

QUALIFY – *Quality standards and authenticity to foster competitiveness of agrifood SMEs*

Action plan for CATALONIA



Introduction

The agrifood sector represents a major economic activity in Catalonia, with a 16.3% of the GDP and over 150,000 people employed in over 57,000 agriculture/livestock/farm exploitations, and about 4,000 food and beverages companies. In the period 2009-2019, the sector enlarged its exports by 95.6% (over 2,700 are exporting ones). This data proves the relevance of the sector, where SMEs represent a major share of them. Nevertheless, these SMEs still face major challenges – especially if we compare them to large companies – when it comes to some domains, including those addressed by the Interreg Europe QUALIFY project: having the right and efficient (self-)control checks, fighting fraud, and using authenticity as a key added value of their products.

Throughout the phase 1 of the QUALIFY project, implemented in the period August 2019 – July 2022, the Government of Catalonia engaged in a sound and fluent collaboration with the other partners of the project, following a large exchange of experience that led to identify potential measures to address this challenge. The framework for these measures will be the addressed policy instrument, is the Catalan Strategic Plan for Food (PEAC) 2021-2026.

The present action plan links the policy instrument to specific actions to be undertaken based on the learnings of the project, and aimed at improving the competitiveness of SMEs in the agrifood sector.



Part I – General information

Project	Quality standards and authenticity to foster competitiveness of agrifood SMEs (QUALIFY)
Partner organisation	Government of Catalonia – Ministry of Climate Action, Food, and Rural Agenda
Member state	Spain
NUTS2 territory	Catalunya (Catalonia)
Contact person	Ms. Glòria Cugat
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Director General's name and signature	Mr. Joan Gòdia, Director General for agri-food companies, quality and gastronomy



Part II – Policy context

The Action Plan aims to impact:

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

Name of the policy instrument addressed:


Catalan Strategic Plan for Food (PEAC) 2021-2026

Background

Throughout the implementation of the phase 1 of QUALIFY project, the Catalan government considered different instruments as those with the right potential to be addressed under the present action plan. Initially, the main policy instrument to be addressed was part of the Operational Programme (OP) of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) of Catalonia for the period 2014-2020, concretely the axis 2.3.1 “Improvement of the competitiveness of the agrifood sector SMEs under ‘Thematic Objective 3 – Support for SMEs competitiveness’”.

During the first semesters of the project, the aforementioned instrument was considered as the key one, and all actions, measures, projects, and other initiatives under it were discussed internally and with the stakeholders, analysed, and considered when thinking of potential improvements based on the learning coming from the exchange of experience with other project partners. Nevertheless, 3 contextual circumstances took place in the second half of 2020 and 2021:

- Following the measures approved by the European Commission and the State government, the Catalan Government decided to use the remaining funds linked to ERDF 2014-2020 to Covid-19 related initiatives, therefore closing any further actions under its OP, closing any possibility to influence this instrument.

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- The responsible team to shape the new OP for ERDF (period 2021-2027) confirmed that this new instrument would not be operative – under any circumstance – before the second half of 2023. This prevented the QUALIFY team to consider this forthcoming instrument to be included in the present action plan, for its implementation could not be monitored throughout the phase 2 of the project (which ends in July 2023).
 - Another potential EU co-funded instrument was the Next Generation EU projects and initiatives. However, when starting drafting the action plan, it was clear that these projects were predefined at a state-wise level and there was no possibility to actual influence them under the logic of the QUALIFY project.

Nonetheless, other actions and instruments were being developed in the country regarding the agrifood sector, including initiatives and measures directly related to the improvement of the competitiveness of SMEs in this sector. The one that clusters them is the **Catalan Strategic Plan for Food (PEAC) 2021-2026**. Therefore, in order to ensure the large impact of the project and the present action plan, the PEAC 2021-2026 will be addressed when considering the actions of the present document.

The PEAC 2021-2026

The PEAC 2021-2026 initiative sets the strategic lines and investment priorities for the agrifood sector in Catalonia in the period 2021-2026, based on fostering a sector that is sustainable, safe, resilient, healthy, and universally accessible, being a key instrument of the Catalan National Food Pact, which will be shaped in the near future, as the key policy for food in Catalonia. PEAC's design was undertaken following a bottom-up approach and joint collaboration of the stakeholders of the food value chain (from farmers to consumers, including manufacturing and transformation industries, distribution, commerce, etc.). The PEAC considers the sustainable development goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations in the framework of its 2030 agenda, aiming at contributing to 15 out of 17 of them. Additionally, it integrates the logic of the EU dimension, namely the programmes Farm to Fork, the Common Agricultural Policy, the Next Generation EU context, and the proposals towards the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) 2021-2027. The PEAC aligns the national investment priorities to the European framework to ensure coherence between them.

Taking all this into consideration, the **PEAC is shaped in four levels**:

- (1) Definition of the main domains of the Catalan food system: (i) sustainable, transformative, and built on the circular economy model; (ii) based on the territorial characteristics of Catalonia; (iii) fair, equitable, and cohesive; (iv) healthy and trustworthy.
- (2) 10 strategic objectives, based on the aforementioned domains.
- (3) 20 strategic lines, aligned to these strategic objectives.



(4) 55 initiatives/programmes, including 301 actions.

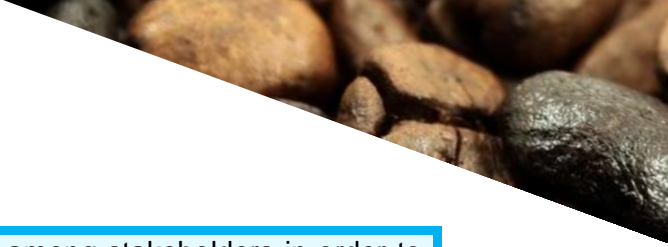
The axes of the present action plan are especially centred in the last domain of the PEAC, linked to the objective number 10: ensure the existence of a food system that is safe, high-quality, and which consumers can trust. In this framework, the main relevant strategic lines are numbers 19 and 20: reach the highest standards in terms of food quality and safety, and fostering transparent and truthful information about food.

The PEAC funding scheme is based on budget lines coming from the own resources of the Catalan Government. Nonetheless, its actions may be enlarged – or connected to other instruments – by making use of other complement funds in the near future, potentially including the coherence with other policy instruments, such as the forthcoming ESIF 2021-2027.

The actions included in QUALIFY's action plan for Catalonia look to improve this policy instrument by enlarging its scope through specific measures which, throughout the implementation of the project, the exchange of experience with its partners, and the collaboration with the local stakeholders, has been understood as key initiatives to support SMEs in the agrifood sectors linked to the challenges covered by the QUALIFY project.

Specific lines/measures/actions of the PEAC 2021-2027 connected to the QUALIFY action plan for Catalonia

- Design training programmes oriented to capacitate and support the professionals of the agrifood sector, as well as other stakeholders in the sector.
- Establish programmes and training initiatives aimed at fostering the knowledge exchange, enhancing entrepreneurship and the inclusion of new professionals to the sector.
- Define new training itineraries to orientate them towards addressing the future needs of the agrifood sector.
- Facilitate new resources, funding, and support and training schemes to small businesses in the sector to help them meet the requirements in terms of food safety.
- Articulation of the QUALIFY Hub to support the agrifood industry in terms of quality, safety, and fraud fighting.
- Foster the dissemination systems that present and make relevant the good practices.
- Introducing visual and accessible resources to inform stakeholders about aspects linked to the relevance of food quality and safety.
- Introducing an ideas laboratory programme to foster the implementation of projects in the field of R&D and innovation and aimed at improving the competitiveness of the SMEs.

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- Creation of focus groups to foster the networking among stakeholders in order to know and understand the real needs of the sector in terms of R&D and innovation.
 - Enhance enabling infrastructures, technology transfer, knowledge generation, and an innovation ecosystem based on digital technologies, fostering investments in these domains.
 - Design and development of digital solutions that support the activities linked to the regulations in terms of food safety and fraud control.
 - Definition and diffusion of materials to facilitate the implementation of auto-controls and traceability by the operators of the food chain.
 - Foster the introduction of emerging technologies to the agrifood sector in order to boost the digital transformation process.





Part III – Details of the actions envisaged

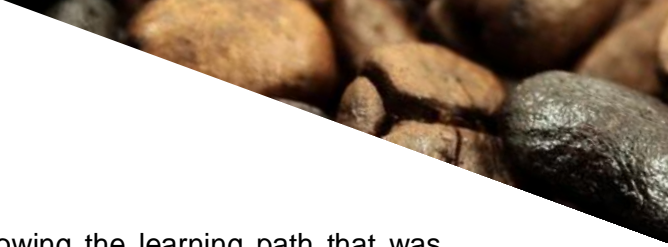
Axis 1: Awareness raising and networking

Background

The implementation of phase 1 of the QUALIFY project allowed to be in contact with a large number of organisations in the territory, especially SMEs in the agrifood sector, being those the main target group of the project.

The interaction with these SMEs has led the Catalan Government to realise that there is a significant lack of information in those SMEs – agrifood sector – when it comes to specific aspects related to public policies and instruments linked to the aspects covered under the QUALIFY project, including the prevention of food fraud, the quality (self-)control, and the promotion of authenticity. These information flaws may be due to the structure of SMEs, which have a smaller dimension than large companies – which tend to be much better informed –, which makes them usually weaker in terms of resources to obtain and/or manage information in a continuously updated way.

Discussions with QUALIFY's project partners on this domain has been majorly relevant, and the influence of initiatives developed in other territories has been key when considering and including the specific actions in this axis. The whole learning process of the project's phase 1 has inspired them. To mention the most significant examples, the practices in Nouvelle Aquitaine – regarding fostering authenticity as a key added value for SMEs, and the success this has had – has been very relevant. Another good practice taken into consideration is the one based on the workshops that take place in Bulgaria about specific aspects on quality and authenticity, aimed at different sub-sectors. Moreover, inspiration also comes from the AgroLabs project, implemented in Greece, which is aimed at improving SMEs' value chains; this has helped to understand the relevance to contextualise the sector and foster collaborations between companies and other organisations, while ensuring that there is a follow-up of their activities in order to provide them with services from the public sector. Finally, fraud prevention seminars in Slovenia were also considered as a good practice when designing the actions included in this axis.



Considering the aforementioned challenge, and following the learning path that was undertaken together with the QUALIFY partners – under the interregional approach – the objectives of the present axis, when it comes to the project context and relating them to the addressed instrument, are:

- Providing SMEs in the agrifood sector with more and better information regarding the possibilities they have to participate in initiatives with public (co-)funding, when they relate to the QUALIFY project domains.
- Improve the support and follow-up model of the public administration when it comes to activities linked to these domains where SMEs are stakeholders.
- Enlarge and improve the visibility of aspects linked to fraud prevention, quality controls, and promotion of authenticity within the agrifood sector, as well as the policies, strategies, and programmes linked to them.


Having these context and objectives in mind, the following actions have been designed.

Action 1.1. Awareness raising and training workshops/courses

This action consists on the organisation of workshops addressed to SMEs in the agrifood sector, aiming at ensuring they have more and better information regarding the policy instrument and the actions linking to it, especially the support mechanisms (including funding schemes) to which they can apply, and which can address aspects related to the QUALIFY topics (quality standards, fraud prevention, promotion of authenticity), connecting it to the promotion of their competitiveness in local, European, and international environments.

Three specific activities are to be developed and implemented under this action:

- Yearly workshops aimed at presenting the current policies, strategies, programmes, and support schemes under the addressed policy instrument and other related ones that can be of relevance to the audience, basically SMEs in the agrifood sector. In these workshops, specific case studies will be presented for reference, the specific support measures will be introduced, and it will serve as a point of encounter for SMEs in the sector to interact with public officers and other companies to solve common doubts, ask for advice or potential support, etc. Centralised workshop to take place in Barcelona.
- Development of an online course about the QUALIFY topics, where the target audience is SMEs in the agrifood sector. The PEAC instrument includes as a target action the promotion of training, and making sure that quality standards – quality self-control, fraud prevention, and promotion of authenticity are included as part of this training is considered as relevant to improve this side.



- Bi-yearly workshops based on addressing technology and innovation challenges faced by SMEs in the agrifood sector, which are susceptible to be considered in the framework of the addressed policy instrument, including financial mechanisms. The aim is to support SMEs to better identify their needs, the potential innovative solutions that they can integrate in their business, and the potential collaborations they could integrate. This activity looks to ensure that SMEs have more and better information on how to innovate so they can make a better use of the possibilities that the instrument offers in this regard.

Players involved: Public officers from the Department of Climate Action, Food, and Rural Agenda of the Catalan Government (organisation), SMEs (main target group), and the participation/collaboration of R&D and innovation providers, as well as intermediary bodies such as clusters (communication and dissemination).


Timeframe: 3 workshops per year; period September 2022 to July 2023: 1 on programmes and instruments – expected in spring 2023 – and 2 on technological/innovation aspects – expected in autumn and 2022 and spring 2023, respectively. 1 new online course linked to QUALIFY topics – expected to be ready for dissemination in early 2023.

Financial aspects: the organisation cost for the workshop on programmes and support mechanisms is estimated to be € 3,000; for each of the other two workshop, the cost is estimated to be € 2,000 (logistical aspects) + cost in terms of hours devoted by the staff. The cost of the new course online is estimated to be € 16,500. The activities will be funded by own funds of the Catalan Government in the framework of the PEAC.

Action 1.2. Online platforms

The PEAC also stressed the need to foster better information and dissemination of content relevant to the SMEs in the agrifood sector, and includes measures in this regard. The present action plan wants to improve those, making sure that QUALIFY-related aspects are covered and made relevant through the online platforms that are to be created, improved, or enlarged under the PEAC. Through this action, the activity to be implemented will be:

- Improvement of the RuralCAT platform, being this platform an online service that supports SMEs (as well as large companies) in the sector. To improve it, through this action plan, the Catalan Government, under the PEAC, will create the Observatory of Quality and Authenticity, a tool that will include relevant information, such as (i) a catalogue on laboratories and analytical services to the sector; (ii) services and infrastructures offered by universities and research centres; (iii) linkage to tools from the department of digital policies of the Catalan Government (Catalonia Digital Hub, Alliance Catalonia on technology supply, etc.); (iv) catalogue on good practices and successful cases to serve as examples to SMEs.



Players involved: Public officers from the Department of Climate Action, Food, and Rural Agenda of the Catalan Government (organisation), SMEs (main target group), and the participation/collaboration of intermediary bodies such as clusters (communication and dissemination).

Timeframe: all activities expected to be operating by spring 2023.

Financial aspects: € 19,000 in staff costs; The activities will be funded by own funds of the Catalan Government in the framework of the PEAC.

Action 1.3: Mentorship & advice measures

Another relevant action under the PEAC is the development of mentorship and support measures. The contact with the stakeholders throughout phase 1 of the QUALIFY project has made evident that there is a need to improve and/or enlarge actions regarding it. Therefore, under the present action plan, two activities are to be introduced under this action:

- Setting-up of an innovation office, which main role will be supporting and advising SMEs aiming at developing initiatives linked to the QUALIFY domains. Officers in this office are to advice SMEs in terms of funding mechanisms, potential partners to engage in collaboration, etc.

Players involved: Public officers from the Department of Climate Action, Food, and Rural Agenda of the Catalan Government (organisation), SMEs (main target group), and the participation/collaboration of intermediary bodies such as clusters (communication and dissemination).

Timeframe: all activities expected to be operating by spring 2023.

Financial aspects: Estimated cost of € 100,000 (€ 80,000 in staff costs and € 20,000 in functioning costs). The activities will be funded by own funds of the Catalan Government in the framework of the PEAC.



Axis 2: Innovation and digitalisation

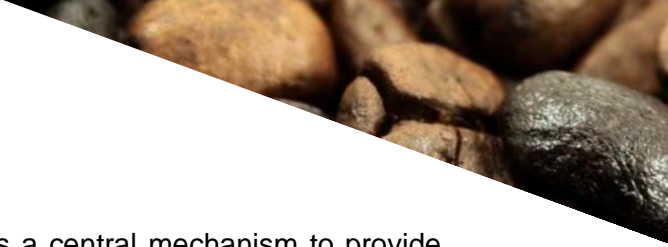
Background

The context analysed under the QUALIFY project, linked to the sector's challenge and, especially, SMEs, has also evidenced the need to undertake actions aimed at addressing needs related to innovation and digitalisation. In the agrifood sector, as in most industrial sectors in the EU, the answers to the main current challenges come and will come from those, innovation and digitalisation. These two domains have been largely discussed in the QUALIFY project's strategic committee, which share the vision that it is important and relevant to foster new and/or improved actions from public administrations to develop projects and initiatives linked to innovation, connected to digital technologies – especially in the field of information and communication – for these are transversal key enabling technologies, and they must be present in the action plan. This is why the second axis is devoted to these activities, including specific measures.

In the design of this axis, the collaboration with the other QUALIFY project partners – under the exchange of experience process – has also been key, for some of the good practices of the partners and/or their territories have served as inspiration to the present axis. Therefore, when it comes to digitalisation, Estonian examples are crucial. To be more concrete, their case of the FoodDocs platform has helped to visualise and understand how information technologies are key for the sector, including what led to the conceptualisation of the initiative based on blockchain technology. For the innovation domain, there has been also some inspiration from the project implemented in Greece, which has been included as a good practice for QUALIFY: the AgroInnoEco, on fostering the innovation ecosystem in the field of agrifood. In the same direction, visits undertaken to different companies and centres in the partnership regions/countries have been key to see some concrete examples on the types of innovation projects – linked to the project domains – that have been successful, which allows to better design measures that are to lead to other successful examples in Catalonia.

In the frameworks of reinforcing the role of the public policy instrument regarding the aforementioned domains, and for which interregional collaboration has been relevant, the main objectives of this second axis are:

- Provide support to the definition of new projects between SMEs in the agrifood sector and universities and research centres aiming at collaborating with them to undertake projects around QUALIFY challenges.
- Foster digitalisation actions in the sector throughout the support to digital public policies in this sector.



- Establish innovation – and public support to it – as a central mechanism to provide solutions to the sector’s challenges, especially those of SMEs.

Having this context and objectives in mind, the following actions are introduced.

Action 2.1. Projects laboratory and project follow-up

One of the key challenges identified when discussing with stakeholders is that there is room to design, develop, and implement more and better research and innovation (R&I) projects – linked, among other, to QUALIFY domains – that can improve the activities and the competitiveness of SMEs in the agrifood sector. The PEAC promotes actions to encourage shaping R&I projects, and further implementing them. The present action wants to improve this by creating the right framework to create and follow-up potential projects between SMEs and research/technology organisations.

The innovation projects laboratory will take the form of participative workshops uniting SMEs in the agrifood sector and R&I providers that address their activities to elements linked to the agrifood sector. SMEs will present their challenges and R&I providers will present potential solutions to them. Once potential matches occur, public officers of the government shall do a follow-up on this potential process, and advice – linked to actions in axis 1 – SMEs and R&I providers on possible opportunities from public support mechanisms that they could use, and they will keep in touch with this organisation to encourage the actual implementation of the project.


Players involved: Public officers from the Department of Climate Action, Food, and Rural Agenda of the Catalan Government (organisation), SMEs (as those with R&I challenges), research centres/universities/technology centres (as those providing R&I solutions).

Timeframe: 1 per year; first one to take place in early 2023.

Financial aspects: € 2,000 per workshop + cost in terms of hours devoted by the staff. The activities will be funded by own funds of the Catalan Government in the framework of the PEAC.

Action 2.2. Digital tools

Digitalisation is a key aspect to foster the competitiveness of the SMEs. Quality, fraud prevention, and authenticity are relevant domains to be considered when developing tools that are to support this target group. The PEAC aims at fostering the development of such tools in order to improve the public support given to the SMEs of the agrifood sector, enlarging the efficiency of their activities. That is why this action plan includes the following activity:



- Development of a blockchain platform that will serve to improve the traceability of food components, with the objective to fight against fraud practices. The first part of this development (2022/2023) will consist on a pilot action to test the tool and its functionalities, working under some specific case studies/data to test the performance and assess potential ways to improve it. A second phase will consist – if the pilot action is successful – of developing the tool further and giving access to the SMEs of the sector to benefit from its functionalities.

Players involved: Public officers from the Department of Climate Action, Food, and Rural Agenda of the Catalan Government (definition of tools), as well as the Department of the Vicepresidency and of Digital Policies and Territory (support to the development), IT companies (technological development).

Timeframe: Pilot action of the blockchain platform – autumn/spring 2022/2023. Development of the full tool, after that.

Financial aspects: No cost – This pilot action is funded by MasterCard Inc. following a testing agreement with the Government of Catalonia.


Action 2.3. Financial support programmes for innovation and digitalisation projects

New (or improved) programmes are to be introduced in order to support the sector – and its stakeholders (being SMEs especially relevant). Considering the existing challenges, the following measures are to be introduced:

- Update of the call ‘operational programmes’ and the call ‘demonstrative projects’, both now under PEAC, which will now stress in the calls and legal texts the QUALIFY domains, specifying that these domains and the activities around them opt for funding, fostering more and better projects in the field.

- New support mechanism to provide funding to projects (implemented for and by companies) based on innovation and digitalisation. This new tool (shaped as a co-financed subsidy) will be named *Innotrack*, and it will foster projects in collaboration between SMEs and R&I providers to address challenges of the sector. Projects linked to the QUALIFY domains will be enhanced.

Players involved: Public officers from the Department of Climate Action, Food, and Rural Agenda of the Catalan Government, SMEs, R&I providers.



Timeframe: Updated calls for proposals: to be updated in the second half of 2022; first calls in 2023. Innotrack instrument:

Financial aspects: € 1,000,000 (for the whole instrument, not just QUALIFY-related domains)

Part IV – Monitoring indicators

Action	Indicator	Target Sep 22 – Jul 23	Yearly target
1.1. Awareness raising and training workshops/courses	Number of workshops implemented – strategies and support mechanisms	1 workshop	1 yearly workshop
	Number of workshops implemented – technology and innovation initiatives	2 workshops	2 yearly workshops
	Number of participants (3 workshops)	20 participants	Yearly increase
	Online course informing and training on QUALIFY related domains	1 active course	Continuous updating
	Number of active users of the course (until July 2023)	40 users	
1.2. Online platforms	Improvement of the RuralCAT platform	Improvement introduced	
1.3. Mentorship & advice measures	Setting-up of an innovation office for information and dissemination	1 active office	
2.1. Projects laboratory and follow-up	Number of workshops – projects laboratories of ideas organised	1 lab	1 per year
	Number of participants to the labs	15 participants	Maintain
	Number of potential projects coming from the lab	2 projects	Maintain
2.2. Digital tools	Number of companies included in the blockchain platform (pilot action)	4 companies	TBD
2.3. Programmes for innovation and digitalisation projects	Number of calls	1 call	1 per year
	Number of approved projects under QUALIFY domains or directly related	2 projects	2 per year