

From Innovation to Market:
Connecting R&D and IP Tools for Agri-Food SMEs through the Enterprise Europe Network

Ancuța-Maria Ivan, Cristina-Maria Bălgărădean, Mădălina-Alexandra Coțiu
INOE 2000 Research Institute for Analytical Instrumentation, str. Donath, nr. 67, Cluj-Napoca, Romania



INTRODUCTION

Agri-food SMEs are the core of European food systems, yet innovation in this sector remains still largely under-protected. The Enterprise Europe Network (EEN), through its Sector Group Agri-Food (SG Agri-Food), Thematic Group Intellectual Property (TG IP) and Thematic Group Research & Innovation (TG R&I), provides a structured framework for translating research into protected, market-ready innovations. Two fundamental tensions define the urgency of this challenge:

1. Innovation without protection: Agri-food is the largest manufacturing sector in Europe, yet 76% of 2024 SME Fund beneficiaries were registering IP rights for the first time ^[2], confirming that under-protection is systemic. Romania illustrates this paradox acutely: despite ranking among the lowest in the EU on the European Innovation Scoreboard, agri-food remains one of its strongest sectors by employment and export value, suggesting that innovation is actively happening, but remains largely informal, undocumented, and unprotected.
2. Romania's untapped potential: Romania holds significant unrealised value in Geographical Indications (GIs) and Plant Variety Rights (PVRs), owing to its exceptional biodiversity, endemic varieties, and centuries-old agri-food traditions, Transylvania alone being home to a wealth of heritage products and endemic varieties that remain largely unprotected and commercially underexploited.

THE R&D-TO-MARKET JOURNEY: EEN SUPPORT AT EVERY STAGE

1. RESEARCH & INNOVATION

R&D organisations generate new knowledge: novel agri-food processes, analytical methods, plant varieties, bioactive compounds, and food technologies with commercial potential.

Challenge:
- most outputs never assessed for IP potential, innovations reach the public domain unprotected.

2. INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

Selection and registration of the appropriate Intellectual Property (IP) instrument (patent, trademark, GI, or PVR, etc.) matched to the innovation type, sector, and target market.

Challenge:
- navigating EUIPO, CPVO, and national patent offices is complex and costly.

3. TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER

IP-protected innovations packaged into Technology Offers (Tos) and made available for licensing, joint development, spin-off creation, or cross-border commercialisation.

Challenge:
- research institutes lack channels to connect with industrial partners.

4. MARKET & FUNDING ACCESS

Protected, partner-ready innovations access EU and international markets through co-funded projects, cross-border ventures, and sectoral programmes.

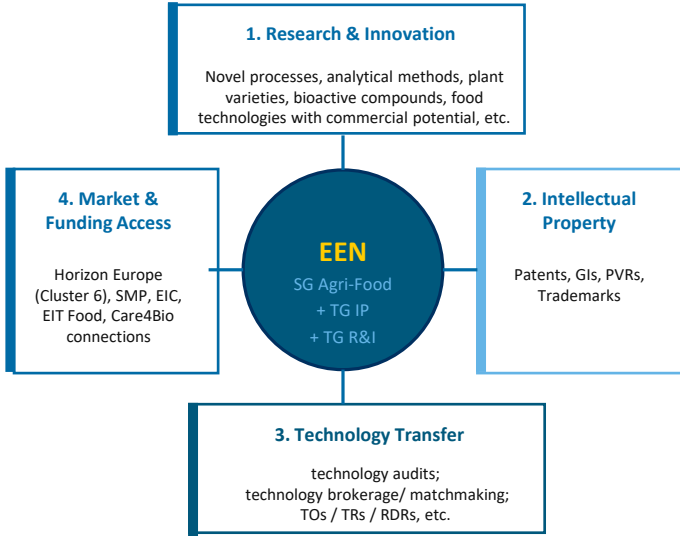
Challenge:
- identifying the right funding instrument requires expertise most organisations lack internally.

EEN support services:
➢ Innovation audits;
➢ IP-protectable output identification;
➢ strategic IP orientation ^[4], etc.

EEN support services:
➢ IP needs assessment / "Providing IP Guidance through the EEN Client Journey" ^[4];
➢ SME Fund grant scheme for SMEs, etc.

EEN support services:
➢ technology audits;
➢ technology brokerage/matchmaking;
➢ TOs (Technology Offers);
➢ TRs (Technology Requests);
➢ RDRs (R&D Requests), etc.

EEN support services:
- Horizon Europe (Cluster 6: Food, Bioeconomy, Natural Resources, Agriculture and Environment);
- SMP (Single Market Programme);
- EIC (European Innovation Council);
- EIT Food, Care4Bio connections ^[3], etc.



CONCLUSIONS

IP protection transforms R&D outputs into defensible competitive assets, but most agri-food SMEs and researchers have never taken the first step.

Agri-food and IP protection are mutually reinforcing in the Romanian context: Transylvania's rich biodiversity, endemic varieties and heritage products hold significant unrealised GI and PVR value, largely untapped due to lack of structured IP support.

The EEN Impact Report 2022-25^[1] confirms the Enterprise Europe Network support model works:

Research & Innovation: ► 90% innovation success/ new products; IP: ► 76% first-time IP;

Technology Transfer: ► 84% new market entry among supported organizations;

Market & Funding Access: ► 78% funding access.

Enterprise Europe Network provides a free, structured pathway from innovation to market access, with expert support embedded at every stage of the SME/ client journey.

As local EEN contact point for Transylvania, **Technology Transfer Center CENTI Cluj-Napoca** offers advice and support services for agri-food and R&D organisations in the region by bridging the gap between technical innovation and commercial market execution, ensuring ideas turn into well-protected, revenue-generating assets.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

[1] EISMEA. EEN Impact Report 2022-25^[1]. Publications Office of the EU, Luxembourg, 2026.
[2] European Commission / EUIPO. Launch of the 2025 SME Fund to help SMEs protect intellectual property. Single Market Economy, 3 Feb 2025.
[3] Enterprise Europe Network. Agri-food Sector Group. een.ec.europa.eu, 2025.
[4] EISMEA. IP Handbook: Providing IP Guidance Through the EEN Client Journey. ISBN 978-92-9469-662-5, DOI 10.2826/114860, 2024.

Acknowledgement: Activities performed in the framework of the project BISNet Transylvania, project ID 101216189, call SMP-COSME-2024-EEN, 1 July 2025 – 31 December 2028.

