

## STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS TO INCREASE COMPETITIVENESS IN THE AGRIFOOD SECTOR

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**Abstract:** *This paper explores strategic directions to enhance the competitiveness of Romania's agri-food sector, focusing on the fruits and vegetables market. Despite its rich agricultural heritage and favourable climate conditions, Romania's fruit and vegetable sector faces challenges such as low productivity, fragmented supply chains, outdated farming practices, and limited access to modern agricultural technologies. These factors have weakened its competitiveness in both domestic and international markets. In response, this study identifies key strategies, including the adoption of innovative agricultural technologies, improvements in supply chain management, and the promotion of sustainable farming practices. This paper seeks to develop strategic pathways to significantly enhance the competitiveness of Romania's fruits and vegetables sector by rigorously addressing systemic challenges and providing comprehensive information for the promotion of strategic directions of competitiveness in the agri-food market. The research adopts a quantitative approach, with a strong emphasis on a comprehensive literature review on agricultural competitiveness, this literature-driven analysis will provide a robust foundation for understanding current challenges and opportunities in the agri-food sector. This paper is important in economics as it addresses the vital role of the agri-food sector in national economic development, particularly for Romania. By identifying strategic directions to boost competitiveness, it contributes to enhancing agricultural productivity, increasing exports, improving rural livelihoods, and aligning with global market trends. The analysis suggests that by investing in sustainability, enhancing resource efficiency, climate-smart practices, and aligning production with emerging consumer trends for organic and local products, Romania can strengthen its market position. These measures will not only boost productivity but also position Romania as a key player in the European agri-food market and future competitiveness will also rely on policy support and rural development initiatives. The paper concludes with policy recommendations and strategic actions to boost productivity and sustainability in Romania's fruits and vegetables sector.*

**Keywords:** strategy, trade policies, food chain, competitiveness, sustainability

**JEL classification:** Q10, O13

### 1. Introduction

Strategic directions are essential for guiding organizations toward achieving their long-term objectives because they represent specific pathways derived from broader strategies and provide a framework for decision-making and prioritization of initiatives (Rumelt, 2011). Strategy is a fundamental concept in management and organizational theory, encompassing

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the plans and actions that organizations adopt to achieve their long-term goals and it involves resource allocation, decision-making, and the creation of a competitive advantage (Porter, 1991; Rumelt, 2011).

The reason for this approach in this study is the need to develop the market, so the strategic directions are a substantiating tool for improving the agricultural sector, as well as the fresh fruit and vegetable market. This paper tries to fill a gap in the existing literature by offering a targeted analysis of strategies to improve the competitiveness of Romania's agri-food sector, with a specific focus on the fruits and vegetables market. It examines strategic opportunities tailored to Romania's present agricultural context, providing insights for market positioning. The agri-food sector plays a crucial role in the economic landscape of Romania, a country endowed with a rich agricultural heritage and favourable climatic conditions. Romania's diverse landscapes and fertile soils have historically supported a wide range of agricultural activities, particularly in the fruits and vegetables market. However, despite these advantages, the sector has encountered significant challenges that have undermined its competitiveness in both domestic and international markets.

One of the primary challenges facing Romania's fruit and vegetable sector is low productivity and the lack of staggered production over a longer period, being concentrated in the warm season (Panait, 2020). According to various studies, yields levels in Romania's agricultural sector often fluctuates (Sirb et. al., 2023) factors contributing to this disparity include outdated farming practices, limited access to modern agricultural technologies, and a lack of investment in research and development.

Another critical issue is the fragmentation of supply chains, the agri-food sector in Romania is characterized by a multitude of smallholder farmers who often operate independently and lack the necessary resources to collaborate effectively (Dumitrascu, 2021). This fragmentation not only hampers the efficiency of supply chains but also leads to inconsistent quality and availability of products.

In response to these challenges, this study identifies several key strategies that can bolster the competitiveness of Romania's fruit and vegetable market. The agri-food sector is a vital component of Romania's economy, contributing significantly to employment, rural development, and overall economic growth. By identifying strategic directions to boost competitiveness, this study contributes to enhancing agricultural productivity, increasing exports, and improving rural livelihoods.

## **2. Literature review**

Strategic directions in agriculture involve planning and implementing initiatives to achieve specific objectives and proactively address challenges in the agricultural sector and the strategies must aim at increasing productivity, sustainability and general competitiveness (Istodor et. al., 2022).

Strategic directions are often described as the specific actions or pathways an organization takes to fulfil its strategic objectives (Rumelt, 2011). According to Johnson et. al. (2008), strategic directions are critical for translating high-level strategies into actionable steps that align with organizational goals and they encompass various initiatives, including market entry strategies, product development, and resource allocation plans.

The literature also highlights the need for strategic directions to be adaptable in the face of changing market conditions as author Mintzberg (1994) argues that organizations must be willing to reassess their strategic directions based on evolving circumstances, such as shifts in consumer preferences or technological advancements, thus this adaptability allows organizations to remain competitive and responsive to new opportunities and challenges.

The literature highlights the importance of understanding strategy as both a formal plan and an emergent process, focusing on competitive advantage and the need for structured

planning to ensure alignment and adaptability in a dynamic market environment (Porter, 1991).

Chivu (2002) considers that a mix of factors is necessary for the competitiveness of agriculture, including the increase in productivity and yields, surplus trade balance and implicitly a high availability of national production and the greater presence of national products versus imported ones.

Recent research (De Janvry, A. and Sadoulet, E., 2021) advocates for policies that foster innovation, support sustainability, and enhance the role of farmers in decision-making processes, where effective governance and policy frameworks are highlighted as critical for supporting agricultural development strategies.

Specialized literature on agricultural development strategies (Nowak and Kasztelan, 2022; Coman, 2020; Borisov et. al., 2021) converges on several core themes: sustainability, technological innovation, market access, policy alignment, human capital development, food security, and system transformation. These strategic directions offer pathways for improving the competitiveness and resilience of the agricultural sector while ensuring long-term environmental and social sustainability. Recent literature (FAO, 2018; IFPRI, 2019) emphasizes the need to transform agri-food systems to make them more sustainable, inclusive, and efficient. This approach considers the entire agricultural value chain, from production to consumption, and aims to integrate innovations that enhance food security while minimizing environmental degradation (Gaitán-Cremaschi, D., et al., 2023).

Wezel et al. (2020) discuss the frameworks and practices that support sustainable intensification in various agricultural contexts where concept of sustainable intensification is gaining attention as a way to increase agricultural productivity without expanding land use.

### **3. Methodology**

This paper outlines a comprehensive approach to enhancing the competitiveness of Romania's fruits and vegetables sector. This paper will employ a qualitative research method to provide a comprehensive analysis of strategic directions to enhance the competitiveness of Romania's agri-food sector, specifically focusing on fruits and vegetables. Through a literature review, this study provides a detailed assessment of existing research on agricultural competitiveness, market trends, and strategic management. This study is founded by a set of research questions designed to explore the complexities of Romania's fruits and vegetables sector. The following questions will guide the research:

1. What are the principal challenges impacting the competitiveness of Romania's fruits and vegetables sector?
2. In what ways do market dynamics affect the operational performance of this sector within both domestic and international frameworks?
3. What strategic directions can be implemented to enhance productivity and sustainability within Romania's fruits and vegetables market?

The findings of this research will be systematically aligned with these questions, offering a comprehensive analysis and targeted recommendations that address the identified challenges, evaluate market influences, and propose actionable strategies for sectoral enhancement.

### **4. Strategic Directions to Boost Competitiveness in the Agri-food Sector**

Increasing competitiveness in the agri-food sector requires a comprehensive approach that integrates innovation, sustainability, and efficient resource management. Strategic directions for enhancing the sector's performance must focus on modernizing agricultural

practices, improving market access, strengthening supply chains, and fostering collaboration between various stakeholders, from farmers to policymakers (The World Bank, 2010).

The following table presents a comprehensive overview of strategic directions aimed at enhancing competitiveness within the agri-food sector, with a particular emphasis on Romania and the fresh fruits and vegetables market. This analysis is framed within the context of economic and business perspectives, highlighting the critical factors and initiatives necessary to improve the sector's performance and market positioning.

**Table 1:** Main strategic directions to improve competitiveness in agriculture

<b>Strategic Directions to Increase Competitiveness in the Agri-Food Sector in Romania</b>	<b>Strategic Directions to Increase Competitiveness in the Fresh Fruits and Vegetables Market</b>
Infrastructure development and technological modernization	Diversified product for market diversification
Policy alignment and support	Enhanced export support
Research and development investments	Quality improvement and certification schemes
Strengthening cooperatives and associations	Smart farming techniques for season extension
Sustainability practices	Value chain optimization

Source: Author's analysis based on Sirb et. al, 2023; Jambor and Baby, 2016

Agricultural strategies comprise the overall plans and actions designed to increase productivity, profitability and sustainability along the agricultural value chain. Specific strategies adapted to the agricultural market focus on increasing competitiveness through market access, in an organized framework and integration within the specific value chain. Market-oriented strategies must give priority to consumer preferences, focus on product differentiation and aim to obtain production with added value are the most appropriate solutions for the development of the economic activity of agricultural companies.

#### **4.1 Investments in technologies for modernization and adaptation to specific innovations**

Investments in technologies for modernization and adaptation to specific innovations have a significant economic impact on agribusiness, particularly in the context of increasing competitiveness and sustainability. In Romania's fruits and vegetables sector, where efficiency and high yield are critical to competing in both domestic and international markets, technological investments can significantly boost production, making local businesses more competitive globally.

A primary strategic direction is the modernization of agricultural techniques. Farmers can optimize the use of inputs like water, fertilizer, and pesticides, resulting in reduced costs and increased yields. These innovations also support the shift toward more sustainable farming practices, helping to reduce the environmental impact of agricultural activities while meeting consumer demands for eco-friendly products, all of these are vital for improving productivity and resource efficiency (IFPRI, 2019).

Automation is another critical component of agricultural modernization that must be at the centre of attention in development strategies, especially for farmers. In the fruit and vegetable sector, labour costs and availability are significant challenges, especially for crops that require manual harvesting. Automatic sorting systems can also classify produce based on size, colour, and firmness, ensuring consistent standards for consumers while reducing

post-harvest waste. These technologies not only improve operational efficiency but also help farmers meet the growing demand for high-quality, uniform produce in competitive markets (IFPRI, 2019).

Agribusinesses that modernize and integrate innovations are more likely to attract investment, both from private equity and public funding as the international and domestic investors are increasingly interested in sustainable and technologically advanced agricultural operations that demonstrate long-term profitability and growth potential (Wezel et al., 2020).

In highly competitive sectors such as fresh fruit and vegetables, being the first to adopt innovations such as vertical farming, hydroponics or blockchain for supply chain transparency provides a significant competitive advantage, with solutions at hand that can fully leverage the agricultural potential, ensuring the amount needed for internal consumption, first, this being one of the objectives of agriculture, to ensure the necessary food.

#### **4.2 Sustainable development as a factor of growth and improvement of competitiveness**

Sustainable development is increasingly recognized as a critical factor for fostering long-term growth and enhancing the competitiveness of Romania's agriculture, particularly in the fruits and vegetables sector. Strategic directions in this area should focus on promoting organic farming, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and conserving natural resources (FAO, 2013). Farmers who adopt sustainable practices are likely to gain a competitive advantage, especially in markets where environmental certifications and organic products are valued by consumers. In addition, sustainability can reduce long-term costs by preserving soil health, improving water use efficiency and reducing your carbon footprint.

Consumers, especially in Europe, are increasingly demanding eco-friendly and sustainably produced food. By adopting practices such as organic farming, agroforestry, and integrated pest management, Romanian farmers can obtain certifications like organic or Global Good Agriculture Practice (Global GAP), which enhance the marketability of their products and these certifications provide access to premium markets (Michael et. al, 2023).

In the fruits and vegetables sector, the organic products can be marketed as premium or health-conscious choices, tapping into growing consumer trends. This opens new revenue streams, especially in international markets, boosting Romania's export potential and strengthening the agricultural sector's contribution to the national economy.

To address these issues, the Romanian agricultural sector must embrace sustainable development principles. This includes the adoption of practices that protect natural resources, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and improve resilience to climate change. Transitioning to sustainable farming not only benefits the environment but also creates new economic opportunities, improves market access, and enhances the sector's competitiveness.

#### **4.3 Economic development through integration in the national and international market**

Another critical aspect of improving competitiveness is expanding access and integration to both domestic and international markets. This involves not only improving logistics and distribution channels, but also ensuring that producers are well informed about market trends and consumer preferences, the transfer of knowledge being essential in providing concise and updated information along with experiences that constitute a theoretical support thorough.

The economic impact of integrating the agri-food sector into national and international markets is significant, particularly for countries like Romania which in recent years had a deficit trade balance. Romania has historically faced trade deficits in its agricultural sector,

including for fresh fruits and vegetables market. Analysing the data provided by International Trade Centre, at the value level, fruit and vegetable imports increased by 342% in 2023 versus 2007, while exports increased by only 175%. Thus, excluding the quantities of products originating exclusively from imports, such as exotic fruits and citrus fruits, the high dynamics of imports suggests a high demand that is not covered by domestic production, while more can be produced to increase exports as well. This reflects the country's need to meet domestic demand, which sometimes outpaces local production.

Integration into national and international markets promotes rural development (OECD, 2006). Market integration helps create a more resilient agricultural sector by diversifying revenue sources because farmers who have access to multiple markets are less vulnerable to local price fluctuations, crop failures, or shifts in consumer preferences.

From an economic perspective, stability in agricultural production helps businesses maintain revenue streams and avoid disruptions that can result in financial losses. Cost efficiency through resource optimization is important from a business standpoint, reduced input costs increase profit margins, making the agricultural sector more competitive (Isenberg et al., 2020). By improving operational efficiency, farmers and producers can lower prices or reinvest savings into expanding production or upgrading technology, further boosting productivity and economic performance.

By accessing global markets, farmers can benefit from greater demand because here, the smallest details matter, from the variety grown, to the type of packaging and the visual marketing elements used. Compared to the national agricultural market, which is still a traditional and classic one, the western European market is dominated by brands even for fresh fruits and vegetables, the orientation of the major agricultural producers being towards a complex product with premium physical and organoleptic characteristics along with a branding which is unique and recognized for quality.

Economic development in the agricultural sector, especially for fruits and vegetables, is highly dependent on the integration of both national and international markets. The integration of the national market ensures that local farmers have access to better prices and efficiently capitalize on the entire production obtained, reaching consumers with a quality product in optimal conditions, while access to the international market offers opportunities for growth, innovation and higher incomes.

#### **4.4 Building a complex agri-food supply chain**

Supply chain optimization is another key strategic direction. A well-functioning supply chain ensures that products move more efficiently from farmer to consumer, reducing waste and minimizing costs. This requires investment in infrastructure, such as cold storage facilities, transport networks, and digital platforms that streamline operations (The World Bank, 2008). Encouraging partnerships between producers, processors, and distributors can enhance coordination, ensuring that the entire supply chain operates smoothly and efficiently. Improved supply chains also benefit consumers by ensuring fresher, higher-quality products reach the market.

Building a complex agri-food supply chain is essential for Romania's agricultural sector, particularly for the fruits and vegetables market. This sector plays a crucial role in Romania's economy and has significant potential for growth. However, realizing this potential depends on developing a well-organized and efficient supply chain that connects farmers to both domestic and international markets.

The modernization of agricultural techniques is a key strategic direction for enhancing the competitiveness of Romania's fruits and vegetables sector. The actors from the agri-food supply chain must adopt these innovations in their strategies, as:

- Farmers and producers can enhance their competitiveness by adopting modern agricultural technologies, such as precision farming and automation, to optimize resource use, increase yields, and reduce costs. Additionally, farmers can improve

their market positioning by staying informed about market trends (Mizik, 2021), diversifying their crops, and participating in local and international markets and fairs. The absence of organized producer cooperatives and associations further weakens the supply chain, as small farmers lack collective strength to negotiate better terms, reduce costs, or share resources like machinery and storage facilities (Fan et al., 2013). Cooperatives can also facilitate access to technology, training, and financial resources (Isenberg et al., 2020), making it easier for farmers to adopt modern farming methods and improve their competitiveness.

- Consumers can stimulate the demand for sustainably produced fruits and vegetables, making informed purchase decisions through consistent and consistent choices, encouraging organic farming practices through a high consumption of such products and supporting local farmers by choosing Romanian products (Mizik, 2021; Manasvi and Matai, 2022). Additionally, by choosing local and seasonal produce, consumers can reduce the environmental impact of food transport, increase market demand for regional farms, and contribute to the resilience of their local food system. These choices not only benefit the environment, but also ensure that consumer preferences directly shape a more sustainable and competitive agricultural landscape.
- Traders and distributors represent actors who can influence the offer through their requirements and through the range of products they choose to commercialize and at the same time have a high influence on the demand through the practices they carry out and the choices they make for the products they sell such as prices and aggressive promotions, the quality and characteristics of the products, the country of origin (Harris et al., 2023). Through the range of available products and through promotion, choosing to market more sustainable, domestic or organic products, they can send a signal to consumers who can change their orientations and food preferences. By establishing stronger connections between producers and retailers, and reducing the reliance on intermediaries, farmers can capture a greater share of profits (Gaitán-Cremaschi et al., 2023).
- Governance and political actors can significantly enhance the agricultural sector's competitiveness by implementing supportive policies, investing in research and development, and improving infrastructure. By offering subsidies for sustainable farming practices and facilitating access to modern technologies, governments can help farmers adopt innovative methods, increase productivity, and reduce environmental impact. Additionally, promoting local and international market access through favorable trade agreements and infrastructure upgrades, such as better transport and cold storage systems, strengthens the agricultural supply chain (Anderson et al., 2013).

Following the effort applied to increase competitiveness by improving the primordial aspects related to sustainability and the factors that increase it and help them in development strategies, the effects will be guaranteed and with a long-term impact, as long as the adaptability to the current market situation but also related markets that influence the activity. By expanding market access and enabling small farmers to compete more effectively, a complex supply chain fosters inclusive growth and strengthens rural economies (OECD, 2010).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the strategic directions outlined for increasing competitiveness in Romania's agri-food sector are crucial for its sustainable growth and development. By embracing

modern technologies, improving supply chain efficiency, promoting sustainable practices, aligning policies with market demands, and investing in research and innovation, Romania can enhance its position in the European agri-food market. These efforts will not only strengthen the economic landscape but also contribute to food security, environmental sustainability, and rural development, ultimately benefiting the entire society.

The paper is intended for a diverse audience, including specialists in agribusiness, students studying related fields, and individuals seeking insights into the agri-food sector, which will benefit from the strategies and recommendations aimed at enhancing competitiveness and addressing contemporary challenges in the agri-food market. The may limitation is the absence of specific case studies or illustrative examples may restrict a comprehensive understanding of the effective implementation of the proposed strategies.

Future research efforts consist of an in-depth study of the knowledge of the current situation faced by national agricultural producers to determine the main and specific needs to build development strategies and quantifying them in a more systematic way and with quantitative scenarios related to the value impact of the strategies.

Enhancing the competitiveness of Romania's fruits and vegetables sector necessitates a multifaceted approach that prioritizes key areas such as the improvement of supply chain infrastructure, access to financing, market research and development, environmental policies, and strengthening farmer associations. By addressing these critical areas, Romania can create a resilient and competitive agri-food sector that not only meets domestic needs but also thrives in international markets. These strategic actions will not only align production with consumer preferences but also empower farmers to thrive in a competitive landscape.

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