the app to a client server and performing mainly administration and organizational operations with the databases of the clients themselves. In the studies conducted on the R4F project in Pazardzhik region only companies supplying internet connections on the

territory were engaged in providing such services. Other available solutions are related to the provision of mass-use services in terms of software apps for specific departments and sectors in the public administration.

### *Digital skills and qualifications*

The report of the European Commission on the index for the penetration of digital technologies in the economy and society in Bulgaria for 2018 states that the overall level of skills in the field of digital technologies in the Republic of Bulgaria is among the lowest in the EU, varying widely between different socio-economic groups. Despite the increase in the number of people with at least basic skills in the field of digital technologies from 26% in 2017 to 29% in 2018, Bulgaria remains among the EU countries with the lowest results. The adoption of digital technologies by enterprises in Bulgaria is slow. A gradually evolving ecosystem of digital and technology entrepreneurs has emerged in recent years, but investments in the digitisation of the economy is still limited. These insufficient investments, as well as the shortage of ICT specialists, are the possible reasons for the slow rate of digitalization in Bulgaria compared to other Member States. The level of digital skills is particularly low in rural areas, also as a result of poorer internet connectivity options.

## **Policy initiatives related to the digitisation of the agri-food sector in Bulgaria and in Pazardzhik Region:**

The new national Strategic Plan for the Development of Agriculture and Rural Areas within the Common Agricultural Policy for the 2021-2027 period is currently under development and not been made public yet (as of August 2021). However, there are a number of policy initiatives at national level related to agro-food digitalization:

- The most recent of them: **the National Recovery and Resilience Plan** concentrates in the field of digitalization almost 1/4 (23.5%) of the total estimated funding distributed in four main areas: (i) deployment of broadband infrastructure; (ii) improving the digital skills of the population; (iii) accelerating the introduction of digital technologies in enterprises and rural economy; (iv) deployment of e-government and e-services. Specifically for the agro-food sector, it includes a Sustainable Agriculture component which in turn has a "Digitalization of the processes from the farm to the fork" investment measure. Envisaged under this is a "A complete electronic information system in agriculture will be built to achieve: electronic integration of the information flows from and for the implementation of the administrative



activities; provision of e-services to the farmers, centralization and use of e-services by the agro-food business in the course of fulfilment of their obligations and requirements depending on the type of agricultural activity; integration of the information systems of the administration and the software apps for management of individual agricultural holdings in a Unified platform for automated data exchange". The system will contain modules for: use of plant protection products and fertilizers through digitizing the logs for their use; registration and tracing of the import, production, trade and storage of veterinary medicinal products and medicated fodders, as well as their application on animals; "farm to fork" tracking - from primary production to final consumption on the principle of a unique identification code in order to inform consumers and stimulate the production of quality and affordable food"; as well as online training module and a module for consultations of farmers. The total national-scale planned resource is approx. EUR 12 million with an implementation period of 2021-2025. This funding is envisaged as complementary to the future national CAP Strategic Plan public funding for the 2021-2027 period.

- **The Digitisation Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Areas** in Bulgaria finally adopted in May, 2019 is the main national-level strategic document implementing the priority given to digitisation in the European Commission's Proposal for Regulation on Strategic Plans in the Common Agricultural Policy based on which member states will provide funding for the 2021-2027 period. The strategy presents necessary actions for the acceleration of digitisation in agriculture and rural areas, as well as in the administrations of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry and its administrative registers and services. Estimated funding will be provided through EARDF for the 2021-2027 period via the national Strategic Plan for the Development of Agriculture and Rural Areas.

- **The currently phasing-out Rural Development (EARDF) Programme 2014-2020** for Bulgaria, **Sub-Measure 16.1 "Support for the formation of operational groups within the EIP - AGRI"** provides funding support for setting up EIP - AGRI operational groups: for their legal establishment, organisational and operational costs, and also for funding their innovative projects and digitalisation in the agro-food sector. 10 mln EUR are dedicated for this call for proposals and 32 mln EUR has been available for the entire 2014-2020 programme period. 50 project proposal applications of interested parties were submitted until the deadline in Feb. 2020 and 26 of these were approved for funding. Two of them involve a major greenhouse vegetable producer in Pazardzhik region (GIMEL).

- **Sub-Measure 7.3 "Support for wide-band infrastructure" of the current national Rural Development (EARDF) Programme 2014-2020** provides support for building up,



enhancement and/or expansion of wide-band infrastructure, passive wide-band infrastructure and access to solutions using wide-band infrastructure and E-governance in order to tackle the currently insufficient fixed wide-band infrastructure coverage of rural territories. 15 mln EUR has been made available for the entire 2014-2020 programme period, based on project proposal application of interested parties. The application process was complete in June, 2019. Approved proposals will have to be implemented within 54 months (not later than 15<sup>th</sup> Sept., 2023).

- **National Programme “Training for an ICT career” of the Ministry of Education and Science** provides free training in software development to high-school students, as a voluntary extra-curricular training in addition to their regular studies, in order to acquire the professional qualification of “Application Developers”. Students who have completed this training and successfully passed the tests are qualified to start work for software companies immediately after leaving high schools. Around 60 students from Pazardzhik region have so far opted in and the first successful graduates completed in the end of the 2020-2021 school year. Allocated public funding has so far been: 370 000EUR for the school year 2017-2018; 200 000EUR for the school year 2018-2019; 380 000EUR for the school year 2019-2020.

## SWOT analysis

At the very beginning of the REGIONS 4FOOD Project a research work was carried out to identify “Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats” in Pazardzhik agri-food sector and its innovation situation, in order to present the state of play to all project partners at the project kick-off meeting.

Subsequently, on the basis of the conclusions drawn after the implementation of the two methodologies developed within the framework of the REGIONS 4FOOD project:

1) the methodological guide for the identification of barriers, needs, relational capital and good practices; and 2) the methodological guide for the creation of data and technology catalogues, both related to the digitisation of the agri-food sector, an update of the SWOT was carried out also with the involvement of external experts, with the following results:



Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Existing national broadband infrastructure capabilities;</li> <li>Available well-developed scientific and research base in the agricultural sector with experimental facilities;</li> <li>Existence of qualified app developers and teachers;</li> <li>National registers and information systems established and operational; availability of an operated platform capable of integration, analysis and data sharing from public and private sources in order to enable trustful traceability, consumer feedback, subsidy applications and decision support to farmers;</li> <li>Availability of EAFRD funding for the promotion of digital investments.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Incomplete coverage of rural areas by fixed broadband infrastructure and low use of information and communication technologies by the population and business;</li> <li>Investments in digitalization are mainly of private nature and depending on the performance of the farms;</li> <li>Most software companies that develop digital solutions and products do not work in the field of agriculture;</li> <li>Insufficient awareness and scepticism of farmers about digitalization in the sector;</li> <li>Lack of digital skills and knowledge among farmers;</li> <li>Lack of forms for transfer of knowledge and innovation among farmers;</li> <li>Poor and mainly informal (not institutionalised) links between the various actors in the quadruple helix</li> <li>Many dispersed and unconnected state registers and systems.</li> </ul>
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Available national public funding for investments to create next-generation broadband infrastructures and provide active cloud connectivity equipment for rural areas;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Delayed access to broadband or lost funding for investment in building relevant infrastructure;</li> <li>Insufficient funding to invest in digitalisation and entry-level digital solutions at farm level;</li> </ul>



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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Wide public communication activities to raise awareness among small and médium farmers and agri-food businesses on the benefits of agri-food digitisation;</i></li> <li>• <i>Public (ERDF and EARDF) funding/resources for the legal setting-up and long-term operation of agricultural DIHs and EIP-AGRI operational groups, and also for implementation of their projects in order to boost the bridging social capital, i.e. relations between different types of organisations;</i></li> <li>• <i>Opportunities to create and develop digital skills among farmers by engaging them in various types of training;</i></li> <li>• <i>Agri-food educational institutions and academia are motivated to develop and introduce curriculums on digitisation and interdisciplinary training to acquire specific sectoral (agrifood) ICT qualifications, also involving ICT business professionals both in the development of courses and in the provision of training;</i></li> <li>• <i>Enhanced possibilities to improve the connections and links between the various actors in the quadruple hélix incl. through institutionalising such links;</i></li> <li>• <i>Plans for creating a single platform including national registers and</i></li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Lack of interest by farmers in applying for available public funding for digitisation;</i></li> <li>• <i>Lack of interest/motivation at the farmer level in raising the level of their digital skills;</i></li> <li>• <i>Purely mechanical integration of national information systems and registers not ensuring interoperability and hence, useability to its planned potential.</i></li> </ul> |
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<i>information systems through Blockchain.</i>	
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## Lessons learnt from other REGIONS 4FOOD partners.

The identification of major needs and barriers to digitalization in the agri-food sector in Pazardzhik region as part of the activities in the R4F project has led to a clearer idea about which of the partners' proposed good practices can be implemented in our territory.

Although we participated in only two of the Study visits: in France and Spain, we had the opportunity to get acquainted in more detail with all the good practices of the partners at the Second Interregional Seminar in Nantes in May 2019 where all were presented. The participation of our stakeholders and experts in this seminar had a significant impact on our choices as well. Representatives of the Agricultural University of Plovdiv and the Land Source of Income Foundation (NGO), as well as a high-level political representative of the decision-making public sector (Regional Governor), proved to be key to the next steps in developing the Action plan activities. The way in which the practices of all partners were presented in parallel sessions during this seminar also contributed.

The Study visit in Pays de la Loire, France was attended by a large group of our representatives - both stakeholders and PRA staff, and not only the good practices presented, but also segments of them (such as the example of one of the tenant companies presented in the Technocampus Alimentation (TCA)) sparked our interest. During the visit, the representatives of the Land source of Income Foundation held a meeting with the French company providing meteorological stations to support agricultural production in the Pays de la Loire region.

The second Study visit we attended was to Andalusia, Spain. The preliminary study of the Good practices also determined the composition of our delegation for this visit. A representative of the Agricultural University of Plovdiv participated in the visit for in-depth study of specific good practices and especially those for the Master's courses in digital transformation in the agri-food sector at the Universities of Cordoba and Malaga and the Master's course in digital agriculture and innovation in the agri-food sector of the University in Seville.



## Contribution of the Action Plan to the improvement of the policy instrument.

Based on the studies conducted since the beginning of the project, as well as after the identification of specific partners' good practices to be used as example activities in this Action Plan, a large number of recommendations were formulated by both regional stakeholders and experts to improve the targeted strategic document of Pazardzhik region addressed in the project.

The Regional Development Strategy of our region identifies the goals and priorities for integrated regional development stepping upon the specific features and potentials of the region. The strategy is a document for mid-term strategic planning of regional development at NUTS3 regional level. It is drafted and developed in cohesion with the Regional Development Plan for the corresponding NUTS2 region (South Central region). On the other hand, it provides strategic guidance to municipal authorities in the region when they develop their local municipal development plans (NUTS4 level).

Currently, several recommendations to the Regional Development Strategy 2014-2020 of Pazardzhik region are outlined based on the actions envisaged in the Action plan:

Priority concerned is *Priority3: Improve the competitiveness of agricultural production; balanced and multifunctional use of forest resources, introducing cost-efficient and environmental models of production of fresh-water fish and aquaculture.*

The proposal is for a new Specific Action: 3.2 "Improving the digitalization of the economy of Pazardzhik Region", adding the following measures:

- Encouraging digitalisation in the Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries sectors;
- Integration, guidance and coordination of various sectoral policies in order to promote the digitalization of the agricultural and food sector, while the agro-food value chain is considered in its entirety;
- Encourage simplification of procedures or introduction of mandatory requirements regarding the processes of digital transformation along the agro-food value chain;
- Contribute to improving interoperability, digital infrastructure and open data availability;
- Awareness raising activities among end-users and stakeholders in the process of digitization of the agro-food value chain;
- Development and implementation of a roadmap shared among the various stakeholders in the process for digitization of the agri-food sector at regional level;



- Creating an ecosystem of innovation and links between all stakeholders in the process of digitalization of the agri-food value chain in order to foster opportunities for joint development of initiatives, programs and technological solutions;
- Promote the development of programs for multidisciplinary education and creation of new professional profiles in the field of digitalization of the agricultural and food sector.

Additionally, it is also recommended to introduce another Specific Action 3.3. " Sustainable development of agriculture based on local resources", adding the following measures:

- Support for building and developing partnerships between participants in the process of cultivation, processing, sale and related intermediate services of agri-food products to create competitive and sustainable value chains (based on the "from farm to fork" principle);
- Promotion and demonstration of innovative technological solutions and specialized software apps specialized for the agricultural and food sectors.

The second policy instrument targeted for changes in the present Action Plan, the national Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialization of the Republic of Bulgaria 2021-2027, steps on the concept of Smart specialization for the programming period 2021-2027. The existence of this document is considered a mandatory condition Member States must implement in order to be able to allocate the European structural funding for the new innovation priority areas of the Union. In Bulgaria it is currently being developed and will soon be available for public consultation.

In the upcoming programming period measures will be based on the same regional priority areas of Bulgarian regions identified for the national S3 policy document for 2014-2020. Pazardzhik region has identified biotechnologies and industries for healthy life as priority strong features of regional economy (Para 1.7 "Regional Specialization"). These rely primarily on agricultural production and food processing technologies. Speeding up digitisation of agriculture and rural areas, modernization in food processing, and enhanced E-government services will contribute to reduce bureaucratic burden, optimisation of production and processing, improve farmers' and food businesses' income and competitiveness, boost productivity and add value while contributing to a sustainable bio-industry, food safety and food security.

However, there is currently limited number of digital solutions in the agro-food sector, mainly of private origin and in large cereals farms and large food processing companies. Therefore, above identified priorities will need additional updating in order to ensure



regional subsectoral support and smart emphasis on strong priority areas. Such updating exercises will follow the same routine as in the previous programming period: our administration will provide to the national MA for the S3 2021-2027 annual reports on its up-to-date priority S3 status based on a wide regional stakeholder consultation process. This is targeted to be achieved through the implementation of Action 1 of the current Action Plan by feeding these annual S3 update reports with common suggestions elaborated by all participants and members of the newly established AGRIFocus Discussion Space.



# PART III – METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

## Challenges/needs addressed

Data has become a key asset for the economy and our society. “Big Data” is leading technological innovation and the development of new tools and professional skills, so it has become a new challenge and also a need to tackle.

Generating value at the different stages of the data value chain will be at the heart of future knowledge economy, and to achieve this, “Big Data” will have to become a major tool for a fast data processing and analysis, which will help decision making with the aim of increasing productivity and profitability.

Within the agri-food value chain, the large volume and diversity of data generated requires designing and implementing specific integration and management procedures that let us take full advantage of the new economic opportunities (security, traceability, customer services, quality, etc.) and based on information, data and cognitive technologies and promote innovation-driven growth, where “Big Data” will play an essential role.

As a result of the participation of relevant regional authorities, the research sphere, ICT and agro businesses, and civil society in the exchange of experience process, partners have elaborated action plans to include measures that will improve the technology transfer, will close the gap between research and markets, and will enhance innovation opportunities and smart specialisation areas.

The project has also contributed to addressing the major challenge to digitisation which is to connect directly producers with consumers and also agro businesses with tech sector companies and with academia sector.

## Approach for the preparation of the Action Plan

REGIONS 4FOOD has a well-defined methodological approach with the following stages:



- **Identification**

The Regional Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, Fisheries and Sustainable Development of the Andalusian Government, as REGIONS 4FOOD Lead Partner, prepared two methodologies to be implemented by project partners with the support of their stakeholders with the aim to identify in each partner region:

- Needs, barriers, relational capital and good practices related to the digitisation of the agri-food sector
- Catalogue of data and technologies in the agri-food sector

- **Exchange of experiences and good practices**

The results of these mappings were presented, shared and discussed within the framework of the interregional seminars organised jointly with the steering committee meetings.

The exchange of good practices has been carried out through study visits, where both project partners and stakeholders participated. Prior to the visits, project partners had identified among the good practices proposed, the ones that were most interesting to them in terms of their capacity to improve the policy instrument tackled.

- **Preparation of Action Plans draft**

Following the template prepared by the Lead Partner, the first Action Plans draft included the lessons learnt from previous stages, the interregional activities, and the learning at all levels. Project partners also met with their stakeholders to assess the results of these previous works and contribute to the elaboration of their Action Plan draft.

## **Presentation of first Action Plans draft**

These were presented to the project reviewers during the Review meeting in April 2021. We received valuable feedback for incorporating into their final versions.

- **Peer-review**

The overall objective of the peer reviews was that the partner owner of the good practice inspiring the actions of another partner Action Plan draft evaluated it, taking into consideration the partner context on innovation strategies.

The process has been carried out as follows:

- First, each project partner determined if the peer review concerned the whole Action Plan draft or just specific action(s).
- Second, partners sent to peer the Action Plan draft with the instructions on what was to be reviewed (the whole Action Plan or just specific action(s)).
- Third, the peer identified the key actors and stakeholders involved in the concerned good practice that had most inspired the action(s)
- Four, once these agents read the draft Action Plan an online meeting was scheduled among both project partners. In that meeting, there was exchange of views,



assessing the document and when needed, how it could be improved in order to obtain the final objective: improving the partner's policy instrument tackled by the project

- Finally, the peers drafted a review report with suggestions to improve the draft Action Plan reviewed.
- These suggestions were discussed with the stakeholders and considered in the drafting of the final Action Plan.

## • Action Plans

This methodological process concluded with seven Action Plans (1 per each project partner) that are to be submitted to the Interreg Europe's Joint Secretariat at the end of the extension of Phase I (30th Nov.).



## PART IV – ACTIONS

### ACTION 1

**Name of the action: AGRIFocus Discussion Space within the structure of the Regional Development Council of Pazardzhik Region**

### Relevance to the project & background

The study of our region's relational capital conducted in the initial study stage of the Phase 1 of the R4F project demonstrated gaps and shortages in collaboration mechanisms and connections between some of the players in the agro-food quadruple helix. Most specifically, the relations between the agro-food businesses/farmers and ICT players were evaluated as exceptionally poor while public institutions seem to have fairly good relations with both agro-food businesses/farmers and research and academia players. Therefore, it was considered necessary for our public organisation to undertake the initiative and adopt measures to encourage such linkages by institutionalising them in order to ensure a lasting and sustainable collaboration in the agro-food sector building upon the relations already established and proven as effective in the first phase of the R4F project. The planned activity follows the example of FORUM S3 (Emilia Romagna, Italy project partner). However, our AgriFocus Discussion space (Committee) will discuss matters specifically in the field of agri-food, and not as in the above followed good practice, in which the discussion forum is in seven different areas of specialization of Emilia-Romagna economy. For this good practice taken as example a study visit was not attended by our representatives, but it was presented by our Emilia Romagna partners in much detail at the 2nd Interregional Seminar in Nantes, France and their stakeholders responsible for the good practice were present there so our attending stakeholders could discuss face-to-face the details. Additionally, the good practice owners were also peer-reviewers of this planned action in our Action plan providing us with valuable tips and guidance on how it can be improved and implemented successfully.

The following good practice has been followed as inspiration:

The Forum S3 - a policy tool fostering new solutions for agrifood sector in Emilia Romagna. Under the mandate of the regional government of Emilia Romagna, ART-ER began to participate in the strategic review process at the end of 2017, which, after extensive and



complex work, led to the creation of seven thematic events (forums) in May 2018. Forum S3 are places of open debates for people interested in the regional innovation system, born with the aim of proposing an update of the thematic orientations foreseen by the Emilia Romagna Region Smart Specialisation Strategies (RIS3), suggesting policies and intervention tools for a more effective implementation strategy, and promoting new solutions for the agri-food sector. The results of each of the forums contain considerations and proposals for political intervention, reflected in a report published on the regional government's corporate website.

## Nature of the action

The Regional Governor of Pazardzhik region and Pazardzhik Regional Administration are institutions holding executive powers at regional level in Bulgaria which by law develop and implement Regional Development Strategies. As written in the Application Form of the R4F project, the Regional Development Strategy 2014-2020 identifies the goals and priorities for integrated regional development stepping on the specific features and potentials of the region. In view of the preparations for the new planning period 2021-2027, as well as the recently adopted changes in legislation in the field of regional development in Bulgaria, a new strategic document at NUTS2 level for the greater South Central region has been developed and is pending approval. This document covers Pazardzhik region and will be the only strategic policy document relating to regional development in the new planning period (old regional development strategy ceased to exist). An ex-post evaluation of the implementation of the 2014-2020 strategy was carried out in order to guide the preparation of the new strategic document (Integrated Territorial Strategy for Development of the South Central Region). As a result of active participation of regional development stakeholders and over two years of work on the R4F project, proposals were made to be included in the draft of the new Integrated Strategy 2020-2027 specifically targeting agro-food digitalisation measures.

The main competences of the Pazardzhik Regional Administration currently are to coordinate between the various participants in the process of regional planning and development. The Regional Governor chairs various consultative bodies established under different laws or by initiative of the Regional Administration. However, no formally institutionalized advisory body has been set up yet in the area of agro-food sector so the planned activity 1 is expected to fill this gap while in line with the current governance political



priorities and building upon the regional stakeholders' collaborations during the Phase 1 of the R4F project.

The AgriFocus discussion space will be formally institutionalized as an agri-food committee within the Regional Development Council and will prepare analyses and reports to support strategic planning activities of the Regional Governor and PRA in the agri-food sector.

According to the Law on Regional Development of Bulgaria, a report on the implementation of the Integrated Territorial Development Strategy 2021-2027 of the South Central Region will be prepared every three years. If significant deviations are found in the process of strategy implementation, these reports may lead to an update of the original strategic document. The planned AgriFocus space institutionalized as an agri-food committee within the Regional Council for Development of Pazardzhik region will support these functions of our organisation. In addition to this specific function the committee will also support the process of integrating local priorities in the agri-food field into the National Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialization 2021-2027, which is currently in preparation.

In view of above the Committee will collect and analyze necessary information. Data obtained will be discussed in a broad representation by quadruple helix stakeholders and reports/proposals will be drawn up. The frequency of meetings is yet to be specified in its rules of procedure but our proposal would be to meet twice a year. For this purpose, in addition to the rules of procedure of the committee, a work program will be developed, which will include all specific activities with a detailed time schedule and lead responsibilities.

Following the example of Emilia-Romagna's good practice, the following specific activities will be carried out for the implementation of Activity 1 of the Pazardzhik Action Plan:

1. Rules of procedure for the AGRIFocus Committee will be prepared with proposals for composition involving representatives of all regional quadruple helix stakeholders;
2. A governing body of the Committee will be elected;
3. Up to three representatives of the Executive Board - PRA employees, will be appointed;
4. A Plan of work of the AGRIFocus discussion space Committee will be prepared, including also activity reports that will be required to be submitted to the Regional Governor and to the Regional Development Council of Pazardzhik region on an annual and semi-annual basis with proposals to update the Integrated Territorial Development Strategy 2021-2027 of the greater NUTS2 region and the National Innovation Smart Specialization Strategy 2021-2027;
5. Elaborating a format of the reports;



6. Four reports (with recommendations to the relevant responsible institutions) will be prepared within the Phase 2 of the R4F project - two for 2022 and two for 2023.
7. A specific section dedicated to the Committee will be opened and fed on PRA's website

## Stakeholders involved

**Organizer:** PRA Regional Development Council - The reports of the committee will be submitted for approval by the Council before being sent to the relevant institutions responsible for the relevant policy documents - the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works (regarding the Integrated Territorial Development Strategy 2021-2027 of the South Central Region) and the Ministry of Economy (regarding the National Innovation Smart Specialization Strategy 2021-2027).

**Members:** Representatives of the regional quadruple helix in the agro-food sector- public authorities, farmers/agri-food and ICT businesses, academia, science and research, as well as representatives of the civil society, as follows: -The coordinating role will be for Pazardzhik Regional Administration and three of its expert staff will be nominated to represent the Executive Board of the Committee; - The Regional Directorate of Agriculture, the State Fund for Agriculture and the Regional Directorate of Food Safety are the public institutions that will provide the necessary information to be discussed and analyzed by the Committee, and their representatives will participate in the discussions; -

Representatives of the agri-food business/farmers will participate in the discussions, giving specific opinions and project proposals for the need to improve public policies and funding measures in the sector; - Scientific/research/academia organizations in the agro-food field: the Agricultural University of Plovdiv, the Plovdiv branch of the Sofia Technical University, the University for Food Technologies, Plovdiv, etc. will also be invited to be members of the Committee and provide opinion and proposals for policy improvements from their point of view; - NGO representatives, such as the Land Source of Income Foundation and the Local Action Group Strelcha/Lesichovo/Panagyurishte who have been actively involved in the discussions of the present Action plan and results of the R4F project so far.



## Timeframe

This action 1 will be implemented during 2021, 2022 and 2023 with the following schedule of activities:

In 11. and 12. 2021, development of activities No.1 and No.2

In 1st quarter of 2022 - activities Nos.3, 4, 5 and 7

In 2nd quarter of 2022 and 1st quarter of 2023 - activity No.6

## Costs

The expected costs are equivalent to the estimated budget for the period 2021-2022 and are oriented to cover, among others:

Total for the entire action: 51 000 EUR including:

- Remuneration for part-time work of the Executive Board members for three years, incl.2023 (end of Phase 2 of the R4F project);
- Administrative costs for three years of operation, incl. 2023.

## Funding sources

All costs will be funded 100% by PRA annual budgets.100% public funding will be at the expense of PRA since there is no alternative funding mechanism available at regional level.

N.B. We would like to clarify here that the targeted strategic document at regional level is not an operational program and no funding is allocated under it. It specifies the priorities for development of the region while their achievement is realised through the implementation of projects applied for under the various sectoral operational programs, which in Bulgaria are exclusively operated and managed at the national level.

## Output and result indicators

The expected results following the implementation of the each planned specific activity will be:

Output: Establishment of Committee within the Regional Council

Result indicators:

1 Establishment Order of the Regional governor

1 Rules of Procedure, incl. number of meetings and quorum;

Output:- Election of Governing Body of the Committee



Result indicator: Number of minutes from meetings (2 per year) and quorum for decision-making;

Output:- Format of the reports to be elaborated

Result indicators:

number of written reports per year: 2 for 2022 and 2 for 2023;

number of recommendations included in written reports per year - 2;

number of municipal projects planned as a result/related to the recommendations per year - 2;

number of private projects planned as a result /related to the recommendations per year - 2;

1 recommendation for updating the Regional Development Strategy towards the end of 2021;

1 recommendation for updating the Integrated territorial development strategy of the NUTS2 region towards the end of 2023;

1 recommendation for updating the National innovation smart specialization strategy towards the end of 2023.

Output: - Creation of dedicated section on PRA Website ; Website address link

Result indicators: - Number of publications, visits and traffic data.



## ACTION 2

### Name of the action: Meteorological stations on two demo farms of Land Source of Income Foundation network

#### Relevance to the project & background

This action was inspired by several good practices presented and visited in 2019 within the R4F project. A tenant SME working on the territory of the public space Technocampus\* in Pays de la Loire, France and also, another company in Andalusia, Spain, presented a system for weather monitoring stations combined with models for predicting plant diseases. On the digital farm during our study visit again in France, but also in Spain, we saw more complete systems that also controlled the water moisture in the soil and managed irrigation based on this. The digital farm was of particular interest as it demonstrated how organising demo digital solutions could help convince small farmers and agro-food businesses of the benefits of implementing digital solutions into their activities.

\* The Technocampus in Pays de la Loire, France is a building that belongs to the regional government and managed by its agency, located near laboratories and professional associations (INRA and ONIRIS), brings together different actors who operate in an ecosystem to develop innovation and training projects in agri-food sector, as well as start-ups working in the sector. The meteo-stations “owner” was one of the tenants.

Several lessons have been learned during the study visits to our French and Spanish partners, also during interregional seminars 1 and 2 and the peer review for this Action plan activity 3 where we had the opportunity to talk in detail to the good practice owner and stakeholder of our French partner. Firstly, there are a large number of digital technologies already available for agriculture and food production. However, small and medium sized farmers are not very willing to implement them, partly due to being sceptical about how effective they are, partly due to lack of free investment capital. Therefore, the main challenges will be to demonstrate and disseminate the effects of these technologies in order to convince small farmers in delivered benefits. Farmers will adopt new technologies only if they see that they work and costs are justified.

Thus, we got together with our major stakeholder and active participant in all our R4F activities and studies, the agro-food NGO “Land-Source of Income”, and having invited them



to attend above study visits and relevant interregional seminars, we sparked their interest in developing this action for part of their operated network of small family farms to whom they are providing integrated operational support. We are all convinced this action and the outcomes and conclusions from its implementation would provide valuable insights for improvement of our targeted strategic document and for giving recommendations for future policies to envisage measures to incentivise small farmers and demonstrate to them the benefits of actual digital solutions.

## Nature of the action

One of the priorities of the targeted Regional Development Strategy 2014-2020 concerns the increase of the competitiveness of the agricultural production in our region. From the above mentioned good practices of the project partners visited and studied, as well as from our own experience working with local farmers, it became clear that the implementation of small-scale investments for demonstration purposes is very suitable for promoting digital technologies among small and medium agri-food producers.

The planned activity envisages the installation of two meteorological stations in two locations in the region. Since the area is characterized by predominantly small farms, installation on individual farms was not considered reasonable. In order for the information from the stations to be useful and efficiently utilized, one of the considerations was for the technology to be installed in an area featuring similar and even identical types of agricultural production. As of Sept.2021, the stations have already been installed and set up, and started collecting data from locations of several farms planted mainly with perennials. The idea is to expand the scope of meteorological stations coverage by expanding the network of stations to other locations after this first initial investment and implementation of the action. After a two-year cycle of data collection and reporting of results, it will be possible to use the project as a demonstration by the example of the Digital Farm good practice in Pays de la Loire, France. The owner of this action, the Land Source of Income foundation, will disseminate the results through its website to all farmers in the region. The model will be presented in future projects and thematic communication events as a good practice for digitisation of small and medium-sized farms.

Specific tasks:

- Selecting the suitable locations for installation

- Purchasing and installing meteorological stations in the two selected locations



Providing and installing software that predicts possible threats for crops growth using data collected by the meteorological stations

Presenting the system to farmers in both locations

Presenting the system to students at the local agricultural high-school

Providing agroconsultancy on using the system

The owners of the action will share with Pazardzhik Regional Administration valuable insights throughout the implementation cycle and will provide recommendations to incorporate their conclusions into policy updates to be made in the targeted policy document. Namely, the outcomes of this action will be the grounds for the planned measure "Promotion and demonstration of innovative technological solutions and specialized software apps specialized for the agricultural and food sectors." to be introduced in the new Specific Action 3.3. " Sustainable development of agriculture based on local resources" under Priority3: "Improve the competitiveness of agricultural production; balanced and multifunctional use of forest resources, introducing cost-efficient and environmental models of production of fresh-water fish and aquaculture" of the targeted Regional Development Strategy 2014-2020 of Pazardzhik region.

## Stakeholders involved

Land-source of income Foundation ☆ selecting the locations and purchasing/development and implementation of the entire system

Vocational High School for Vineyards and Wine Production - providing one of the locations for installing one of the stations and training to students how to use the system and the generated data.

Agricultural University Plovdiv - supporting the implementation and calibration of the software for predicting plant diseases.

Agricultural producers from the locations in the region - town of Perushtitsa and Brestovitsa village - as beneficiaries of the information collected and software predictions.

## Timeframe

September 2020 purchasing and installing the stations in two locations

September 2020 purchasing and installing the software for diseases' prediction.

October 2020 presenting the system to the farmers in both regions

October 2020 presenting the system to the students of the agricultural high school



October 2020 and ongoing - providing agro-consultations to small and medium local farmers on using the system;

January 2021 and ongoing - communicating the results of the activity to a wider audience during regional informational events;

Ongoing - assessment of outcomes and results and providing recommendations to Pazardzhik Regional Administration

## Costs

Meteorological stations - 2100 EURO

Software for prediction of the plant diseases- 1150 EURO

Maintenance of Meteorological automatic stations 500 EURO

Agronomists 7 400 EUROS per year (3 years)

Webpage support - 100 EURO per year (3years)

Total: 26,250 EUR

## Funding sources

100% of costs will be provided by the Land-Source of Income Foundation own funding.

## Output and result indicators

2 Meteorological stations installed

2 Software packages for plant disease prediction installed linked to the two meteostations

40 farmers informed of the benefits from the system

20 students trained for using the system

40 farmers regularly consulted by means of the system

## PART V – MONITORING SYSTEM

The monitoring period of the Action Plan will be from 1st June 2021 (once validated by the Joint Secretariat) till 31st May 2023. During this period, project partners will report to the Interreg Europe Joint Secretariat on an annual basis.

There will be two monitoring mechanisms for each Action Plan:

- ☒ One is common to the seven Action Plans. It has been designed by the Lead Partner to monitor, analyse and report the implementation of actions.
- ☒ An additional self-monitoring mechanism is defined by each partner according to their needs and internal structure.

Regarding the joint monitoring mechanism, it includes result indicators. It will allow project partners to measure their results according to their policy instrument tackled to be improved, and their self-defined performance indicators. Project partners will be required to report to the Lead Partner twice a year (each semester) to strengthen the monitoring mechanism and have the capacity to take corrective measures, if necessary. With the information provided, the Lead Partner will prepare a monitoring report per semester. In addition, the results will be discussed in the two project meetings foreseen in Phase 2 (one in Semester 8 and another one in Semester 10) to give project partners recommendations for improvement.

Also, one additional project meeting (not foreseen in the application form) will be organised online by the end of Semester 7 to monitor, evaluate and share information about the situation at the project level.

Additionally, a self-monitoring mechanism has been defined to complement and feed the joint monitoring mechanism and ensure the correct implementation of actions as foreseen, according to our organizational needs and internal structure.

Above partner monitoring tools both at project level and for Pazardzhik regional Administration are attached as Annex 1 herewith.





RESULT INDICATORS (Application Form, page 47)	TARGET (at project level)	ACHIEVED (accumulated at regional level)	ORIGINAL EXPECTED CONTRIBUTION (by partner)
Number of Growth & Jobs or ETC programmes addressed by the project where the measures inspired by the project will be implemented 100% of policy instruments addressed with structural funds link	5		
Number of other policy instruments addressed by the project where measures inspired by the project will be implemented 100% of policy instruments addressed without structural funds link	2		
Estimated amount of Structural Funds (from Growth & Jobs and/or ETC) influenced by the project (in EUR)	27 600 000 €		
Estimated amount of other funds influenced (in EUR)	10 600 000 €		



Accumulated figures at project level To be completed by partner according to the original information provided before project started

## Endorsement letters

Action 1: Regional Governor of Pazardzhik region

Action 2: Land-Source of Income Foundation





**REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA**  
Regional Administration  
Pazardzhik

**REGIONS  
4FOOD**  
Interreg Europe

## Endorsement letter from the relevant organisation responsible for the action



Project acronym <sup>1</sup>	REGIONS 4FOOD
Project title	REGIONal Strategies 4 FOOD 4.0 Revolution
Name of the signing organisation (original) including department if relevant	Областна администрация Пазарджик
Name of the signing organisation (English) including department if relevant	Pazardzhik Regional Administration
Name of the action in charge/responsible	AGRIFocus Discussion Space at the Regional Development Council of Pazardzhik Region
Name of the policy instrument addressed (original)	Областна стратегия за развитие на област Пазарджик 2014-2020
Name of the policy instrument addressed (English)	Regional Development Strategy of Pazardzhik Region 2014-2020
Name of partner concerned in the application form (English)	Pazardzhik Regional Administration

<sup>1</sup> Information indicated in this table must correspond to the information provided in the application form.

We hereby confirm:

- that we were informed about the preparation of the above-mentioned project,
- that the topic tackled by this project is in line with our organisation's policy and strategy,
- that we acknowledge the participation of the above-mentioned partner in the project,
- that we have actively collaborated in the design and elaboration of the action in charge/responsible,
- that we have involved with the stakeholder group in the exchanging experiences,
- that we agree with the action plan statement,
- that we are responsible for the implementation of action "AGRIFocus Discussion Space at the Regional Development Council of Pazardzhik Region" included in the action plan

In this scenario, we endorse the action plan presented by the *Pazardzhik Regional Administration*, through "Pazardzhik Regional Administration" in the context of the REGIONS 4FOOD project.

Name of signatory	Ivan Vasev
Position of signatory	Regional Governor
Date and place	27.09.2021, Pazardzhik, Bulgaria
Signature and institution stamp	 



**REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA**  
Regional Administration  
Pazardzhik



## Endorsement letter from the relevant organisation responsible for the action

Project acronym <sup>1</sup>	REGIONS 4FOOD
Project title	REGIONal Strategies 4 FOOD 4.0 Revolution
Name of the signing organisation (original) including department if relevant	Фондация „Земята източник на доходи“
Name of the signing organisation (English) including department if relevant	Land Source of Income Foundation
Name of the action in charge/responsible	Meteorological stations on two demo farms of Land Source of Income Foundation network
Name of the policy instrument addressed (original)	Областна стратегия за развитие на област Пазарджик 2014-2020
Name of the policy instrument addressed (English)	Regional Development Strategy of Pazardzhik Region 2014-2020
Name of partner concerned in the application form (English)	Pazardzhik Regional Administration

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We hereby confirm:

- that we were informed about the preparation of the above-mentioned project,
- that the topic tackled by this project is in line with our organisation's policy and strategy,
- that we acknowledge the participation of the above-mentioned partner in the project,
- that we have actively collaborated in the design and elaboration of the action in charge/responsible,
- that we have involved with the stakeholder group in the exchanging experiences,
- that we agree with the action plan statement,
- that we are responsible for the implementation of action "Meteorological stations on two demo farms of Land Source of Income Foundation network" included in the action plan

In this scenario, we endorse the action plan presented by the *Pazardzhik Regional Administration*, through "Land Source of Income Foundation" in the context of the REGIONS 4FOOD project.

Name of signatory: Dr. Georgi Georgiev  
Position of signatory: Member of the Board of Land Source of Income Foundation  
Date and place: 10.09.2021, Plovdiv, Bulgaria

Signature and institution stamp

