

POLICY BRIEF

Mainstreaming Alternative Proteins: Conclusions from Co-Creation with Middle Food System Actors

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Bringing alternative proteins into the mainstream will require more than technological innovation or changes in individual consumer behaviour. The actors who produce, process, distribute, sell and serve food play a decisive role in determining which products reach the market, how affordable they are, and whether they fit into everyday diets.

Through six co-creation workshops, the LIKE-A-PRO Transition Arena brought together 52 food-system actors from 22 European countries to identify the conditions needed to make alternative proteins a standard part of Europe's food system¹. The discussions showed that isolated initiatives will not be enough. Middle food system actors need clearer policy direction, economically viable business models, investment in production and scale-up, and stronger cooperation across the supply chain. Products must also respond

to operational realities, including cost, functionality, taste, texture, processing performance, and suitability for different retail, catering and culinary contexts². Training and early involvement of chefs, food-service operators, retailers, and product developers can help ensure that innovation reflects market needs, rather than requiring professionals to adapt products only after development is complete³.

This policy brief translates these co-created findings into recommendations for EU and national authorities. It calls for coordinated protein-transition strategies, fairer economic conditions, clearer routes to market, investment in skills and infrastructure, and sustained collaboration with food-system actors to move alternative proteins from niche products to mainstream food choices.



BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Moving alternative proteins from niche markets into everyday diets depends not only on innovation and consumer interest, but also on the actors connecting primary production with the final food environment. Ingredient suppliers, processors, manufacturers, distributors, retailers, caterers and chefs influence which products are developed, how they are formulated and priced, and whether they become available in formats that work for consumers and food professionals. To integrate these perspectives, LIKE-A-PRO established the Food Actor Network and organised six online co-creation sessions between September 2024 and April 2025. The process was designed to engage actors from different parts of the middle food system in identifying barriers to the availability and accessibility of alternative proteins and in developing pathways for their wider deployment⁴. Using the Transition Arena methodology, participants first developed a shared vision for 2040 and then explored the actions, responsibilities and collaborations required to achieve it⁵.

The discussions showed that the protein transition cannot rely on a single type of product or intervention. Participants called for complementary strategies: reducing dependence on animal-based proteins while expanding alternative sources; supporting innovation while continuing to value familiar and minimally processed plant-based foods; and combining meat-like alternatives for mainstream consumers with new products that have their own culinary identity⁶.

This brief focuses on the structural and operational conditions identified through this process. It complements previous LIKE-A-PRO work on behavioural tools by examining what middle food system actors need to develop, distribute and integrate alternative proteins successfully across European food markets and food-service environments.





EVIDENCE ON THE CONDITIONS NEEDED TO MAINSTREAM ALTERNATIVE PROTEINS

Clear policy direction and shared commitments.

Participants stressed that individual frontrunners can demonstrate what is possible, but voluntary action alone is unlikely to transform the market. Food businesses need predictable national strategies, measurable targets and consistent signals across agricultural, health, climate and food policies. Shared commitments among retailers and food-service operators can also reduce the competitive risk faced by companies acting alone. Public procurement was identified as an important instrument for creating stable demand and normalising alternative proteins in schools, hospitals, universities and other public institutions⁷.

Economic viability and investment remain decisive barriers.

Alternative proteins must become commercially viable for producers, suppliers, retailers and consumers. Price parity cannot be achieved sustainably by transferring the cost to processors or compressing suppliers' margins. Participants therefore called for a combination of public and private measures, including more balanced agricultural support, favourable fiscal instruments, investment grants, shared production infrastructure and support for first movers. Long-term policy certainty is particularly important for companies considering investments in new facilities or the conversion of existing production lines. A just transition should also provide farmers and conventional food businesses with credible opportunities to diversify their activities⁸.

Products must meet the operational requirements of the food industry.

For manufacturers and ingredient users, sustainability claims are not enough to guarantee market uptake. Products and ingredients must perform consistently during processing and preparation, remain cost-

efficient and satisfy requirements related to stability, formulation, nutrition and scalability. Industry participants highlighted the need for better access to pilot facilities, technical expertise and opportunities to test ingredients under realistic production conditions. They also raised practical questions concerning heat stability, protein quality, ingredient combinations and the costs of reformulation and scale-up⁹.

Market development requires both familiarity and innovation.

The co-creation process did not produce a single preferred approach to product positioning. Familiar alternatives can reduce barriers for mainstream consumers, while products with an independent identity may appeal more strongly to early adopters. Hybrid products and the gradual reformulation of familiar meals can provide additional entry points. However, products and communication strategies must reflect national food cultures, consumption habits and expectations concerning taste and preparation. Clear information on ingredients, nutrition, safety and production methods is also essential for building trust without overwhelming consumers with technical language¹⁰. Where relevant, consumer communication should help consumers understand the specific characteristics of products containing novel food ingredients and how they compare with conventional foods.

Professional skills and early collaboration are missing links.

There is a need for chefs, caterers, culinary teachers, food product developers and retailers to have practical knowledge on working with different protein sources. It was thus suggested that professional training, technical manuals, shared learning platforms and cooperation among research organizations, ingredient suppliers and food service experts be used. Practical learning can take place through the process of tasting, cooking, product development and co-development¹¹.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1

Establish coherent national protein-transition frameworks

The Member States should integrate alternative proteins in their national food, nutrition, agricultural and climate strategies, supported by measurable targets and clear implementation pathways. Public procurement can be employed in a strategic way to provide steady demand for alternative proteins within public facilities such as schools, hospitals, and universities¹².

2

De-risk investment and improve commercial viability

EU and national funding should support pilot facilities, demonstration projects, shared processing infrastructure and the conversion or diversification of existing production capacity. Financial instruments should reduce the risks faced by first movers, start-ups and SMEs, while ensuring that efforts to improve price parity do not simply compress the margins of producers and suppliers. Support should also enable farmers and conventional food businesses to diversify through a just transition.

3

Create clearer and more predictable routes to market

Regulatory requirements should remain rigorous but at the same time transparent, clear, and understandable. The companies need clear guidance on the novel food status, safety evidence, labelling, terminology, and communication with the regulatory bodies when getting authorization. A more predictable system will reduce uncertainty and better possibilities for investments while maintaining consumer protection.¹³



4

Involve food professionals throughout product development

The chefs, caterers, retailers, ingredient suppliers and product developers should be involved from the early stages of the research and innovation process. Testing should take place under practical conditions of processing, retailing and food service operations, assessing the market readiness on the basis of taste, functionality, texture, cost, and ease of preparation.¹⁴

5

Strengthen coordination across the food supply chain

The retailers, food producers, food distributors, and food service operators should develop shared commitments regarding sourcing, availability of products, and inclusion of alternative proteins in daily meals. The market strategy needs to blend traditional concepts, hybrid concepts, and independent cuisine concepts. Clear and non-misleading consumer communication and adaptation to the national food culture will play a crucial role in gaining confidence and acceptance.



REFERENCES

- 1 Demos Helsinki, Changing the Default in Proteins: Insights and Transition Pathways of the LIKE-A-PRO Transition Arena, 2025.
- 2 Nursh, Task 5.3 Capacity Building and Training Report: In-Person Workshop, 28 November 2025.
- 3 Basque Culinary Center, Task 5.3 Capacity Building and Training Report: In-Person Workshop, 15 December 2025.
- 4 LIKE-A-PRO, Food Actor Network Information Sheet and Consent Form: Stakeholder Engagement and Co-Creation Activities, 2024.
- 5 Demos Helsinki, LIKE-A-PRO Transition Arena Workshop 2: Vision and Goals, 9 October 2024.
- 6 Demos Helsinki, LIKE-A-PRO Transition Arena Workshop 5: Transition Pathways and Immediate Recommendations, 12 February 2025.
- 7 LIKE-A-PRO, Changing Industry Mindsets: Transition Arena Workshop 4, 15 January 2025.
- 8 LIKE-A-PRO, Policies Enabling Transitions: Transition Arena Workshop 4, 15 January 2025.
- 9 Nursh, Task 5.3 Capacity Building and Training Report: Online Workshop, 21 November 2025.
- 10 LIKE-A-PRO, Increasing Consumer Acceptance: Transition Arena Workshop 4, 15 January 2025.
- 11 LIKE-A-PRO, Food Education and Learning: Transition Arena Workshop 4, 15 January 2025.
- 12 LIKE-A-PRO Food Actor Network, Recommendations to Howspace: Prioritised Recommendations from the Transition Arena, 2025.
- 13 Demos Helsinki, LIKE-A-PRO Transition Arena Workshop 6: Results and Recommendations for Accelerating the Protein Shift, 2 April 2025.
- 14 Basque Culinary Center, Task 5.3 Capacity Building and Training Report: Online Workshop, 27 November 2025.

Learn more about
LIKE-A-PRO at:

 **LIKE-A-PRO**
 **like-a-pro.eu**

