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Brussels, 9.7.2025
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PART 2/3

COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT
EVALUATION

Ex Post Evaluation 2014-2020 Fund European for Aid to the most deprived (FEAD)

{SWD(2025) 190 final}

X.5 Greece

1. Context and background

Poverty and social exclusion in Greece have been consistently above the EU average, throughout the period of implementation of FEAD (2013-2022). At the beginning of the period, Greece was coming out of a recession that affected not only the poor but also the non-poor⁴⁰⁹. The crisis had resulted in a higher number of people being at risk of poverty and social exclusion, and one of the highest declines in disposable income and social inequality rates in the EU⁴¹⁰. Against this context, **Greece has generally experienced an improvement in its socio-economic indicators related to poverty and social exclusion, from 2013 to 2022.**

The main poverty and social exclusion indicator, AROPE, which measures the share of persons who are either at risk of poverty, or severely materially and socially deprived or living in a household with a very low work intensity⁴¹¹, has declined significantly from 2015 to 2022 (Table A. 55). However, more than 26% of the Greek population are still at risk of poverty and social exclusion, remaining above the EU average of 21.6%. The situation is worse for children, with 28.2% in 2022 being at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

The non-monetary component of the AROPE indicator, notably severe material deprivation, which shows an enforced lack of necessary and desirable items to lead an adequate life, has declined since 2013. However, for the last three years leading up to 2020 (the last year for which there is available data), it has remained more or less stagnant at the relatively high rate of around 16.5%, considerably above the EU27 average of 6.7%. When looking at specific target groups⁴¹², **women experience more severe material and social deprivation⁴¹³ than men** (14.6% for women compared to 13.1% for men in 2022), while children (less than 17 years old) are the target group that is worst off, with a rate of 15.5% in 2022.

Looking at specific components of material deprivation, a relevant one for FEAD is the inability to face unexpected financial expenses. This affected more than 50% of the Greek population between 2014 and 2018; it has since dropped but still remained at 44% in 2022, markedly above the EU27 average of 32%. The groups that suffer more from this type of material deprivation are single persons with dependent children (an increase from 59% in 2014 to 64% in 2022) and elderly people (an increase from 47% in 2014 to 66% in 2022). The rates for these groups, therefore, are not only very high but have worsened with time.

Another component of material deprivation that is very relevant for FEAD is the inability to afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish (or vegetarian equivalent) every second day. This indicator has been declining since 2013, with an exception in 2020 where it increased, possibly due to COVID-19. It has however declined since then to 10% in 2022 (Table A. 55). According to a survey of the Greek Statistical Office⁴¹⁴, 32.2% of the poor households have declared the incapacity to afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish (or vegetarian equivalent) every second day, while the respective percentage of the non-poor households amounts to 4.9%. **In terms of more specific target groups, households with dependent children have consistently been the target group with the greatest difficulty to afford a healthy meal,** followed by single persons with

⁴⁰⁹ FEAD OP

⁴¹⁰ Eurostat SILC database

⁴¹¹ [Glossary: At risk of poverty or social exclusion \(AROPE\) - Statistics Explained](#)

⁴¹² Source ELSTAT (Greek Statistical Office) <https://www.statistics.gr/documents/20181/bfdac782-5df9-7a23-54d2-7a471b70e73b>

⁴¹³ Since 2019, the severe material and social deprivation (SMSD) rate has replaced the severe material deprivation (SMD) rate.

⁴¹⁴ <https://www.statistics.gr/documents/20181/bfdac782-5df9-7a23-54d2-7a471b70e73bsin>

dependent children (Figure A. 71 – Percentage of people facing inability to afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish (or vegetarian equivalent) every second day). Although the trend has been declining since 2013 for these two groups, at the end of the reference period (2022) the rates were higher than the EU27 average for households with dependent children (8.6% in the EU27 and 10.7% in Greece). At the same time, the situation for elderly people has worsened significantly, with increasing shares of people aged 65 years or over experiencing the inability to afford a meal, culminating at 18% in 2022 (compared to 8.7% in 2013), well above the EU27 average of 11.8%.

Further data from the survey of the Greek Statistical Office⁴¹⁵ shows that 50.7% of the poor households are confronted with payment arrears⁴¹⁶ regarding utility bills for electricity, water, natural gas, etc., whereas the respective share for non-poor households is estimated at 30.1%.

In conclusion, according to the socio-economic data for Greece, the main indicators that suggest serious food and/or material deprivation concern the overall at risk of poverty and social inclusion rate (28% in 2022), especially for children (28.2% in 2022), the inability to face unexpected financial expenses (44% in 2022), the housing cost overburden rate (27% in 2022), the persons at risk of monetary poverty (19% in 2022) and the inability to afford a meal with protein every second day (10% in 2022).

Table A. 60 – Socio-economic context in Greece

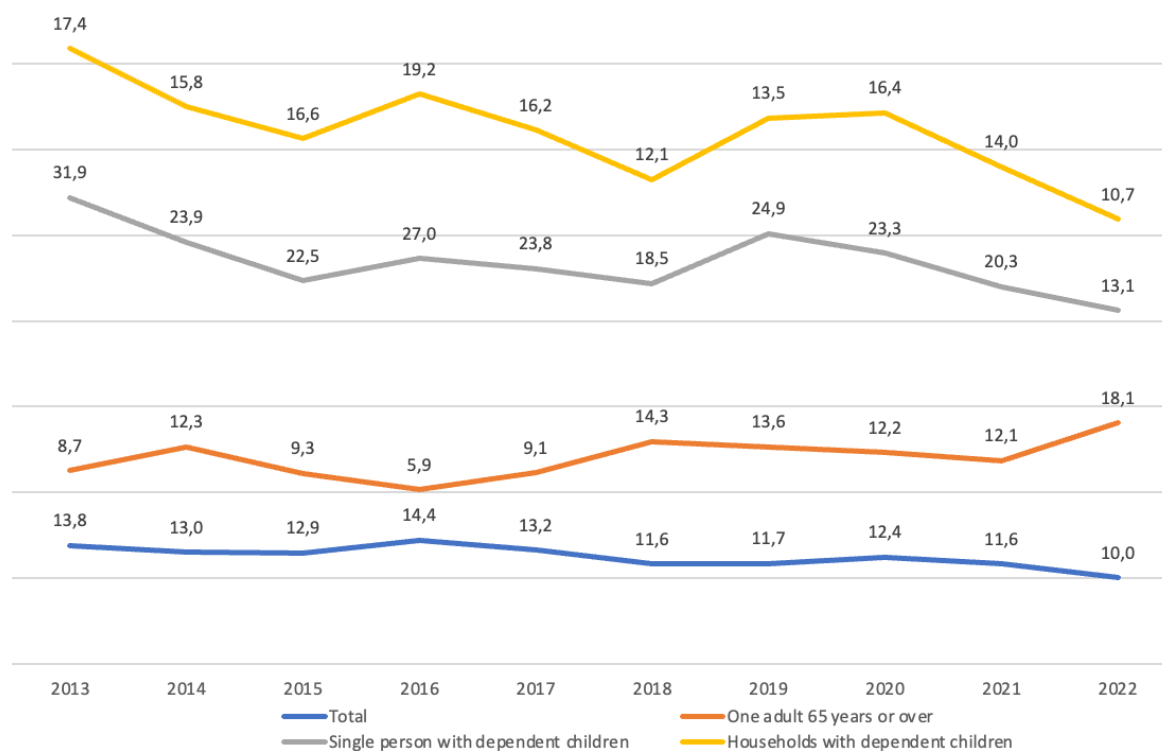
Greece	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Trend
1. At-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate (AROPE) Total		32.4	32.6	32.2	30.3	29.0	27.4	28.3	26.3	
2. AROPE Children		37.2	36.6	36.5	33.6	30.5	30.2	31.6	28.2	
3. Severe material and social deprivation rate (SMSD)		17.6	18.4	18.3	16.1	15.8	14.9	13.9	13.9	
4. Severe material deprivation rate (SMD)	21.5	5.8	22.4	21.1	16.7	16.2	16.6	0.0	0.0	
5. Inability to afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish (or vegetarian equivalent) every second day	13.0	12.9	14.4	13.2	11.6	11.7	12.4	11.6	10.0	
6. Impact of social transfers (other than pensions) on poverty reduction % reduction of AROPE	15.0	16.1	15.9	15.8	20.3	22.8	24.7	20.7	20.3	
7. Housing cost overburden	44.9	45.5	40.5	39.6	39.5	36.2	33.3	28.8	26.7	
8. Self-reported unmet need for medical care % of population 16+	10.9	12.3	13.1	10.0	8.8	8.1	6.5	6.4	9.0	
9. Households with very low work intensity		15.3	15.7	14.3	13.6	12.7	11.8	12.1	9.5	
11. Population in the EU could not afford unexpected financial expenses	51.8	53.4	53.6	52.7	50.4	47.8	50.7	46.3	43.6	
13. Share of total population having neither a bath, nor a shower in their dwelling	0.7	0.5	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.2			
14. No indoor flushing	0.7	0.5	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.2			
17. Persons who cannot afford a telephone	0.8	0.7	0.5	0.6	0.3	0.2	0.1			
18. Persons who cannot afford to replace worn-out clothes	1.3	1.8	3.9	3.8	3.8	3.9	4.3	4.5	5.3	
20. Persons who cannot afford to get-together with friends or family (relatives) for a drink or meal at least once a month	20.7	18.5	18.9	21.0	21.2	17.3	13.1	12.3	11.7	
21. Persons who cannot afford internet connection for personal use at home	10.8	10.1	8.2	5.5	5.1	5.4	4.0	2.3	1.4	
22. In-work risk of poverty	11.9	11.6	12.2	11.2	9.5	9.1	9.0	10.5	9.9	
23. Long-term unemployment	17.5	16.4	15.4	14.3	12.5	11.3	10.5	9.2	7.7	
25. Employment rate	49.2	50.7	51.8	53.2	54.5	56.1	53.7	57.2	60.7	
26. Children (aged less than 18) living in households with very low work intensity		10.6	10.8	9.5	9.0	7.9	7.7	7.5	4.7	
27. At-risk-of-poverty rate for children		26.6	26.3	24.5	22.7	21.1	20.9	23.7	22.4	
28. Severe material and social deprivation rate (SMSD) for children		23.9	24.2	23.8	19.9	18.2	19.0	16.1	15.5	

Source: Eurostat.

⁴¹⁵ <https://www.statistics.gr/documents/20181/bfdac782-5df9-7a23-54d2-7a471b70e73b>

⁴¹⁶ Defined as arrears in the past 12 months, that is, people were unable to pay on time (as scheduled) the utility bills (water, electricity, natural gas, heating, etc.) for the main dwelling.

Figure A. 71 – Percentage of people facing inability to afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish (or vegetarian equivalent) every second day

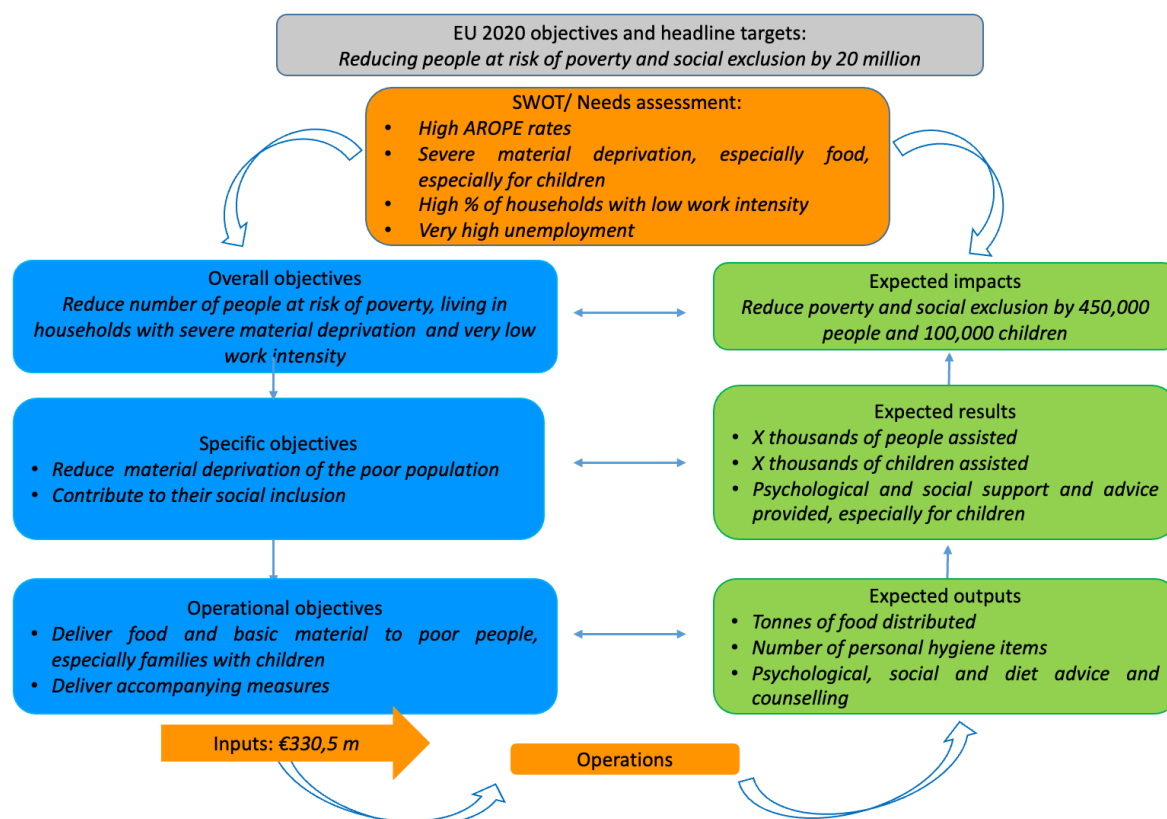


Source: Eurostat, EU-SILC survey [ILC_MDES03__custom_7420371]

2. Reconstructing the intervention logic

FEAD in Greece was introduced in a context of severe food deprivation which led it to focus on **the distribution of food to people with the lowest income levels**. Its aims were to contribute to the national objective of reducing the number of people at risk of poverty and/or facing material deprivation and/or living in households with no working member by 450,000 and by 100,000 children by 2020.

Figure A. 72 – Intervention logic of FEAD in Greece



Source: adapted from FEAD mid-term evaluation

2.1. National policy framework

FEAD was introduced in Greece in 2014 in a context of increasing poverty and social exclusion as a consequence of the crisis and austerity that followed. At the time, there was an ESF supported programme for Social Structures for the Alleviation of Poverty, implemented by partnerships of NGOs and local authorities. There was also a social system for social housing. There was no other national programme or policy for the provision of material assistance.

In 2017, the Guaranteed Minimum Income (GMI) programme was introduced. It offers an unconditional guarantee ensured by the government where all citizens have enough income to meet their basic needs without a work requirement. Beneficiaries of the GMI programme are single-person households, multi-person households and the homeless, access to which is based on certain income and property criteria⁴¹⁷. Since the introduction of the GMI programme, FEAD is implemented in parallel to maximise the effects and provide a holistic approach to addressing poverty and material deprivation. FEAD end recipients are those benefiting from the GMI programme. In this way, **FEAD boosts the support already provided as guaranteed minimum income and is consistent with this national programme.**

There are also a number of local level structures in Greece that contribute to combating poverty and social exclusion, established by NGOs and the Church of Greece, as well as local authorities. They include social markets offering food to the most deprived and operated by local authorities, NGOs and the Church and in some cases in cooperation with social enterprises; social canteens, operated by local authorities, NGOs and the Church; social residences for short-term accommodation offering also food; social welfare centres (for disabled, children, etc.); other special structures operated by NGOs (e.g. food banks, ‘We Can’ initiative, etc.). These structures are supported on one hand by private donations and, on the other hand, by the State through the previous Food Distribution Programme for the Most Deprived People.

⁴¹⁷ Income criteria range from 1,200-euro semi-annual income for a single person household to 3,000 euro for a household consisting of four adult members or two adults and four minor members or a single parent family with five minor members.

2.2. Objectives and target groups

The **overall aim** of the FEAD programme in Greece was to provide food and basic material assistance to the most deprived households. Specific objectives comprised:

- To reduce material deprivation of the poor population, notably the recipients of Guaranteed Minimum Income.
- To contribute to their social inclusion through psychological and social support.

The **operational objectives**, i.e. those related to the specific activities that take place were:

- To deliver food and basic material to poor people, especially families with children.
- To deliver accompanying measures related to psychological and social support and advice on a balanced and healthy diet.

When it was introduced, FEAD addressed the most deprived people⁴¹⁸, especially low-income families with children (with an emphasis on single parent and large families), as well as homeless people. However, when the Guaranteed Minimum Income programme was introduced in Greece in 2017, the target groups became more focused on those who are beneficiaries of the Guaranteed Minimum Income according to the following criteria:

- being settled in Greece.
- having a social security number.
- being beneficiaries of the Guaranteed Minimum Income.
- having chosen during their registration at the GMI that they also wish to become beneficiaries of FEAD.

The registration of the end recipients was done through the Guaranteed Minimum Income platform and was activated one month after registration. By setting the GMI as the key precondition for receiving assistance, the FEAD programme responded to the needs of all deprived people who obtain the GMI. According to statistics of the Managing Authority, an average of 200,000 households and 400,000 people participated in the programme each month.

For the accompanying measures, however, FEAD reached specific groups, such as people over 60 (offering psychological support and capacity-building for using computers for example), children of all ages, people from the Roma ethnic minority through health and nutritional advice, and homeless people through psychological support.

2.3. Implemented operations and accompanying measures

FEAD in Greece was implemented through **two types of operations as well as accompanying measures**. The operations comprised food assistance and basic material provision, notably:

- Food assistance comprises a) food packages including fresh produce (meat, poultry, dairy), fresh vegetables and fruit, dry produce (including baby food), and b) hot meals (rations) to deprived people.

⁴¹⁸ 'Most deprived' as defined in Article 2 (2) of Regulation (EU) 223/2014. 'Most deprived' means natural persons, whether individuals, families, households or groups composed of such persons, whose need for assistance has been established according to the objective criteria set by the national competent authorities in consultation with relevant stakeholders, while avoiding conflicts of interest, or defined by the partner organisations and which are approved by those national competent authorities and which may include elements that allow the targeting of the most deprived persons in certain geographical areas.

- Basic material provision includes household cleaning items, personal hygiene items, baby and children's items, school items, and personal protection items in response to COVID-19.

The accompanying measures aimed to address social exclusion and the social needs of deprived people in a more active and sustainable way. They included:

- Social tutoring;
- Dietary advice;
- Counselling/psychological support for adults and children;
- Individual consulting on accounting issues;
- Creative workshops for children and adults;
- Educational seminars and counselling days.

The **OP placed significant importance on the provision of accompanying measures for children** facing material deprivation and poverty. Some of the types of measures that were implemented include: psychological support to both children and their families, dietary advice, socialisation services (e.g. access to sports activities, spaces for play, meetings and events), cultural and creative play activities (e.g. theatre performances and theatre workshops for children), educational and recreational activities such as excursions.

2.4. FEAD governance and delivery system

The Managing Authority (MA) for FEAD in Greece in 2014-2020 was the National Institute of Labour and Human Resources. The Certifying Authority (CA) was the Paying Authority of Community Support Framework for Structural and Cohesion Funds, within the Ministry of Development and Competitiveness. The Audit authority was the Financial Control Committee.

In 2022, following a government decree, the tasks of the MA were transferred from the Institute of Labour and Human Resources to the Organisation of Welfare Benefits and Social Solidarity. This has become the MA for the management of three programmes, notably FEAD, the 'Housing and Work for the Homeless' and the 'Coverage' programmes. In the future, these three programmes aim, through a variety of actions, at the continuous support of the most deprived citizens, for ensuring their dignified living, as well as their full social reintegration.

The MA had overall responsibility for the delivery of FEAD. It was responsible for programming and evaluation, monitoring and management of operations, on-the-spot checks and organisation and support of the programme. At the operational level, **FEAD was implemented through 57 partnership organisations throughout Greece for the delivery of all measures** (food and material support and accompanying measures). The partnership organisations were selected at the beginning of the programme and were composed of a variety of partners from the public and third sector. Partners included *inter alia*: local and regional authorities, development organisations, local parishes/churches, NGOs, etc. The lead partner was always a public authority, local or regional (i.e. municipality or prefecture). At the end of the programming period, there were 600 distribution points in the municipalities and regions throughout Greece that ensured that food support was delivered to approximately half a million people in need.

The **delivery of FEAD food and basic material support took place via two processes**. The first one was a central purchase process, where the MA was responsible for central purchases of food and other materials via public procurement. It then distributed the food to the lead partner of each partnership who in turn ensures the delivery to end recipients through the network of partners. The second delivery process concerned decentralised purchases, where the lead partner of each partnership was responsible for the purchase of food and material through public procurement processes. It then ensured the delivery to end recipients through its network of partners. During the first years of FEAD, delivery took place via a combination of these two processes (centralised and decentralised purchases). The aim was to gradually prepare partnership organisations for carrying out the purchases themselves. The programme was implemented via the central purchase process during 2015 and 2016. In 2017-2019, there was a combination of the two with a gradual increase of decentralised purchases. At the end of the programming period, FEAD operated only via decentralised purchases, therefore the partnership organisations bore the main responsibility for purchasing and distributing food and basic material support to end recipients.

Accompanying measures were delivered since the beginning of the programme only in a decentralised manner. Each partnership decided the type of accompanying measures to implement depending on the profile and needs of their end recipients.

3. Key findings on the implementation of FEAD

3.1. To what extent was FEAD support successful – or not – and why?

Overall achievement of FEAD objectives [criterion: effectiveness]

FEAD has brought positive results in terms of covering food and material needs and complementing this with accompanying measures. It has addressed people facing severe food deprivation, especially due to the timing of its introduction, notably following the 2012 economic crisis in Greece which created an unprecedented situation of poverty and social exclusion.

According to the MA, **all assistance offered was substantial for end recipients as FEAD was a totally new programme** and everything was done from zero. This form of non-financial assistance contributed to the alleviation of extreme poverty. Partner organisations confirmed that the main contribution of FEAD's assistance is 'relief' to people suffering from poverty. By receiving FEAD non-financial support, they were able to save some money and cover other needs (e.g. 'since I have food covered, I can buy shoes for my children'⁴¹⁹).

The **success of FEAD activities in providing non-financial support is evident in the very high absorption rate** (85% or more in attendance rates according to partner organisations). Despite a slow start in some areas where end recipients felt mistrust and did not attend the deliveries, with time they learned they can benefit, and attendance rates increased substantially. There were no gaps in the delivery process and all processes flowed well, even during COVID-19. The effectiveness of the food and material assistance is also evident in the numbers achieved. According to the Annual Implementation Reports (AIRs) of the programme, the following results were achieved by 2022:

- 71,842 tonnes of food aid were distributed;
- 16,067,696 meals were distributed, partially or fully financed by the OP;
- 4,444,751 of food packages were distributed, partially or fully financed by the OP;
- 2,190,897 of people received food support;
- 1,789,570 people received basic material assistance.

Based on the results of the structured survey (AIR 2022), half of the end recipients (47%) are satisfied or very satisfied with FEAD, while only 19% are not satisfied. At the same time, 9 out of 10 participants in the accompanying measures of counselling consider the provision of counselling very or fairly useful. Evidence from partner organisations also suggests that they reached the peak of their learning curve on how to organise the deliveries and can now more successfully deliver food through more direct contact with end recipients and avoiding long queues ('people expect with excitement their delivery every month'⁴²⁰).

Although there is an almost unanimous agreement amongst programme stakeholders⁴²¹ on the success of the food and material support, **opinions about the effectiveness of accompanying measures are mixed**. On one hand, there is an overarching recognition of their importance as complementary measures to food and material assistance to ensure that integrated support is offered to deprived people. There are numerous examples of efforts to offer accompanying measures that help end recipients in their social inclusion process. On the other hand, in some areas⁴²², accompanying measures were not very effective as few people took part. Some of the

⁴¹⁹ Information received during a focus group organised online, in November 2023, from a representative of a FEAD partner organisation

⁴²⁰ Information received during a focus group organised online, in November 2023, from a representative of a FEAD partner organisation.

⁴²¹ Consulted during interviews and focus group.

⁴²² Based on individual interviews with partner organisations and a focus group with representatives of 13 partner organisations.

reasons include lack of staff or lack of competent staff to offer specialised services such as psychological support, lack of interest of some municipalities to offer accompanying measures or lack of interest of end recipients if they already receive support via other channels (e.g. the case of Roma in one municipality). At the same time, the use of volunteers which were in some cases used to address the lack of resources was not always effective as volunteers expected something in return, which contradicts the principles of volunteering.

In conclusion, the novelty of FEAD (no other programme offering such type of food and material support in a structured manner), its timing (i.e. at the time of the economic crisis in Greece) and its combination of food and material assistance with accompanying measures, have contributed to some of the specific objectives of FEAD. In particular, **the programme managed to alleviate some of the worst forms of poverty and social exclusion and to support the most deprived persons to improve their wellbeing.**

Reach of target groups [criterion: effectiveness]

FEAD was designed in Greece to contribute to the national objective of reducing the number of people at risk of poverty and/or facing material deprivation and/or living in households with no working members.

It addressed **all people who were beneficiaries of the Guaranteed Minimum Income (GMI) programme.** Therefore, it did not differentiate between target groups, since everyone who benefits from the minimum guaranteed income was eligible for FEAD support. Ongoing monitoring of activities confirms that the support reached these target groups, which included Roma, single parent families, and single persons⁴²³. As data is collected for specific target groups⁴²⁴, it can be observed that, by 2022, the programme reached 2,190,897 people, of which:

- 23% were children at risk of poverty;
- 52% were women;
- 29% were less than 25 years old, 59% were between 25 and 64 years and 12% were 65 years or over;
- 5% were migrants;
- 2% were participants with disabilities; and
- 2% were homeless.

For the accompanying measures, other groups were also reached, e.g. psychological support and capacity-building (e.g. in using computers) for people over 60, activities for children of all ages, health and nutritional advice to Roma, psychological support to homeless people.

However, it is not certain that all people who are registered as recipients of the GMI were aware of the possibility of receiving FEAD support. One factor that helped people become aware and apply also for FEAD support was the existence of community centres, especially in small areas, where they know all the residents and can help reach those in need⁴²⁵.

At the same time, **it is clear that not all people requesting FEAD food and material assistance attended the delivery points.** Reasons for this included lack of confidence, fear of stigmatisation especially if they must queue for a long time or simply inability to travel due to long distances, lack of means of transport or some form of disability⁴²⁶. This was overcome by introducing flexibility in the delivery which was reorganised and adapted to the individual situations of end recipients, so they did not all have to go to the delivery location at the same time. Furthermore, home delivery, which was introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic, has become a permanent option for people who cannot travel (e.g. if they are ill, old, do not have a car, cannot afford public transport).

Finally, there is a recurring issue that hinders the capacity of FEAD to reach all deprived people, notably the requirement for beneficiaries to be recipients of the GMI⁴²⁷. This implies that **some deprived people are left out just because they do not qualify for the GMI** and this, in some cases, can be a difference of a few euros.

⁴²³ Interviews with MA and partner organisations.

⁴²⁴ Annual Implementation Report 2022.

⁴²⁵ Interviews with partner organisations.

⁴²⁶ Interviews with MA and partner organisations.

⁴²⁷ This issue has come up consistently in interviews with the MA and partner organisations as well as the focus group.

It is suggested⁴²⁸ that social research to determine the most relevant target groups is carried out by local authorities or social services to increase the effectiveness in ensuring that all deprived people are reached by FEAD.

In conclusion, given the regulatory boundaries of FEAD in Greece, i.e. that beneficiaries can only be the recipients of GMI, it has reached this target group effectively, especially due to its flexible delivery procedures. However, **there is potential to reach even more deprived people if a different approach is used to identify them, such as social research.**

Adjustments to FEAD to address new challenges [*criterion: effectiveness*]

The main challenge during the implementation of FEAD in Greece was the COVID-19 pandemic. This crisis initially caused some delays in the delivery of the programme. However, **obstacles were overcome as there was an immediate response to the COVID-19 challenges.** The MA introduced changes that were taken up by partner organisations in the way measures were delivered. Specifically, a 'Home Support' model was adopted with door-to-door distribution of food and material assistance. Another option was 'drive-through' where the end recipients proceeded to the delivery points in their own vehicles and the parcels were placed in their vehicle, without direct contact with the staff. A third option was delivery at distribution centres by personal appointments. Accompanying measures were also delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic in an online manner where possible.

These measures were very effective and successful⁴²⁹. Indeed, it is surprising to note that, during COVID-19, there were more deliveries and greater efficiency. All those involved adapted quickly to the new situation (loading and unloading trucks and cars, home deliveries, different management of products).

Home delivery in particular, proved to be very effective for target groups who could not travel to the delivery locations (e.g. old people, people who live in remote mountain areas, which condition the capacity of people to move around, or even people who do not have a car or cannot afford public transport). Consequently, this delivery method continued even after the COVID-19 pandemic.

In conclusion, **programme stakeholders reacted quickly to the COVID-19 challenges and adopted new ways of working, notably new delivery models**, such as Home Support, whose effectiveness and relevance for some target groups resulted in maintaining this delivery option available still today.

Horizontal principles of FEAD [*criterion: effectiveness*]

Reducing food waste was ensured in Greece by choosing the type of food products in order to contribute to the balanced diet of the end recipients and careful management of food waste. In some cases, left-over food was sent to social supermarkets. However, the main approach adopted to reduce food waste was the close monitoring of deliveries and consistent outreach to end recipients (mainly through direct phone contact) so as to ensure a limited amount of non-delivered food.

The programme has placed special emphasis on **respecting the dignity of the most deprived persons** by scheduling deliveries in a way that avoids people queuing and feeling exposed. In addition, the new delivery modalities adopted to respond to COVID-19, notably drive-through and home delivery, have proved to contribute also to this horizontal aspect as people can receive assistance without having to be seen by others. At the same time, accompanying measures were also designed to this end, by focusing on psychological support and cultural and recreational activities that help build self-confidence and promote the feeling of dignity for end recipients.

Non-discrimination based on sex, race or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation is considered to be inherent in that all recipients of the GMI are eligible for support, without any distinctions.

Gender equality is taken into account in the various stages of the preparation of distributions - planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

Success and failure factors [*criterion: effectiveness*]

There are numerous factors that have facilitated the effectiveness of FEAD operations in Greece⁴³⁰:

- **The composition and quality of partner organisations.** The combination of local and regional authorities and other local actors helped build strong teams that worked well together to reach deprived people. What proved particularly effective was when the lead partner was a regional authority, and members of the partnership included all municipalities of the region. There is evidence of good cooperation at various

⁴²⁸ Partner organisations in interviews and focus groups.

⁴²⁹ Overarching finding in AIRs, interviews and focus group.

⁴³⁰ Evidence mainly from the focus group and interviews with partner organizations.

levels (between the MA and partner organisations, between partner organisations and between members in partner organisations).

- **The commitment of the members of partnership organisations.** There is a general recognition that members of partner organisations (i.e. organisations working with partner organisations such as churches, community centres, etc.) were dedicated to the FEAD objective to alleviate poverty and social exclusion and worked hard to this end. Particularly effective was the participation of community centres in small areas as they know all the residents and can help reach those in need. Capacity building of members also contributed to a better understanding of the philosophy and technicalities of FEAD.
- **The flexibility of implementation.** The main factor was the flexibility with which delivery was reorganised and adapted to the individual situation of end recipients, so they did not all have to go to the delivery location at the same time (e.g. scheduled deliveries by appointment, home support and drive-through options).
- **The robust monitoring of deliveries.** Every delivery entailed a careful review of the number of food products, their quantity, type and quality to ensure the relevant items are delivered to each end recipient. The use of the electronic tablets at delivery points speeded up the process and allowed a quick check and update of the number of end recipients who had received their food package and of the stock levels in storage/warehouses.
- **The visibility and outreach strategy.** There was good visibility of the programme through for instance, press conferences, press releases, presence in local media to inform about the programme and the needs it addresses. This contributed to better reaching the end recipients most in need.
- **The quality of the supplier organisations.** When food suppliers were selected based on strict quality criteria, there were benefits such as guaranteed product quality and faster delivery times. Careful selection of suppliers who delivered on time also contributed to reaching people in remote areas in good time.
- **Frequent updates of needs identification.** The needs of end recipients changed over time, especially in view of external events such as the pandemic or other natural catastrophes. In some areas, there was bottom-up research to assess the changing needs of end recipients.
- **Accompanying measures tailored to the needs of end recipients.** There are various examples where the needs of end recipients were taken into account to provide tailored psychological support (there is even evidence of prevention of suicides thanks to targeted psychological support), activities for children, social tutoring to students (extra-curricular support offered for free), regional observatories for social cohesion, dietary advice adapted to the specificities of specific groups (e.g. Roma minorities who lack dietary habits), online advisory courses for people with access to IT, legal advice to people who lack the means to carry out basic legal processes (e.g. people who need a divorce but have no money to pay a lawyer), etc.
- **The type of partners delivering accompanying measures contributed to their effectiveness.** When partners have the skills required for the delivery of certain accompanying measures, their implementation is more effective. For instance, in one region in Greece, the involvement of three universities having contacts with enterprises (for practices) enabled the implementation of social research and professional mentoring to end recipients as a means to help them enter the labour market.

There is also evidence of unintended results for the partner organisations. Building experience with a programme that was unique for Greece, they improved their management and organisational skills for the provision of support to the most deprived. They also improved their adaptation capacity to external circumstances, such as COVID-19, and have managed, thanks also to extensions of deadlines, to achieve the objectives of the programme.

At the same time, the following factors were found by partner organisations⁴³¹ to hinder the effective implementation of FEAD:

- **Insufficient staff or insufficient competences of social services staff.** This had an impact in some cases on the delivery of accompanying measures that required more specialised skills and experience.

⁴³¹ Evidence mainly from the focus group and interviews with partner organizations.

- **Lack of incentives for partnership organisations to participate in the programme.** Some partnership organisations stressed that the burden of implementing the measures did not justify the additional effort required. More incentives for partnership organisations may be needed, such as paying for overtime.
- **Difficulties related to suppliers.** These include rivalry amongst suppliers for participation in the programme, delays in the provision of goods. However, these difficulties have been overcome with time and experience.
- **Remoteness.** Greece has many islands, some of which are small and difficult to reach, therefore the delivery of FEAD there has been rather challenging. For instance, some islands are not connected even if they are close to each other, and connections must take place via the mainland port of Piraeus, implying delays. There is a cost-benefit issue when, for instance, a small island has one end recipient, and it is difficult to reach by boat. A third issue is the lack of municipal staff on certain islands for delivering FEAD support. Furthermore, due to the size of municipal structures on some islands, it was difficult to find storage spaces and for this reason they relied on direct, on-the-spot deliveries by paying private transport companies. Finally, decentralised purchases that work well on the mainland could not work on the islands for the reasons listed above (distances, transport, lack of staff).
- **Lack of volunteering culture in Greece.** While in other Member States the role of volunteers was instrumental for the delivery of FEAD support, in Greece volunteers expect some kind of reward, which is contradictory with the principles of volunteering. It was therefore difficult to rely on them for addressing gaps in the lack of staff.
- **Linking FEAD support with the GMI.** There are two issues identified. First, updates to the GMI are not automatically communicated to FEAD authorities and some end recipients may wait for up to two months to have their situation revised for receiving FEAD support. Second, and more critical for the effectiveness of support, were the implications for people who are on the borderline, i.e. they do not qualify for GMI for a few euros and therefore do not qualify for FEAD support, although their poverty situation may justify the relevance for support.

In conclusion, in view of the numerous facilitating and hindering factors for the effective delivery of FEAD, it is important to capitalise on what worked well, such as the structure and typology of partnership organisations, the monitoring mechanisms and outreach strategies or the provision of accompanying measures targeted at identified needs. At the same time, the hindering factors should inform the design of future support, especially ensuring that all those in need can receive quality and timely assistance, based on objective criteria that do not leave anyone out.

Overall cost-effectiveness of FEAD operations [*criterion: efficiency*]

The most cost-effective type of operation was the **provision of food support** as this was the type of operation in Greece where the bulk of the funding went. Given that food deprivation has been identified as the most important component of material deprivation in Greece, food support addressed the primary needs of end recipients.

The second most effective measures were the **accompanying measures** which cover secondary needs and are very important for social inclusion through activities that included for instance psychological support, legal advice, recreational and cultural activities for children and families, etc. The experience of partners who provided psychological, social, and other support suggests that accompanying measures were effective in enabling target groups to move towards social inclusion, especially for deprived children and their families. Despite their high relevance, their effectiveness is low, given the very small budget allocation to these measures (1% of the total FEAD budget for Greece)⁴³².

The cost-effectiveness of FEAD in Greece mainly improved as a result of **changes in the way deliveries took place**. More specifically, drive-through deliveries, although set up due to COVID-19, became very cost-effective. People drove through, showed their National Insurance Number, got a paper with what they are supposed to receive, then moved to the next point, opened their car boot, put in the food/material assistance and left.

Another factor that contributed to cost-effectiveness was the **change in the duration of delivery**: initially all deliveries took place in 2-3 days, later they lasted 1-2 weeks. End recipients received a message with the date, time and location as well as the list of items they would receive, then they turned up on the designated date and location and obtained the assistance. This proved to be more cost-effective. For the partner organisations, this implied more delivery days, but for the end recipients it was less time consuming.

⁴³² Source: Operational Programme, December 2013.

Greece has not used vouchers. Their use was recommended during the mid-term evaluation of the programme with the rationale that they would allow the purchase of fresh food directly in supermarkets and thus better cover the nutritional needs of end-recipients; while allowing them to ration their purchases according to daily needs and transport capacities (e.g. they would not have to carry 12 kilos in one go). The MA proposed vouchers for the new period as they consider them relevant for people who live far and cannot travel or for whom travelling entails extra cost⁴³³.

However, partner organisations have a different opinion. As the programme evolved and changes in the delivery as described above were introduced, there were no queues anymore and end recipients received what they needed in every delivery. As such, partnership organisations do not consider the vouchers relevant, especially in an economic context of inflation. Vouchers have a fixed value and end recipients would lose purchasing power as prices go up due to inflation⁴³⁴.

In conclusion, **FEAD is considered cost-effective** for two main reasons: for assigning the bulk of support to food assistance which is the prime need of end recipients and for the flexibility entailed in the delivery processes which have been streamlined to become more efficient. There are inconclusive findings on vouchers, with the MA considering they can resolve the travel burden for some people, and the partner organisations considering them inappropriate in an inflationary economic context.

Administrative burden of monitoring and reporting requirements [*criterion: efficiency*]

Administrative procedures are generally considered time consuming, but this is a feature in all co-funded programmes. The most burdensome administrative activity was the procurement procedures due to Greek legislation. It can take up to 6 months from the publication date until the award date. It is considered unnecessary to have such long procurement times, which could be reduced to half (3 months)⁴³⁵.

A survey to partner organisations showed that administrative requirements were of medium difficulty (64%) or high difficulty (25%), especially due to lack of staff, notably specialised/competent staff. Other reasons were the lengthy public procurement procedures, the national legislative requirements, and the involvement of many different departments and actors.

Flat rates are considered very useful for administrative aspects, especially for the deliveries, but it is suggested to set them at 7% instead of 5%⁴³⁶.

Partner organisations cannot quantify the administrative burden. Lead partners spent a lot of time on checks (how much has been received, how much it costs, monitor what is happening, monitor the warehouses, the accompanying measures, etc.). Often there was only 1-1.5 persons (not full-time) in the municipality dealing with FEAD tasks, and who was also present in all food deliveries to end recipients ('I open and close all deliveries').

There is an example⁴³⁷ where administrative procedures worked well, with no delays, even though FEAD procedures were very heavy. The reason administrative procedures worked well was because they hired a sub-contractor, paid by the 5% flat rate of administrative costs reserved by the partner organisation to cover the costs related to recruitment/contracts for the implementation of distribution. This meant there were 5-8 people helping the person responsible for implementation in the municipality who would have been alone otherwise.

In conclusion, **the main administrative burden stems from the public procurement procedures.** Otherwise, there does not seem to be an important concern about administrative burden, with partner organisations not being able to quantify the time spent on different activities. Generally, there seems to be a small number of staff dealing with FEAD at the lead partner organisations.

⁴³³ Interviews with the MA.

⁴³⁴ Information received during a focus group organised online, in November 2023, from representatives of FEAD partner organisations.

⁴³⁵ Interviews to the MA.

⁴³⁶ Interviews to the MA.

⁴³⁷ Partner organization from Xanthi.

Simplification measures [*criterion: efficiency*]

The main simplification has been the streamlining of delivery procedures, notably the drive-through deliveries and the scheduled deliveries, both described above under overall cost-effectiveness. This experience can be used to drive the design of future delivery schemes.

Although vouchers were not used, they are proposed as a simplification measure by the MA for the future, but not recognised as relevant by partner organisations in an unstable economic context.

Coherence of FEAD with other interventions [*criterion: coherence*]

FEAD was coherent and implemented in parallel with the national programme for the Guaranteed Minimum Income to maximise the effects and provide a holistic approach to addressing poverty issues. Accompanying measures were also coherent with the Child Guarantee Programme. Several FEAD partnership organisations, such as the Municipality of Athens, together with the Network for the Rights of the Child, the Region of Western Greece, etc., implemented targeted actions for children from preschool age to the last grades of school. Actions included for instance, visual psychotherapy through crafts, theatrical interactive games, sports events, social tutoring, psychological support for teenagers, etc.

FEAD also cooperated with the national ‘Help at Home’ Programme to carry out home distributions to elderly people, people with disabilities, as well as people living in hard-to-reach areas, even if they were not registered as recipients of FEAD support.

There was external coherence of FEAD with the ESF. Complementarity with ESF actions regarding potential synergies with FEAD was carried out in two ways:

- The Special Service for Coordination and Monitoring of ESF actions monitored ESF operations to identify potential complementarities with FEAD.
- The National Coordination Authority of ESIF monitored FEAD activities to ensure maximum complementarity with ESF interventions. The aim was to achieve maximum complementarity with ESF interventions (especially with TO9) as well as avoiding double funding.

Complementarity between the two Funds was also ensured as they informed each other’s end recipients, e.g. FEAD end recipients received information on further support they can get from the ESF, while the ESF informed its beneficiaries about the food support that was available through FEAD. There are some good practice examples from partner organisations including the following:

- A Helpdesk in the Region of Central Macedonia directed end recipients to other types of support, including ESF.
- The group of professionals involved in the delivery of accompanying measures in the Kavala partner organisation (psychologist, physical trainer, social workers, etc.) referred end recipients to the ESF.

There is also some ‘bad’ practice to learn from, notably in the partner organisation of Kozani where there was low awareness in the municipality of the importance of activities supported by FEAD for the reduction of poverty and social exclusion. This limited the coherence with other policies. The overall perception of the MA and partner organisations⁴³⁸ was that the ESF is the main Fund for social inclusion while FEAD had a complementary character covering basic food and material needs and emergency situations.

In conclusion, FEAD in Greece was designed as a complement to other initiatives, mainly national and local initiatives, but also as a complement to ESF.

3.2. Is FEAD still relevant?

Relevance to target groups [*criterion: relevance*]

FEAD operations were relevant, not only because of their nature (food and material assistance to deprived people) but also because they were implemented through cooperation with community centres who informed, helped and activated/mobilised the community and especially those who need support. Although the absolute amount offered by FEAD was very small per person per month, it addressed most types of deprived people and their material needs. By complementing other programmes (e.g. the national Help at Home’ Programme,

⁴³⁸ Evidence from interviews with the MA and partner organizations.

the Guaranteed Minimum Income programme, the ESF) it offered a holistic approach to addressing poverty and social exclusion.

Furthermore, **FEAD was relevant for the target groups it covered**, i.e. the recipients of GMI, and no new target groups emerged from recent crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic or Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. As noted above, support was however adapted to the changing needs of end recipients over time.

There were some drawbacks, however. FEAD was designed to reach deprived people who obtained the guaranteed minimum income. Although FEAD was relevant for the needs of GMI recipients as it aimed to alleviate the worst forms of poverty and social exclusion, **there were some groups who were left out**. This limits FEAD's relevance to address all needs in Greece or the poverty line may need to be re-established. Examples of deprived people who were left out include:

- People who miss the eligibility for the guaranteed minimum income for a few points only, but who have important material deprivation needs (e.g. elderly people, families).
- Pensioners with low pension levels. Although many are poor, they often do not gather the required points to qualify for the GMI.

Some partner organisations found a way around the limitations of the GMI. They allowed end recipients to take non-delivered food and in turn distribute it to other families they knew were in need.

In addition, there is a lot of tax evasion in Greece, so there were people who did not really need the support but managed to qualify by presenting very low incomes to the tax authorities.

FEAD operations could also become more flexible in view of changing situations, in terms of who and how FEAD offers assistance. Examples include:

- Including more flexible measures to address unforeseen situations and needs. One example was that of a mother whose husband left her and therefore, became a single mother but, as they did not have a divorce, she could not claim support as a single mother. If there was some flexibility, the support could be adapted to such legally complicated cases⁴³⁹.
- Some people need legal support, but FEAD cannot pay a lawyer. Social workers are paid by the municipality, but lawyers are private so, although access to social workers is possible, legal advice needed to be offered by volunteers where they exist or by public staff if they had the relevant skills.

In conclusion, FEAD was a unique programme for addressing the needs of severely deprived people in Greece. However, its design limited some deprived people from accessing FEAD assistance, and there were also some situations where more flexibility would have allowed more targeted assistance.

Relevance of FEAD now and in the future [*criterion: relevance*]

Overall, the FEAD programme, in terms of objectives, design and delivery mechanisms, was very relevant in Greece and also in the future. It was a very popular programme, with deprived people actively seeking it out. Partner organisations consider that, if it were to stop, there would be a lot of reactions and target groups would feel abandoned. FEAD is even more important now than before due to the economic crisis and consequent increase in prices of products in supermarkets.

There are however some recommendations to make the programme even more relevant in the future:⁴⁴⁰

- **A more integrated approach.** FEAD support is relevant as long as it complements other support for people at risk of exclusion. For instance, end recipients of working age (e.g. the long-term unemployed) should at the same time acquire new skills to be able to enter the labour market. This implies that potentially more budget should be allocated to accompanying measures so they can be more effective.
- **More emphasis on psychological and social support**, also in coherence with ESF+. Accompanying measures can become 'social cohesion measures' offering non-material assistance. FEAD should be able to support in a holistic manner people who are deprived and at the same time cannot easily access social services, by combining food and psychological and social support.
- **More local cooperation** with actors who are closer to potential beneficiaries (such as local associations and NGOs), so that it can reach all potential beneficiaries, even those who cannot travel.

⁴³⁹ Interview with a partner organisation.

⁴⁴⁰ Interviews and focus group with partner organizations.

More social research to identify the needs of deprived people. This can complement the GMI requirement to ensure that FEAD reaches also deprived people who are left out of the GMI.

- **More physical meetings between partner organisations** so they get to know each other, exchange experiences and learning from each other's good practice.
- **More information and awareness raising to partner organisations** on the availability of other types of support / other programmes so they can use them in a complementary manner to FEAD.
- **More organised approach to reducing food waste** by re-directing leftover food to social canteens or to food banks or by establishing cooperation agreements with supermarkets to distribute left over food to poor people with the use of volunteers.

In conclusion, FEAD and its objectives, design and delivery model are still relevant for the future, but some improvements could be made to make it a more integrated support programme, to better reach all potential beneficiaries and to improve the knowledge and capacities of partner organisations.

3.3. Did FEAD make a difference and to whom?

EU added value [criterion: EU added value]

The novelty is FEAD itself and not the target groups and their needs. **FEAD has been instrumental in addressing the needs of deprived people**; if it were to stop, people would feel abandoned. People at risk of poverty and social exclusion facing material deprivation were not offered material assistance before in the way FEAD offered it (structured, systematised, organised). There is therefore a **volume effect by providing assistance that was not available before**.

FEAD enabled the development of efficient procedures for material support to deprived people. It is innovative as a mechanism. Many partner organisations achieved very good organisation of deliveries in a very small period of time leading to no queues, no waiting time as beneficiaries pass by a buffet table, pick up their products are then accompanied to their car. The identification of end recipients with tablets at the delivery points was another innovation. Logistics were smooth, all the supply chain worked smoothly, e.g. trucks arrived on time for products to be downloaded from the trucks, stored in fridges if needed and then picked up by end recipients. This is therefore evidence of **scope effects by introducing new ways for reaching deprived people**.

The partner organisation principle of the FEAD delivery model obliged partners to cooperate and as a result they got to know each other, come closer and cooperate efficiently. There was excellent cooperation amongst partners who are municipal and regional authorities. There was cooperation not only within but also between partner organisations, facilitated by the National Coordination Network which conducted meetings of partner organisations, where they could collaborate and exchange on various issues they faced, ranging from how to obtain the food supplies to how to best deliver them and various other technical issues where they supported each other. Partner organisations did not know what delivery meant at the beginning, FEAD was a totally new tool for them, but by now everyone is up to speed. This is evidence of **process effects by bringing about changes in the way administrations and other entities** (social cooperatives, social services, associations, NGOs, church organisations, etc.) cooperate.

Visibility [visibility]

At the beginning of the programme, there was low awareness of the existence of FEAD, with most people thinking that support was funded by the organisation that delivered it. **At the end of the programming period, most people knew about FEAD** thanks to press releases, posters in delivery locations, communication campaigns and presence in social media (last two years). There were however differences in views between partner organisations⁴⁴¹. Some considered that communication campaigns including banners, press releases, advertisements increased the visibility of the programme and its understanding amongst the general public and end recipients. Others, on the contrary, considered that people were not very aware; they knew that the funding comes from the EU, but do not understand the co-financing element, nor how the programme works.

⁴⁴¹ Interviews and focus group with partner organizations.

The MA organised a survey which was sent to the mobile telephones of end recipients (a sample of 20,000 people) which further contributed to their awareness. Older people are the only group who were less aware as they do not access social media or surveys on their mobiles.

A factor that contributed in some cases to improve the knowledge of end recipients about FEAD was the **personal relationship developed between the partner organisation and end recipients**. Where social services of local authorities were involved, they managed to increase visibility due to their closeness to target groups.

In conclusion, although there has been significant progress since the beginning of the programme in making it known to the general public and to end recipients through various communication channels, there were cases where people are less aware. Proximity to target groups was a factor that contributed to visibility of the programme.

4. Good practices

The delivery model in the region of Central Macedonia □ reducing delivery times

The Region of Central Macedonia approached the beneficiaries in the following ways: the regional authority invited them each time through personalised SMS and phone calls to reach the delivery points or to participate in an activity (accompanying measures); they also made announcements in the local press on social media as well as placing posters in squares and bus stops. To address the COVID-19 challenges, they relied on good cooperation and unity of all involved in the programme and implemented home deliveries as well as a psychosocial support call centre. To reduce delivery times, they established as a condition to suppliers that all products should be delivered packed in boxes with the communication identity of the programme. The aim was to safeguard that no mistakes were made and to reduce the burden on the staff involved in the delivery. In this way, they distributed the same products horizontally to all beneficiaries, defending the principle of equality and transparency, and established in their methodology the priority system that is used in banks. There was a system where a sequential priority number was issued per end recipient so that food deliveries were made in order and end recipients are served according to the order of arrival at the delivery point without any discrimination.

The online application system of the Ministry of Labour, Social Security and Social Solidarity □ reaching difficult to reach people

The Ministry of Labour, Social Security and Social Solidarity decided to introduce an online application system for accessing FEAD assistance, to ensure that individuals did not need to travel long distances to reach designated offices to apply for support services. In this way, it became easier to identify and reach end recipients living in remote areas, which was very relevant in a country with a geographically challenging environment (mountains and many islands, many of which are difficult to reach).

The first step was a major information campaign, launched by the MA together with municipalities and regional authorities (the partner organisations). The campaign was designed to inform the public about how to participate in FEAD food assistance and when the application period would be launched.

A second step was to address the issue of reaching people who were not digitally literate. Therefore, in order to support potential end recipients who did not have access to the internet, local hotspots were created in each municipality for about one month, with trained personnel available to support applicants throughout the application period.

Based on this online information system, a list of end recipients was produced including detailed data on age, sex, origin and the composition of the applicant's household, which was transmitted to partner organisations. In this way, they were able to use this information to tailor their accompanying measures and organise food distribution to address the needs of the end recipients and their household.

The Explorers of the Mind project in the region of Achaia □ impact on social integration of children

The operation provided greater opportunities for social integration of children in mid-childhood (aged 10-12) and young adolescents (aged 13-14). Through a play-based learning approach and the provision of a number

of activities designed to stimulate multi-sensory learning, the project sought to encourage children's autonomy and cultivate their emotional development and social skills. Through their exposure to the activities, children began to explore their emotions, learnt to cooperate, developed their means of expression and ultimately improved their self-esteem, developed positive resilience, improved their communication skills and cultivated a sense of social responsibility.

We Strengthen Together in the region of Western Greece □ directing end recipients to relevant social services

'We Strengthen Together' was implemented in the framework of accompanying measures. It is a telephone line that provides individualised psychological and social support to end recipients of the FEAD-funded operation to build mental resilience during the COVID-19 crisis. It was implemented in synergy with the online platform www.menoumedytikiellada.gr (living in Western Greece). Callers to the telephone line were informed about the online platform available to the general public but specially targeted at vulnerable groups (e.g. elderly, depressed people, children with autism, patients with chronic diseases). In total, 1,800 end recipients of FEAD support were directed from the support line towards specialised services, such as public social services or local/national NGOs. Both the telephone support line and the online platform reduced the social stigma associated with COVID-19, supported by the fact that these services were open to all and not just to vulnerable people. Another important added value of the online platform was the increased knowledge of end recipients' needs. Daily conversations with experienced telephone agents allowed for links to be created between callers' needs and local public services and NGOs.

5. Conclusions and lessons learned

Effectiveness

FEAD has been an innovative programme in Greece offering food and material support in a structured manner at a time when Greece was hit hard by the economic crisis which started in late 2009, following the financial crisis of 2007-2008. The combination of food and material assistance with accompanying measures, contributed to alleviate some of the worst forms of poverty and social exclusion and to support the most deprived persons to improve their wellbeing.

FEAD managed to reach the target groups it was designed to address, notably the beneficiaries of the Guaranteed Minimum Income scheme. The flexible delivery procedures enabled this target group to effectively obtain food, material assistance as well as access a variety of accompanying measures (including psychological support, dietary advice, recreational, education and cultural activities, especially for children and their families). However, the requirement for end recipients to be beneficiaries of the GMI had some limitations, as it left out some people who did not qualify for it but who have severe material deprivation needs.

The programme stakeholders (MA and partner organisations) demonstrated a high degree of flexibility to adjust to external challenges such as COVID-19. The reorganisation of deliveries through new modalities such as the 'Home Support', the 'drive-through' or online accompanying measures' support, proved to be very popular and effective in reaching target groups. They resulted also in more efficient implementation by reducing waiting times and queues and managed to reach people in remote areas or with difficulties to travel to the delivery points (e.g. mountainous areas with limited access, old people, disabled, people who cannot afford to pay for transport, etc.). There was also a psychological effect on end recipients as they felt that their dignity was respected by not having to queue for food. Therefore, the new delivery modalities remained in place even after the COVID-19 crisis.

Horizontal principles were respected, distinguishing in particular the respect to the dignity of deprived people as a result of reduced waiting times, avoiding queues and tightly scheduled deliveries.

Efficiency

Generally, FEAD can be considered cost-effective especially due to the streamlining of its delivery procedures. Vouchers have not been used in Greece and, although the MA considers them an efficient tool to use in the future, partner organisations consider they are not relevant in an inflationary context. The administrative burden was principally focused on the length of procurement procedures. Otherwise, partner organisations could not estimate the administrative burden involved in their tasks for delivering FEAD. Overall, though, administrative burden was not a major concern for partner organisations, although resources were scarce, and staff often worked overtime to complete their tasks.

Coherence

FEAD in Greece complemented other local and national initiatives, such as the national GMI programme, the Child Guarantee programme or the 'Help at Home' programme. It was also coherent with the ESF, having structures that oversee and safeguard this coherence.

Relevance

FEAD was a unique and very relevant programme for addressing the needs of severely deprived people in Greece. However, its design could be improved to allow those who do not qualify for the GMI to be considered. Some flexibility could also be introduced to ensure that FEAD is better suited to the needs of end recipients. For instance, more flexibility in the choice of accompanying measures, allowing for adaptations to address unforeseen situations and needs or enhance partners with the necessary skills for offering accompanying measures to end recipients (e.g. through capacity building, selection of staff and/or volunteers with the required skills).

For the future, FEAD and its objectives, design and delivery model are still relevant, but some improvements could be made to make it a more integrated support programme, to better reach all potential beneficiaries and to improve the knowledge and capacities of partner organisations. In relation to measures offered to end recipients, a more holistic approach could be considered, combining material assistance and psychological and social support through 'social cohesion' measures. In relation to the partner organisations, capitalisation on their effective collaboration could include more meetings and exchanges of experiences and good practice and more information on the availability of other types of support that could complement FEAD.

EU added value

FEAD produced a volume effect by providing assistance that was not available before. It produced a scope effect by introducing new ways for reaching deprived people. Finally, it also generated process effects by bringing about changes in the way administrations and other entities (social cooperatives, social services, associations, NGOs, church organisations, etc.) cooperate.

There was significant progress since the beginning of the programme in increasing its visibility to the general public and to end recipients through various communication channels. However, there were cases where people are less aware. Proximity to target groups was a factor that contributed to visibility of the programme.

Lessons learned

The structure and typology of partnership organisations (collaboration of local and regional authorities) as well as the dynamics that emerged (close collaboration within and between partnership organisations), the monitoring mechanisms (e.g. the use of tablets at delivery points to track products delivered), outreach strategies (e.g. closeness of social services to target groups to motivate their participation), and the provision of accompanying measures that meet specific needs, are all factors that have contributed to the success of FEAD in Greece.

However, improvements are possible in the future, notably in relation to more inclusive support by extending the range of end recipients beyond the GMI potentially through social surveys to identify all those in need. There are also improvements possible regarding partnership organisations by increasing the number of staff and/or building their skills and promoting the volunteering culture as volunteers can play a key supporting role. In this respect, Greece can learn from the experience of other partnership organisations in the EU where volunteers have been a key factor in delivering assistance to the most deprived.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Methodology

The methodology used for the case study is based on the analysis of data and information from the following sources, to ensure triangulation of findings:

- Desk research of literature related to FEAD in Greece, including the FEAD programme, Annual Implementation Reports (AIR), FEAD surveys carried out in Greece, documentation on the programme from the Greek FEAD website and other relevant literature related to FEAD in Greece.
- Use of statistical data for setting the context, using as main sources the Eurostat Survey on Living and Working Conditions and the Greek Statistical Office (ELSTAT). Statistical data was also extracted from the AIRs to analyse the achievements of the programme.
- Interviews with Managing Authority representatives as well as with representatives of partner organisations.

- A focus group with 23 participants from 13 partner organisations, representing one fourth of the partner organisations in Greece. It was carried out online on 13 November 2023.

The only limitation was the difficulty to reach end recipients for obtaining direct information from them. This was principally due to the vulnerability of deprived people, who may interpret an interview as intrusive and stigmatising, but also the difficulty of ensuring representativeness. Therefore, we opted for carrying out only the interviews and focus group with members of partner organisations.

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Primary information collection

- Interviews with three representatives of the national Managing Authority in Greece, conducted during September and October 2023.
- Interviews with representatives of the partner organisations, from the municipalities of Kavala, Kozani and Xanthi and with the Development Organisation of the West Athens regional authority.

Focus group with 23 participants from 13 partner organisations (Arkadia, Thessaloniki West area, Biotia, Ionian Islands, Ioannina, Larissa, Crete, Achaia, Rodopi, Cycladic Islands, Region of Attika (north, central and south area), Fili, Messinia. Conducted online on 13 November 2023.

Table A. 61 – Input indicators for the implementation of FEAD in Greece in 2014-2022

Indicator	Total amount of eligible public expenditure approved in the documents setting out the conditions for support of operations (EUR)	Total amount of eligible public expenditure incurred by beneficiaries and paid in implementing operations (EUR)	Total amount of eligible public expenditure declared to the Commission (EUR)	Implementation rate (expenditure declared as share of allocated budget)
2014-2022	240 895 883.84	253 202 357.49	203 233 613.23	84%

Source: SFC 2014 database.

Table A. 62 – FEAD output indicators in Greece in 2016-2022, per year

Output indicators on food support distributed	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Quantity of fruits and vegetables (tonnes)	3 842.77	2 303.87	1 746.09	1 746.68	1 696 83	1 704 88	1 224.20
Quantity of meat, eggs, fish, seafood (tonnes)	1 120.07	1 907.79	1 306.55	1 151.98	1 861.21	2 095.79	1 389.19
Quantity of flour, bread, potatoes, rice and other starchy products (tonnes)	971.22	1 341.81	2 785.06	2 546.05	3 599.08	3 541.60	2 198.57
Quantity of sugar (tonnes)	800.83	454.67	688.41	657.80	1 010.20	778.00	428.21
Quantity of milk products (tonnes)	823.96	710.14	922.32	1 294.65	1 582.02	1 376.30	1 306.65
Quantity of fats, oil (t)	586.45	404.28	628.30	825.90	1 131.29	1 155.34	1 096.50
Quantity of convenience food, other foodstuff (not falling in abovementioned categories) (tonnes)	977.01	1 446.58	1 471.05	1 769.02	2 068.09	1.901.17	1 447.58
Total quantity of food support distributed (t)	9 122.31	8 569.14	9 547.78	10 010.08	12 948.72	12 533.08	9 090.90
Proportion of FEAD co-financed	77.00	98.30	100.00	100.00	99.60	70.18	100.00

Output indicators on food support distributed	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
food products in the total volume of food distributed by the partner organisations (%)							
Total number of meals distributed partly or totally financed by the OP	225 728	3 177 258	2 900 314	3 234 788	2 582 737	2 594 839	1 352 032
Total number of food packages distributed partly or totally financed by the OP	696 327	527 982	630 318	625 282	733 740	692 171	538 931

Source: SFC 2014 database.

*Please note that there was no expenditure in 2014 and 2015.

Table A. 63 – Number of FEAD participants in Greece in 2016-2022

Result indicators on food support distributed	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Total number of persons receiving food support	410 000	243 689	353 320	290 172	293 885	319.238	280 593
Number of children aged 15 years or below	108 155	55 235	88 537	66 363	58 657	62 988	53 800
Number of persons aged 65 years or above	17 957	13 842	19 813	19 991	26 341	30 747	31 639
Number of women	213 566	118 136	184 379	154 505	152 090	165 589	147 600
Number of migrants, participants with a foreign background, minorities (including marginalised communities such as the Roma)	5 000	0	13 293	22 078	23 291	22 640	21 542
Number of persons with disabilities	727	2 796	6 901	7 518	7 480	8 288	8 348

Result indicators on food support distributed	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Number of homeless	1 000	3 159	5 115	4 456	4.090	8 433	8 879

Source: SFC 2014 database.

**Please note that there was no expenditure in 2014 and 2015.*

X.6 Estonia

1. Context and background⁴⁴²

Estonia has a mixed social protection and welfare policy, with universal benefits for families with children, contribution-based sickness and unemployment benefits, pensions offering income slightly below the at-risk-of-poverty line⁴⁴³ and social services provided mainly by local governments. Overall expenditure on social protection is among the lowest in the EU (EUR 3 970 per inhabitant in 2020, compared with an EU-27 average of EUR 9 324) (Eurostat 2023).

The Social Welfare Act sets out the social services that should be offered by local governments and the eligibility conditions for services are set by each local government. This arrangement has resulted in unequal accessibility of social services across the country. Food aid delivery is not among the services that local governments are obliged to offer, although this has been used by social workers to help those in most need and to offer primary social assistance, as revealed in the interviews with local government representatives.

Minimum income for the most deprived is a subsistence benefit paid by local governments that covers housing costs and guarantees income up to subsistence level. This subsistence level should meet minimum needs in relation to food, transport, household items, leisure time activities, etc. However, as assessed by the National Audit Office (2023), this benefit is often not sufficient to cover minimum needs.

The at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion (AROPE)⁴⁴⁴ rate in Estonia was 23.6% in 2015, close to the EU average (24.0%). From 2015 to 2021 the rate remained stable with minor fluctuations, dropping to 22.2% by 2021. However, by 2022 the rate rose again by 3 pp to 25.2% (Eurostat, teprs_lm411). The government Strategy Estonia 2020 aimed to reduce the AROPE rate to 15% by 2020. This aim was not met and the relative poverty rate stayed quite stable over the years of 2014 – 2021.

The AROPE varies considerably within different socio-economic groups.

For older people in Estonia, the AROPE rate is the highest in the EU and the upward trend continued till 2022. In 2015, the AROPE rate for people 65+ was 37.2%, rising to 41.6% in 2021 and 53.1% by 2022. The AROPE rate is notably high among older women, who tend to live considerably longer than men and often find themselves living alone in older age (Statistics Estonia, LES 02). However, the poverty gap is not wide within different groups of older people – the majority are slightly below the at-risk-of-poverty line and do not face severe deprivation.

The AROPE rate for children decreased from 22.2% in 2015 to 16.6% on 2022. The AROPE rate for children was slightly below the average AROPE rate for the population as a whole in 2015 and by 2022 this still decreased whereas the AROPE rate for the overall population grew (Eurostat, teprs_lm411). The highest poverty risk is faced by families with a single parent.

In 2014, unemployed people faced the highest poverty risk of other groups: 54.8% of the unemployed were at risk of poverty. However, by 2020 the at-risk-of-poverty rate for this group had decreased to 43.0% and people aged 65+ became worst hit by poverty (Statistics Estonia, LES 02: poverty and material deprivation rate by year and labour status).

The severe material and social deprivation rate was 3.5% in 2015, and this decreased to 2.3% by 2020 but rose again to 3.3% in 2022 (Eurostat, tespm030). In 2022, the deprivation rate was highest among unemployed people, at a rate of 24.0%: it was 4.4% among employed people and 9.9% among old-age pensioners (Statistics Estonia, LES 02: poverty and deprivation rates: year, employment status, sex and value).

The share of people who could not afford a meal with meat, chicken or fish was 7.5% in 2014 (below the EU-27 average of 9.7%). With food aid, the share decreased by 2.5 pp to 5.0% in 2015 and fluctuated slightly over the next years, settling at 5.4% in 2022.

⁴⁴² The FEAD programming period 2014 – 2020 operations were implemented until the end of 2023. The research was carried out between September and November 2023 when FEAD operations were not yet fully complete.

⁴⁴³ At-risk-of poverty measures low income in comparison to other residents. At-risk-of poverty line is set at 60% of the national median disposable income after social transfers.

⁴⁴⁴ AROPE corresponds to the sum of persons who are either at [risk of poverty](#), or [severely materially and socially deprived](#) or [living in a household with a very low work intensity](#).

The inability to deal with unexpected expenses decreased by 7.8 pp from 39.1% in 2014 to 31.3% in 2022. Although it is not clear whether the most deprived persons also experienced this reduction.

In addition to the AROPE rate, Estonia uses an absolute poverty indicator to measure deprivation. The absolute poverty line is an estimated subsistence minimum calculated on an annual basis. The overall absolute poverty that manifests deprivation has decreased substantially, dropping from 6.3% in 2014 to 3.5% in 2022. Men experience slightly higher absolute poverty rates than women. The absolute poverty rate for children up to the age of 15 decreased from 9.0% to 4.1% and for working-aged people from 7.0% to 4.1% whereas for older people the rate increased by 0.2 pp from 1.3% to 1.5% between 2014 and 2022 (Statistics Estonia, LES 01: poverty and material deprivation by year, age group, indicator and gender).

Table A. 64 – Socio-economic context in Estonia

Estonia	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Trend	
1. At-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate (AROPE) Total			23.6	23.1	23.3	23.6	23.7	22.8	22.2	25.2	
2. AROPE Children			21.5	19.4	18.5	16.9	19.3	17.4	17.2	16.1	
3. Severe material and social deprivation rate (SMSD)			3.5	2.2	4.0	3.1	2.6	2.3	1.9	3.3	
4. Severe material deprivation rate (SMD)	6.2	5.8	4.7	4.1	3.8	3.3	2.7	0.0	0.0		
5. Inability to afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish (or vegetarian equivalent) every second day	7.5	5.0	4.6	5.3	4.4	5.3	5.5	3.5	5.5		
6. Impact of social transfers (other than pensions) on poverty reduction % reduction of AROPE	23.2	22.3	24.9	27.3	26.8	28.2	31.7	30.6	28.1		
7. Housing cost overburden	8.3	6.8	4.9	4.8	4.0	4.4	4.4	4.4	4.9		
8. Self-reported unmet need for medical care % of population 16+	11.3	12.7	15.3	11.8	16.4	15.5	13.0	8.1	9.1		
9. Households with very low work intensity		6.2	5.5	5.4	5.3	5.3	4.8	5.1	5.7		
11. Population in the EU could not afford unexpected financial expenses	39.1	36.7	31.6	36.3	34.7	31.4	30.5	27.1	31.2		
13. Share of total population having neither a bath, nor a shower in their dwelling	8.2	7.3	7.5	7.0	6.6	5.8	5.2				
14. No indoor flushing	8.2	7.3	7.5	7.0	6.6	5.8	5.2				
17. Persons who cannot afford a telephone	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.1	:	:				
18. Persons who cannot afford to replace worn-out clothes	10.3	7.7	6.8	7.5	6.4	5.6	5.2	4.7	5.9		
20. Persons who cannot afford to get-together with friends or family (relatives) for a drink or meal at least once a month	9.4	5.2	4.0	5.3	4.9	4.3	4.1	3.3	4.2		
21. Persons who cannot afford internet connection for personal use at home	4.3	3.3	2.6	2.7	2.4	2.0	1.6	1.6	2.2		
22. In-work risk of poverty	10.5	8.9	8.6	8.0	7.6	8.6	8.0	7.4	8.3		
23. Long-term unemployment	3.3	2.4	2.2	2.0	1.3	0.9	1.2	1.6	1.3		
25. Employment rate	70.2	72.1	72.4	74.5	75.0	75.5	74.0	74.0	76.4		
26. Children (aged less than 18) living in households with very low work intensity		5.1	3.7	3.9	3.8	3.6	3.1	3.9	3.6		
27. At-risk-of-poverty rate for children		20.0	18.6	16.5	15.2	17.2	15.2	15.5	13.6		
28. Severe material and social deprivation rate (SMSD) for children		2.9	1.6	3.3	2.4	2.1	2.0	1.7	2.6		

Source: Eurostat.

In sum, during the period from 2015-2021 there has been no significant change in overall AROPE rates, however with an increase in 2022; relative poverty among children as well as among unemployed people decreased but it increased considerably among older people. Food aid as a benefit in kind was not able to influence relative poverty rates. Nevertheless, severe material and social deprivation rate and the share of people who could not afford a meal with meat, chicken or fish fell compared to 2014 when food aid was not provided, although it slightly rose during FEAD activities.

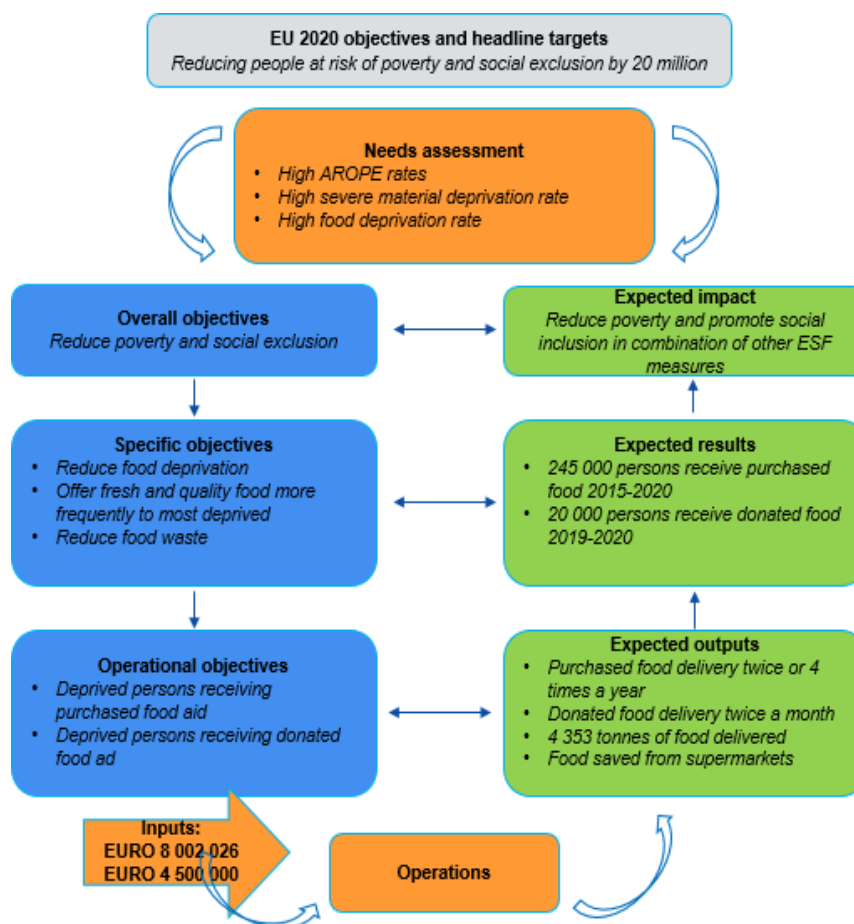
2. Reconstructing the intervention logic

FEAD activities in Estonia were targeted at those on low incomes and households facing absolute poverty and took the form of food aid. Purchased food parcels were delivered to end recipients twice a year, and from 2021 onwards purchased food was delivered quarterly. The eligibility criteria applied for purchased food were strict and uniform – initially only the recipients of subsistence benefit and applicants whose incomes exceeded subsistence levels by 15% qualified for food aid.

Donated food was added to the programme activities from 2019 with less strict eligibility criteria. This also enabled food aid to be delivered to persons assessed by local governments as in need of it and enabled more frequent food delivery.

FEAD activities in Estonia contained no direct actions to promote social inclusion. As argued in the explanatory note of the FEAD programme, the activities were of supportive nature to other ESF programmes that offered activation and services to similar groups (Ministry of Social Affairs 2015, b).

Figure 5: Intervention logic of FEAD in Estonia



Source: adapted from FEAD mid-term evaluation.

2.1. National policy framework

Social security benefits in Estonia cover well-known social risks. When income from work and social security benefits are not enough to enable decent living due to unemployment, low wages, personal circumstances or household composition, a person can apply for subsistence benefit, which is a minimum income scheme. This is granted to the whole household, considering all incomes, housing costs and household composition.

Subsistence benefit consists of housing costs and a subsistence amount. It is provided to a person living alone or to a family whose monthly net income, after the deduction of housing expenses (up to a certain limit), is below the subsistence level.

The subsistence level is based on minimum expenses relating to consumption of foodstuffs, clothing, footwear and other goods and services which satisfy primary needs. The level is fixed for each year by the state budget. Although this is a political decision affected by fiscal considerations, it is stipulated in the Social Welfare Act that each new subsistence level must not be lower than the level in force and that the level should reflect minimum expenses needed to ensure a decent standard of living for those in need. There is no regular indexation of the subsistence level, and it is therefore changed in a discretionary manner.

People receiving subsistence benefit can be regarded as the most deprived. There is no specific approach in relation to gender, or specific groups such as Roma, immigrants, low-wage earners, etc. The subsistence level is the income that is considered necessary for living for one month, including expenses on food, medicines, transport, communications, household items, etc. The main criticism of the subsistence level is its low value, which means that it does not protect people from falling below the absolute poverty line. The national Audit Office has in a report (National Audit Office 2023) indicated that the calculation logic of the benefit should ensure that after paying housing costs, the recipient of the benefit has enough money to allow them to purchase

other essentials for life, such as food, clothing, etc. Further, there are large differences between local authorities in terms of covering the expenditure on housing of a person in need of assistance. In the case of every third application, the limits for housing costs established by local authorities did not cover the actual costs associated with housing.

Equivalence scales 1:0.8:1.2 are applied when calculating the subsistence level for families (see Table A. 65). Children under 18 are given a higher score of 1.2 when applying weights from 2018. The scales applied to children give them 4 times greater weight compared to OECD classical scale of 0.3 (Koppel, et al 2018). Accordingly, families with children have also been more advantaged in receiving food aid. The condition for receiving minimum income is legal residence in the country: persons who are not legal residents have no access to subsistence benefit.

Table A. 65 – Subsistence level 2015-2022

Subsistence line (EUR)	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022*
1 st person	90	130	130	140	150	150	150	200
2 nd person	72	104	104	112	120	120	120	160
Child under 18 years	90	130	130	168	180	180	180	240

* From June 2022.

Source: Ministry of Social Affairs. Data on benefits, subsistence benefit 2001-2022.

Studies suggest that increasing the subsistence level is the most cost-effective way to reduce direct poverty compared to other benefits (Trumm and Kasearu 2011). Policy simulations have concluded that the most cost-effective policy measures to reduce absolute poverty among families with children were changes in the subsistence benefits (Vörk, Paulus, Leppik 2014).

Whereas other social security benefits are granted centrally by social insurance institutions, the subsistence benefit is paid by local governments. All recipients, including household members, are registered in the Social Services and Benefits Registry (STAR).

The social welfare system in Estonia lacks proactivity and deprived people are assumed to make the first move themselves in asking for assistance. In an annual survey of local governments carried out by the Ministry of Finance, the median level of service in social welfare was 3 in a scale of 0 – 9 throughout 2018–2020. The level of service 3 corresponds to fulfilment of 90% of basic assessment criteria. That means that statutory basic services, stipulated in the Social Welfare Act⁴⁴⁵, are offered. Historically there has not been much trust in local governments and distrust, previous bad experiences and pride may prevent people from seeking help. In recent years, however, municipalities have been more proactive in attempting to find people in need through healthcare and social services coordination projects and encouraging residents to report someone in need of help.

In the early years of FEAD, deprived people could not apply for food aid directly. Instead, it was obligatory to apply for and meet the income criteria for subsistence benefit. As argued by the Ministry of Social Affairs, the aim was to encourage people to turn to local governments for social assistance, apply for subsistence benefit and be available for assessment for other social services. Thus, there was an attempt to connect food aid and assessment of the need for social services that deprived people would potentially need. Later, with donated food, people could apply for food aid from local governments and had to pass a needs assessment to be granted this.

As food aid is a benefit-in-kind it does not have a direct impact on people's or households' incomes. Receiving food aid enables people to allocate money not used on food to other items and therefore enables better every day coping as argued by project partners.

⁴⁴⁵ The statutory social services include home service, general care service provided outside home, support person service, care service for adults, personal assistant service, shelter service, safe house service, social transport, social dwelling, debt counselling, childcare service, alternative care service and continued care service.

2.2. Objectives and target groups

The objective of FEAD activities was reducing food deprivation of the neediest persons, supporting their everyday coping by offering food delivery and promoting social inclusion (Ministry of Social Affairs 2015 a).

From 2015-2020 purchased food was delivered twice a year to subsistence benefit recipients. The objective was to deliver food aid to 35 000 persons per year, to 70 000 persons in 2020 with a budget of EUR 8 049 099 (Ministry of Social Affairs 2015 a).

Table A. 66 – The purchased food objective was to reach 245 000 persons by 2020

Objective	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Number of persons who received purchased food aid	35 000 persons	70 000 persons	105 000 persons	140 000 persons	175 000 persons	245 000 persons

Source: Ministry of Social Affairs, 2015 a. Cumulative, one person can be reflected in several years.

In 2019, donated food delivery was added to FEAD activities. With these changes the aim was that quality, and varied foodstuffs would be delivered to most deprived people, thus reducing food deprivation and supporting their everyday coping. In both 2019 and 2020, donated food was intended to be distributed to 10 000 recipients (Ministry of Social Affairs 2019).

Table A. 67 – Donated food objective was to reach 20 000 recipients

Objective	2019	2020
Number of persons who received donated food aid	10 000 persons	20 000 persons

Source: Ministry of Social Affairs, 2019. Cumulative, one person can be reflected in several years.

In 2015, the target group for FEAD was subsistence benefit receivers and applicants. Additionally, applicants for subsistence benefit whose incomes exceeded the subsistence level by 15% were eligible for food aid. People who needed help under special circumstances were not included in the target group, as food parcels were delivered only twice a year (Ministry of Social Affairs 2015 a). The only specific target group in addition to subsistence benefit recipients or applicants was homeless people.

With declining numbers of subsistence benefit recipients, the target group for purchased food was expanded in 2017, with people receiving other benefits from local governments that depend on the incomes of recipients. In a survey conducted in 2017, more than one third of respondents found that food aid should be delivered more frequently. During 2017, local governments paid additional subsistence benefit to 11 400 persons to whom delivery of food aid would have been appropriate. Thus, purchased food needed to be supplemented with other measures (Ministry of Social Affairs 2015 a).

The target group for donated food was a person or a household in economic hardship whose need for aid had been assessed by a local government social worker. Re-assessment of aid needed to be carried out every three months. Donated food consisted of donations from private individuals and enterprises and included saved food from retail, production and catering. In practice, food was saved mainly from supermarkets. In addition to easing food deprivation, saved food was intended to have a positive impact on the environment.

Subsistence benefit recipients as the target group of food aid formed 2% of the Estonian population in 2014 (Ministry of Social Affairs). From 2015 to 2021, there was a continuous decline in individuals and households receiving subsistence benefits whereas the number of recipients rose sharply in 2022. By 2021 the 2% figure recorded in 2014 had fallen to 1.2% of the Estonian population but rose to 3.6% in 2022. The increase of benefit recipients in 2022 was mainly due to addition of Ukrainians fleeing Russian military aggression. Also, the increase of subsistence level from June 2022 had an impact on the number of benefit recipients.

Table A. 68 – Subsistence benefit recipients 2015-2022

Subsistence benefit receivers	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Number of households	14 604	15 300	14 056	12 226	10 904	10 501	9 806	25 016
Number of persons	26 301	27 990	25 360	20 931	18 719	18 295	16 508	48 731
Children 0-17	8 717	9 587	8 652	6 616	6 042	6 008	5 162	17 168

Source: Ministry of Social Affairs. Data on benefits, subsistence benefit 2001-2022.

In 2020, approximately one-third of subsistence benefit recipients were children and one-third were unemployed. The share of old-age pensioners among subsistence benefit recipients was less than 5%. By 2022, 37% of benefit recipients were children and 28.6% were unemployed. Among families with children two-thirds of benefit recipients were single parent households; slightly more than half of families with children had one child.

The biggest share among households receiving subsistence benefit were households where a member was registered as unemployed. The share of this household type among all households receiving the benefit increased until 2021, whereas the share of households with children decreased.

A specific target group was homeless people, for whom food parcels were designed in a way that food could be consumed on the streets. The parcels were distributed through shelters for homeless people operated by local governments. In 2015, 1 146 homeless people used shelters, of whom 13% were women and 10% were older people (65+ years). By 2020, the number of homeless people who used shelters rose to 1 459 and subsequently decreased to 1 347 in 2022 (Ministry of Social Affairs, H-veeb).

2.3. Implemented operations and accompanying measures

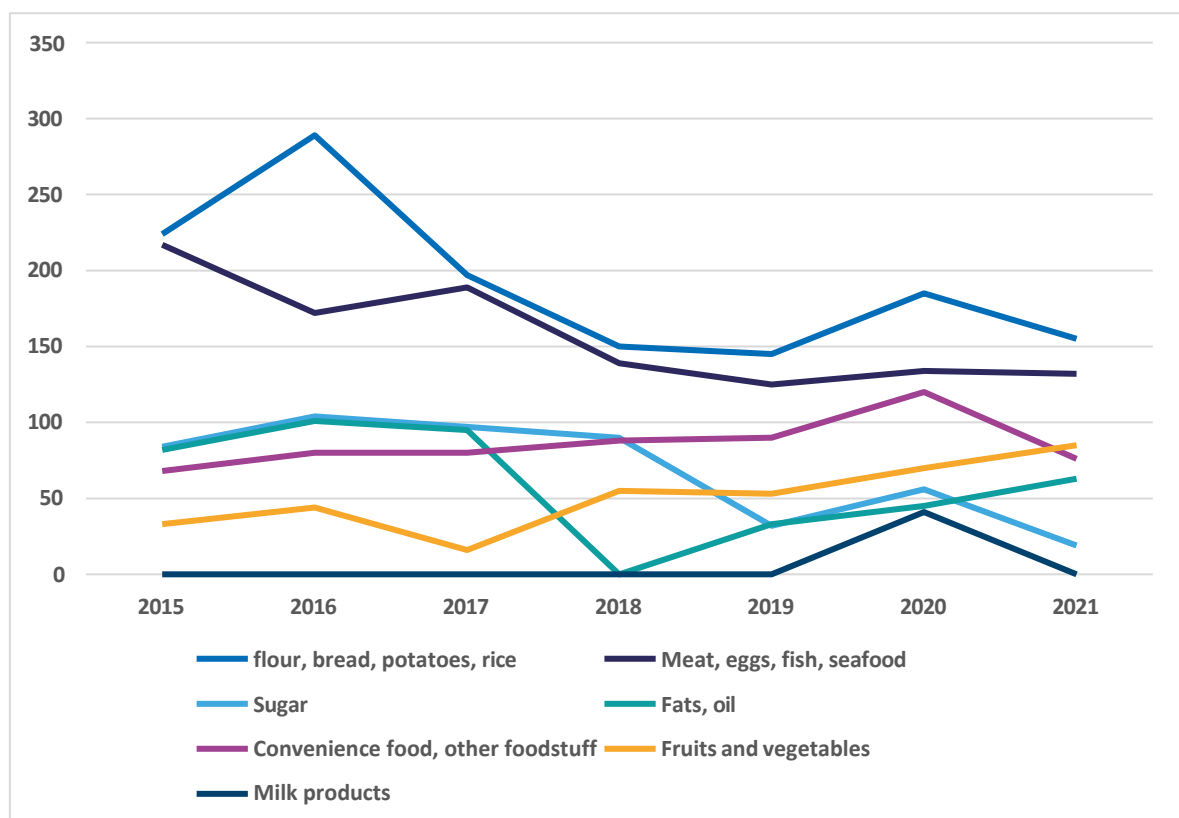
As noted above, the main FEAD activity in Estonia was food delivery. Purchased food was offered from 2015 and in 2019 donated food was added. Under the new programming period 2021-2027, food vouchers replacing purchased food were piloted in two counties from April 2023. From October 2023 purchased food was replaced by food vouchers across the whole country.

Purchased food contained food parcels weighing 8-10 kg that consisted of items that were long-lasting and easily transportable. The parcels included canned meat or fish, high nutrition dry products, oil and fats, dried fruit, chocolate, coffee and tea. Each household member eligible for subsistence benefit received a food parcel - a family of five received five parcels with similar content. A healthy diet principle was followed as far as possible, although fresh foodstuffs could not be included. It was only when donated and saved food were added to the programme that food parcels became more diverse, containing bread, meat, milk products, fruit and vegetables.

Donated food gathered by food banks included donations in cash and in goods from companies and private individuals and saved food that contained foodstuffs about to expire brought from supermarkets at the end of the day. The saved foodstuffs were deep frozen if appropriate, and later delivered to end recipients. The donated food parcel had to weigh at least 3 kg and contain at least three different food groups (vegetables, grain products, milk products, fish or meat, sweets) (Ministry of Social Affairs 2019). The delivery had to take place at least twice a month. In practice, the frequency of donated food deliveries varied – according to local food banks and local governments, it took place weekly in bigger cities such as Tallinn and Tartu but less frequently in smaller cities – once a month when not enough donations were available.

Between 2015-2017 the purchased food parcels contained mainly canned meat or fish, flour and starchy products, sugar, fat and oil, and relatively little dried fruit. In 2020, the food distributed contained more fruit, vegetables and milk products as new product category (see Figure A. 73 below).

Figure A. 73 – Food aid became more varied over time: quantity of food products delivered 2014-2021, tonnes



Source: SFC database 2024-2020.

Accompanying measures

Food packages were accompanied by information sheets about the social services offered by local governments, the labour market services provided by the Unemployment Insurance Fund and information regarding aid organisations operating nearby. The objective of the information sheet was to promote take-up of social and labour market services and thereby increase social inclusion. Thus, the connection was made with other ESF-funded initiatives as many of the social and labour market services, such as social counselling, supported living, childcare, rehabilitation, debt counselling, etc., were provided under EU programmes.

Later the end recipients received a receipts booklet by well-known Estonian chefs along with their food parcel. The booklet contained recipes from products provided in food parcel, nutritional advice and mental help tips.

Local governments also took some initiatives to provide accompanying measures to food aid. Tartu city, in cooperation with a local food bank, provided cooking workshops to help make the best use of food aid. As food aid is not fit for instant consumption but requires cooking skills to make a meal, not all recipients were happy with the contents of the food aid and found it of little use. Cooking workshops therefore provided knowledge and skills on how to make use of the food aid. Unfortunately, according to a consulted social worker, there was not much interest in this initiative. A social worker in Rakvere city argued that food aid was used in smarter ways when social workers provided advice on how to use the foodstuffs.

2.4. FEAD governance and delivery system

The Ministry of Social Affairs, local governments and the Estonian Food Bank as a partner organisation with local food banks were the main actors involved in the activities of the FEAD programme. The delivery systems of purchased and donated food followed different logics.

The Ministry of Social Affairs as the first level intermediate body was responsible for:

- Procuring and purchasing food parcels
- Transporting food parcels to storage
- Ensuring availability of data in a uniform manner
- Coordination of information delivery in cooperation with local governments and partner organisation
- Monitoring the budget, making budget forecasting
- Publicity and communication
- Reporting

The Ministry of Social Affairs was responsible for procuring food parcels that were initially purchased and delivered twice a year and, starting from 2021, four times a year. Two international procurements were carried out during the period. The parcels had to meet the conditions of transportability, healthy eating, and the longevity of products. Every household member eligible for subsistence benefit received a parcel. The Ministry in cooperation with Social Insurance Board provided food banks with the list of recipients of purchased food.

Local governments were not an official partner of FEAD; however, they played a crucial role in implementing the programme. There are 79 local governments in Estonia, varying from approximately 400 000 inhabitants (Tallinn) to 5 000 inhabitants. Local governments obtained lists of individuals who have the right to purchased food from a local food bank. Their primary task was informing the end recipients about their right to receive food aid and communicating with local food banks. Communication with the recipients was carried out by phone, SMS or email. In smaller municipalities with no food bank present, the social workers also delivered food parcels themselves. For donated food, local government's role was different – they conducted the needs assessment for qualifying for food aid and provided food banks with the lists of donated food recipients. The information on donated food aid recipients was subsequently entered into the information system STAR, to which the local food banks were given access.

The partner organisation in FEAD that was found by procurement was the Estonian Food Bank, which began its activities in Estonia in 2010. By the end of 2017 there were 14 local food banks operating in the bigger cities across the country. Currently there are 16 local food banks in operation.

The partner organisation’s tasks included storage and delivery of purchased food to the target group and informing the target group about measures that are aimed at increasing social inclusion, i.e. delivering information sheets. Home delivery was to be guaranteed for people with a disability, long-term illness, or lack of transport facilities. Keeping records of food quantities and end recipients was also one of the tasks of the local food banks.

In the case of donated food, the Estonian Food Bank’s obligations included gathering donations from commercial enterprises and private individuals; making up the food parcels and delivery of food at least twice a month. The local food banks contacted end recipients concerning delivery dates. As the local food banks use volunteers, the management of volunteers was also part of their work operations.

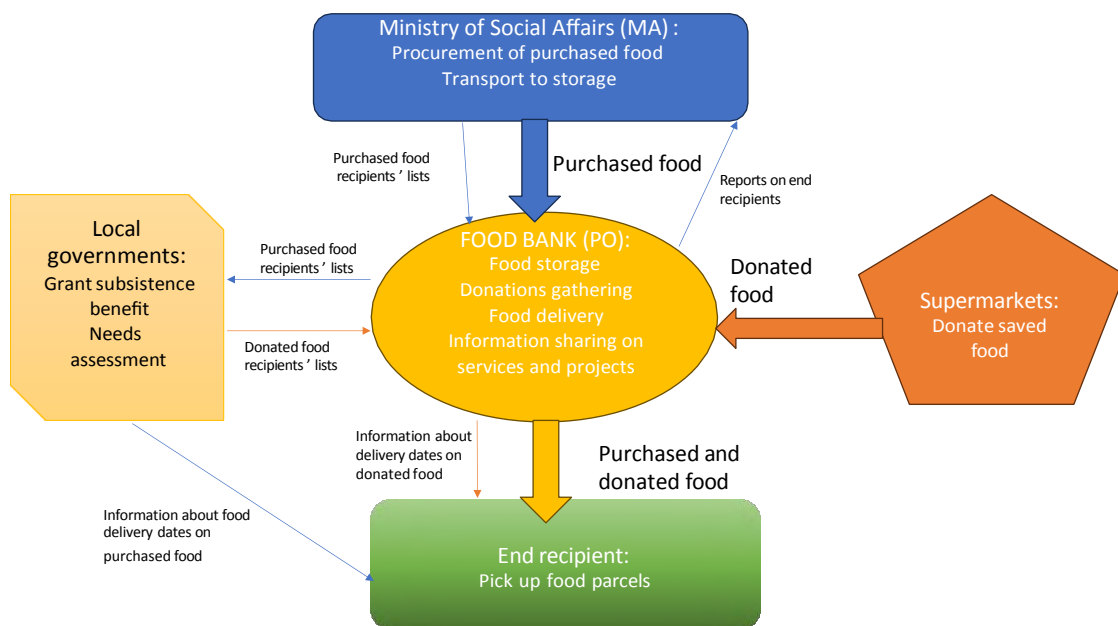
Food storage and food delivery took place on the premises of the local food banks. Any food aid not taken up by the end recipient for 30 days, was delivered further by the partner organisation. In the case of further delivery, families with children or long-term unemployed people were to be preferred.

The role of Managing Authority was divided between the Ministry of Social Affairs and the State Shared Service Centre (SSSC) (Riigi Tugiteenuste Keskus) operating under the Ministry of Finance. SSSC also fulfils the role of certifying authority for EU-funded programmes.

The audit authority for FEAD was the Ministry of Finance. Audits in local food banks were carried out by the Innove Foundation.

An illustration of the stakeholders’ roles is presented in the figure below.

Figure A. 74 – FEAD governance and delivery system followed two separate routes



Source: Expert interviews with FEAD counterparts.

3. Key findings on the implementation of FEAD

3.1. To what extent was FEAD support successful – or not – and why?

Overall achievement of FEAD objectives

The FEAD activities in Estonia were targeted at financially deprived persons and households. Additionally, homeless people received food parcels tailored to their specific situation and needs.

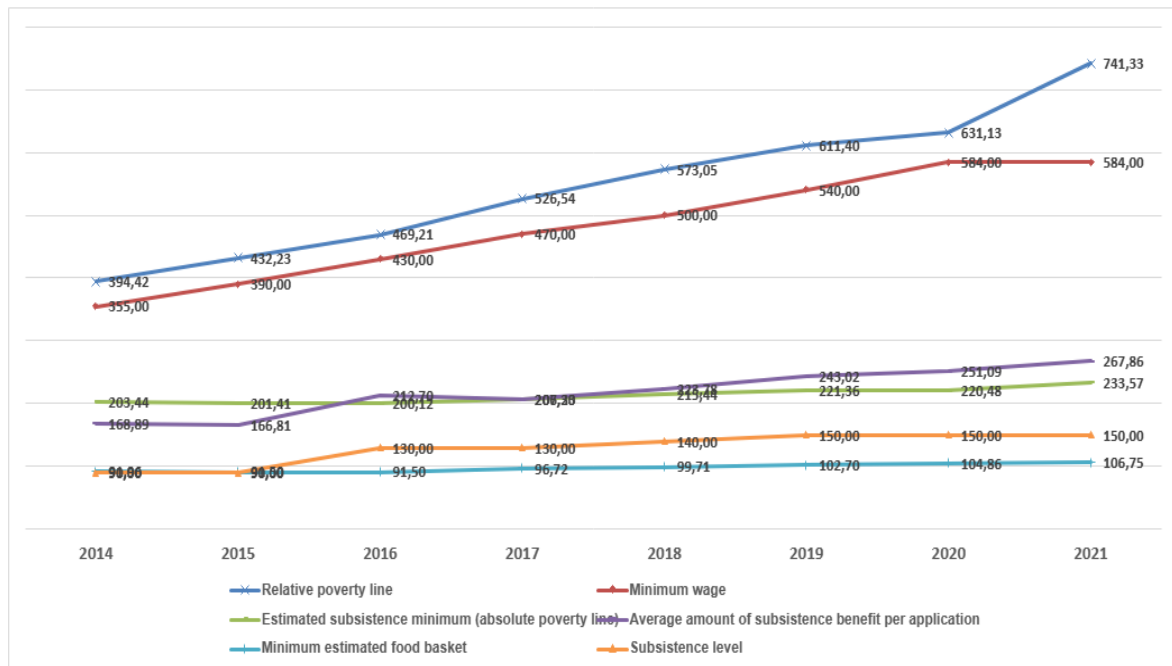
The at-risk-of-poverty and social exclusion rate in Estonia was quite stable, with slight fluctuations, during the FEAD implementation period. After a decline of 0.8 pp by 2020 it experienced a resurgence in 2022 to 25.2%. As no cash benefits were provided within FEAD activities, an impact on poverty reduction could not

be expected. Absolute poverty faced by the target group was revealed by the payment of subsistence benefit. Any additional assistance, including reducing costs on food and other necessities, helped this target group with everyday coping.

For an overview of living standards and incomes of the food aid target group, Figure A. 75 below compares the average subsistence benefit level, relative and absolute poverty (subsistence minimum), and the subsistence level with the price of the minimum estimated food basket. The minimum wage is added to illustrate income standard. Average subsistence benefit (including housing costs) slightly exceeded the absolute poverty line from 2018, whereas before 2018, the subsistence benefit remained under the absolute poverty line.

In 2014 and 2015, the subsistence level was equal to the minimum food basket although the former should also cover other costs of everyday consumption, except for housing. Since 2016 the subsistence level has exceeded the minimum food basket. The amount left to spend on clothes and footwear, household items, transport, communication and leisure activities remained between EUR 34 and EUR 45 per month. According to the calculation methodology of the subsistence minimum, costs of products excluding food and housing were between EUR 35 and EUR 36 per month (Statistics Estonia, LE 27: estimated subsistence minimum per 30 days for one-person household by Indicator and year). Considering the subsistence level, the food aid recipients could theoretically cover their essential costs from 2016 onwards but not in 2014-2015.

Figure A. 75 – Subsistence level exceeded minimum food basket from 2016: poverty indicators, subsistence benefit, subsistence level and minimum food basket



Source: Statistics Estonia, Ministry of Social Affairs.

Although it is clear that the food aid recipients had to operate within an extremely tight budget, the impact of food aid is rather difficult to measure, partly due to alterations in the measurement of deprivation in 2019. Since 2019, the deprivation data is not comparable to earlier periods as the components describing deprivation were changed. The food deprivation component, however, remained the same.

It can be argued that food aid contributed to a reduction in material deprivation, including food deprivation. Between 2014–2018, the material deprivation rate decreased by 5.2 pp, from 15.7% to 9.9%, although it remained higher among people aged 65+, at 11.6%. The severe material deprivation rate fell from 6.2% to 3.8% during the same period, again being slightly higher for older people.

In 2019, 8.7% of children could not afford regular paid leisure time activities, compared with 7.6% of people aged 18-64 and 10.1% of older people. Meeting friends or relatives once a month was not affordable for 4.8% of children and 5.6% of older people. Buying new clothes was least affordable for older people – 11.2% could not afford new clothes. Compared to 2022, the level of deprivation fell in all above-mentioned categories for all groups, indicating that social inclusion had improved within 3 years. (Statistics Estonia, LES 290: household members with deprivation: year, deprivation component, sex and age group).

Data on food deprivation shows that in 2022 5.5% of the population could not afford fish, meat or food with a similar protein level. This type of deprivation was highest among older people, at 7.6 %, and lowest among children under 18, at 3.9%. The share of food deprived women was slightly higher than that of men (women 5.6% and men 5.2%). Compared to 2014, food deprivation decreased by 2.1 pp in all age groups, by 2.1 pp among children and by 2.0 pp among older people. (Statistics Estonia, LES 291: household members with deprivation: year, deprivation component, sex and age group).

Food aid is a benefit-in-kind that enabled the most deprived to save money on food and use this money on other items. Thus, it can be argued that FEAD activities improved the quality of living of end recipients. Overall, giving food aid resulted in reduction of food deprivation and severe material deprivation thus contributing to alleviating the worst forms of poverty and social exclusion.

Reach of target groups

There is no state food aid delivery system apart from FEAD activities in Estonia. Food aid as a social assistance measure was used by local governments before FEAD programme, although not on a unitary and regular basis. Through the FEAD programme, food aid became a regular additional policy measure for local governments.

‘There has always [already before FEAD] been a food package on the table of the social worker. With FEAD food delivery became regular.’⁴⁴⁶

Before 2014, food aid was funded by the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF). However, the open calls did not enable food aid provision on a uniform basis across the country. With FEAD food aid delivery being centralised by the state, the differences in terms of food aid delivery between regions were reduced and the activities enabled food delivery in the more remote corners of the country.

The overall goal was simple and straightforward - to deliver all purchased food to target groups. As estimated by the Estonian Food Bank, the initial delivery accounted for around 90% and follow-up delivery enabled other groups that were initially excluded to receive food aid. As presented in an interview with representatives of the Ministry of Social Affairs, 99% of purchased food reached the target group.

The introduction of donated food in 2019 improved the delivery of food aid in many aspects: frequency, food variety and recipients’ self-esteem, and brought into attention the concept of food waste and food saving. Healthy food choices and dietary habits were also highlighted, although the quality issues relating to donated food cannot be overseen.

Food aid delivery in Estonia can be assessed as effective in the sense that it reached the target groups well. The table below shows that during 2015-2021 the number of end recipients of purchased food exceeded the number of subsistence benefit recipients. In 2020, more people received donated food compared to purchased food and the number of donated food recipients considerably exceeded the subsistence benefit recipients. Thus, the expansion of the target group through the addition of donated food was successful. 2022 stood out exceptionally with high number of subsistence benefit receivers and high number of people with migrant background, namely Ukrainians fleeing Russian military aggression, who received both purchased and donated food aid (see Figure A. 76).

Table A. 69 – Food aid was successful in reaching the target groups: the number of food aid recipients and subsistence benefit recipients 2015-2022

Subsistence line (EUR)	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Number of subsistence benefit receivers	26 301	27 990	25 360	20 931	18 719	18 295	16 508	48 731
Number of purchased food recipients	26 608	29 516	28 453	22 920	20 872	20 560	24 113	18 532**

⁴⁴⁶ Interview with a representative of Tallinn Welfare and Health Department.

Subsistence line (EUR)	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Number of donated food recipients					2 890*	31 365	23 759	20 791**
Number of homeless who received purchased food aid	1 022	1 000	1 000	1 000	1 000	1 000	1 000	1 000

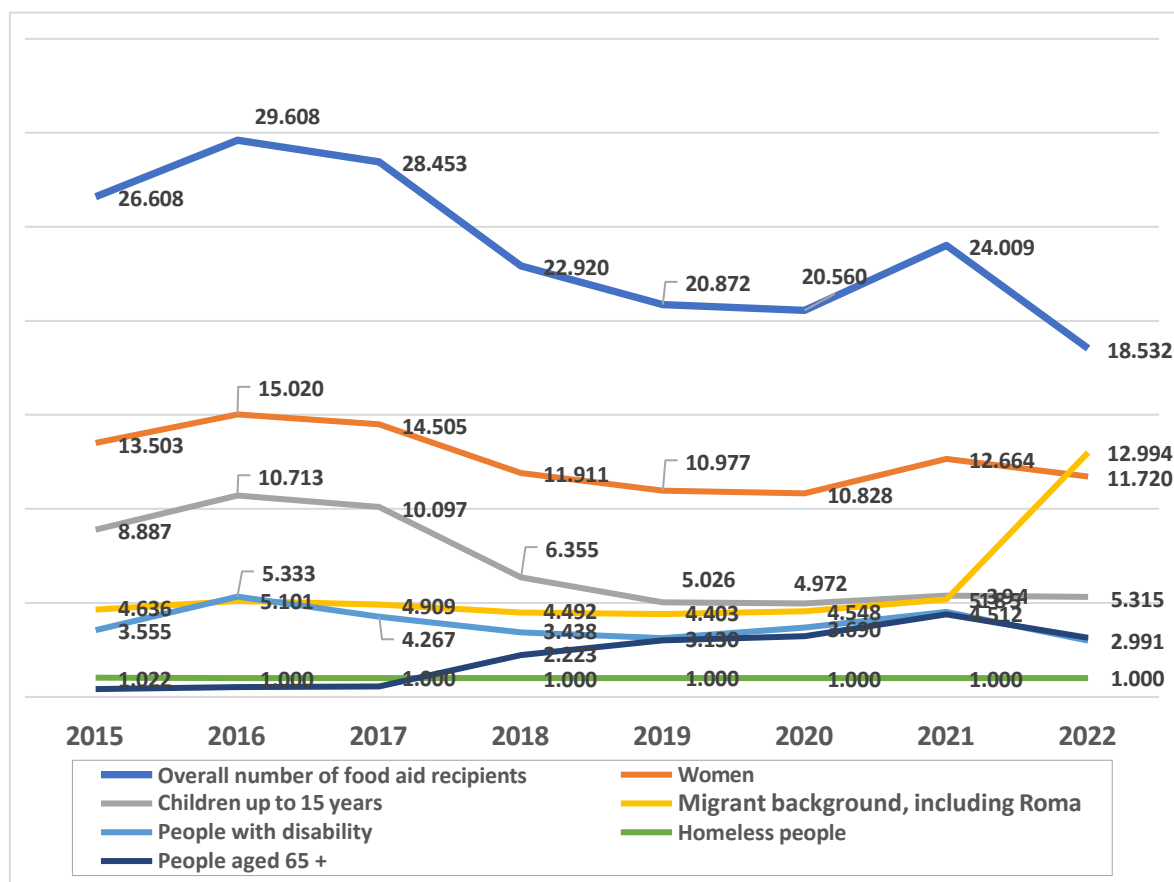
Source: Ministry of Social Affairs. * Figure represents data from October to December. ** Figure represents data of the 1st quarter as the 2022 Q2-Q4 food aid actions were financed solemnly from EE state budget.

Eligibility for purchased food was based purely on financial assessment, with no specific target groups in mind. In the first years, a very small proportion of people aged 65+ qualified for purchased food. People with disabilities formed 13% to 18% of food aid recipients, which exceeds the share of people with disabilities in the population (9.3%). The share of people with a migrant background, including Roma, increased during the period from 17% to 22% in 2020 and upsurged in 2022 with the arrival of Ukrainians fleeing Russian military aggression. The number and share of child recipients decreased considerably from 2018, partly due to a rise in family benefits that lifted families with children above the subsistence level.

In 2017, the target groups were extended to encompass people who did not qualify for subsistence benefit but qualified for other social assistance types of benefits offered by local governments. This resulted in a significant increase in older people among purchased food aid recipients, probably on the account of medication support provided by local governments that gave them right to receive food aid. The share of people aged 65+ which was initially 1.5% of the recipients of food aid, rose to 17% by 2022.

Food aid reached the homeless population rather well. Between 2015-2022, 1 000 food parcels were delivered to homeless people yearly (1 022 in 2015). In 2015, 89% of homeless people who used the service of shelters received purchased food. By 2022, the share decreased to 74% as the number of homeless people increased but the number of parcels delivered remained constant.

Figure A. 76 – Number of purchased food aid recipients decreased between 2016 and 2020 as fewer people received subsistence benefit



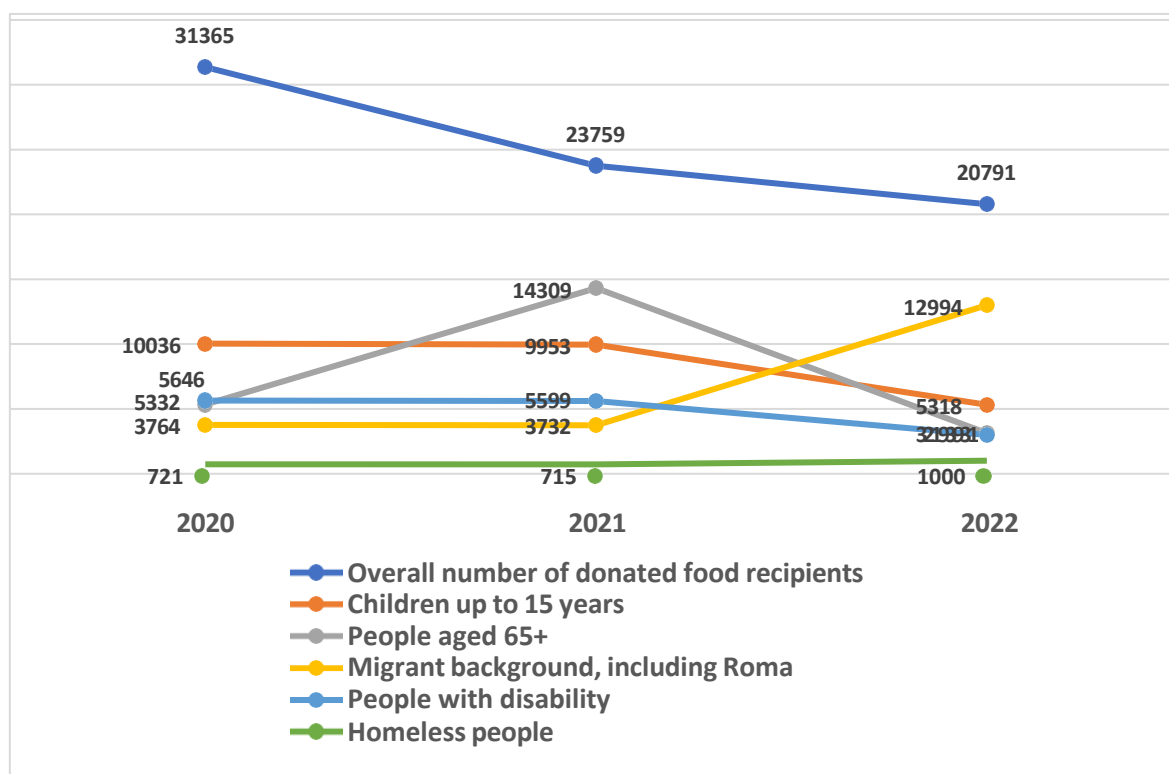
Source: Ministry of Social Affairs. 2022 figure represents data of the 1st quarter as the 2022 Q2-Q4 food aid actions were financed solemnly from EE state budget.

Donated food reached 31 365 recipients in 2020 of whom one-third were children, 46% women, 17% people aged 65+, 8% people with disabilities, and 12% people with a migrant or marginalised background. In 2021 donated food reached 23 759 recipients. The share of older people increased significantly in 2021, whereas the share of children and people with migrant background remained the same (data of the Ministry of Social Affairs). In the first quarter of 2022, more than half of donated food recipients represented people with migrant background, including Ukrainians fleeing Russian military aggression.

In the period 2014 to 2022, FEAD distributed a total of 4 493 tons of food aid including 329 681 food packages, reaching 196 910 persons. Of these, 29% (56 759) were children at risk of poverty, 9% (17 339) were above 65 years of age, 23% (46 268) were migrants, participants with a foreign background or minorities, and 16% (30 916) were people with disabilities.⁴⁴⁷

⁴⁴⁷ SFC2014 Database, AIR 2022 data

Figure A. 77 – The recipients of donated food aid in 2022 were mainly of migrant background



Source: Ministry of Social Affairs. 2022 figure represents data of the 1st quarter as the 2022 Q2-Q4 food aid actions were financed solemnly from EE state budget.

Feedback from end recipients of food aid indicated that the purchased food parcel was assessed as necessary, and 76% of respondents found that food aid had improved their lives (Ministry of Social Affairs 2019).

As a Tartu food bank representative pointed out, food aid was given at the moment when a person was most vulnerable. A high take-up rate, reaching 90-100% in some regions, reflects the demand for food aid, which contributed to everyday coping with life and fighting deprivation.

The frequency of delivery of donated food varied from weekly to monthly, depending on the municipality.⁴⁴⁸ Thus, it can be assumed that there are geographical disparities in accessing donated food aid.

The experts interviewed assessed that some target groups who might have needed food aid remained excluded from FEAD activities. Firstly, purchased food eligibility rules excluded people whose incomes were slightly above the subsistence level. Secondly, the fact that there are people who do not turn to local government for aid may hinder efforts to reach deprived people. As pointed out by a local food bank, older women do not often ask for help and are determined to self-manage their situation. This occurs in bigger cities with more anonymity and less community interaction. Homeless people who do not visit shelters were outside the reach of programme activities. Furthermore, people with poor health who are not able to contact local government or pick up a food parcel due to health conditions need special attention in terms of targeting. Strengthening the community's role in finding people who do not turn to local governments themselves would help to reach those deprived people who remain hidden.

Adjustments to FEAD to address new challenges

The FEAD programme was not adjusted due to COVID-19 or the energy crises, although the latter increased the number of end recipients considerably. CRII, CRII+ and CARE programmes were not used in FEAD activities in Estonia.

In 2017, the programme was adjusted to expand the target group for purchased food. With falling unemployment, the number of subsistence benefit recipients decreased annually. Thus, the eligibility conditions for food aid were eased. The recipients of income-tested benefits or benefits covering certain costs by local governments were included in the food aid programme. During 2015-2017, a needs-based family benefit was paid to families with children whose income met the income test. With the expansion of the target

⁴⁴⁸ Based on interviews with representatives of local governments.

group, the recipients of needs-based family benefit were also considered as eligible for food aid. This benefit was ceased by the end of 2017 due to low take-up rates and incorporated into subsistence benefit. Thereby, the scale applied to children when calculating subsistence line is higher (1.2) from 2018 onwards. Due to the broadening of the target group, food aid improved its reach to older people.

When 2020 was hit with COVID-19 pandemic, the FEAD programme was not adjusted. The local food banks and local governments had to reorganise their work operations to meet the restrictions on social gatherings. Visiting older people was not allowed and families were no longer able to help their elderly relatives. Home delivery of food parcels was guaranteed to vulnerable groups, and in some regions (i.e., island of Saaremaa) to all recipients. According to the Estonian Food Bank, adjustments to work operations were effective - food delivery was never postponed or late to end recipients as a result of COVID-19.

The COVID-19 crisis forced the food banks to reorganise their work, including applying isolation rules and providing more home delivery. The increased costs due to COVID-19 were not reimbursed to the food banks, which had to operate within the limit of a flat rate cost of 5%.

The energy crisis increased the number of subsistence benefit recipients significantly and consequently those benefiting from food aid. However, the FEAD programme remained unadjusted. REACT-EU funds of EUR 4.5 million were used to pay for donated food and to cope with the increased number of recipients. In spring 2022, Ukrainians fleeing Russian military aggression, having residence permits and thus right to claim subsistence benefit, were included among the recipients of food aid.

Under the new programming period 2021-2027, food vouchers were piloted in two counties (Harjumaa and Raplammaa) from spring 2023. This brought about changes in overall work processes and the actors involved in purchased food delivery. Instead of the Estonian Food Bank, the supermarket chain RIMI became a partner for local governments in distributing quarterly purchased food aid in form of vouchers. Food vouchers of the value of EUR 30 per household member per quarter replaced the quarterly purchased food package. Quarterly vouchers could be used to buy food and basic hygiene items, with the exception of alcohol, lotto, tobacco products and gift cards. From October 2023, food vouchers have been used nationwide.

Horizontal principles of FEAD

The parties involved in FEAD activities argued that the horizontal principles of FEAD, including reducing food waste, respecting the dignity of the most deprived persons and preventing discrimination, were well met.

The concept of saved food brought attention to food waste, attempting to reduce it in the supermarkets. Saved food contributes directly to the goal of reducing wasted food and that can be considered as a significant achievement of the programme.

The dignity of the most deprived persons is hard to measure. Donated food delivery can give end recipients slightly more choice when compared to purchased food parcels, however, the choice was enabled only in places where people picked up the parcels themselves. According to social workers interviewed, food aid was not seen as negative or humiliating. Using food vouchers under the new programming period 2021-2022 adds dignity to deprived persons as their choices, preferences and special needs are met.

Preventing discrimination was achieved by applying the strict criterion of income testing as a pre-condition of receiving purchased food aid. No specific socio-economic group had an advantage in reaching food aid. As children have a higher rating in the subsistence benefit calculation, it can be argued that families with children had better access to food aid compared to other groups. People with special needs had their food aid delivered to their home.

In addition to saving food, an attempt was made to attain well-balanced food options. For that purpose, experts from the Health Development Institution were consulted when assembling purchased food parcels. As much as the pre-conditions of long-lasting and transportable foodstuffs were enabled, healthy choices were preferred, i.e. dark chocolate instead of milk chocolate, buckwheat instead of pasta, etc. Obviously, not all recipients were happy with some of the contents, such as canned meat, that the parcels contained.

FEAD activities were not expected to have an impact on gender equality (Ministry of Social Affairs 2015 a). The income test was applied to all groups in a similar manner. There were slightly more women among subsistence benefit recipients than men. Of all food aid recipients, the share of men and women was equal for purchased food. For donated food, the share of women was 46%.

Success and failure factors

The main success factor of FEAD activities was a good reach of the target group. The partner organisation evaluated that the aid reached the target group well and most recipients came to pick up the parcels. Targeting and direct support facilitated by electronic data use were seen as the factors leading to effectiveness in delivering purchased food to target groups. The pre-determined target groups and the data available on recipients from the STAR information system made the process effective. Informing clients was the key to effective food delivery. However, contacting end recipients was an additional task and this proved to be a challenge for local governments. Despite this challenge, people eligible for food aid were generally knowledgeable about it. The parcels that were not picked up were offered to the next month's subsistence benefit recipients or people assessed by local government to be in need of aid. During the COVID-19 pandemic, local food banks and local governments effectively responded by offering home delivery to groups in need.

While the initial framework proved to be effective, its lack of flexibility resulted in the exclusion of individuals who were not eligible for subsistence benefits, thus preventing them from receiving food aid. However, within a few years, the eligibility conditions were amended to incorporate more discretion. Nevertheless, people with low incomes who did not qualify for subsistence benefit and received no income-tested benefits provided by municipality, may have missed out on food aid.

The inclusion of donated food in 2019 added flexibility and expanded the target group. The local food banks, attuned to the needs of the target groups, were ready to react swiftly to this change, in cooperation with local governments. Of note is that in smaller municipalities social workers have more direct contact with beneficiaries and the community may play a bigger role in noticing people in need, whereas in bigger municipalities deprived people may remain unseen and anonymous.

Giving more discretion power to local governments and linking access to food aid to additional social support offered on the local level on the one hand increased the diversity of end recipients. On the other hand, it might create discrepancies in access to food aid between local governments. The costs on social protection and social inclusion vary between municipalities. Regions with higher unemployment or higher share of older population have less resources available to offer additional means-tested benefits or other type of support to local people. Furthermore, the National Audit Office (2023) raised concerns regarding discrepancies in granting subsistence benefit that hinders equal access to food aid.

The unintended result of FEAD activities relates to gaining a stronger sense of community when food parcels were delivered to end recipients by neighbours or other community members. For Ukrainians fleeing Russian military aggression who became volunteers in a local food bank, this may have helped them to integrate into society.⁴⁴⁹

As evaluated by the Estonian Food Bank, the distinct operational and delivery processes for purchased and donated food hindered the overall efficiency of FEAD activities. While there is an approximate 50% overlap of the recipients of these two separate measures, the eligibility assessment and delivery of purchased and donated food followed a different logic. Furthermore, the data on individual recipients of both types of food aid lacks compatibility.

According to the representative of the Ministry of Social Affairs, the information gathering for recipients of donated food was conducted manually. From September 2023, local governments were mandated to enter data on both types of food aid recipients into the STAR information system, enabling a better overview of individual recipients across both types of food aid in the future.

Overall cost-effectiveness of FEAD operations

The overall budget allocated to FEAD in Estonia was EUR 12 549 099, of which EUR 8 049 099 was allocated to purchased food and EUR 4 500 000 to donated food (Ministry of Social Affairs 2015, c). The budget of EUR 12.5 million was used effectively, with 4 353 tonnes of food delivered to end recipients. EUR 0.3 was allocated per kg of food⁴⁵⁰. Compared to the EU-27 average of EUR 0.8, Estonia performed effectively in food delivery, being amongst the most efficient countries.

The centralised system with a rigid budget promoted cost-effectiveness. The purchased food budget was divided between the Ministry of Social Affairs for purchasing food and transportation of it to storage (EUR 7 699 425) and the Estonian Food Bank for storing and delivery (EUR 379 674)⁴⁵¹. Thus, approximately 95%

⁴⁴⁹ Based on interviews with local governments representatives.

⁴⁵⁰ During the research and drafting period data in 2023 was not available.

⁴⁵¹ The conditions of purchasing and delivery of food aid to the most deprived people. Programme Budget. Ministry of Social Affairs, 2015.

of the purchased food budget was allocated to food (including transport) and 5% to storage and delivery. On the one hand, operating with a flat rate budget for purchased food added to the efficiency of the programme. On the other hand, it did not respond to the changed circumstances brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which more home deliveries took place.

‘Five per cent was meant for our organisation and we had to manage with it.’⁴⁵²

Although effectiveness was achieved due to the flat rate cost of the partner organisation, the rate of 5 % of purchased food aid budget did not cover the actual storage and delivery costs, as argued both by the Ministry of Social Affairs and partner organisation. The rigid budget forced the local food banks to optimise their operations and minimise administrative tasks. For donated food, the partner organisation received a fixed price per kg of donated food delivered from the FEAD budget. This additional funding enabled the Estonian Food Bank to proceed with its activities.

Using social benefits and services data from the STAR made it possible to find and contact end recipients of purchased food easily and swiftly without further assessment of eligibility. The lists of purchased food aid recipients were passed from Social Insurance Board, an implementation institution of Ministry of Social Affairs, to local food banks and local governments, whose task was to inform end recipients. As pointed out by the representatives of the Ministry of Social Affairs this intervention logic made the implementation of purchased food uniform across the whole country, in addition to being efficient and cost-effective.

Despite challenges in informing end recipients by local governments, the recipients were well informed about food aid delivery times and places due to effective cooperation of local governments and the partner organisation. Due to this efficient cooperation, 96% of food was delivered during the main delivery period and the rest of the parcels were delivered during additional delivery times, according to the Ministry of Social Affairs.

Effectiveness was also achieved by the local food banks being based on volunteers’ activities. It was estimated that about 90% of the FEAD activities were carried out by volunteers, which enabled expenditure on employees to be kept down.

Overall, the effectiveness was achieved due to optimal work processes, limited budget, and reliance on volunteer work. As income level was the criterion for receiving food aid and the eligibility criteria were identical for all target groups, no groups can be identified for whom the activities were most effective.

From October 2023, purchased food aid was replaced by food vouchers under the new programming period 2021-2027 as a new ESF+ measure⁴⁵³. According to the social workers, a voucher adds to the simplicity of administration as vouchers are sent by post, although the practices of delivery of vouchers in municipalities vary, and there is no need to pre-inform people about food delivery. On the other hand, fewer products might be available to end recipient as prices in the supermarket are higher than for food purchased through a procurement procedure. The supermarket where the voucher can be used may not be nearby and end recipients may face barriers in accessing the supermarket due to distance or lack of transport. To overcome this problem, orders can be made in an e-shop as argued by the Ministry of Social Affairs. That however requires access to the internet and digital skills and in practice, online purchases have been very few and rare.

Nevertheless, there are positive sides of using vouchers under the new programming period 2021-2027. Food vouchers give more choice and flexibility to the end recipients and also offer more dignity. Compared to a food parcel, a voucher is better suited to people with special dietary needs. Basic hygiene items can be bought using the voucher, whereas food parcels contained no such products. As argued by a social worker, food aid gave a limited range of products, did not cover all products needed for preparing a proper meal and did not consider the specific needs of a family – there was no baby food, for instance, in parcels. The social worker explained that to overcome this, the municipality she represented additionally offered people in deprivation food vouchers that could be consumed in a local supermarket, financed by the municipality. Another social worker noted that purchased food parcels containing similar foodstuffs over time, could have remained unconsumed. Finally, end recipients are pleased with vouchers due to the fact that they offer a broader array of options, as argued by specialists in local governments.

Purchasing large quantities of food has proved to be cost-effective. The choice is between purchasing and delivering cheap but unvaried food parcels versus giving people food vouchers that offer more choice and require less administrative burden. For families, it also comes down to the question of storing several big food parcels at home versus using vouchers in a supermarket on actual need basis.

⁴⁵² Interview with partner organisation representative

⁴⁵³ The separate FEAD programme was discontinued, and the FEAD was added under the ESF+ programme.

Administrative burden of monitoring and reporting requirements

The Ministry of Social Affairs found that FEAD resulted in a substantial administrative burden compared to the volume of the programme.

For the Ministry of Social Affairs, managing FEAD required the workload of approximately one person full-time. The most time-consuming tasks reported were procurement procedures and audit requirements. The procurement procedures for tenders were conducted twice during the period. Further, the partner organisation was found by procurement. The eligibility rules did not prove to be a burden as these were clearly set. Communication activities were also a task assigned to the Ministry of Social Affairs. The Ministry presented annual implementation reports once a year to the State Shared Service Centre and to the European Commission via an electronic portal.

For the partner organisation, the most time-consuming administrative task was reporting. When purchased food reporting was automated for partner organisation, donated food reporting by different target groups requiring manual input was seen as burdensome. Furthermore, Estonian Food Bank as well as local government representatives considered reporting on paper to be unnecessary, believing that there should be better solutions replacing paper. For purchased food, an administrative burden occurred during delivery times i.e., twice to four times a year.

Partner organisation whose focus is not on administrative tasks assessed the share of administrative burden as too large. For the central organisation – Estonian Food Bank - reporting and checking the lists of end recipients took one person working half time. In a local food bank, administrative tasks were assessed to take half the time of one employee during delivery times.

Local municipalities assessed the administrative workload associated with food aid to be rather large. For purchased food, the main burden was linked to checking the contacts and informing end recipients about delivery times. For donated food, most of the burden occurred when creating lists of end recipients to be forwarded to the food bank or entering the relevant data to STAR system. According to a local government which delivered donated food parcels, (instead of local food banks) home delivery took a whole working day of a social worker each week.

For donated food, monitoring reports were provided to the Ministry of Social Affairs by local governments three times a year with detailed data on end recipients.

According to the estimations of social workers the implementation of food vouchers starting from October 2023 under the new programming period 2021-2027 on the one hand reduces administrative activities for local governments, on the other hand implementing the new system gives rise to queries from recipients that local governments have to deal with.

The use of flat rate expenditures for purchased food parcels delivery simplified the process but was seen as insufficient and thus unfair to the partner organisation. Home delivery had to fit into the flat rate amount and the need for home delivery increased considerably during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Simplification measures

The cost-effectiveness in the case of purchased food was achieved by buying large quantities of food with a procurement procedure delivered to pre-defined target groups a few times a year. However, this efficiency came at the expense of the variety of foodstuffs, lack of fresh food, storage costs and inflexible eligibility rules.

The use of food vouchers (instead of purchasing parcels) starting from October 2023 under the new programming period 2021-2027 eases the administrative burden considerably. Using vouchers leaves the Estonian Food Bank as a partner organisation out of the voucher scheme. Tasks such as the purchasing, assembly and storage of food parcels are omitted from the process as well as informing the end recipients about delivery times of food parcels. Personalised vouchers enable many administrative steps to be left out and add to the efficiency of the operations. On the other hand, a lesser amount of food could be obtained for the same amount of money as prices in supermarkets are higher than for food purchased through the procurement procedure.

Donated food offers more flexibility in terms of food variety and target group composition. In the case of donated food, cost-effectiveness is achieved due to the saved food initiative. Gathering donations and saving food requires more labour and therefore, volunteers are used.

As the main contributor to the administrative burden was reporting, it is expected that more efficiency can be achieved by unifying and digitalising reporting. The simplification suggestions provided by those interviewed mainly revolved around the reporting and data collection processes related to recipients.

A preferred solution to reduce the burden of reporting would be the creation of a central portal where data on end recipients can be entered in a unified manner, enabling central data analyses. Therefore, the possibility of using programme resources on IT -development are welcome. The use of food vouchers also needs information system development for smoother implementation and innovation.

Coherence of FEAD with other interventions

Overall, FEAD actions were aligned with the national policy of reducing severe material deprivation, as they supported the most financially deprived, who received additional support with food aid. This helped them to cope with daily life and eased their situation of deprivation.

National policies for poverty alleviation are presented in the Social Welfare Development Plan 2016-2023, with the general objectives being a high employment rate, the reduction of poverty and social inequalities, gender equality and better social inclusion. FEAD activities described under the subsection 'People's economic coping is improved due to adequate and sustainable social protection' contribute to the development plan by reducing food deprivation, supporting the target group's ability to cope with daily life and social inclusion. The objective of the subsection is measured by absolute poverty and severe material deprivation indicators.

The Population Health Development Plan envisions, among other objectives, the provision of a healthy and secure environment for children and the promotion of a healthy lifestyle.

The Development Plan for Children and Families 2012–2020 advanced the development of social services for families' independent coping.

It can be argued that offering families and individuals food aid is coherent with the objectives of the above-mentioned development plans. On the other hand, food aid is a passive measure and requires activating steps to bring about a major change in the lives of deprived people.

In granting subsistence benefits, social workers are also deemed to assess the need for social services. Additionally, the target group is informed about active labour market services and welfare services that are supported by the European Social Fund. FEAD operations were designed as a supportive measure on the assumption that the target group of low-income people is simultaneously the target group for other ESF programme activities. FEAD activities were connected to employment measures such as 'Promoting access to labour market and preventing labour market dropout' and open calls aiming to promote access to, as well as improve the variety and quality of, social services (Ministry of Social Affairs 2015, a). Information on these programmes was conveyed to the target group through the partner organisation. In 2017, approximately 30% of adult food aid recipients participated in one or another ESF programme (Ministry of Social Affairs 2015, a). Data from Statistics Estonia indicated that 39% of end recipients of purchased food participated in other EU funded measures, to the greatest extent in the active labour market services offered nationally by the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund. Furthermore, 115 persons received addiction rehabilitation (Ministry of Social Affairs 2020).

As noted by the Ministry of Social Affairs, the food aid programme remained a separate measure, therefore not much integration with local level policies was experienced, nor were new target groups brought into the spotlight. No attempts from local governments to systematically improve social inclusion for the most deprived was determined. However, the local governments held a different view on this. With complex needs assessment that at times included home visits, food aid recipients were granted other necessary services. Although there were no straightforward actions to promote social inclusion, people's needs were considered and addressed. Examples given included offering home services for older people, giving one-off financial help and offering compensation for children's leisure activities. Some food aid recipients became volunteers for the food bank and their social inclusion was enhanced by their volunteer actions.

FEAD activities are in concordance with school lunch subsidies provided nationally by the state. Estonia offers free school meals for all students in grades 1-12 (Toim, Melesk, Kendler and Kletter 2023). The meals are largely covered by state school lunch subsidies, with the remaining cost financed by local authorities (Global Child Nutrition Foundation 2021). Some schools also provide a free-of-charge breakfast and snacks for those in need. Access to free school meals is free for all children and access does not vary between schools.

In childcare and pre-school institutions for children aged 18 months to the compulsory school age of 7 years, a small fee is paid by parents to cover tuition and meal costs. (Toim, Melesk, et al 2023). The fees covered by parents may not exceed 20% of the national minimum wage (Pre-School Childcare Institutions Act). There are reductions or exemptions from the above-mentioned fees available for low-income families (Lang et al 2021).

A soup kitchen, opened daily and provided by local governments, is the last resort in cases of food deprivation for adults, including older people. In bigger cities, soup kitchen services are operated by NGOs. The Salvation Army has assessed that in Tallinn 6 000 persons use the service monthly. Also, the food bank offers warm meals from donated food. In Tartu, people denied food aid due to irresponsible behaviour (mainly alcohol use) were directed to soup kitchens for warm meals.

3.2. Is FEAD still relevant?

Relevance to target groups

According to surveys and the take-up rate, FEAD operations responded well in terms of reaching out to target groups on a large scale. Purchased food provided necessary food items for an extended time although it was not adjusted to people's preferences or dietary needs. Donated food added more foodstuffs and food vouchers implemented from October 2023 under the new programming period 2021-2027 provide a larger variety of food, responding to individual preferences. Donated food and food vouchers under the new programming period 2021-2027 enable basic hygiene items to be added to the packages which are well received by the end recipients.

It was assessed⁴⁵⁴ that FEAD operations responded well to the needs of target groups who had to operate with very limited budgets. The take-up rates of food aid were high, which confirms the accurate targeting and the need for food aid. Follow-up delivery to people who were assessed as in need expanded the target group and enabled faster reactions by local governments to any unexpected circumstances of persons or households.

People who do not turn to local governments for social services by themselves were beyond the reach of FEAD. The FEAD rules following the overall logic of being eligible for the subsistence benefit or other benefits offered by local governments left out people who were extremely marginalised or lacked information or the legal basis for residing in the country. People experiencing temporary unexpected hardships were included in the target group from 2019 on with the donated food programme. The greater discretionary power, however, could lead to bigger discrepancies in access to food aid in different regions.

The food aid target group was increased by Ukrainians fleeing Russian military aggression following Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine in early 2022. Temporary protection gave a right to legal residence and social protection, including granting subsistence benefits and food aid. The condition for receiving the subsistence benefit was registration with a local government, which meant that people residing in state-provided accommodation like hotels, or a ship received catering and were not included among the recipients of food aid.

While the COVID-19 pandemic and the energy crisis did not create any new target groups, the full-scale Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine changed the scene. By 2023, it was assessed by local food bank in Tartu city, that 50% of their food aid recipients were Ukrainians fleeing Russian military aggression.

As assessed by social workers in local governments, food aid continues to be relevant for people in need. Although compared to 2014 the subsistence level has increased and enables the purchase of more products than merely food, the inflation resulting from the energy crisis has again reduced the coping abilities of many people and increased the demand for food aid.

Relevance of FEAD now and in the future

FEAD design in the future could place emphasis on efficiency and cost-effectiveness, or on a more individual approach – the choices, preferences and individual dietary needs of people. In the former case, the purchased food model is appropriate, in the latter case, food vouchers would be more appropriate. In May 2024, the voucher scheme introduced under the new programming period 2021 – 2027 was honoured with the Innovation in Politics Award⁴⁵⁵ for promoting social cohesion as an innovative solution providing people with the freedom and dignity to select the food and necessities they wish to buy. The products most frequently purchased using the voucher included milk products, bread, meat, grains and vegetables.

Donated food that addresses food waste continues to be of importance as it combines the needs of the deprived with more global issues to which food waste contributes.

In 2022, the number of purchased food aid recipients was doubled compared to 2021, reaching 50 560 persons⁴⁵⁶. This can be attributed to high inflation rate that increased the number of subsistence benefit

⁴⁵⁴ Interviews with Ministry of Social Affairs and partner organisation representatives.

⁴⁵⁵ The Innovation in Politics Awards 2024.

⁴⁵⁶ Data of Ministry of Social Affairs, encompassing the Estonian food aid in 2022, including funding from state budget.

recipients as well as arrival of Ukrainians fleeing Russian military aggression. In 2023, the number of food aid recipients was still close to 50 000 persons.

The consequences of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine had a strong impact on food aid delivery. The number of people in need increased drastically in 2022 with the arrival of approximately 50 000 Ukrainians fleeing Russian military aggression within a short time who were given temporary protection and thus received the right to social assistance on the same basis as legal residents. According to the Estonian Food Bank, there were around 13 000 food aid recipients before and 34 000 after the full-scale Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine started. It can therefore be concluded that international conflicts can increase the number of food aid recipients within a very short time.

Migration creates a variety of cultures and religions among aid recipients. Translation services are needed, and food parcels have to be adjusted to respond to the eating habits and limitations of different cultures.

A rise in unemployment also increases the potential number of food aid receivers, as households with unemployed persons hold the biggest share among subsistence benefit recipients.

According to the Estonian Food Bank, the energy crisis had a significant impact on the availability of donated food. As the crisis made supermarkets optimise their own processes also the tendency of clients to buy more discounted products increased, thus, there was less waste and less saved food available. Moreover, the energy crisis increased the operational costs of local food banks due to increased home deliveries, which was not anticipated in the programme.

Saving food and reducing food waste are on the public agenda and this issue receives significant public attention. The Estonian Food Bank has estimated that more than 80 tonnes of food are wasted in Estonia yearly. Although less saved food is currently available in the supermarkets, the volumes of wasted food are still large and efforts to save food should be continued.

As a global trend, climate change is expected to have an impact on food aid as it can lead to a rise in prices of primary goods and leave less choice in food selection.

3.3. Did FEAD make a difference and to whom?

EU added value

FEAD activities gave local governments an additional and convenient instrument to support deprived people. Purchased food aid ensured a common approach nationally on how to support people of low incomes and those who suffer from deprivation.

The Estonian Food Bank as an organisation underwent a huge development in implementing FEAD and receiving funding from FEAD. According to the Estonian Food Bank, the food aid service was brought to a new level. Local food banks amended and made their work operations more efficient.

FEAD activities boosted the cooperation and partnership between the local food banks and local governments. The cooperation, which was earlier of a random nature, became regular and official.

FEAD did not expand social services or find new target groups in the margins of society but still supported the development of food aid delivery as a social policy instrument.

Reducing food costs instead of direct cash benefits was well-suited for persons or families with low budgeting skills or addictions. On the other hand, the approach can be patronising and gave little room for empowerment and taking responsibility. However, reducing the costs of food for low-income people still gave them more room to manoeuvre with their tight budget and spent on other necessary items.

Research on subsistence benefit recipients has indicated that people and families with low incomes need help and financial counselling to effectively manage their modest budgets and prevent over-indebtedness (Melesk, et al 2022). So far there is no such service available in Estonia as debt counselling is only for indebted persons (Melesk, et al 2022). Deprived people deserve a complex needs assessment, food aid being one instrument in the toolbox of fighting deprivation. As assessed by the Ministry of Social Affairs, food aid has remained a separate measure, and the take-up of other services is still a responsibility of the person him/herself. An attempt to create new ways of thinking and synergies between food aid and social services was intended and to some extent achieved. The local governments were more optimistic about the synergies and complexity of the approach compared to the Ministry of Social Affairs, offering a complex assessment of needs and additional services where appropriate.

Cooperation between the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Agriculture (currently the Ministry of Climate) to whose remit food waste falls, improved due to FEAD activities.

Not much innovation was embedded in purchased food delivery, although donated food was seen as more innovative. Donated food that attempts to bring food to deprived persons with the smallest green footprint can be regarded as an innovative approach for fighting food waste. Innovation is further achieved by switching to electronic food vouchers, which has been already carried out under the new programming period 2021-2027.

About 90% of homeless people received food aid in 2015 and later this share decreased, so there is some room for improvement for this extremely marginalised group. The low share of older people among the end recipients of food aid should receive more attention, considering their material deprivation rates.

The provision of food aid had a noticeable impact on subsistence benefit recipients, particularly during 2014-2015, when the subsistence level was almost equal to the minimum food basket. From 2019, donated food that complemented purchased food affected families with children and older people in a positive way, offering timely help and leading to complex needs assessments of deprived people. The need for food aid increased again with the energy crisis, when inflation left little resources for daily consumption, and this was also accompanied by the arrival of Ukrainians fleeing Russian military aggression.

Visibility

There has been some public communication about FEAD activities, including in the media. To make FEAD activities visible to end recipients, all information sheets delivered with food parcels had an EU emblem together with the mentioning of the EU support. The food voucher launch in fall 2023 under the new programming period 2021-2027 was communicated widely and received widespread media attention at national and local newspapers including mentioning the EU support.

The Estonian Food Bank estimated that around half of the recipients were aware of where the support came from. The local social workers revealed that end recipients were rather well aware of the EU support regarding purchased food aid as this was also called European Union food aid in local governments and among end recipients. Donated food was seen as a local initiative and was therefore much less associated with EU funding. Even local governments' representatives were not aware of the EU financing mechanism of donated food delivery.

4. Good practices

Food waste and food loss are an important part of the debate on climate change and the sustainable use of natural resources. According to a study of food waste and food loss (Piirsalu, et al 2022), it was estimated that approximately 167 000 tonnes of food waste are generated each year in Estonia of which 12% occurs in the retail sector - about 58 tonnes of food remain unsold annually. About 12% of unsold food is donated to food banks or similar organisations. The monetary value of food loss in food trade sector was estimated to be EUR 34.6 million yearly.

The impacts of food waste are receiving increasing attention in Estonia, and internationally (Piirsalu, et al 2022). Donated food programme contributes to a decrease in food waste and a reduction in the number of people in deprivation.

Donated food was included in FEAD activities in Estonia from 2019 in addition to purchased food with a more flexible approach to reach target groups and equally important, significantly more frequent food delivery. Donated food consisting of donations and saved food can be regarded as a success story of FEAD activities. Although food banks were rescuing surplus food from supermarkets prior to including donated food in FEAD activities, the distribution was at that time limited to larger cities only.

Donated food is provided by donations from private persons, companies, and supermarkets. The Estonian Food Bank gathers donations from persons on the spot, or with donations machines present in 14 supermarkets all over the country. The machines are suitable for donating long-lasting products that do not require storage at a special temperature. Saved food is gathered from supermarkets in the late hours of the day, containing food with an imminent expiry date. Saved food is delivered within a short period, or deep frozen, if appropriate. Food parcels containing at least three different product types are made up by the local food bank.

Donated food is provided to people who turn to the local government social welfare department and have passed a needs assessment. To receive purchased food aid, persons or households have to meet income criteria set by the local government. However, there is enough flexibility to determine the need for donated food. The donated food granting process, compared to purchased food, is in better concordance with the social welfare provision logic. As needs assessment is part of social workers' everyday routines, this facilitates finding people who need food aid and vice versa, food aid applicants might receive other social services additionally.

Information on food aid is spread by word of mouth in smaller communities, people turn to local governments to receive food aid and are simultaneously assessed for need in respect of other social services.

Donated food also reaches people who do not meet the criteria of receiving subsistence benefits, although with increased prices have a hard time making ends meet. This is particularly true for elderly individuals who are single or couples with low pensions, as well as those facing additional expenses related to medications that are difficult to cover.

Donated food delivery takes place weekly to monthly, depending on the municipality. In bigger cities and nearby local municipalities, there is more donated food available, and therefore the delivery takes place more frequently and the food choice is more varied than in smaller places. According to the Estonian Food Bank, donated food enables recipients to have a say and a choice about the foodstuffs – they can choose between different types of bread, milk products etc. However, in some regions, the contents of food parcels are one-sided and offer no choice.

With food aid, most relief was brought to families with children and older people. Social workers found that food aid assumes that people have cooking skills as purchased food products as well as some frozen donated food products have to be cooked for consumption. They believed that people who can cook were better adjusted to using food aid. Recipients not used to cook sometimes expressed disappointment with the contents of food parcels, and some products were even denied to children.

Donated food and saved food promote green thinking and reduction of food waste. With the energy crisis there is less donated and saved food available. The recommendations by the authors of the survey described above included promoting food donation and supporting food banks as well as increasing motivation to donate food. In 2022, the Food Bank saved 4.3 tonnes of food according to its estimation. There is room to expand food savings to catering establishments, with approximately 11 000 tonnes of wasted food per year (Piirsalu, et al 2022) and provide more fresh food through a faster delivery process.

The donated food programme has improved the cooperation between local governments' social welfare departments and local food banks and brought it to a new level in terms of being able to react quickly and in a timely manner to deprived people's needs, fight food deprivation and to help them to cope better with daily life.

The future of food aid in Estonia rests on food vouchers instead of purchased food parcels, with the former offering choice, being able to respond better to recipient needs and requiring less administrative burden. A combination of food vouchers and donated food enables deprived people to face less food deprivation and a better life.

5. Conclusions and lessons learned

FEAD support in Estonia took the form of food support solely. The implementation of the system was effective and swift. Most deprived people were identified as financially deprived who applied for the minimum income – subsistence benefit in the country. Subsistence benefit is an income-tested aid for individuals and households whose income per household member, including social security benefits, remains below the subsistence level after deducting housing costs.

In sum, FEAD activities in Estonia effectively supported people with very low incomes and in need of social assistance reducing their expenditure on food. The budget of EUR 8 million for purchased food was used effectively, with 4 353 tonnes of purchased food delivered to end recipients. EUR 0.3 was allocated per kg of food. Compared to the EU-27 average of EUR 0.8, Estonia performed effectively in food delivery, being among the most efficient countries. Donated food with a budget of EUR 4.5 million enabled swifter reaction to personal and household circumstances and emerging economic hardships.

The target group of FEAD activities was composed of financially deprived persons and households who had the right to receive the minimum income benefit, forming 2% of the overall population in 2015 and 1.2% in 2020. In 2017, the target group was expanded with other types of social assistance recipients, although financial deprivation remained the basis of assessing the right to food aid.

Two measures - purchased food and donated food - were meant to complement each other. Purchased food parcels were offered initially twice, later four times a year and under the new programming period 2021-2027 are replaced by quarterly food vouchers as from October 2023, which offers many advantages. Donated food was introduced in 2019 to deliver food in smaller quantities and more frequently, with the delivered parcels also serving a food waste-reducing purpose. Initially, the target group of the purchased food aid was narrowly defined, leaving out people whose income was slightly above the subsistence level. However, the conditions were eased and people receiving other types of benefits from local governments were included. That

amendment considerably increased the share of people aged 65+ among recipients. For donated food, the eligibility conditions were still based on financial assessment, but social workers could use more discretion to determine a need for food aid.

When focusing on end recipients, the food aid delivered made a positive impact on their everyday coping with life – less expenditure on food enabled allocating money to other necessities. Food aid from FEAD helped to compensate for the inadequacy of subsistence benefits, especially in the early years of the programme. Limited impact on social inclusion was both anticipated and observed. New target groups, mainly older people, were found with expanding the target group, giving more discretionary power to local governments. Food aid became a policy measure for local governments to swiftly react to the needs of deprived people and also reach deprived people who would otherwise not turn to them. However, the increase in the discretionary power could result in unequal access to food aid and food vouchers under a new programme of individuals residing in various regions. Access to reliable data on the total number of individual recipients of different types of food aid requires enhancement.

The overall social welfare approach foresees that people are responsible for their welfare and should be active in seeking support. Although in bigger cities deprived people can remain unnoticed, the social workers interviewed estimated that all people who needed food aid also received it.

Food aid does not have a direct impact on poverty rates, but it relieves material and food deprivation and helps the most deprived to cope with everyday life. For the future, a choice has been made to switch from the efficiency of purchased food delivery to the flexibility of food vouchers. Donated food that contributes to a decrease in food waste and a reduction of the number of people in deprivation is seen as an important policy measure responding to the difficulties brought by the energy and refugee crises today and possibly their impacts in the future.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Methodology

Research methodology of the Estonian case study consisted of desk research and interviews with organisations involved in FEAD activities: Ministry of Social Affairs, partner organisations.

Explanatory notes to the conditions of FEAD as well as evaluations were used, complemented by statistics on subsistence benefit recipients and number of homeless people by the Ministry of Social Affairs.

In September 2023, four interviews were conducted with the representatives of the Ministry of Social Affairs and the partner organisations: the Estonian Food Bank, Tartu Food Bank and Tallinn Social and Health Department. Interviews took place in Teams, by phone and face-to-face on the premises of the Estonian Food Bank.

Additionally, four interviews were conducted with local government social workers whose tasks include assessing the need for food aid, granting food aid and in one case also delivering food aid. The interviewees were from one bigger city, two medium-sized cities and a small-sized local government without a local food bank. All interviews were conducted in Teams in October 2023. The local governments were geographically diverse but represented good social work practices and showed interest in offering food aid. For instance, there were no examples where complex need assessment of deprived people was not conducted, or initiatives to find people in need were not present. However, the level of social work practices can vary across the country. Also, the small number of interviews does not reveal both the variety of social work practices and availability of donated food across the country, although the differences were visible already from five interviews (including Tallinn).

The number of food aid recipients dealt with by interviewed social workers varied considerably - from ten to hundreds.

The retrospective evaluation period 2014-2020 entailed some limitations, including poor accessibility to initial project documents; persons involved with the project had changed positions and organisations and thereby people interviewed often lacked retrospective knowledge. Many social workers and food bank representatives had no experience with pre-FEAD times and therefore it was hard for them to assess the effects that FEAD brought about.

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Table A. 70 – Input indicators for the implementation of FEAD in Estonia in 2014-2022

Indicator	Total amount of eligible public expenditure approved in the documents setting out the conditions for support of operations (EUR)	Total amount of eligible public expenditure incurred by beneficiaries and paid in implementing operations (EUR)	Total amount of eligible public expenditure declared to the Commission (EUR)	Implementation rate (expenditure declared as share of allocated budget)
2014-2022	76 218 928.00	76 213 374.00	76 213 374.00	100%

Source: SFC database 2014-2020. *Please note that there was no expenditure in 2014.

Table A. 71 – FEAD output indicators in Estonia in 2015-2022, per year

Output indicators on food support distributed	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Quantity of fruits and vegetables (tonnes)	33.00	44.00	16.00	55.00	53.00	70.00	85.00	356.00
Quantity of meat, eggs, fish, seafood (tonnes)	217.00	172.00	189.00	139.00	125.00	134.00	132.00	1,108.00
Quantity of flour, bread, potatoes, rice and other starchy products (tonnes)	224.00	289.00	197.00	150.00	145.00	185.00	155.00	1,345.00
Quantity of sugar (tonnes)	84.00	104.00	97.00	90.00	32.00	56.00	19.00	482.00
Quantity of milk products (tonnes)	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	41.00	0.00	41.00
Quantity of fats, oil (tonnes)	82.00	101.00	95.00	0.00	33.00	45.00	63.00	419.00
Quantity of convenience food, other foodstuff (not	68.00	80.00	80.00	88.00	90.00	120.00	76.00	602.00

Output indicators on food support distributed	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
falling in above-mentioned categories) (tonnes)								

Source: SFC database 2014-2020.

*Please note that there was no expenditure in 2014.

Table A. 72 – Number of FEAD participants in Estonia in 2015-2022

Result indicators on food support distributed	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Total number of persons receiving food support	26,608	29,516	28,453	22,920	20,872	26,000	24,009	18,532
Number of children aged 15 years or below	8,887	10,713	10,097	6,355	5,026	4,972	5,394	5,315
Number of persons aged 65 years or above	412	525	551	2,223	2,889	3,219	4,387	3,133
Number of women	13,503	15,020	14,505	11,991	10,977	10,828	12,664	11,720
Number of migrants, participants with a foreign background, minorities (including marginalised communities such as the Roma)	4,636	5,101	4,909	4,492	4,403	4,548	5,185	12,994

Result indicators on food support distributed	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Number of persons with disabilities	3,555	5,333	4,267	3,438	3,130	3,690	4,512	2,991
Number of homeless	1,022	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000

Source: SFC database 2014-2020.

*Please note that there was no expenditure in 2014.

6. Context and background

This section describes the **evolution of certain socio-economic indicators** that are relevant to the FEAD over the evaluation reference period (2013-2022). It starts with an evaluation of the general socio-economic context before delving into the situation of specific FEAD target groups. Table A. 73 below presents Eurostat data on socio-economic indicators in France between 2014 and 2020. It is worth noting that there was a break in series in 2022 for EU-SILC data (i.e., microdata on income, poverty, social exclusion and living conditions). Indeed, in 2022, data started to be collected for the French overseas departments Guadeloupe, Martinique, Guyane and la Réunion. However, this break in series does not apply to employment data, which stems from a different dataset.

In terms of **housing and employment indicators**, Eurostat data shows that the employment rate has steadily increased over the reference period. Indeed, it grew from 64,5% in 2014 to 66,1% in 2018 and 68,1% in 2022. Thus, it seems that the employment rate did not decline with the COVID-19 pandemic that broke out in March 2020. This is in contrast to the rates of long-term unemployment and households with very low work intensity, which seems to have been impacted by the pandemic. Whilst there has been a decrease in long-term unemployment from 2014 (3,1%) to 2020 (1,9%), this trend was reversed in 2021 (2,3%). There has also been a sharp increase in the share of households with very low work intensity as this share grew from 7,1% in 2019 to 9,7% in 2020, culminating at 10,7% in 2021. The share of people declaring that housing is a cost overburden was particularly low in 2018 (4,7%), but it grew after the pandemic until reaching 6,5% in 2022. The French national audit office (Cour des comptes) estimated that 300 000 people were homeless in 2019, which means that homelessness increased by 10% on average each year since 2012⁴⁵⁷. Between 2014 and 2020, the rate of in-work risk of poverty varied between 6,5% (2016) and 5,3% (2020). The greatest variation happened between 2021 (3,3%) and 2022 (5,4%). This sudden change has also been reported in interviews with partner organisations, which alerted to the growing number of ‘working poor’ among FEAD beneficiaries. The cost-of-living crisis has been described as an ongoing challenge that reinforces FEAD’s relevance.

When looking at **financial indicators of poverty for individuals**, it becomes clear that the sharpest increases also took place between 2020 and 2022. However, as explained above, it should be noted that 2022 data includes data collected in four overseas regions, which partly explains the sudden increase in 2022. The share of people unable to afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish (or vegetarian equivalent) every second day rose from 6,3% in 2021 to 9,5% in 2022. There is a similar trend for the share of people who cannot afford to replace worn-out clothes (8,8% in 2021 vs 9,4% in 2022) and the share of people who cannot afford to get together with friends or family (relatives) for a drink or meal at least once a month (4,9% in 2021 vs 6,0% in 2022). Unsurprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have impacted the share of self-reported unmet needs for medical care. Indeed, whilst the share of self-reported unmet needs was progressively decreasing from 2,8% in 2014 to 1,2% in 2019, it rose to 2,7% in 2020. In 2022, it reached 3,2%, which is the highest it has been during the evaluation reference period. In sum, many indicators point to a worsening of poverty in the last three years. This has also been reported in interviews with partner organisations.

This recent increase in poverty is reflected in the **overall evolution of the at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) rate**. Over the reference period, the share of people who are AROPE was at its lowest in 2017 (17,8%) and at its highest in 2022 (21%). There has been a steady increase of AROPE people since 2018, which is illustrated in Figure A. 78 **Figure A. 78 – Evolution of poverty indicators (2015-2022)**. Nonetheless, 2021 was the year for which the contribution of social transfers (other than pensions) to poverty was the greatest with a 46,4% reduction of AROPE that year. Eurostat data shows that the severe material deprivation rate (SMD) was 0% in 2021 and 2022, but this is likely due to missing data. Over the reference period, the severe material and social deprivation rate (SMSD) was at its highest in 2022 (7,5%).

Similarly, the **share of AROPE children** was at its highest in 2022 (27,7%) and at its lowest in 2021 (22,1%). Between 2016 and 2021, this share remained between 23,2 and 23,8%. The SMSD for children was also the highest in 2022 (10,7%), whereas it was relatively low in 2021 (6,9%). Figure A. 79 shows the evolution of specific poverty indicators for children between 2015 and 2022. This increase in poverty indicators for children has been echoed in the interviews with partner organisations. Indeed, partner organisations have

⁴⁵⁷ Cour des comptes (2021). L’hébergement et le logement des personnes sans domicile pendant la crise sanitaire du printemps 2020. Rapport public annuel 2021 – Tome I.

reported a recent increase in the number of children and single parents (especially single mothers) seeking food assistance.

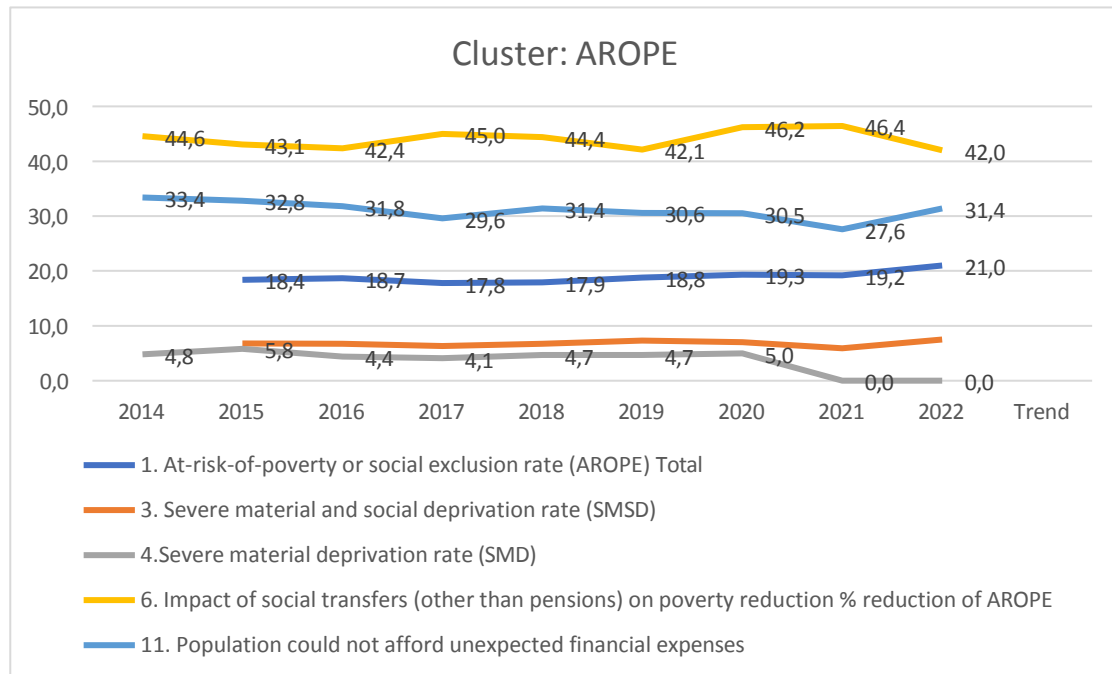
Besides reflecting a worsening of poverty in metropolitan France, the high values reported in 2022 are due to the aforementioned break in series in EU-SILC data collection. Because 2022 data includes additional data collected in Guadeloupe, Martinique, Guyane and la Réunion, values are higher than for previous years. This is accentuated by the fact that these overseas departments are characterised by high levels of poverty. In Guyane for example, the rate of AROPE people was almost 50% in 2022, which is significantly higher than the French average (21%)⁴⁵⁸.

Table A. 73 – Socio-economic context in France

France	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Trend
1. At-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate (AROPE) Total			18,4	18,7	17,8	17,9	18,8	19,3	19,2	21,0
2. AROPE Children			22,3	23,5	23,2	23,8	23,6	23,4	22,1	27,7
3. Severe material and social deprivation rate (SMSD)			6,8	6,7	6,3	6,7	7,3	7,0	5,9	7,5
4. Severe material deprivation rate (SMD)		4,8	5,8	4,4	4,1	4,7	4,7	5,0	0,0	0,0
5. Inability to afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish (or vegetable)		7,2	7,3	7,4	7,1	6,9	7,5	7,2	6,3	9,5
6. Impact of social transfers (other than pensions) on poverty		44,6	43,1	42,4	45,0	44,4	42,1	46,2	46,4	42,0
7. Housing cost overburden		5,1	5,7	5,2	5,0	4,7	5,5	5,6		6,5
8. Self-reported unmet need for medical care % of population		2,8	1,2	1,3	1,0	1,2	1,2	2,7	2,8	3,2
9. Households with very low work intensity			8,3	7,8	7,7	7,5	7,1	9,7	10,7	9,9
11. Population in the EU could not afford unexpected financial expenses		33,4	32,8	31,8	29,6	31,4	30,6	30,5	27,6	31,4
13. Share of total population having neither a bath, nor a shower		0,5	0,5	0,6	0,6	0,6	0,5	0,5		
14. No indoor flushing		0,5	0,5	0,6	0,6	0,6	0,5	0,5		
17. Persons who cannot afford a telephone		0,1	0,1	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0			
18. Persons who cannot afford to replace worn-out clothes		9,1	8,5	8,4	7,9	8,3	9,0	8,6	8,8	9,4
20. Persons who cannot afford to get-together with friends or family		6,2	5,3	5,5	5,1	5,3	6,1	6,8	4,9	6,0
21. Persons who cannot afford internet connection for person		2,7	2,1	2,1	1,8	1,8	1,9	1,9	1,5	1,7
22. In-work risk of poverty		6,3	6,0	6,5	5,8	5,9	5,5	5,3	3,3	5,4
23. Long-term unemployment		3,1	3,1	3,1	2,9	2,5	2,3	1,9	2,3	2,0
25. Employment rate		64,5	64,7	65,0	65,6	66,1	66,4	66,1	67,2	68,1
26. Children (aged less than 18) living in households with very low work intensity			7,5	7,6	7,5	7,5	7,1	9,7	11,4	10,7
27. At-risk-of-poverty rate for children			18,7	19,1	19,0	19,9	18,2	19,4	18,5	21,7
28. Severe material and social deprivation rate (SMSD) for children			8,5	9,1	8,6	8,5	9,2	9,3	6,9	10,3

Source: Eurostat.

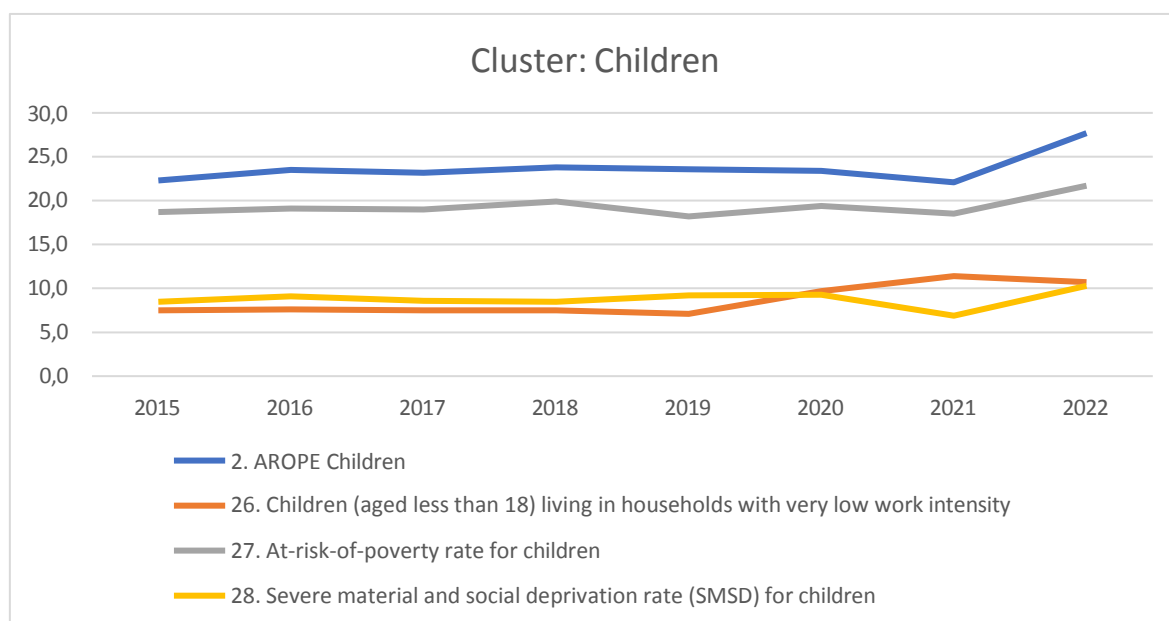
Figure A. 78 – Evolution of poverty indicators (2015-2022)



Source: Eurostat.

⁴⁵⁸ Eurostat SILC data
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_peps11n/default/table?lang=en&category=livcon.ilc.ilc_pe.ilc_peps

Figure A. 79 – Evolution of poverty indicators for children (2015-2022)



Source: Eurostat.

7. Reconstructing the intervention logic

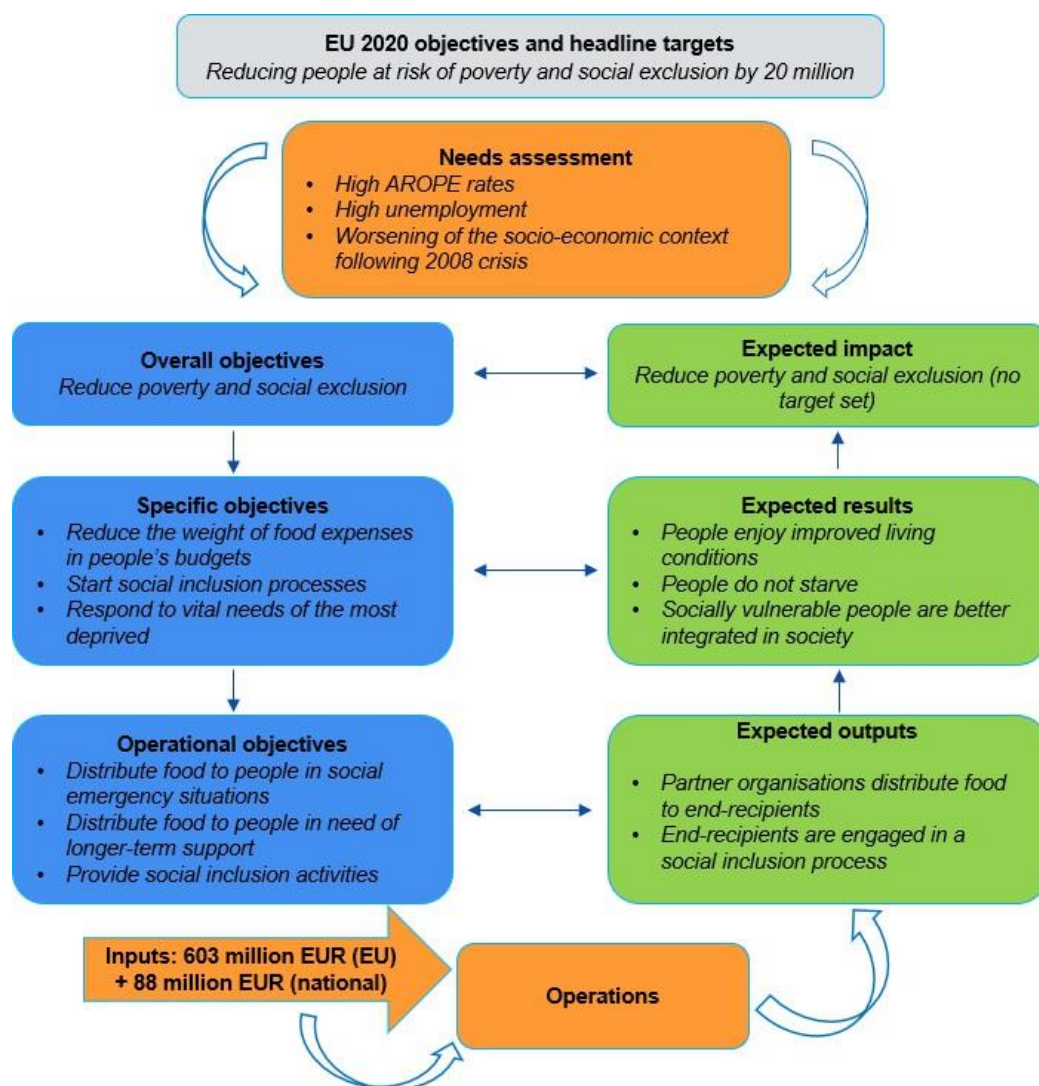
This section provides an **overview of the FEAD in France**. An ex-ante evaluation of the OP was commissioned by the Managing Authority to quality-assure the OP's preparation and critically assess the OP's coherence, relevance, and implementation plan. The FEAD OP was largely designed in the continuity of the European Union Food Distribution programme for the Most Deprived Persons (MDP), called "Programme européen d'aide aux plus démunis" (PEAD) in French⁴⁵⁹. The stakeholders interviewed were aware of the continuity between the MDP and the FEAD. This is also reported in a study of the FEAD published in 2018⁴⁶⁰.

The **FEAD OP is based on a 'diagnosis' of poverty and food insecurity in France**, which informed the intervention logic presented in Figure A. 80 below. However, the FEAD OP does not set quantitative targets in terms of end recipients or volume of food to be distributed. Annual Implementation Reports present yearly data for relevant indicators including the volume of food distributed and the number of people reached, but these are reported *a posteriori*. No forecasts could be found in strategic and operational documents.

⁴⁵⁹ Balny, Philippe & Pascal, Alexandre & Martin de Lagarde, Olivier (2014). Evaluation ex ante du Programme opérationnel 2014-2020 pour la mise en œuvre du Fonds européen d'aide aux plus démunis (FEAD). The MDP was the EU's food aid programme preceding the FEAD. It ran from 1987 to 2013 and fell under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

⁴⁶⁰ Alberghini, A. & Brunet, F. & Lehrmann, J. & Petit, C. (2018).

Figure A. 80 – Intervention logic of FEAD in France



Source: adapted from FEAD mid-term evaluation, inputs including EU-REACT.

7.1. National policy framework

Since the MDP's introduction in 1987, **EU support has played a crucial role in France's policy for food aid and poverty alleviation**. Currently, FEAD is a pillar of France's food aid strategy. The Fund has a 'structuring' role in France's policy framework on food aid and social inclusion because of its stability and leverage effect⁴⁶¹. Indeed, unlike other supply sources (e.g., donations and food collections), FEAD resources are guaranteed over time. The budget is set for seven years, which means that partner organisations can plan their operations over the long term. FEAD has been described as a 'pillar' of partner organisations' supply strategy. Moreover, it has a leverage effect on the wider food aid ecosystem in France. Indeed, due to its stability, FEAD attracts complementary initiatives and supply sources.

This sub-section provides an **overview of France's food aid and poverty alleviation strategy** and explains FEAD's role in it.

Although it already existed in practice, **food aid was given an official, legal definition** in 2010⁴⁶². According to law number 2010-874 of the 27 July 2010 on the modernisation of agriculture and fishing, 'the purpose of

⁴⁶¹ Interviews with representatives of FEAD partner organisations in France conducted between July and September 2023.

⁴⁶² Balny, Philippe & Pascal, Alexandre & Martin de Lagarde, Olivier (2014). Evaluation ex ante du Programme opérationnel 2014-2020 pour la mise en œuvre du Fonds européen d'aide aux plus démunis (FEAD).

food aid is to provide food to the most deprived people. This aid is provided both by the European Union and by the State or any other legal entity. Food aid is **part of a wider policy on food**, notably implemented through the National Food Programme (*Programme national pour alimentation*, PNA). In 2009, stakeholders of the food aid ecosystem decided to sign a ‘Charter for developing food aid’, which is structured around promoting donations, improving the delivery of food aid, and financing social inclusion initiatives⁴⁶³. Thus, even before the FEAD was introduced, food aid and social inclusion were linked in France’s national policy framework. This was confirmed by representatives of partner organisations. French partner organisations all defend a certain vision of food aid as a gateway towards social inclusion. For them, food aid and social inclusion are intrinsically linked. This vision was described by a partner organisation representative as the ‘*French approach to food aid*’ (*aide alimentaire à la française*).

By the time the FEAD was introduced, **France had adopted several food aid, health and social inclusion strategies**, including the Programme National Nutrition Santé (2001), the Programme alimentation-insertion (2003), the Programme National d’Aide Alimentaire (2004), Programme National pour l’Alimentation (2010) and the Programme de lutte contre le gaspillage (2013). In 2014, FEAD replaced the MDP and the Crédits Nationaux destinés aux Epicerie Sociales (CNES) replaced the Programme national d’aide alimentaire. The FEAD’s Managing Authority explains that **France has a two-pronged strategy for food aid, which relies on both national and EU funds**. Both the FEAD and national programmes for food aid and social inclusion are managed by the Ministry of Labour, Health and Solidarities. Collaboration within the Ministry ensures that there is no duplication between the FEAD and national programmes⁴⁶⁴. FEAD and national food aid initiatives serve different purposes. Whilst FEAD ensures the supply of basic products, national initiatives allow to complement the food basket of end-recipients with fresh products. The Garot law (2016), which aims to tackle food waste, has contributed to increasing donations from supermarkets and has thus had the effect of complementing FEAD with fresh products⁴⁶⁵. National funds are available under the Crédits Nationaux destinés aux Epicerie Sociales (CNES) to support social solidarity stores (‘épicerie sociales et solidaires’), which are not covered by the FEAD as they offer products at a discounted price⁴⁶⁶. **FEAD and national initiatives are thus complementary**.

Stakeholders interviewed agree on the **FEAD’s importance in France’s national policy on social inclusion and poverty alleviation**. FEAD has been described by partner organisations as a ‘basis’ that is complemented by other supply sources. FEAD represents between 25-30% of the food distributed in France every year and is the main source of public funding for food aid. In 2021, for example, FEAD represented approximately 28,15% of the food distributed by partner organisations⁴⁶⁷. As explained above, at the level of partner organisations, FEAD has a structuring impact because it allows these organisations to build a solid seven-year sourcing strategy and provides financial stability.

7.2. Objectives and target groups

The **FEAD’s general objective is to contribute to reducing poverty by alleviating the burden of food in people’s budget and starting social inclusion processes**⁴⁶⁸. Through food aid, **FEAD’s specific objectives are to 1) provide foodstuff to the most deprived people, 2) respond to people’s vital needs and 3) initiate social inclusion support**⁴⁶⁹.

Although some national stakeholders wanted to cover other material needs during the OP’s elaboration, France chose to **focus OP I specifically on food aid**⁴⁷⁰. This is because the Managing Authority wished the FEAD to remain in the continuity of the MDP, which was historically linked to the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP)⁴⁷¹.

The **OP was modified four times to respond to the crisis experienced in recent years**⁴⁷². In 2021, the Managing Authority amended the OP to incorporate REACT-EU funds. In 2020 and 2022, the OP was also

⁴⁶³ Balny, P. et al. (2014)

⁴⁶⁴ Interview with representatives of the FEAD Managing Authority in France conducted in September 2023.

⁴⁶⁵ Interview with experts on food aid in France conducted in December 2023.

⁴⁶⁶ Alberghini, A. et al (2018).

⁴⁶⁷ DGCS (2022). Programme opérationnel français FEAD (PO1) 2014-2020. Rapport d’exécution 2021.

⁴⁶⁸ Balny, Philippe & Pascal, Alexandre & Martin de Lagarde, Olivier (2014). Evaluation ex ante du Programme opérationnel 2014-2020 pour la mise en œuvre du Fonds européen d’aide aux plus démunis (FEAD).

⁴⁶⁹ Balny, P. et al. (2014)

⁴⁷⁰ Balny, P. et al. (2014)

⁴⁷¹ Balny, P. et al. (2014)

⁴⁷² Based on the screening tool provided by the research team

modified to make use of the flexibilities under CRII and CRII+, as well as the use of e-vouchers in FEAD's implementation.

France is characterised by a bottom-up approach in selecting **target groups**. The OP distinguishes between **two types of eligible groups: people in emergency situations and people seeking longer-term support**⁴⁷³. For people in emergency situations (e.g., homeless people), the OP guarantees 'unconditional reception'⁴⁷⁴. No proof of eligibility is required in this case. For provision of support beyond emergency situations, partner organisations are free to choose their own eligibility criteria⁴⁷⁵. Nonetheless, the OP gives guidelines on the process to determine eligibility for long-term support⁴⁷⁶. This process has four steps: 1) Tailored reception of potential beneficiary, often with an interview; 2) Appreciation of the support needed based on the person's socio-economic situation; 3) Decision to grant support (acceptation of request for support, volume of food distributed, pace and length of support); 4) Opening of an administrative record for follow-up and sustained support.

The OP does not define specific target groups, but states that: "**Target groups are people in social emergency situations or who are socially and financially dependent**". Due to this general definition, target groups of the FEAD in France are ultimately defined empirically.

7.3. Implemented operations and accompanying measures

In France, FEAD finances the **purchase, storage, and transportation of food and distributes** it via partner organisations to the most deprived people. Specifically, operations implemented are the following⁴⁷⁷:

- Selection of the food based on partner organisations' requests;
- Allocation of a budget to each selected partner organisation to benefit from EU support;
- Assessment of volume and quality of food needs;
- Logistics planning: selection of delivery points, volumes delivered, rhythm and schedule of deliveries;
- Initiation of procurement by the intermediary organisation FranceAgriMer (FAM);
- Selection of offers based on organoleptic, nutritional and economic criteria;
- Awarding of contracts by FAM;
- Delivery of food by suppliers to delivery points (first delivery warehouses) at dates planned;
- Storage and transport of food by partner organisations from first delivery warehouses to other warehouses and/or delivery points.

As explained in the section above, **France decided to exclude basic material assistance** from the scope of the FEAD. This is because stakeholders drafting the OP wanted to ensure continuity with the MDP and focus support on food aid only.

During the 2014-2020 programming period, **FEAD did not finance accompanying measures**⁴⁷⁸. Accompanying measures are offered by partner organisations as part of their routine operations and are financed by national or local funds. This could be explained by the fact that partner organisations already had a history of providing social inclusion support, even before the FEAD. As explained above, the French partner organisations' approach to food aid has always been to link food aid with social inclusion. Besides cooking workshops and nutrition education activities, partner organisations help beneficiaries to become aware of their legal rights ('accès au droit'), provide support with clothing and leisure activities (e.g., holidays) and social inclusion through job counselling. Accompanying measures also cover support with accommodation, school guidance, French language courses and financial inclusion (i.e., access to banking services). Accompanying measures are now financed under ESF+.

⁴⁷³ Balny, Philippe & Pascal, Alexandre & Martin de Lagarde, Olivier (2014). Evaluation ex ante du Programme opérationnel 2014-2020 pour la mise en œuvre du Fonds européen d'aide aux plus démunis (FEAD).

⁴⁷⁴ Balny, P. et al. (2014)

⁴⁷⁵ Balny, P. et al. (2014)

⁴⁷⁶ Balny, P. et al. (2014)

⁴⁷⁷ Balny, P. et al. (2014)

⁴⁷⁸ Based on the screening tool and interviews with representatives of FEAD partner organisations in France conducted between July and September 2023.

7.4. FEAD governance and delivery system⁴⁷⁹

FEAD's **Managing Authority** is the **Directorate General for Social Cohesion of the Ministry of Labour, Health and Solidarities (DGCS)**. The DGCS steers the fund's implementation. It establishes, updates, and safeguards the rules around implementation.

Concretely, the **DGCS lays the groundwork for procurements, establishes agreements, participates in the selection of organisations** that can benefit from the fund and in the **selection of food, oversees the execution and control of food procurement campaigns**, and, if necessary, **intervenes to address difficulties**, unforeseen events, or potential arbitrations.

The DGCS also monitors the budget and creates necessary tools and processes for the certification of expenses to be included in a funding request. As with other EU funds, the DGCS organises governance and collaboration with various FEAD stakeholders, ensures legal monitoring in connection with the European Commission, supervises responses to audits, and establishes an internal control and risk management system, as well as the program's evaluation and monitoring system.

The Ministry of Agriculture's Directorate General for Food (DGAL), which was formerly the Managing Authority of the MDP, still **retains some competences under the FEAD**. The DGAL collaborates with the DGCS in selecting beneficiary organisations and food. The DGAL co-drafts nutritional fact sheets for each product, which are then attached to the tender documents, and manages health crises. The Ministry of Agriculture and Food is also the supervisory ministry of FranceAgriMer, the intermediary organisation that is responsible for procuring the food.

However, in the context of FEAD, **FranceAgriMer (FAM) reports to the DGCS**. FranceAgriMer is an **intermediary organisation, but also a beneficiary organisation** in place of partner organisations to limit financial risks. Partner organisations are considered beneficiaries only for the flat-rate expenses of transportation and storage (up to 5% of the distributed food). FranceAgriMer **manages the procurement of the food to be distributed to partner organisations**. Through supporting documents and factories or warehouse visits, it controls selected suppliers and pays them. FranceAgriMer also visits partner organisations to ensure compliance with the rules for the delivery of FEAD food to end recipients. The intermediary organisation also carries out community certification checks (*contrôles de service fait*, CSF), which are the tools for certifying expenses necessary for any reimbursement requested from the European Commission.

As with the ESF and the ERDF, the **certifying authority for the FEAD is the Directorate General of Public Finances (DGFIP)**. The DGFIP guarantees the reliability of the data declared to the European Commission for payment requests and annual accounts. It checks that the certificates of services rendered (CSF) transmitted by FranceAgriMer conform to the data entered into the computer system. To ensure eligibility of declared expenses, the DGFIP implements, based on a sample of selected CSFs, in-depth risk assessments and quality checks. Once these checks are completed, the certifying authority prepares and submits reimbursement requests and 'annual accounts' to the European Commission, detailing in particular the amount of eligible expenses declared and the financial corrections applied during the past accounting period.

The **Interministerial Commission for the Coordination of Controls (CICC)** has been designated as the **audit authority**, as it already held this role for other European structural funds.

As part of the management of the FEAD, the CICC must:

- Present, at the beginning of the programming period, an audit strategy to the European Commission;
- Conduct audits to ensure the proper functioning of the management and control system of the OP;
- Carry out annual controls on operations, based on a statistical sample that meets international audit standards;
- Provide an opinion on the annual accounts produced by the management and certification authorities.

The CICC thus annually submits to the European Commission a control report and an opinion on the results of the controls and audits conducted during the previous 12-month period ending on June 30 of the relevant year.

In addition, FEAD's delivery on the ground fundamentally relies on volunteers of partner organisations. Volunteers and staff of partner organisations are thus a crucial element of FEAD governance

⁴⁷⁹ Bazin, Arnaud & Bocquet, Eric (2018). RAPPORT D'INFORMATION FAIT au nom de la commission des finances (1) sur le financement de l'aide alimentaire.

and the delivery system. Approximately 200,000 volunteers were involved in delivering food aid in France in 2018. This is valued at approximately 500 million euros.

8. Key findings on the implementation of FEAD

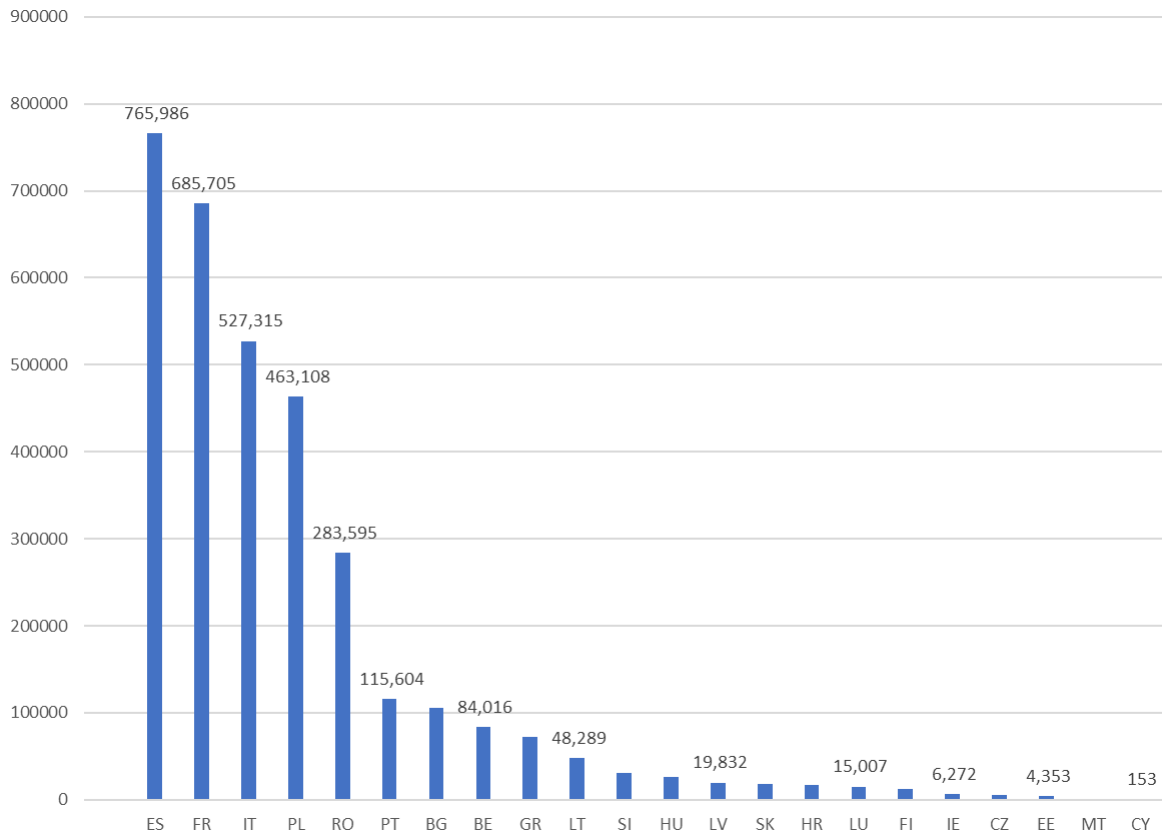
8.1. To what extent was FEAD support successful – or not – and why?

Overall achievement of FEAD objectives [*criterion: effectiveness*]

Based on the evidence stemming from desk research and interviews, it can be deemed that **FEAD general and specific objectives were achieved in France**. All five stakeholders interviewed (i.e., the four partner organisations and the intermediary body) agree that FEAD reached its qualitative targets.

According to the latest annual implementation report available, 83 575.82 tons of food were delivered to partner organisations in 2021⁴⁸⁰. Over the whole implementation period, 685 704,8 tons of food were distributed, which makes France the second country where the most food was distributed under FEAD (see Figure A. 81)⁴⁸¹. Partner organisations interviewed consider that because the food materially reached people in need, the **FEAD’s objective to ‘provide non-financial assistance to the most deprived persons by food assistance and accompanying social inclusion measures’ was well-reached**. As shown in Figure A. 81, France is the EU country with the second highest volume of **food support effectively distributed** (following Spain). The volume of food effectively distributed attests to the reach and impact of FEAD. For interviewees, the sheer fact that the food was distributed is a proof of FEAD’s effectiveness and fulfilment of objectives.

Figure A. 81 – Total quantity of food distributed in tonnes, EU-27, 2014-2022



Source: research team, based on data from the SFC2014 database.

Partner organisations argue that **FEAD contributes to alleviating poverty by reducing the share of money going to food in people’s budgets**. Indeed, food expenses are often an adjustment variable in the ongoing

⁴⁸⁰ DGCS (2022). Programme opérationnel français FEAD (PO1) 2014-2020. Rapport d’exécution 2021.

⁴⁸¹ Based on data provided by the research team

expenditures of households at risk of poverty⁴⁸². For vulnerable people, benefiting from food aid allows readjusting some of the ongoing expenses in favour of expenditure items other than food. However, this does not fundamentally change their standard of living⁴⁸³. According to a structured survey of end-recipients carried out by FORS-Recherche sociale (FORS) which is cited in the annual implementation report for 2021, “food aid partially addresses the needs of those who benefit from it. While the support ensures a food ‘subsistence level’ for some, diversifies the diet, and/or eases the financial burden for others, food insecurity persists for certain households, especially the most dependent ones”⁴⁸⁴. Thus, although stakeholders interviewed unanimously praise FEAD’s effectiveness, findings from the ground nuance this view.

Reach of target groups [*criterion: effectiveness*]

Due to the fact that **France did not define specific target groups, it is difficult to precisely assess their reach**. Thus, this section takes an empirical approach to show which groups of people have benefited from the FEAD the most. These groups of people are *de facto* FEAD target groups. Partner organisations define FEAD target groups as people in a precarious situation i.e., ‘all kinds of poor people’ (*les personnes pauvres dans leur diversité*)⁴⁸⁵.

A 2018 FEAD country fiche for France estimates that 53% of end-recipients were **women**, 35% were **children aged 15 or below**, 16% were **homeless** persons and 4% were **persons aged 65 or above**⁴⁸⁶. This distribution is echoed in qualitative data. The Restos du Coeur reported that approximately 40% of people receiving support are minors, which means that AROPE children are their main target group^{487, 488}. Women are also a prominent target group of FEAD support, as 53% of end-recipients of food aid delivered by the Restos du Coeur are women according to the latest data. Among these, single mothers are a prominent sub-category⁴⁸⁹. The Fédération Française des Banques Alimentaires (FFBA) explained that 90% of people receiving support were under the poverty threshold, and/or lived in social housing and/or were single parents⁴⁹⁰. The structured survey of end-recipients carried out by FORS shows a difference in groups reached in urban vs rural areas. In cities, end-recipients are more often families, individuals in precarious living situations, or foreigners and/or unstable administrative status.

In France, FEAD requirements are not a hindrance in reaching certain target groups. On the contrary, the way that France chose to define eligibility for **FEAD support means that FEAD is a ‘universal’ fund that does not have specific eligibility criteria**⁴⁹¹. For example, 5% of end-recipients of food aid provided by the Secours Populaire Français are homeowners⁴⁹². As per their founding documents, partner organisations provide ‘unconditional reception’ to people in social emergency situations. Consequently, FEAD implementation in France reaches all kinds of people in need. To ensure that all people needing food aid are reached, partner organisations put in place specific outreach initiatives. For example, two partner organisations have reported the use of touring trucks to find people in the most remote areas of the territory.

Adjustments to FEAD to address new challenges [*criterion: effectiveness*]

In France, the **challenges brought about by the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis have widened the scope of target groups** falling under FEAD support. In 2020, the number of people needing food aid ‘significantly increased’⁴⁹³. Between 2020 and 2021, a partner organisation representative explained that there has been a 22 percent increase in the number of recipients of food aid. Since COVID-19, partner organisations have noticed an increase in the number of young adults (e.g., university students) and ‘working poor’ seeking food aid. During the pandemic, FEAD operations were also impacted by the unavailability of most volunteers

⁴⁸² DGCS (2022). Programme opérationnel français FEAD (PO1) 2014-2020. Rapport d’exécution 2021.

⁴⁸³ DGCS (2022).

⁴⁸⁴ DGCS (2022).

⁴⁸⁵ Interviews with representatives of FEAD partner organisations in France conducted between July and September 2023.

⁴⁸⁶ DG EMPL (2018). FEAD Country fiche for France.

⁴⁸⁷ Interviews with representatives of FEAD partner organisations in France conducted between July and September 2023.

⁴⁸⁸ Les Restaurants du Coeur (2022). Rapport Annuel 2021/2022.

⁴⁸⁹ Interviews with representatives of FEAD partner organisations in France conducted between July and September 2023.

⁴⁹⁰ Interviews with representatives of FEAD partner organisations in France conducted between July and September 2023.

⁴⁹¹ This might be theoretically inaccurate, but it is how a representative of a partner organisation described it during an interview conducted in September 2023.

⁴⁹² Interviews with representatives of FEAD partner organisations in France conducted between July and September 2023.

⁴⁹³ DGCS (2021). Programme opérationnel français FEAD (PO1) 2014-2020. Rapport d'exécution 2020.

to deliver food⁴⁹⁴. To adapt to rules around social distancing, drive-through systems, and home delivery distributions have sometimes been implemented, with a greater number of products per package than in previous years⁴⁹⁵. Food aid experts interviewed have explained that the unavailability of volunteers was overcome by a stronger cooperation and pooling of resources (e.g., volunteers) of partner organisations. This cooperation ensured a flexible and pragmatic approach to food delivery.

The Restos du Coeur explained that the quality of support deteriorated because they had to **stop social inclusion activities (such as counselling) and focus on distributing food packages outdoors**. In contrast to their usual way of distributing food (whereby end recipients can freely choose their food), the Restos du Coeur had to distribute pre-selected food packages during COVID.

The Managing Authority **relaxed its guidelines to adjust to the COVID-19 pandemic**. Whilst rules around free distribution, storage and health safety conditions, and document retention have not been subject to relaxation, guidelines concerning the eligibility of individuals, support measures, European signage, material accounting, as well as the reporting of numerical data, have been subject to tolerance⁴⁹⁶.

REACT-EU funds were added to the FEAD in 2021 (104 million EUR)⁴⁹⁷. In 2020, REACT-EU funds allowed the purchase of an additional 12 types of products⁴⁹⁸. In 2021, a single ‘FEAD-REACT 2021’ procurement was launched⁴⁹⁹. REACT-EU funds have ensured the continuity of food aid from the EU in France⁵⁰⁰. During the pandemic, FEAD’s significance for food aid in France increased because other ways of gathering food (e.g., collections from supermarkets or agricultural donations) became less frequent.

In 2020, **the Managing Authority used flexibilities under the CRII to allow partner organisations to use e-vouchers or cards to distribute food indirectly to end recipients**. Between 2020 and 2021, 2,6 million EUR of the national budget was earmarked for a paper voucher scheme in Mayotte (France’s overseas territory) delivered by the French Red Cross. The General Secretariat for Regional Affairs of the Prefecture of Mayotte (SGAR) was designated as the delegated Managing Authority. However, the DGCS explained that the voucher scheme was challenging in practice. Consequently, expenses for this operation have not been claimed.

All partner organisations interviewed stood **strongly against using e-vouchers or other forms of indirect support**. They argued that e-vouchers jeopardise the universality of FEAD support because it necessitates access to digital infrastructure and excludes some target groups (e.g., people who are not registered with social services). Thus, e-vouchers would exclude some of the most deprived target groups and be counterproductive to the FEAD’s objectives. Partner organisations are also against vouchers because they do not allow for accompanying measures⁵⁰¹ i.e. with vouchers, food aid loses its social dimension.

Horizontal principles of FEAD [*criterion: effectiveness*]

In the FEAD’s delivery in France, the principle of ‘unconditional reception’ is by definition non-discriminatory. **Gender equality and discrimination** are enshrined in most partner organisations’ founding documents⁵⁰². Some partner organisations also put in place specific training (e.g., about interculturality) for volunteers delivering FEAD support⁵⁰³. The fact that most FEAD end recipients are women also demonstrates that the principle of gender equality is implemented in FEAD operations. The principle of non-discrimination and respecting the dignity of the most deprived persons applies not only to the delivery, but also to the procurement of food.

Indeed, when procuring FEAD food, FranceAgriMer ensures that the most deprived have access to a similar quality of food, and that there is **no discrimination** whatsoever e.g., in terms of attractiveness of packaging⁵⁰⁴.

⁴⁹⁴ DGCS (2021) and interviews with representatives of FEAD partner organisations in France conducted between July and September 2023.

⁴⁹⁵ DGCS (2021). Programme opérationnel français FEAD (PO1) 2014-2020. Rapport d’exécution 2020.

⁴⁹⁶ DGCS (2021). Programme opérationnel français FEAD (PO1) 2014-2020. Rapport d’exécution 2020.

⁴⁹⁷ Based on the screening tool provided by the research team

⁴⁹⁸ DGCS (2021). Programme opérationnel français FEAD (PO1) 2014-2020. Rapport d’exécution 2020.

⁴⁹⁹ DGCS (2022). Programme opérationnel français FEAD (PO1) 2014-2020. Rapport d’exécution 2021.

⁵⁰⁰ DGCS (2021). Programme opérationnel français FEAD (PO1) 2014-2020. Rapport d’exécution 2020.

⁵⁰¹ Interviews with representatives of FEAD partner organisations in France conducted between July and September 2023.

⁵⁰² Interviews with representatives of FEAD partner organisations in France conducted between July and September 2023.

⁵⁰³ Interviews with representatives of FEAD partner organisations in France conducted between July and September 2023.

⁵⁰⁴ Interview with a representative of FEAD intermediary organisation in France conducted in September 2023.

FranceAgriMer has detailed procedures in place to ensure the food provided to the most deprived is of a similar quality and attractiveness as those found in supermarkets for the same, mid-range products.

As regards considering environmental impacts, the Managing Authority introduced **ESG requirements** for its procurements. It requested that deliveries be optimised (i.e., that delivery trucks always be full) and that partner organisations return transport pallets⁵⁰⁵. This has proven effective: the return rate of pallets is monitored and prompts partner organisations to return pallets more frequently.

Concerning the **prevention of food waste**, two laws have been passed during the 2014-2020 FEAD programming period: the “Loi Garot” (2016) and the “Loi Egalim” (2018). These laws reinforce the horizontal principle of preventing food waste and complement FEAD operations.

Facilitating and hindering factors [*criterion: effectiveness*]

The **structure of FEAD governance has been praised as a facilitating factor** by most interviewees. Indeed, the four partner organisations authorised to deliver FEAD support are large ‘network heads’, which all have the capacity to manage a significant budgetary envelope. In addition, grouped purchases via FranceAgriMer help to structure and strengthen networks. Otherwise, stakeholders report that it would be complicated to coordinate with each 400 delivery points individually. The partner organisations’ extensive networks ensure that the whole territory is covered, including the most remote ones. This territorial coverage has a positive impact on local communities because it brings into play local authorities and businesses. In remote areas, partner organisations’ activities allow for social cohesion since partner organisations’ premises are often the sole space to create social links. Through taking part to partner organisations’ activities, isolated people benefit from social interactions.

Moreover, **public procurements ‘go back directly into the European economy’**, which could be seen as a positive unintended impact⁵⁰⁶. In terms of the facilitating factors pertaining to the results, the **FEAD’s comprehensive list of products allows end-recipients to enjoy a complete meal**.

Audits and rules around controls have been described as **hindering factors** during interviews. Partner organisations are subject to several layers of controls, including controls already in place as per national law. An interviewee explained that the Managing Authority added an additional layer of control, which prompted discussion. There is a contrast between the fact that the FEAD is mostly delivered by volunteers (with a great turnover rate) and the administrative burden generated by FEAD implementation. This administrative rigour about European funds is difficult to explain when working with the most deprived. In particular, the fact that all entities, regardless of their size and capacity, are subject to the same control procedures (i.e., lack of flexibility) is difficult to understand on the ground. One stakeholder explained that this hindering factor was unexpected, as FranceAgriMer and partner organisations did not initially foresee how different FEAD is from the MDP. The heavier administrative requirements of using European structural funds were not in place during the MDP. A representative of the intermediary organisation FranceAgriMer explained that the staff found it difficult to adapt to these changes, so it is not surprising that volunteers faced difficulties too.

There can sometimes be **external factors** that **hinder** the effectiveness of FEAD operations, such as **climatic events** (e.g., droughts) that delay the supply of a specific product.

Overall cost-effectiveness of FEAD operations [*criterion: efficiency*]

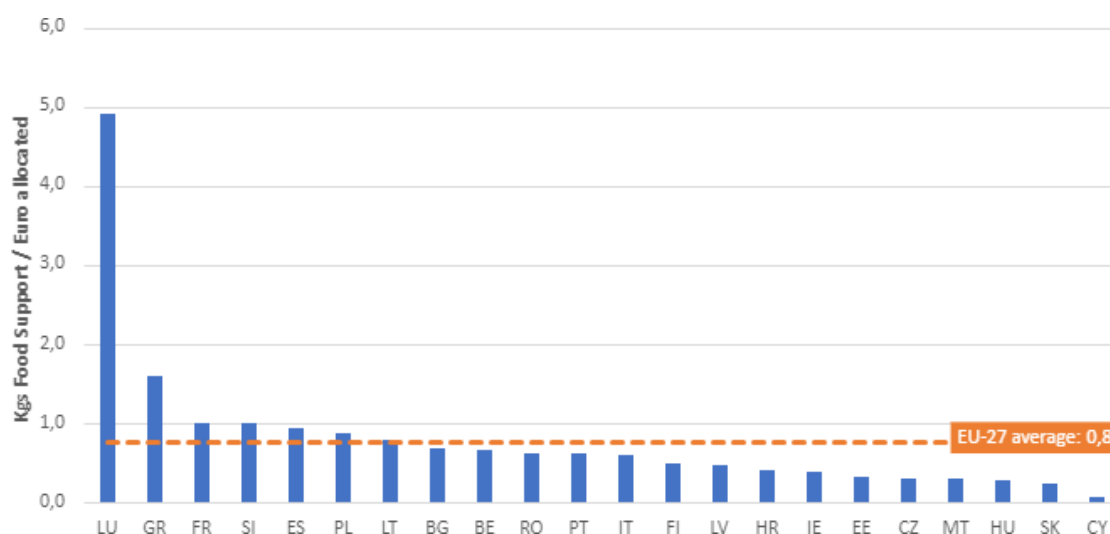
On average, per allocated EUR, France was able to distribute one kilogram of food support, which is higher than the EU average (0,8 kg per Euro, see Figure A. 82)⁵⁰⁷. This makes France the third most cost-effective FEAD OP I country to deliver food support. Simultaneously, FEAD operations are unanimously deemed **cost-effective** by stakeholder interviews.

⁵⁰⁵ Interview with representatives of the FEAD Managing Authority in France conducted in September 2023.

⁵⁰⁶ Interviews with representatives of FEAD partner organisations in France conducted between July and September 2023.

⁵⁰⁷ Based on data provided by research team.

Figure A. 82 – Kgs of food support per allocated EUR



Source: research team, based on data from the SFC 2014 database.

A key factor for FEAD’s cost-effectiveness in France is the fact that the **support is delivered at no cost by volunteers from partner organisations**⁵⁰⁸. Volunteering has a ‘multiplier effect’ because it costs little and has a great impact. A representative from a partner organisation explained: “For each euro of public money invested, 4-5 euros are delivered on the ground thanks to volunteers”. Moreover, the fact that the state is responsible for procuring the food facilitates the FEAD’s efficiency. Indeed, having a centralised food purchase system (through FranceAgriMer) allows to purchase in large volumes, and therefore, at attractive prices⁵⁰⁹. Grouped purchase also diminishes the risk of product unavailability thanks to the diversity of suppliers. For example, in case of drought, there will always be a region that is not impacted and FranceAgriMer can choose to rely on this supplier instead of suppliers affected by the drought. This would not be the case if partner organisations had to secure the food themselves locally.

Vouchers may appear cost effective in theory because unlike food, they do not have set expiry dates and do not incur transport costs⁵¹⁰. They may also help to respect the dignity of end-recipients because end-recipients using vouchers can choose the products they would like to receive and are not limited to the pre-defined list of FEAD products. However, **vouchers’ cost effectiveness appears limited in practice because they are difficult to trace**⁵¹¹. The Managing Authority devised procedures to ensure traceability, but in practice, these were not enough. The Managing Authority took anti-fraud measures (e.g., to avoid duplication) but it was difficult to implement these on the ground, as people putting in place the operations were not adequately trained. A representative from a partner organisation argued that vouchers are not cost-effective because the costs to introduce and manage the scheme are higher than the benefits. In addition, the loss of social inclusion activities limits vouchers’ cost effectiveness⁵¹².

Administrative burden of monitoring and reporting requirements [criterion: efficiency]

All stakeholders interviewed reported **challenges with monitoring and reporting requirements**. Partner organisations evoked the **rigidity of rules, which are not adapted to reality**. For example, as regards promotion requirements, the FEAD posters in some FFBA members’ premises were not in the right format or colour. This was noted during inspections. However, it is difficult to comply with such a level of detail when most FFBA do not have stable premises and/or share their premises with other, unrelated organisations.

Delivery notes were most frequently reported as a burdensome element. Notably, the requirement to keep delivery notes on paper appeared counter-productive since all partner organisations use robust digitalised processes.

⁵⁰⁸ Interviews with representatives of FEAD partner organisations in France conducted between July and September 2023.

⁵⁰⁹ Interviews with representatives of FEAD partner organisations in France conducted between July and September 2023.

⁵¹⁰ Interview with representatives of the FEAD Managing Authority in France conducted in September 2023.

⁵¹¹ Interview with representatives of the FEAD Managing Authority in France conducted in September 2023.

⁵¹² Interview with representatives of the FEAD Managing Authority in France conducted in September 2023 and interviews with representatives of FEAD partner organisations in France conducted between July and September 2023.

The back-and-forth to trace delivery notes also appeared unnecessarily burdensome. For example, a representative from a partner organisation explained that they had to return the same delivery note four times to different entities.

The Managing Authority also needs to present a ‘million pieces’ of evidence during **audits**. There are already detailed rules for procurements at the national level. On top of these national rules, there is a second audit round by the European Commission. Even if all is in order, the auditing authority will seek to go further and request more details. This forces the Managing Authority to rewrite procedures and incurs additional work.

Simplification measures [*criterion: efficiency*]

Flat rates are a good idea in theory, but they **do not simplify operations in practice for the Managing Authority**. For example, even though the European Commission does not request Managing Authorities to trace the new flat rates introduced under ESF+, the French Managing Authority still needs to put in place a ‘lightened’ audit trail to comply with these internal procedures. Nonetheless, partner organisations generally appreciate flat rates as these allow for a return on logistics costs (stocking and transports)⁵¹³. Partner organisations welcomed the fact that flat rates have increased from 5% to 7% under ESF+⁵¹⁴.

A yearly review of administrative requirements is taking place between the Managing Authority and partner organisations. As partner organisations have proved able to pass this procedural review, it is suggested that they could be granted a certification valid for ten years. Stakeholders stressed the **need to adopt a risk-based, or sample-based approach to controls instead of aiming to control each component of the system**.

Although the intermediary organisation’s expertise lies in the scientific control of food quality, **administrative requirements and rules sometimes force FranceAgriMer to perform technical inaccuracies**. For example, if FranceAgriMer decided to buy a coffee made up of 50% Arabica beans and 50% Robusta beans, controllers would require that this composition is precisely evidenced. However, it is not technically possible to precisely determine the coffee’s composition. Even if FranceAgriMer chooses a coffee with 100% Arabica beans, it is scientifically impossible to prove that the coffee is 100% made up of Arabica beans (whereas controllers require such a level of detail). In addition, it is impossible for FranceAgriMer to have oversight of each of the 15-25.000 food deliveries per year.

Coherence of FEAD with other interventions [*criterion: coherence*]

Stakeholders interviewed deem **FEAD operations coherent with France’s national policies on food aid and social inclusion**. The fact that food aid schemes financed by national funds are also managed by the FEAD Managing Authority (Ministry of Labour, Health and Solidarities) ensures coherence. Indeed, staff working on FEAD and staff working on national initiatives within the Ministry collaborate to avoid duplication and maximise synergies. As explained in an earlier section, coherence is also reinforced by the fact that the former Managing Authority of the MDP (Ministry of Agriculture) complements the Managing Authority’s work on aspects related to food quality.

As evoked above, two laws have been passed during the 2014-2020 FEAD programming period: the “loi Garot” (2016) and the “loi Egalim” (2018). These **laws prevent food waste and ensure coherence with FEAD horizontal principles**.

A partner organisation representative explained that the **choice of the four FEAD partner organisations is also coherent** because these organisations represent 90% of food aid in France and cover the whole territory.

8.2. Is FEAD still relevant?

Relevance to target groups [*criterion: relevance*]

Due to the principle of ‘unconditional reception’, interviewees think **all target groups needing FEAD support were reached**. The fact that the OP does not specify target groups may allow for gaps in FEAD reach, but this is not backed by evidence. To ensure that all people needing food aid are reached, partner organisations put in place specific outreach initiatives. For example, two partner organisations have reported the use of touring trucks to find people in the most remote areas of the territory.

Nonetheless, partner organisations often reported **a lack of relevance about the choice of FEAD products to be distributed**. Indeed, whilst the Managing Authority seeks to promote healthy eating habits, it is also important to keep a pragmatic approach towards the needs of the most deprived end recipients. For example,

⁵¹³ Interviews with representatives of FEAD partner organisations in France conducted between July and September 2023.

⁵¹⁴ Interviews with representatives of FEAD partner organisations in France conducted between July and September 2023.

partner organisations had to defend the inclusion of ready-made meals in the list of FEAD products to be procured. Indeed, although ready-made meals do not fit nutritional quality criteria, they are often better suited to the living conditions of the most deprived (e.g., precarious housing, squats).

Relevance of FEAD now and in the future [*criterion: relevance*]

A partner organisation representative said: “**The FEAD is indispensable and will keep being relevant during future crises.** It is both a food aid programme but also has the ability to respond to the impact of various crises on precarious groups”. Another partner organisation representative remarked that the envelope allocated to the FEAD throughout the programming period remained the same, whereas the demand for FEAD increased. It was suggested that even more money should be allocated to FEAD due to its relevance in responding to current crises. As evoked above, the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis have widened the population seeking FEAD support, with a greater number of university students and ‘working poor’ receiving food aid. With fuel costs rising, the share of people’s expenditure going to transport will increase, which means they will have less money to spend on food. All stakeholders interviewed argued that the need for FEAD will increase with the ongoing inflation and are thus advocating for bigger budgets.

8.3. Did FEAD make a difference and to whom?

EU added value [*criterion: EU added value*]

According to a partner organisation representative, the **FEAD had a ‘structuring’ impact on France’s food aid policy due to the weight and stability of the envelope allocated.** Because the FEAD budget is set for seven years, partner organisations have greater visibility over the future and can plan their operations better. This suggests a positive role effect of EU support.

Nonetheless, the Managing Authority did not describe FEAD as having a ‘structuring’ impact on food aid in France but rather views it as complementary to national policies. According to the Fédération Française des Banques Alimentaires (FFBA) the FEAD’s EU added value lies in a **volume effect because 40% of their supply comes from the EU.** This means that EU support allows for a greater volume of food distributed to the most deprived. As evoked above, the EU’s significant support for food aid became evident between 2020-2021 when other sources of supply decreased.

Overall, stakeholders interviewed agree that FEAD products ensure the basis of an end-recipient’s meal. This basis is complemented by other products (e.g., fresh food) that are sourced elsewhere. All stakeholders interviewed agree that **FEAD is a pillar of France’s food aid ecosystem.**

Scope effects are limited because FEAD is in continuity with the MDP. Moreover, French stakeholder’s approach to food aid had already quite a wide scope (e.g., unconditionality of support, links between food aid and social inclusion).

In terms of **process effects, FEAD fostered stronger collaboration between the Managing Authority and partner organisations.** Indeed, whilst the Ministry and partner organisations were already working together as part of national initiatives, the EU programme’s financial weight reinforced this collaboration. The Managing Authority and partner organisations collaborate on all aspects of the FEAD e.g., by devising a grid of accompanying measures and anticipating related audit trails. This bottom-up approach was commended at European level.

Visibility [*visibility*]

Feedback from interviewees suggests that the **French public is aware of FEAD operations and that the support comes from the EU.** For example, during an event three years ago at the Ministry of Agriculture, the FFBA remarked that visitors (i.e., not necessarily end recipients) were aware that the support came from the EU. Moreover, the Restos du Coeur’s founder (comedian Coluche) contributed to creating the MDP, so the Restos du Coeur “always politically and institutionally” promoted the food aid’s European dimension.

Partner organisations agree that because the **EU flag is on the products distributed,** end recipients are aware that the support comes from the EU. Moreover, **volunteers are trained to say that the support comes from the EU.** The Managing Authority has put in place a tool to report non-compliance with FEAD rules. Some instances of **non-compliance with visibility requirements have been signalled,** which shows that the public is aware of these requirements.

9. Good practices

A good practice reported by the Croix-Rouge stems from their branch called “**Croix-Rouge Insertion**”. Croix-Rouge Insertion created “social inclusion sites” whereby vulnerable groups such as the long-term unemployed, homeless persons, or young people without an income learn skills related to logistics. Some of these people are employed in the Croix-Rouge’s warehouses used during FEAD operations. Thus, on some occasions, people at risk of social exclusion found jobs within the context of FEAD operations.

10. Conclusions and lessons learned

FEAD stakeholders are **generally satisfied with the way FEAD is structured in France**. Such a centralised system works well, and allocating budgets to regional/local authorities would fragment food aid policy and effectiveness for target groups.

The evidence gathered from stakeholders’ consultation and desk research indicates that **FEAD reached its objectives**. Eligibility criteria are very loose, with a bottom-up approach to the definition of target groups. Partner organisations believe that this approach is key to the FEAD’s effectiveness. The reasoning behind stakeholders’ evaluation of the FEAD’s effectiveness is that because the food actually reached people, FEAD fulfilled its objectives. Partner organisations would like **more flexibility as regards monitoring and reporting requirements**. They advocate for a risk-based or sample-based approach to ensure that auditing efforts are targeted at specific situations only instead of hindering the smooth running of operations for well-established partner organisations. There could be more digitalisation introduced in monitoring and reporting processes, especially as regards delivery notes.

Similarly, the Managing Authority recognises an **administrative burden** linked to monitoring FEAD operations and submitting expenses for reimbursement. In some cases, even when simplification is encouraged by the European Commission, such simplification cannot happen in practice because of internal audit rules.

FEAD plays an essential role in France’s food aid ecosystem. It has been described by partner organisations as a ‘pillar’ of food aid in France. It is a stable source of supply for partner organisations that can plan their operations over several years. FEAD is also **complementary to national initiatives** such as the Garot law, which contributed to increasing food donations. Whilst FEAD covers long shelf-life products of an end-recipient’s meal, national initiatives provide fresh produce. This complementarity ensures a balanced meal for recipients of food aid.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Methodology

This case study is based on a review of key operational and strategic documents. These documents mostly informed the intervention logic and the section on the national policy framework. Interviews were conducted with representatives from the four partner organisations, the Managing Authority, and the intermediary organisation responsible for procuring the food (FranceAgriMer). Stakeholders’ insights were crucial to shed light on both the FEAD’s design and implementation. Statistical evidence was used to back-up specific sections and present a diagnosis of France’s socio-economic situation since 2013. When triangulating the evidence evoked above, a coherent picture of the FEAD in France emerged.

Following a first draft, gaps were identified, and further interviews were arranged with food aid experts.

Appendix 2: References

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Primary information collection

- Interview with representatives of the FEAD Managing Authority in France conducted in September 2023
- Interviews with representatives of FEAD partner organisations in France conducted between July and September 2023
- Interview with a representative of FEAD intermediary organisation in France conducted in September 2023.

Interview with researchers in the field of food aid policy in France conducted in December 2023.

Annex 3: FEAD indicators

Table A. 74 – General financial data for the implementation of FEAD in France in 2014-2022

Indicator	Total amount of eligible public expenditure approved in the documents setting out the conditions for support of operations (EUR)	Total amount of eligible public expenditure incurred by beneficiaries and paid in implementing operations (EUR)	Total amount of eligible public expenditure declared to the Commission (EUR)	Implementation rate (expenditure declared as share of allocated budget)
2014-2022	812,477,863.83	619,247,646.72	615,972,862.70	76%

Source: SFC 2014 database.

Table A. 75 – FEAD common output indicators in France, 2015-2022

Output indicators on food support distributed	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Quantity of fruits and vegetables (tonnes)	6,230.58	7,952.52	7,145.79	7,619.62	7,350.80	14,204.94	11,343.00	15,264.42	15,422.14
Quantity of meat, eggs, fish, seafood (tonnes)	2,368.75	3,543.03	4,757.92	4,697.76	4,714.31	5,552.50	4,872.00	8,304.35	7,151.70
Quantity of flour, bread, potatoes, rice and other starchy products (tonnes)	10,238.82	10,924.54	9,138.99	9,865.82	10,094.12	11,816.64	9,535.00	15,170.72	13,635.29
Quantity of sugar (tonnes)	2,602.67	2,752.84	2,784.38	2,152.08	1,989.11	5,477.00	2,075.00	1,963.66	1,527.77
Quantity of milk products	37,145.77	40,002.20	47,346.57	39,914.37	39,871.07	38,923.46	36,230.00	32,644.73	35,978.64

Output indicators on food support distributed	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
(tonnes)									
Quantity of fats, oil (tonnes)	2,939.08	4,047.33	2,939.38	2,821.20	2,536.32	2,694.61	3,637.00	3,295.83	1,868.73
Quantity of convenience food, other foodstuff (not falling in above mentioned categories) (tonnes)	4,334.09	4,864.27	6,036.12	6,325.08	6,515.99	2,485.30	5,199.00	6,932.11	5,908.97
Total quantity of food support distributed (tonnes)	65,859.76	74,086.73	80,176.15	73,395.93	73,071.72	81,154.45	72,891.00	83,575.82	81,493.24
Proportion of FEAD co-financed food produc	28.20	29.40	31.73	29.68	34.00	27.40	24.50	28.15	20.81

Output indicators on food support distributed	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Percentage of food distributed by the partner organisations (%)									
Total number of food packages distributed partly or totally financed by the OP	72,781,897.00	76,616,897.00	76,252,590.00	57,714,869.00	54,249,743.00	62,908,116.00	62,934,453.00	59,639,117.00	70,323,907.00

Source: SFC 2014 database.

Table A. 76 – Number of FEAD participants in France in 2014-2022

Result indicators on food support distributed	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Total number of	4,047,812	4,216,026	4,397,813	4,459,019	4,340,340	4,790,472	5,504,382	5,120,090	5,614,867

Result indicators on food support distributed	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
persons receiving food support									
Number of children aged 15 years or below	1,471,148	1,438,335	1,561,066	1,547,553	1,505,296	1,691,539	1,629,078	1,598,303	1,740,609
Number of persons aged 65 years or above	250,801	183,025	177,597	178,253	194,985	231,151	328,131	334,812	364,352
Number of women	2,419,290	2,212,815	2,307,787	2,348,631	2,291,810	2,498,468	2,889,109	2,645,985	2,901,824
Number of homeless	0	1,010,198	0	0	673,077	735,762	613,443	581,793	639,645

Source: SFC 2014 database.

X.8 Italy

11. Context and background

The **Italian socio-economic context has improved or remained constant** since 2014/2015 across most indicators presented in Table A. 77 below, which summarises the most relevant indicators on poverty and social exclusion, severe material deprivation, child poverty, and food insecurity in Italy. Notably, the Italian situation is comparatively worse than the EU average in relation to the at risk of poverty and social exclusion rate (AROPE) for both adults and children, as measured by the AROPE rate, but slightly more positive concerning severe material and social deprivation (SMSD rate).

Table A. 77 – Socio-economic context in Italy

Italy	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Trend	
1. At-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate (AROPE) Total		28.4	27.8	25.9	25.7	24.6	24.9	25.2	24.4		
2. AROPE Children		34.4	32.6	30.4	29.7	27.2	28.9	29.7	28.8		
3. Severe material and social deprivation rate (SMSD)		12.1	10.1	6.6	6.5	6.4	6.2	5.9	4.5		
4. Severe material deprivation rate (SMD)	11.6	5.8	12.1	10.1	8.5	7.4	5.9	0.0	0.0		
5. Inability to afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish (or vegetarian equivalent) every second day		12.6	11.8	14.3	13.4	11.1	9.9	9.1	7.5		
6. Impact of social transfers (other than pensions) on poverty reduction % reduction of AROPE		21.5	21.7	21.4	19.4	21.6	20.2	21.0	29.5	25.8	
7. Housing cost overburden		8.5	8.6	9.6	8.2	8.2	8.7	7.2	7.2	6.6	
8. Self-reported unmet need for medical care % of population 16+		7.0	7.2	5.5	1.8	2.4	1.8		1.8	1.8	
9. Households with very low work intensity			11.2	12.1	10.8	10.7	9.6	10.2	10.8	9.8	
11. Population in the EU could not afford unexpected financial expenses		38.8	39.9	40.4	38.3	35.1	33.8	32.3	32.7	32.9	
13. Share of total population having neither a bath, nor a shower in their dwelling		0.4	0.4	0.4	0.6	0.5	0.7	0.7			
14. No indoor flushing		0.4	0.4	0.4	0.6	0.5	0.7	0.7			
17. Persons who cannot afford a telephone		0.1	0.2	0.6	0.4	0.3	0.1	0.1			
18. Persons who cannot afford to replace worn-out clothes		15.0	15.0	10.7	7.6	8.2	8.3	7.5	7.6	6.0	
20. Persons who cannot afford to get-together with friends or family (relatives) for a drink or meal at least once a month		13.7	11.1	9.9	6.9	6.5	6.9	6.8	6.5	4.8	
21. Persons who cannot afford internet connection for personal use at home		7.7	7.0	6.2	4.4	4.5	3.8	3.6	3.7	2.6	
22. In-work risk of poverty		9.6	9.8	10.0	11.1	10.9	10.3	9.6	10.1	9.7	
23. Long-term unemployment		8.2	7.4	7.1	6.9	6.5	5.9	5.1	5.4	4.6	
25. Employment rate		55.3	56.0	57.1	57.9	58.5	59.0	57.5	58.2	60.1	
26. Children (aged less than 18) living in households with very low work intensity			8.5	9.0	7.8	7.1	6.2	7.4	8.2	6.2	
27. At-risk-of-poverty rate for children			26.8	26.7	26.4	26.2	24.5	25.1	26.0	25.4	
28. Severe material and social deprivation rate (SMSD) for children			15.8	12.6	7.4	7.1	5.8	7.1	7.1	4.7	

Source: Eurostat, 2023.

According to available data from Eurostat, 24.4% of the Italian population (14.4 million people) were at **risk of poverty or social exclusion** in 2022, 4 percentage points lower than in 2015, in comparison to the EU-27 average of 21.6% in 2022. The rate of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion is even higher, amounting to 28.8% in 2022 (5.6% lower than in 2015 at 34.4%), slightly higher than the EU average (24.6%). This rate is even higher among the Roma population, where in 2021 the AROPE was 98%.⁵¹⁶ Moreover, 4.5% of Italians (2.7 million people) in 2022 were in **severe material and social deprivation**, in comparison to over 12.1% in 2015 (7.6 percentage points lower), which depicts a more positive situation than the EU average (6.7% in 2022). 4.7% of children in Italy were in severe material and social deprivation in 2022, 11.1 pp lower than in 2015, and similarly lower than the EU average (8.4% in 2022).

Moreover, in 2022 9.8% of Italians (5.8 million people) lived in **households with very low work intensity**, 1.4 percentage points lower than in 2015. In relation to **food insecurity**, the share of Italians who were unable to afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish (or vegetarian alternatives) every second day amounted to 7.5% in 2022 (4.4 million people), 5.1 percentage points lower than in 2014. The overall **employment rate** was 60.1% (35.5 million people) in 2022, 9.7% percentage points lower in comparison to the 8 of the EU (69.8%).

⁵¹⁶ FRA (2021) Roma survey

12. Reconstructing the intervention logic

12.1. National policy framework

The establishment of FEAD in 2014 introduced innovation within the Italian national policy framework of material assistance and social inclusion, while ensuring elements of continuity with previous national policies and programmes. In lack of a comprehensive, structural policy for income support and social assistance until recent years, **FEAD** quickly became a **fundamental element of the Italian political landscape of poverty reduction**.

FEAD significantly builds on the experience and knowledge gathered by its predecessor programme MDP (programme of aid for the most deprived persons), which ran from 1987 to 2013 and aimed at the re-distribution of unsold food stock produced through the Common Agricultural Policy funds via charities to reach the most deprived. Several innovations were pioneered by FEAD in Italy, such as the focus on new target groups including deprived children and the homeless, and the introduction of accompanying measures aimed at the social inclusion of the most deprived.⁵¹⁷

The national policy framework has experienced **several key developments** in the last decade with the introduction of the **Inclusion income (Reddito di Inclusione, REI)** in 2018,⁵¹⁸ replaced by the **Citizens' income (Reddito di Cittadinanza, RDC)**⁵¹⁹ in 2019, a conditional and non-individual guaranteed minimum income. Both policies aimed to reduce poverty by providing low-income households with financial aid while facilitating their active participation in the labour market through personalised projects to foster social inclusion and employment. Notably, the key differences between the two concern the eligibility requirements and the amount of financial support granted. To receive REI, Italian citizens or residents are required to have resided in Italy for at least two consecutive years, while in the case of RDC, this number rises to ten years. Moreover, the RDC was granted in monthly payments ranging between EUR 780 and 1330 depending on the number of household members, a sum nearly three times higher than that of REI (EUR 187,50 and 539,82).

On the basis of the Legislative Decree no. 48/2023 of 4 May 2023, the so-called “**Labour Decree**” (*Decreto Lavoro*), the Citizens' income was replaced in January 2024 by two new subsidies: the **Inclusion cheque (assegno di inclusione)**, and the **Aid to vocational training (supporto alla formazione e al lavoro)**. The Inclusion cheque is reserved exclusively for low-income households where at least one family member is either a minor, older than 60 years old, or with a disability, for a maximum monthly value of EUR 780 and a total duration of 30 months.⁵²⁰ On the other hand, the Aid to vocational training is an active labour market policy targeting low-income, unemployed people aged between 18 and 59 actively looking for a job who are also ineligible for the Inclusion cheque as well as individual members of household beneficiaries of the Inclusion cheque, through participation in vocational training, qualification, and re-qualification projects.⁵²¹

One of the key components of the FEAD Programme which was consolidated throughout the first programming period (2014-2020) is its **extensive network of active third sector stakeholders** established through MDP and their **strong involvement in the provision of social services**, which has evolved through time and developed into a widespread network of entities directly working with individuals in extreme poverty and serious

⁵¹⁷ European Commission (2018). FEAD Country Fiche Italy. Available at:

<https://www.lavoro.gov.it/sites/default/files/temi-e-priorita/europa-e-fondi-europei/focus-on/fondo-di-aiuti-europei-agli-indigenti-Fead/Documents/2018-FEAD-Country-Fiche-Italy.pdf>

⁵¹⁸ Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (N.A.). Inclusion income (REI) (*Reddito di inclusione (REI)*). Available at:

<https://www.lavoro.gov.it/temi-e-priorita/poverta-ed-esclusione-sociale/focus-on/reddito-di-inclusione-rei/pagine/default>

⁵¹⁹ Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (N.A.). Citizens' Income (*Reddito di Cittadinanza*). Available at:

<https://www.redditodicittadinanza.gov.it/>

⁵²⁰ Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (N.A.). Inclusion cheque (*Assegno di inclusione*). Available at:

<https://www.lavoro.gov.it/temi-e-priorita/decreto-lavoro/Pagine/assegno-di-inclusione>

⁵²¹ Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (N.A.). Vocational training support (*Supporto formazione e lavoro*). Available at:

<https://www.lavoro.gov.it/temi-e-priorita/decreto-lavoro/pagine/supporto-formazione-e-lavoro>

marginalisation. This extended network plays a key role in the Italian welfare system and provision of basic material assistance and food distribution to the most deprived, as demonstrated by the governance and delivery of the FEAD Programme (discussed in Section 2.4).⁵²²

12.2. Objectives and target groups

As outlined in its Operational Programme, the **general objective** of FEAD in Italy is to **tackle food and severe material deprivation and contribute to the social inclusion of the most deprived individuals, contributing to reaching the EU2020 target for poverty reduction** by decreasing by at least 2.2 million the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion in Italy by 2020.

Four types of material deprivation are specifically defined by the Italian Operation Programme:⁵²³ food deprivation; material deprivation of children and young people in the school environment; food and educational deprivation of children and young people in deprived areas; and material deprivation of homeless and other marginalised groups. Five further **specific objectives** are also laid out:⁵²⁴

- mitigate food deprivation;
- promote social mobility to tackle material deprivation of children and young people in the school environment;
- tackle early school leaving to fight educational and social deprivation of young people in deprived areas;
- mitigate material deprivation to tackle specific needs of children and other frail categories in material deprivation;
- tackle extreme marginality, with a focus on the homeless and people in severe deprivation.

Several **target groups** are discerned in connection to the typologies of material deprivation set out:⁵²⁵ homeless people; individuals and families in absolute poverty and severe material deprivation, with particular attention to people living in severe psychological and social discomfort and families with children (among which larger families are prioritised); people with disabilities or housing deprivation; and pupils / young students in deprived conditions or housing deprivation. Figure A. 83 below showcases the **intervention logic of FEAD** in Italy as set out by the FEAD mid-term evaluation.

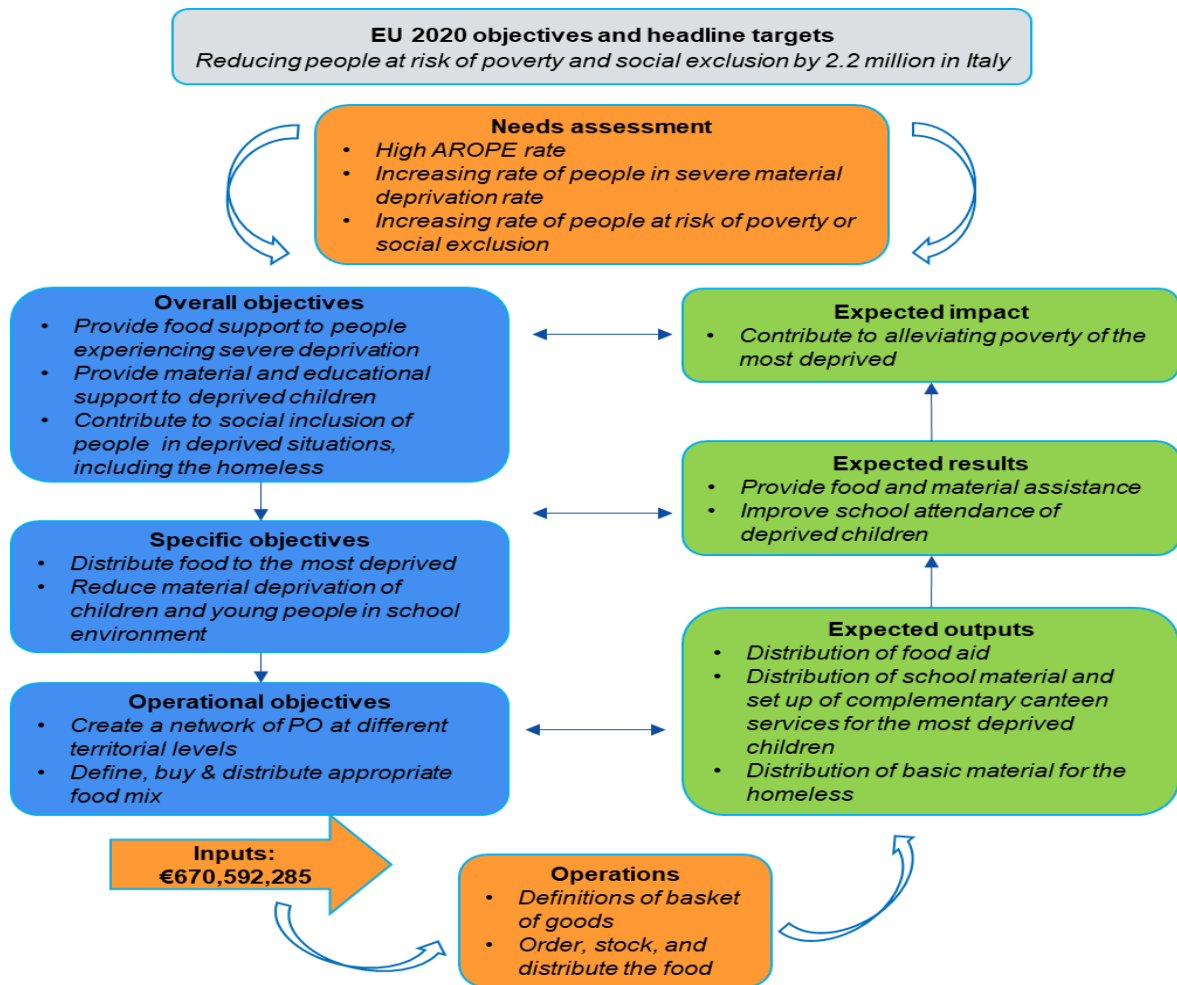
⁵²² European Commission (2018). FEAD Country Fiche Italy.

⁵²³ European Commission (2018). FEAD Country Fiche Italy; Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (2021). OPERATIONAL PROGRAMME FOOD DISTRIBUTION AND BASIC MATERIAL ASSISTANCE (PROGRAMMA OPERATIVO PER LA FORNITURA DI PRODOTTI ALIMENTARI E/O ASSISTENZA MATERIALE DI BASE). Available at: <https://www.lavoro.gov.it/temi-e-priorita/europa-e-fondi-europei/focus-on/fondo-di-aiuti-europei-agli-indigenti-Fead/Documents/PO-1-FEAD-versione-5.0.pdf>

⁵²⁴ Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (2021). OPERATIONAL PROGRAMME FOOD DISTRIBUTION AND BASIC MATERIAL ASSISTANCE.

⁵²⁵ European Commission (2018). FEAD Country Fiche Italy; Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (2021). OPERATIONAL PROGRAMME FOOD DISTRIBUTION AND BASIC MATERIAL ASSISTANCE.

Figure A. 83 – Intervention logic of FEAD in Italy



Source: adapted from FEAD mid-term evaluation

12.3. Implemented operations and accompanying measures

Four measures are foreseen by the Italian FEAD OP, although measure 2 (**material deprivation of children and young people in scholastic environment**) and measure 3 (**food and educational deprivation of children and young people in deprived areas**) have never been implemented due to administrative and regulatory constraints in relation to the burden of centralised procurement procedures at national level, and to the selection of the type of goods to be provided at European level.⁵²⁶ The two remaining measures focus on food deprivation (measure 1) and material deprivation of the homeless and other vulnerable categories (measure 4).⁵²⁷

671 million EUR was allocated to FEAD in Italy, to which an additional 199 million EUR was allocated through REACT-EU funding to counteract the COVID-19 crisis, for the purchase of food goods and the related flat-rate reimbursements to partner organisations for administrative, transport, and storage costs. This brought the **total funding of the FEAD 2014-2020 funding to 870 million EUR** (the largest funding across EU Member States).⁵²⁸

⁵²⁶ European Commission (2018). FEAD Country Fiche Italy.

⁵²⁷ European Commission (2018). FEAD Country Fiche Italy.

⁵²⁸ European Commission (2023). ESIF 2014-2020 EU payments (daily update), Cohesion Open Data. Available at: https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/2014-2020-Finances/ESIF-2014-2020-EU-payments-daily-update-timeseries/gayr-92qh/about_data

Measure 1 was the first to be activated within FEAD in Italy and the most prominent since its outset. This measure aims to address **food deprivation** through the provision of food aid to individuals living in conditions of extreme poverty and vulnerability. As further discussed in Section 2.4, food products are purchased by the intermediary body *Agenzia per le erogazioni in agricoltura* (AGEA) within the Ministry of Agriculture and consequently distributed through partner organisations to direct beneficiaries through different channels. The majority of the Italian FEAD OP budget was allocated to this measure amounting to 988,312,100 million EUR in 2021 (including national co-financing and REACT-EU funding).⁵²⁹

Accompanying measures to Measure 1 included **educational activities** aimed at promoting healthy nutrition (e.g. cooking workshops), **accompaniment to social and administrative services**, **support and guidance in job searching**, **reception and listening activities** and **other types of psychological and social support** (e.g. in relation to family budget management, school support, first medical assistance and legal protection).

Measure 4 seeks to address the **material deprivation of homeless people and other vulnerable categories at risk of housing exclusion** as key target groups in order to contrast extreme marginalisation and more specifically, homelessness. It finances the provision of basic material goods (e.g., clothing, hygiene products, sleeping bags, emergency kits, food, ready meals) and other non-financial goods. The measure was first implemented in 2016 in cities and municipalities with more than 250,000 inhabitants. According to the latest annual monitoring report published in June 2022 by the Managing Authority, 50 million EUR has been allocated to this measure.⁵³⁰ Goods are purchased by beneficiaries or by partner organisations and are distributed directly by volunteers from the partner organisations or their accredited entities at their premises or on the streets.⁵³¹

Measure 4 was also combined with a set of **accompanying measures**, encompassing **educational activities and skills training/programmes**, **accompaniment to services**, **support and guidance in job searching**, **legal protection**, **first aid medical assistance**, and other support activities such as **assistance in housing searches and autonomy**, **in the purchase of food and non-food products**, and **assistance in carrying out bureaucratic procedures**.⁵³²

12.4. FEAD governance and delivery system

Key to FEAD implementation in Italy is the **constant cooperation between all relevant stakeholders** within the FEAD national coordinating group, which the programme is structured around. The group is in charge of supervising and monitoring the ongoing implementation of the programme, as well as managing its operational parameters, revising any aspects as needed to reflect the interaction with beneficiaries on the ground, including the food products to be distributed and the criteria for the selection of beneficiaries. The national coordination group is governed by the **Managing Authority**, which is placed within the **Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, General Directorate for Inclusion and Social Policies**, and consists of representatives from the **intermedia body situated within AGEA**, and of representatives of the **seven national partner organisations**: Fondazione Banco Alimentare, Associazione Banco Alimentare Roma, Croce Rossa Italiana, Caritas Italiana, Comunità di S. Egidio, Banco delle 453uppo di Carità, and Associazione Sempre Insieme per la Pace.⁵³³

The **implementation of Measure 1**, which represents the majority of FEAD support in Italy, **relies on the FEAD intermediate body and the registered non-profit or public entities operating in the sector acting as partner organisations**. Building on its experience in the implementation of MDP, AGEA oversees the procurement of

⁵²⁹ Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (2021). OPERATIONAL PROGRAMME FOOD DISTRIBUTION AND BASIC MATERIAL ASSISTANCE; European Commission (2018). FEAD Country Fiche Italy; SFC 2014 database

⁵³⁰ Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (2022). ANNUAL REPORT FEAD – OP I (RELAZIONE DI ATTUAZIONE ANNUALE FEAD – OP I). Available at: <https://www.lavoro.gov.it/temi-e-priorita/europa-e-fondi-europei/focus-on/fondo-di-aiuti-europei-agli-indigenti-Fead/Documents/RAA-FEAD-2022.pdf>

⁵³¹ Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (2021). OPERATIONAL PROGRAMME FOOD DISTRIBUTION AND BASIC MATERIAL ASSISTANCE.

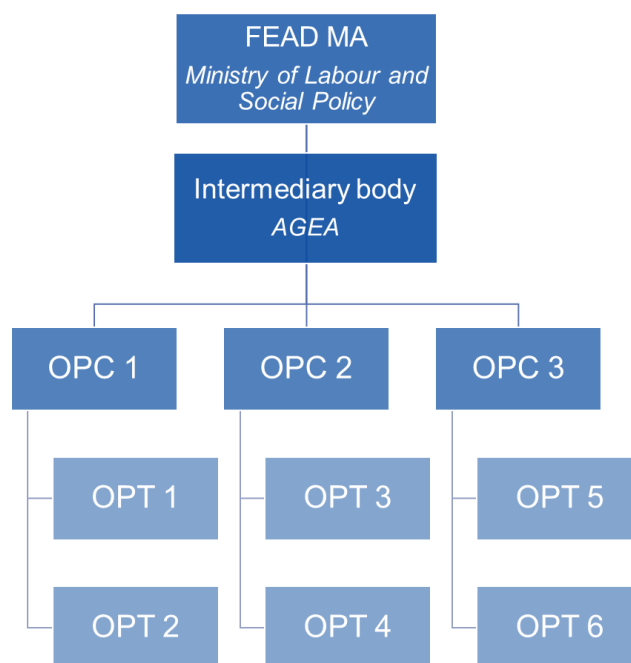
⁵³² SFC 2014 database

⁵³³ European Commission (2018). FEAD Country Fiche Italy.

the food stock through public auctions open to food suppliers and transport service companies and its distribution to the premises or warehouses of the 219 accredited coordinating partner organisations called *capofila* in Italian (OPC). OPC in turn either delivers it to their network of nearly 10,000 local partner organisations (OPT) spread across the national territory or distributes it directly to end beneficiaries. Local partner organisations distribute food through five main channels: canteen services, distribution of food packages, social warehouses (*454support sociali* in Italian), food and beverage units, and door-to-door delivery. Based on their available resources and expertise, local partner organisations also offer a range of accompanying measures for social inclusion spanning from initial needs assessments, orientation and basic counselling services, administrative support and more personalised assistance to basic health care, school support, and job search counselling.⁵³⁴

The **interaction between the key stakeholders involved in the implementation of FEAD** is showcased in the figure below. With regard to Measure 4, the Managing Authority interacts directly with FEAD Coordinating partner organisations without an intermediary body.

Figure A. 84 – Interaction between key stakeholders involved in the governance and delivery of FEAD operations



Source: own iteration

13. Key findings on the implementation of FEAD

13.1. To what extent was FEAD support successful – or not – and why?

Overall achievement of FEAD objectives [criterion: effectiveness]

The qualitative and quantitative evidence analysed, including the interviews conducted with key stakeholders and quantitative indicators, reveals that **FEAD support has been relatively successful in achieving the FEAD specific objectives**, although it is not fully possible to assess the extent of its effectiveness quantitatively due to the non-financial nature of the support provided.

⁵³⁴ European Commission (2018). FEAD Country Fiche Italy.

The key objective of FEAD OP I Italy is to provide **non-financial assistance to the most deprived persons** by food and/or basic material assistance and accompanying social inclusion measures. With regards to FEAD's **specific objectives** in Italy, the stakeholders consulted highlighted that FEAD support has allowed to **alleviate the worst forms of poverty and social exclusion**, representing a positive action in mitigating the effects of extreme poverty; however, it is not possible to accurately measure its impact in quantitative terms because the support provided is non-financial in nature and as such is not able to lift people out of poverty.⁵³⁵ By 2021, FEAD support reached almost 3 million people, of whom 2.1 million were assisted on a continuous basis (about half of the Italian population living in extreme poverty).⁵³⁶ Therefore, although the poverty rate in Italy has not substantially decreased since the beginning of the Programme, mainly due to external circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of inflation whose impact negatively affected the Italian economy, FEAD is considered an essential form of support that has enabled easing the burden on the most deprived persons and supporting them through the provision of food aid.⁵³⁷

Nonetheless, the support provided under **Measure 1** has been reported by stakeholders to **not sufficiently cover families' basic daily needs** due to the bi-weekly frequency of delivery, which makes it difficult to ensure that deprived families follow a healthy diet.⁵³⁸ Rather, FEAD support aims to integrate families' diets through the provision of basic food products which represents an essential form of support to allow deprived individuals to access products which they would have not been able to otherwise access (e.g., cheese, cured meats, bread, pasta, and later on products for children, fruit and jam were also included).⁵³⁹

On the other hand, the provision of food products and other types of material assistance (e.g. furniture, household appliances) has also been financed by FEAD through **Measure 4 to improve the living conditions and overall wellbeing of the most deprived persons**, with specific focus on the homeless and other vulnerable individuals and families. Material assistance was combined with a range of accompanying social inclusion measures and interventions aimed at supporting the homeless (discussed above in Section 2.2).⁵⁴⁰

Moreover, FEAD funds have contributed to **developing and fostering support structures for alleviating poverty and social exclusion** in Italy, creating greater coordination and stimulating the exchange of information and dialogue between the key stakeholders active in the field of food and material aid. The 2014-2020 FEAD Programme not only brought continuity to the national framework of social inclusion policies and the fight against serious marginalisation, but it also strengthened welfare services and innovated the national welfare policy framework, increasing synergies between the different actors at national and local level.⁵⁴¹ As one of its horizontal principles, FEAD in Italy promoted the principle of partnership by fostering an interactive dialogue between partner organisations, the Managing Authority and the intermediate body AGEA, thus establishing a working relationship between the public and third sector. This provided a unique experience that Coordinating and local partner organisations had not experienced before within MDP, creating a sense of awareness on the topics of poverty alleviation and social inclusion, as well as fostering a network of contacts that enabled important moments of discussion.⁵⁴²

The impact of FEAD support in Italy in relation to FEAD's **general objectives** is more difficult to assess due to their broader nature. FEAD aims to contribute to the objective of **eradicating poverty in the European Union**, aiming to reduce the number of persons at risk of poverty and social exclusion by at least 20 million by 2020 and by 15 million by 2030. As previously mentioned, poverty in Italy has not substantially decreased since the beginning of the roll-out of FEAD, with the incidence rate of absolute poverty among families in Italy having increased by 1.8 percentage points between 2014 (7.7%) and 2021 (7.5%).⁵⁴³ Nonetheless, this is primarily due to unpredictable phenomena and external circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis rather than due to a lack of effectiveness of the FEAD Programme.⁵⁴⁴ Because FEAD support focuses on food aid, it does not significantly alter the poverty rate, but it rather alleviates situations of extreme poverty and

⁵³⁵ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in September 2023.

⁵³⁶ Chapter 3 of AIRs accepted in 2022, AIR 2021 (SFC 2014 database)

⁵³⁷ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in September 2023.

⁵³⁸ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October, 2023b.

⁵³⁹ Interview with a representative of the national Intermediate Body in Italy, conducted in September 2023.

⁵⁴⁰ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October, 2023a.

⁵⁴¹ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October, 2023a.

⁵⁴² Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in September 2023.

⁵⁴³ Statista, 2024. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/577032/incidence-rate-of-absolute-poverty-among-families/>

⁵⁴⁴ Interview with a representative of an implementing organization Italy, conducted in September, 2023.

marginalisation. Nevertheless, FEAD covers an important share of food aid in Italy, where income support measures were only recently introduced, and thus **complements the Italian poverty eradication and social inclusion policy framework**.

While speaking about tangible impact is difficult in quantitative terms at a macroeconomic level, a key impact of FEAD in Italy relates to **promoting social cohesion and enhancing the social inclusion** of the most deprived members of society. In this regard, some of the partner organisations consulted explained that FEAD has helped them in creating and maintaining a bond with individuals living in extreme poverty, which then allows them to bring such individuals closer to the welfare services. In this context, food aid is used as an important tool to reach individuals who are on the outskirts of society, thus beginning their path toward social inclusion by building a relationship of trust between the individuals and social services, which they can then turn to for other more complex issues (e.g. housing, employment, etc.). FEAD creates links between deprived families and services, which is especially key for reaching individuals who are not yet receiving support from services, and which prepares them for their inclusion in society and exit from poverty. Most importantly, the food and material assistance provided by FEAD ensures that the most deprived individuals still maintain hope.⁵⁴⁵ Overall, although FEAD has also been effective in addressing its general objectives, this is less tangibly the case in comparison to the programme's specific objectives.

Reach of target groups [criterion: effectiveness]

The key target groups addressed by FEAD OP I Italy include homeless people, as well as individuals and families in absolute poverty⁵⁴⁶ and severe material deprivation, encompassing the homeless, people with disabilities, migrants, and other vulnerable groups. Beneficiaries of FEAD support can be divided into two main groups: continuous, non-occasional recipients, and occasional beneficiaries, among which those who access aid through canteens. End users who receive food packages through FEAD must be considered continuous beneficiaries if they have obtained food aid monthly for more than six months in the past year; and occasionally if they only access support irregularly. As set out by the Managing Authority, the total number of individuals that can benefit occasionally from the distribution of food packages cannot be higher than 40% of the total number of beneficiaries for each territorial partner organisation, aside from exceptional circumstances authorised by the Managing Authority.⁵⁴⁷

By 2021, FEAD support under Measure 1 reached almost 3 million people, of whom over 2.1 million were assisted on a continuous basis (about half of the Italian population living in extreme poverty), and the remaining 823,000 as temporary beneficiaries.⁵⁴⁸ Overall, individuals who made use of FEAD support in 2021 can be disaggregated into the following groups: 602,000 children (aged 0 to 15), 337,000 elderly (aged 65 and above), 1.5 million women (51.9% of the total recipients), 670,000 migrants, 33,000 people with a disability, and 91,000 homeless persons.⁵⁴⁹

The data gathered on FEAD beneficiaries under Measure 4 reveals that the majority of individuals in severe material deprivation are largely adult, male, and of migrant background. In this case, 29,000 beneficiaries were reached by FEAD support among which 25,000 men (86.4%) and 4,000 women (13.6%). When disaggregating by age, it emerges that the vast majority of beneficiaries are aged between 15 and 65 (27 thousand, 92.7%), nearly 1,000 are younger than 15 (3.4%), and slightly more than 1,000 are elderly (4%), while 22,000 of all recipients under this measure are migrants (76.5%). Finally, 27,000 of these recipients are homeless persons (93.7%), and only 339 (1.2%) are people with disabilities.⁵⁵⁰ The majority of beneficiaries under Measure 4 in 2021 (21,000, 71.1%) also made use of food aid, almost the entirety of which (99.3%) fall within the category of homeless persons.

⁵⁴⁵ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in September 2023; Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October, 2023b.

⁵⁴⁶ According to the Italian National Institute of Statistics' (Istat) definition, individuals and families in absolute poverty are those unable to afford basic goods and services that are essential to protect them from severe social marginalisation. <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/217028>

⁵⁴⁷ Agenzie per le Derogation AGEA (2019). OPERATIONAL GUIDELINES n. 43 (ISTRUZIONI OPERATIVE n. 43). Available at: [AGEA](#)

⁵⁴⁸ Chapter 3 of AIRs accepted in 2022, AIR 2021 (SFC 2014 database); Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (2022). ANNUAL REPORT FEAD – OP I.

⁵⁴⁹ Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (2022). ANNUAL REPORT FEAD – OP I.

⁵⁵⁰ Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (2022). ANNUAL REPORT FEAD – OP I.

The Managing Authority stores additional information on beneficiaries disaggregated by age, socioeconomic characteristics, gender, income, homelessness and other personal characteristics, collected by the local partner organisations, which the research team has not been able to access at the time of writing in May 2024.

The partner organisations consulted highlighted the risk that the rigidity of FEAD requirements brings, particularly the case of the relatively fixed categories of goods provided, hindering the reach of specific target groups, including homeless persons (clothing, personal hygiene products, emergency kits). This has had a negative impact on the distribution of food and material goods provided within Measure 4, where a lack of flexibility in FEAD requirements created complications in the selection of products to be delivered.⁵⁵¹ It was suggested that target groups should also be defined at the local level in order to consider the specific reality of different local contexts and adequately address their needs, allowing for flexibility in the selection of material products.⁵⁵²

Adjustments to FEAD to address new challenges [*criterion: effectiveness*]

FEAD in Italy effectively made **adjustments to address new emerging and urgent needs** resulting from global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, and the rising inflation rate. The **COVID-19** crisis in particular increased an already existing need for food assistance, to a greater extent in the Centre-South but also in the Northern regions, leading to a dramatic surge of 42.6% in direct beneficiaries of FEAD support under Measure 1 in 2021 (nearly 3 million recipients) in comparison to 2019 (2.1 million recipients) pre-pandemic levels.⁵⁵³ The stakeholders consulted emphasised the stress local partner organisations found themselves under in order to meet the heightened demand for food aid, which required them to strengthen their capacity to distribute food by increasing their human resources and spaces available to store food stocks.⁵⁵⁴

Further adjustments were made to FEAD to respond to the **energy crisis and rise in inflation experienced following the Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine**. The inflation rise caused a surge in product prices, which was highlighted by the intermediate body AGEA as a key issue for the roll-out of FEAD in Italy, both in terms of basic foods costing more now than they used to and the increasing requests received by companies in revising the prices of their products, as well as the need to replace products that were previously produced in Ukraine (e.g. sunflower oil).⁵⁵⁵

To counteract the COVID-19 emergency, with decree 116 of 12 May 2020, the Managing Authority **expanded the scope of FEAD support to include among its recipients individuals that had not been priorly assisted** by suspending the previously held limit of 40% continuous, non-occasional recipients, and including several additional entities among its partner organisations to distribute food aid to match the increased demand for support.⁵⁵⁶ A **network of municipal operational centres** (*Centri Operativi Comunali, COC*) was also established by the government to replace the organisations that closed during the pandemic and support the collection of food products and their distribution to municipalities and people in need.⁵⁵⁷ Measures were implemented during the pandemic to specifically help individuals at greater risk of falling into poverty (e.g. seasonal workers, hospitality workers) who were suffering from intermittent poverty.⁵⁵⁸

The **funds devoted to FEAD**, which were originally intended to conclude in 2020, were increased and deferred to continue until December 2023. During the pandemic, these **funds were used to diversify and increase the size of food baskets delivered to beneficiaries** by integrating products that were not typically included (i.e., soups, frozen foods, coffee, chocolate). In the years following the pandemic outbreak, they also **greatly helped to offset the rise in inflation** experienced in recent years, without these resources, the quantities of products able

⁵⁵¹ SFC 2014 database

⁵⁵² Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October, 2023a.

⁵⁵³ Interview with a representative of the national Intermediate Body in Italy, conducted in September 2023: Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (2021). OPERATIONAL PROGRAMME I FEAD – ANNUAL REPORT EVALUATION OF MEASURE 1 (*PROGRAMMA OPERATIVO I FEAD – RELAZIONE ANNUALE DI RIESAME MISURA 1*). Available at: [Programa Operativo I FEAD](#).

⁵⁵⁴ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in September 2023.

⁵⁵⁵ Interview with a representative of the national Intermediate Body in Italy, conducted in September 2023.

⁵⁵⁶ Interview with a representative of the national Intermediate Body in Italy, conducted in September 2023.

⁵⁵⁷ Interview with a representative of the national Intermediate Body in Italy, conducted in September 2023; Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in September 2023.

⁵⁵⁸ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October, 2023a.

to be delivered to end users would have dropped dramatically.⁵⁵⁹ **A mechanism to temper companies' requests for price revisions** was also established by AGEA to respond to the increasing demands of businesses to increase their prices due to inflation. On the other hand, due to the surge in requests for food products, an unintended result was that the focus of FEAD in Italy re-shifted from the provision of accompanying measures for social inclusion to the distribution of material goods, which was further enhanced by the subsequent crises.⁵⁶⁰

The operations introduced by **CRII+, REACT EU and CARE** under FEAD were also mentioned for their positive impact on mitigating the negative social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, energy crises and other crises. The implementation of CRII and CRII+ measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in the demand for food products of individuals already assisted within FEAD, and those that had not priorly been users and who were affected by the crisis, such as seasonal and hospitality workers.⁵⁶¹ REACT EU was also integrated within FEAD during the pandemic alongside other national funds, leading to a significant increase in the resources available for Measure 1, which were then used to enhance the quantity and types of different products provided to recipients.⁵⁶²

Lastly, the introduction of **CARE** allowed to respond to the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine rapidly and enhanced the support provided by FEAD. Support structures in Italy reported the increased need for food aid to support Ukrainian families fleeing the war, primarily in the Centre-North. The flexibility of the Managing Authority, who allowed the registration of Ukrainians fleeing Russian military aggression as occasional recipients of FEAD support specifically linked to the emergency, enabled partner organisations to provide food assistance to nearly 40,000 refugees. Ukrainians fleeing Russian military aggression still in need of support are now included in the group of continuous recipients, although this number is relatively low because many of them have family ties in Italy and have quickly become employed.⁵⁶³

Horizontal principles of FEAD [*criterion: effectiveness*]

FEAD in Italy **made progress towards some of FEAD's horizontal principles**, with particular emphasis on respecting the dignity of the most deprived persons, preventing discrimination, and reducing food waste.

Measures aimed at **respecting the dignity of the most deprived persons** included the diversification of food baskets, incorporating products not only for their food value but also for the sense of dignity they bring, in respect of a balanced and healthy diet (snacks with lower sugar content, chocolate cream for children) for a total of 25 products offered by the end of the 2014-2020 programming period.⁵⁶⁴ The stakeholders consulted stressed the importance of diversifying the range of products offered, giving beneficiaries the choice of different goods, also in consideration of the specific food needs of different groups (migrants, religious minorities) and of regional traditions within the country, therefore **preventing discrimination against minorities**. According to one of the partner organisations interviewed, it is the task of OPC and OPT to understand the different needs target groups have at a territorial level and translate them in discussions with the Managing Authority.⁵⁶⁵ In this regard, vouchers were mentioned as a potential instrument to better address the diverse needs of recipients as they would allow them to purchase their products independently.⁵⁶⁶ The dignity of beneficiaries has also been safeguarded by the changes made to the packaging of food products, where the label 'help for the deprived' was removed to eliminate the stigma associated with it.⁵⁶⁷

Although FEAD was reported not to have had a direct impact on **reducing food waste** and recovering food surpluses, despite this aspect being foreseen in Italy's FEAD OP, the management of FEAD helps organisations that distribute food to prevent food surpluses from occurring, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many companies encountered difficulties with surplus warehouses.⁵⁶⁸

⁵⁵⁹ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in September 2023.

⁵⁶⁰ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October, 2023a.

⁵⁶¹ Interview with a representative of the national Intermediate Body in Italy, conducted in September 2023; Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October, 2023a.

⁵⁶² Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in September 2023; Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October, 2023b.

⁵⁶³ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in September 2023.

⁵⁶⁴ Interview with a representative of the national Intermediate Body in Italy, conducted in September 2023.

⁵⁶⁵ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October, 2023b.

⁵⁶⁶ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October, 2023b.

⁵⁶⁷ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in September 2023.

⁵⁶⁸ Interview with a representative of the national Intermediate Body in Italy, conducted in September 2023.

Facilitating and hindering factors [*criterion: effectiveness*]

FEAD support has generated important **socio-economic impacts** at macro-economic level in Italy, positively influencing the Italian industrial and agricultural supply chains. According to data reported by AGEA, nearly 700 million EUR have been spent across seven years in the purchasing of food products, which has had a positive impact on financing companies participating in the procurement and supply of food goods. The possibility of producing goods for FEAD was important for these companies, especially as their production continued in great quantities during difficult times for the market when the demand for them would have otherwise been lower. Moreover, through FEAD 100 million contracts worth nearly 1 billion EUR have been managed.⁵⁶⁹

Overall, FEAD is also considered as an essential form of support that has enabled to **mitigate the effects of severe deprivation and ease the burden of almost 3 million people in extreme poverty** through food and material aid.⁵⁷⁰ Nonetheless as remarked above, the stakeholders consulted consider FEAD support under Measure 1 (to integrate families' diets through the provision of basic food products) an essential form of support to allow deprived individuals to access products which they would have not been able to otherwise access, although it does not sufficiently cover families' basic daily needs due to the bi-weekly frequency of food delivery.

On the other hand, **Measure 2** (material deprivation of children and young people in the school environment) **and Measure 3** (food and educational deprivation of children and young people in deprived areas) **have never been implemented due to administrative and regulatory constraints** in relation to the burden of centralised procurement procedures at national level, and to the selection of the type of goods to be provided at European level.⁵⁷¹ The resources originally designed for Measure 2 and Measure 3 (approximately EUR 60 million each) were then re-allocated to Measure 1 for food distribution.⁵⁷²

Measure 2 was intended to provide children and young people with goods for academic use (i.e., notebooks, pens) which would be purchased by partner organisations and then distributed to beneficiaries. However as noted by one of the partner organisations consulted, it became apparent that such a measure would **create a stigma** around the children using scholastic goods clearly labelled as obtained through FEAD funds, soon leading to the elimination of this measure from the Italian OP alongside other **administrative constraints**. Difficulties associated with **Measure 3** specifically concerned the provision of food through school canteens, which was difficult to **carry out as a common project on food education across different territories**.⁵⁷³

Overall cost-effectiveness of FEAD operations [*criterion: efficiency*]

The stakeholders consulted reported on the **cost-effectiveness** of FEAD operations in Italy, which largely relied on the extended network of volunteers working for the coordinating and local partner organisations (mostly third sector organisations) across the Italian territory.⁵⁷⁴ Almost the entirety of the resources devoted to FEAD in Italy have been used, meaning that FEAD has achieved its objective in a cost-effective way in relation to the distribution of food products. Nonetheless, most of the resources allocated to the four measures outlined in the FEAD Italy were later transferred to food aid (Measure 1); the partner organisations consulted suggested that part of these could have instead been allocated to support training and technical assistance for partner organisations to reduce their administrative burden, given the typically small size of their teams. Technical assistance support was effectively provided for the digitalisation of the fund and its portal in Italy but could have been increased to cover other areas.⁵⁷⁵

⁵⁶⁹ Interview with a representative of the national Intermediate Body in Italy, conducted in September 2023.

⁵⁷⁰ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in September 2023.

⁵⁷¹ European Commission (2018). FEAD Country Fiche Italy

⁵⁷² Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (2020). ANNUAL REPORT FEAD – OP I (RELAZIONE DI ATTUAZIONE ANNUALE FEAD – OP I). Available at: <https://www.lavoro.gov.it/temi-e-priorita/europa-e-fondi-europei/focus-on/fondo-di-aiuti-europei-agli-indigenti-Fead/Documents/FEAD-RAA-2019.pdf>

⁵⁷³ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October, 2023b.

⁵⁷⁴ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October, 2023b.

⁵⁷⁵ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in September 2023.

The reported **efficiency of FEAD operations** was associated with the voluntary work of partner organisations in the delivery of food aid, and with the previous expertise of AGEA in the management of the MDP programme. The entire budget allocated to FEAD in Italy, with the exception of 5% devoted to lead organisations (which now has become 7% in the new 2021-2027 programming period), reaches end users directly, while every other expense is covered by third sector organisations. This structure was highlighted as particularly effective because it is rooted in the territory and makes use of small entities with great knowledge of the territory and who are well known to potential beneficiaries, meaning that they are able to maintain a direct relationship with the users and reach vulnerable people more easily.⁵⁷⁶ Moreover, because the intermediate body AGEA was already specialised in the distribution of food before FEAD thanks to the legacy of MDP, it carried over its practices in the procurement of food goods.⁵⁷⁷

A number of **recommendations** were therefore put forward by the partner organisations consulted within the scope of this evaluation. Devoting greater resources to improving the technical and IT skills of partner organisations and providing them with technical assistance was highlighted as a key factor in ensuring the efficiency of FEAD operations in Italy.⁵⁷⁸ Although resources were originally devoted to such purposes, they were unspent in the first programming period. It was suggested that the new programming period could provide greater technical assistance for territories and municipalities in order to increase their efficiency, alongside enhancing communication with the FEAD management bodies to avoid overlaps of responsibilities between different entities (e.g. working with the same target groups, dealing with similar issues) and prevent resources from being wasted.⁵⁷⁹ In this regard, it is necessary for the Italian Managing Authority to increase its involvement in the roll-out of FEAD and coordination with the seven national partner organisations to avoid delays and adequately match the increased volume of requests from persons in need.⁵⁸⁰

Administrative burden of monitoring and reporting requirements [criterion: efficiency]

The implementation of FEAD introduced more complicated **monitoring and reporting requirements** than those foreseen by the previous MDP programme, among which the requirement to provide documentation to certify the status of the individual or the family unit as deprived introduced by the Managing Authority. This led to the creation of a file for each family unit, leading to a significant drop in the number of accredited facilities and recipients reported by one of the partner organisations consulted, giving the idea to local partner organisations of the bureaucratisation of the programme.⁵⁸¹ Reporting requirements are seen by partner organisations as bureaucratic, but at the same time important to avoid fraud and increase awareness of it in the world of volunteering.⁵⁸² There is scope to simplify further monitoring requirements, although these are partly dependent on Italian laws rather than on the applicable EU Regulations.⁵⁸³

The **requirements on the procurement of goods were also deemed as unnecessarily bureaucratic** by the partner organisations consulted, although this was also highlighted as a national problem emerging from the fact that they rely on the procurement code designed for the private sector. Overall, a certain level of bureaucracy is

⁵⁷⁶ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October 2023b.

⁵⁷⁷ Interview with a representative of the national Intermediate Body in Italy, conducted in September 2023.

⁵⁷⁸ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in September 2023.

⁵⁷⁹ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October 2023a.

⁵⁸⁰ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in September 2023.

⁵⁸¹ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in September 2023.

⁵⁸² Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October 2023b.

⁵⁸³ Interview with a representative of the national Intermediate Body in Italy, conducted in September 2023.

seen as necessary to monitor the results achieved through public funds. However, practices for the social sector could be streamlined through collaboration between public and private bodies.⁵⁸⁴

The **digitalisation** of FEAD has nevertheless **helped to reduce the administrative burden of monitoring and reporting requirements**. FEAD is now entirely managed through a digital platform (SiFEAD), which is used to monitor products and activities and extract data automatically for reporting, making data visible and available to the Managing Authority and AGEA with transparency and solidity. Initially, the process of digitalisation was seen as a complication because of the high number of individuals lacking IT skills, leading OPC and OPT to spend a lot of time training their staff. Ultimately, digitalisation positively influenced the management of FEAD and led to its simplification and automatization of processes and procedures.⁵⁸⁵ The SiFEAD portal has thus allowed to computerize daily practices that were priorly paper-based and overly complicated (e.g. data storage). The process of certification for continuous recipients has also been simplified; priorly, each recipient had a file containing their ISEE (income declaration made by municipalities), citizenship income, and documentation demonstrating their right to receive FEAD support. Since 2022, recipients can now provide a self-certification themselves online.⁵⁸⁶

Budget was also devoted to **technical assistance for the intermediate body AGEA**, which allowed to contract an external company and thus **hire specialised staff** who greatly helped its work in the roll-out of FEAD, given the small size of the organisation. This was particularly important for the fulfilment of FEAD's monitoring requirements especially due to the high frequency of requests being delivered by AGEA.⁵⁸⁷

Nonetheless, an outstanding issue is that the **audit requirements** imposed on partner organisations do not reflect the simplification introduced through the digitalisation of FEAD. The audit still requires paper evidence and as such the reinstatement of a system that had already been replaced because it is conducted through processes set for other programmes such as ESF which are not tailored to FEAD.⁵⁸⁸ This has led to reverting back to practices that had been digitalised to pass the audit, creating inconsistencies and complications. Although the European Commission has urged for the simplification of monitoring procedures and implementation, there are still multiple steps that could be revised to reduce the burden for both OPs and the Managing Authority.⁵⁸⁹

The unnecessary administrative burden set at national level was also highlighted by the stakeholders consulted. The previously mentioned requirement of providing a family's status as deprived through ISEE by the Managing Authority was problematic because ISEE always reports the situation of the previous year which may not adequately reflect the current need in times of emergency and created an unnecessary administrative burden. To prevent people in need from being excluded, other systems of evaluation were recently introduced, such as the 'current ISEE'.⁵⁹⁰

Simplification measures [criterion: efficiency]

Although some of the bureaucratic steps foreseen by FEAD in Italy are fundamental for the adequate monitoring and tracking of operations in the country, there is scope for improvement or simplification. In order to simplify FEAD processes at the national and EU levels, the partner organisations consulted highlighted that **separate**

⁵⁸⁴ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October 2023a.

⁵⁸⁵ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in September 2023.

⁵⁸⁶ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October, 2023b.

⁵⁸⁷ Interview with a representative of the national Intermediate Body in Italy, conducted in September 2023.

⁵⁸⁸ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in September 2023.

⁵⁸⁹ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in September 2023.

⁵⁹⁰ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in September 2023.

interventions on social inclusion aimed at different target groups should be harmonised.⁵⁹¹ In particular, as discussed in the section above, key stakeholders call for **greater simplification in monitoring, reporting and audit requirements** to reduce the administrative burden on organisations involved in the roll-out of FEAD.

Potential strategies to further increase the simplification of FEAD in Italy include other purchasing methodologies such as the **use of vouchers**, which was discussed within the roundtable of the National Coordinating Group. Moreover, vouchers were mentioned by some of the partner organisations consulted as a potential instrument to not only better address the diverse needs of recipients from different religious, ethnic and territorial backgrounds and dietary requirements (e.g. allergies and intolerances), as they would allow them to purchase their products independently, but also to introduce greater simplification within FEAD support overall.⁵⁹² Vouchers could indeed represent a more cost-efficient approach to adapt to the rapidly changing needs of recipients, ensuring that the needs of each key target group across vastly different territorial areas are met, and respecting the dignity of beneficiaries in choosing their own products to purchase independently.

Coherence of FEAD with other interventions [*criterion: coherence*]

In recent years, political attention towards poverty reduction in Italy has increased, with enhanced resources and investments. **FEAD is one of the few stable measures on poverty reduction and social inclusion within the Italian national landscape, where a structured policy is missing.** Most measures implemented in this field over the past years have been short-term interventions linked to specific emergencies, as policies keep changing in each new government, thus hindering continuity in this sector.⁵⁹³

FEAD Measure 1 is complementary to the measures funded by the ESF in Thematic Objective 9 (TO9) - Fostering social inclusion and tackling poverty and discrimination.⁵⁹⁴ The measures included by FEAD are more based on emergencies in comparison with ESF, which rather focuses on active social inclusion. **Measure 4 activities on homelessness are complementary to the activities financed by the ESF** in the PON *Città Metropolitane e Inclusione*, through which material goods are distributed to recipients of accompanying measures for housing independence by ESF.⁵⁹⁵

13.2. Is FEAD still relevant?

Relevance to target groups [*criterion: relevance*]

The **key target groups** addressed by FEAD OP I Italy include **vulnerable categories of the population**, such as homeless people (specifically targeted by Measure 4), as well as individuals and families in absolute poverty and severe material deprivation, encompassing the homeless, disabled people, migrants, children, the elderly, and other groups.

The data made available by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies makes it possible to assess the degree to which the **most relevant groups targeted by FEAD support in Italy were reached**. Individuals who made use of FEAD support in 2021 in the form of food aid and basic material assistance under Measure 1 (nearly 3 million overall) can be disaggregated into the following groups: 1.5 million women (51.9% of the total recipients), 670,000 migrants, 602,000 children (aged 0 to 15), 337,000 elderly (aged 65 and above), 91,000 homeless

⁵⁹¹ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October 2023a.

⁵⁹² Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October 2023b.

⁵⁹³ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October 2023b.

⁵⁹⁴ PON Inclusione (N.A.). ITALY'S OPERATIONAL PROGRAMME (OP) FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION.

Available at: <https://poninclusione.lavoro.gov.it/Pagine/Sintesi-PON-Inclusione-EN>

⁵⁹⁵ Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (2022). ANNUAL REPORT FEAD – OP I.

persons, and 33,000 people with a disability.⁵⁹⁶ Concerning the measure on material deprivation of homeless people and other vulnerable categories at risk of housing exclusion (Measure 4), the majority of beneficiaries are largely adult, male, and of migrant background. Almost the entirety of the 29,000 beneficiaries who were reached by this type of FEAD support in 2021 were homeless persons (93.7%). Overall, the vast majority of recipients are male (86.4%), and aged between 15 and 65 (92.7%), with only a minimal share of recipients being either younger than 15 (3.4%), or older than 65 (4%). A considerable portion of beneficiaries under Measure 4 is made up of individuals in severe deprivation and of a migrant background (76.5%), while a marginal portion of recipients has a disability (1.2%).⁵⁹⁷

A **key issue** in ensuring that the support made available through FEAD is relevant to the needs of the most deprived was highlighted by multiple partner organisations consulted. The **centralised decision-making concerning the food and material goods delivered** through FEAD and **lack of flexibility in this choice at the level of implementing organisations and beneficiaries** due to the fixed categories of products offered may hinder the effective reach of specific target groups (e.g. ethnic or religious minorities with specific dietary requirements, homeless persons) and thus prevent organisations from adequately responding and adapting to the needs of key target groups. As such specific needs largely vary from territory to territory, it is therefore important to allow scope for decisions to be made at the local and regional level in order to consider the specific reality of different local contexts and adequately address their needs, allowing for flexibility in the selection of material products.⁵⁹⁸

Finally, **due to the experience in recent years of several crises** such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, and the cost-of-living crisis, **new target groups in need of FEAD support emerged**. Due to the pandemic in particular, a wider group of individuals were at greater risk of poverty, including seasonal and hospitality workers who found themselves unable to work and were not adequately protected by a safety net.⁵⁹⁹ Looking ahead at the future, it is important that FEAD support can dynamically shift to adapt to the needs and target groups emerging from global phenomena, ensuring that its key goal of alleviating poverty and easing its burden on the most deprived is promoted.

Relevance of FEAD now and in the future [*criterion: relevance*]

The **continued relevance** of FEAD today as a key element of Italy's national poverty alleviation policy is evidenced by the opinions of the stakeholders consulted. FEAD is not only considered as a form of immediate support for people in extreme poverty, which is especially crucial in moments of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, but also as a fundamental way to connect people through food assistance. The food packages recipients can access in public spaces or at the premises of the territorial partner organisations thus create a connection between beneficiaries and the services, bringing people closer to the system and ensuring their rights are protected. Therefore, food aid can represent the first step to helping harder-to-reach groups who live outside of the public services system and begin a pathway of community-building and social inclusion. This is specially made possible by the extended network of implementing organisations deeply rooted in their territories and that are actively involved in FEAD delivery at local and regional level.⁶⁰⁰

FEAD is also regarded by the partner organisations consulted as an **innovative tool in the promotion of social inclusion**, which has helped to bring the issue of extreme social marginalisation to the forefront in Italy in the

⁵⁹⁶ Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (2022). ANNUAL REPORT FEAD – OP I.

⁵⁹⁷ Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (2022). ANNUAL REPORT FEAD – OP I.

⁵⁹⁸ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October 2023a.

⁵⁹⁹ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October 2023a.

⁶⁰⁰ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October 2023b.

last 10 years. To ensure that FEAD continues to be relevant in its aim to enhance social inclusion, it is therefore essential to generate continuity with the progress achieved to date through the strengthening and innovation of the networks made up of public services and implementing organisations, as well as to continue experimenting and increasing flexibility with the use of FEAD funds towards poverty alleviation and social inclusion which place the individual at the centre.⁶⁰¹

The lack of a long-standing structural approach to poverty reduction policy in Italy makes the support provided through FEAD ever more relevant. Due to the short-term consecutive changes of government, several income support measures have been introduced and rapidly replaced in recent years, as discussed in Section 2.3 above. **FEAD, on the other hand, has remained a constant form of support offered to the most deprived, despite political shifts, global crises, and other challenges.**⁶⁰²

Several **future trends** could affect the future relevance of this EU support to the most deprived. Among these, migration affects the food requests and demand received by specific minorities (e.g. Muslims) who have different eating habits. The demographic slowdown and low birth rates in Italy and the recent migratory flows also influence the lower demand for food for children because the majority of requests come from adults; this will bring about change in the products offered which should be more targeted.⁶⁰³ Overall, it is hoped that the integration of FEAD within ESF+ will more closely link material distribution to long-term social inclusion paths and emancipation,⁶⁰⁴ in a way that established a more structured policy on poverty reduction and social inclusion which is not solely linked to specific emergencies and is consistent with the approach adopted across the EU.⁶⁰⁵

13.3. Did FEAD make a difference and to whom?

EU added value [criterion: EU added value]

FEAD support has generated added value in Italy in producing beneficial effects that would otherwise not have taken place, complementing existing policies in the country. In particular, FEAD support has led to a re-evaluation of food aid by the European Commission as an emergency measure that must always remain accessible to people in difficulty (especially in countries where income support measures are missing), shifting the focus from social inclusion to material assistance. Such aid must provide immediate connection to people in difficulty, as highlighted by the experience of the pandemic.⁶⁰⁶

The 2014-2020 FEAD Programme introduced innovation in the national welfare policy framework of social inclusion and poverty alleviation policy, while also gaining increasing importance in the political agenda in Italy. Before FEAD, the field of material assistance and severe marginalisation had always been exclusively managed by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policies. With the introduction of FEAD in 2014, other key third sector actors across the national territory who had long been rooted in their territories, gained an increasing influence in the distribution of food aid and material assistance, now being able to participate in dialogue with the Managing Authority and other organisations experienced in the fight against poverty and social exclusion.⁶⁰⁷

⁶⁰¹ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October 2023a.

⁶⁰² Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October 2023b.

⁶⁰³ Interview with a representative of the national Intermediate Body in Italy, conducted in September 2023.

⁶⁰⁴ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October 2023a.

⁶⁰⁵ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October 2023b.

⁶⁰⁶ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October 2023b.

⁶⁰⁷ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October 2023a.

FEAD also **strengthened cooperation** between national partner organisations, the Managing Authority and the intermediate body AGEA in **developing and fostering support structures, establishing a working relationship between the public and third sector** while also **increasing synergies between the different actors** at national and local level and **enhancing the local welfare services**.⁶⁰⁸ This provided a unique experience that coordinating and local OPs had not experienced before within MDP, creating a sense of awareness on the topics of poverty alleviation and social inclusion, as well as fostering a network of contacts that enabled important moments of discussion.⁶⁰⁹ The outcomes of this process were enhanced communication and partnership between the key stakeholders involved in the delivery of FEAD, alongside promoting dialogue and smoothening their coordination in matters relating to the choice of products to be offered in baskets, digitalisation, training awareness and management of public funds, and overcoming common challenges, for instance.⁶¹⁰

Finally, **FEAD had an important effect on reaching individuals who are on the outskirts of society**, thus beginning their path toward social inclusion by building a relationship of trust and creating links between deprived families and public services, preparing them for their exit from poverty. In particular, FEAD was effective in reaching homeless individuals, who represent almost the entirety of recipients of FEAD Measure 4, and an extremely vulnerable population.

Visibility [visibility]

Partner organisations and end recipients are to a smaller or larger extent **aware that support comes from FEAD and the EU**. Partner organisations are obliged to display a logo with reference to FEAD aid at their distribution points, as well as on their websites. Labels on food products provided to recipients are also indelible to prevent them from entering the regular market.⁶¹¹ Through FEAD, beneficiaries receive a physical product with the emblem of the European Commission in their home to let them know that they are not alone and receive concrete support, which according to some of the stakeholders consulted, represents an irreplaceable and tangible form of support.⁶¹²

However, it is the opinion of one of the stakeholders consulted that **FEAD and EU support is not entirely visible to the public**. Although the logos and signs are displayed on the organisations' websites, there is little awareness of how much Italy benefits from European funds. There is no institutional culture in Italian civic education schools on what a public body is, which increases the risk of fake news and the understanding of how public funds work.⁶¹³

14. Good practices

A good practice example emerging from the consultations with the stakeholders interviewed concerns the **adjustments made in FEAD delivery to respond** to the rapidly changing needs and consequences of the **COVID-19 pandemic**, which helped to continue ensuring that the specific and general objectives of FEAD in Italy were adequately addressed, particularly in relation to:

⁶⁰⁸ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October 2023a.

⁶⁰⁹ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in September 2023.

⁶¹⁰ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October 2023b.

⁶¹¹ Interview with a representative of the national Intermediate Body in Italy, conducted in September 2023.

⁶¹² Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in September 2023.

⁶¹³ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October 2023b.

- The implementation of structural adjustments and new measures made to respond to an increasing need for food aid and number of prospective beneficiaries caused by the COVID-19 crisis; and
- The increased volume of funding devoted to FEAD and its postponement after the end of the originally planned programming period.

The **COVID-19 crisis** increased an already existing need for food aid, leading to a significant rise in the number of prospective beneficiaries of FEAD support, placing local partner organisations under great stress in order to meet this heightened demand, which required them to increase their human resources and physical spaces available to enhance their capacity to both distribute food and store food stocks.⁶¹⁴ Further adjustments were made by the Managing Authority, who expanded the scope of FEAD support to include among its recipients individuals that had not been priorly assisted by suspending the previously held limit of 40% continuous, non-occasional recipients, and to include a number of additional entities among its partner organisations to distribute food aid to match the increased demand for support.⁶¹⁵ To enable this process, a network of municipal operational centres (*Centri Operativi Comunali*, COC) was established to replace the organisations that closed during the pandemic and support the collection of food products and their distribution to municipalities and people in need.⁶¹⁶ Moreover, further measures were implemented tailored to specifically help individuals at greater risk of falling into poverty (e.g. seasonal workers, hospitality workers) who were facing the possibility of intermittent poverty.⁶¹⁷

The **increased volume of the funds devoted to FEAD and their postponement after the end of the originally planned programming period in 2020 can also be considered as a good practice in the delivery of FEAD in Italy** as a prompt response to an unprecedented crisis. Due to the pandemic, the funds allocated to FEAD were deferred to continue until December 2023 in order to diversify and increase the size of food baskets delivered to beneficiaries by integrating products that were not typically included (i.e., soups, frozen foods, coffee, chocolate). These funds were later used to also offset the rise in inflation experienced in recent years and ensure that the quantities of products delivered to recipients are sufficient despite the increased costs of food products, and have been considered as an invaluable tool to address the urgent demands arising from the pandemic and inflation crises.⁶¹⁸

15. Conclusions and lessons learned

The assessment presented in this case study regarding the implementation of FEAD in Italy, based on a mixture of qualitative and quantitative evidence, reveals **positive outcomes of FEAD support in the country, challenges, and lessons learnt across the different evaluation criteria**: effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence, EU added value, and visibility.

With regard to **effectiveness**, FEAD support has been **relatively successful in achieving the FEAD specific objectives**, namely to alleviate the worst forms of poverty and social exclusion, to improve the living conditions and overall wellbeing of the most deprived persons, and to develop and foster support structures for alleviating poverty and social exclusion in Italy, as evidenced by the number of beneficiaries and intended target groups reached by FEAD support. By 2021, FEAD support reached almost 3 million people, of whom 2.1 million were assisted on a continuous basis (about half of the Italian population living in extreme poverty). Moreover, multiple of the stakeholders consulted through this exercise stressed the important **contribution of FEAD funds to**

⁶¹⁴ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in September 2023.

⁶¹⁵ Interview with a representative of the national Intermediate Body in Italy, conducted in September 2023.

⁶¹⁶ Interview with a representative of the national Intermediate Body in Italy, conducted in September 2023; Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in September 2023.

⁶¹⁷ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in October 2023a.

⁶¹⁸ Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation Italy, conducted in September 2023.

creating greater coordination and partnership between the key players active in the field of food and material aid, **bringing continuity to the national framework** of social inclusion policies and the fight against serious marginalisation. There is also a need to be more open and flexible to take other partners on board when needed. On the other hand, although FEAD has also been effective in addressing its general objectives, this is less tangibly the case in comparison to the programme's specific objectives because it is not fully possible to gauge in quantitative terms its effectiveness and impact in eradicating poverty due to the non-financial nature of the support provided, meaning that it would be difficult for the poverty rate in Italy to substantially decrease solely through material assistance. Nonetheless, FEAD support has also **generated an important socio-economic impact** at macro-economic level in Italy, positively influencing the Italian industrial and agricultural supply chains and financing companies participating in the procurement and supply of food goods.

The support provided through FEAD has also been **relatively effective in reaching its key target groups**, as set out in the FEAD OP I Italy: individuals and families in extreme poverty and severe material deprivation, encompassing the homeless, people with disabilities, migrants, and other vulnerable groups. Overall, according to the 2022 Annual FEAD Report delivered by the Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, the almost 3 million individuals who made use of FEAD support in 2021 under Measure 1 can be disaggregated into the following groups: 602,000 children (aged 0 to 15), 337,000 elderly (aged 65 and above), 1.5 million women (51.9% of the total recipients), 670,000 migrants, 33,000 people with a disability, and 91,000 homeless persons.⁶¹⁹ On the other hand, the data gathered on FEAD beneficiaries under Measure 4 reveals that the majority of individuals in severe material deprivation are homeless persons, largely adults, male, and of migrant background. Ensuring flexibility in FEAD requirements, such as in the case of the choice of products, emerged as an important element to maximise the reach of specific target groups such as homeless people and increase simplifications. In this regard, the partner organisations consulted highlighted the need for goods to be decided at the local level, taking into consideration different territorial realities.

FEAD in Italy **effectively made adjustments to address new emerging and urgent needs arising from world events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, and the rising inflation rate**, which increased an already pressing need for food aid, leading to a significant increase of direct beneficiaries of FEAD support which was highlighted by several interviewees. Adjustments were also effectively made to counteract the increased costs of products and their diversification following the energy crisis and the Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, and the subsequent increase in inflation. Under FEAD, the operations introduced by CRII+, REACT EU and CARE mitigated the negative social effects of these crises and increased the resources available to address the specific and general objectives of FEAD.

Progress was also made towards some of FEAD's horizontal principles, with particular emphasis on respecting the dignity of the most deprived persons, preventing discrimination, and reducing food waste. Measures in these areas included the diversification of food baskets, incorporating products not only for their food value but also for the sense of dignity they bring, respect to a balanced and healthy diet, and the changes made to the packaging of food products, where the label 'help for the deprived' was removed to eliminate the stigma associated with it.

The **high cost-effectiveness** reported by the stakeholders consulted regarding FEAD operations in Italy underpins the **efficiency** of its system. The reported efficiency of FEAD operations was linked to the voluntary work of partner organisations in the delivery of food aid, relying on an extended network of volunteers working for the coordinating and local partner organisations (mostly third sector organisations) all across the Italian territory, and with the previous expertise of AGEA in the management of the MDP programme, who carried over its practices in the procurement of food products. This structure was highlighted as particularly effective because it is rooted in the territory and makes use of small entities with great knowledge of the territory and who are well-known to potential beneficiaries, meaning that they can maintain a direct relationship with the users and reach vulnerable people more easily. Nonetheless, **several burdensome monitoring and reporting requirements** could be simplified which mainly concern national legislation on procurement, and excessively bureaucratic audit requirements which do not reflect the simplification introduced through the digitalisation of FEAD. Several lessons can be therefore learned from the 2014-2020 FEAD programming period to further increase the cost-effectiveness of FEAD operations: continuing to devote resources to improving the technical and IT skills of partner organisations and provide them with technical assistance, increasing the involvement of the Italian Managing Authority in the roll-out of FEAD and coordination with partner organisations, and considering the use of vouchers as a new approach to simplify FEAD procedures.

⁶¹⁹ Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (2022). ANNUAL REPORT FEAD – OP I.

In terms of **coherence**, FEAD Measures 1 and 4 are complementary to 2014-2020 ESF measures. The new ESF+ programme integrates FEAD as one of its key areas alongside other poverty reduction policies, including other issues such as migration and youth in a global panner. The ESF+ tender also provided a social intervention plan which outlined the objectives and levels of services that the State must guarantee in each area and the funds available, embracing the multi-fund logic prioritising certain social issues. this should be refined to avoid overlap between different policies and ensure synergies.

FEAD today continues to be **relevant** as a key element of Italy's national poverty alleviation policy, a form of immediate support for people in extreme poverty, and as a fundamental way to connect people through food assistance which brings people in need closer to the public services and initiating their path towards social inclusion. FEAD is also regarded as an innovative tool in the promotion of social inclusion, which has helped bring the issue of extreme social marginalisation to the forefront in Italy in the last ten years. To ensure that FEAD continues to be relevant in its aim to enhance social inclusion, it is therefore essential to generate continuity with the progress achieved to date through the strengthening and innovation of the networks made up of public services and implementing organisations, as well as to continue experimenting and increasing flexibility with the use of FEAD funds towards poverty alleviation and social inclusion which place the individual at the centre.⁶²⁰ Another key issue in ensuring that the support made available through FEAD is relevant to the needs of the most deprived relates to the granting of greater flexibility in the choice of products to be delivered through FEAD support to adequately address the changing needs of diverse target groups and reflect different realities, thus allowing scope for decision-making at the local and regional level. Lastly, future trends could affect the future relevance of this EU support to the most deprived, among which include migration, demographic slowdown, and the imminent integration of FEAD within ESF+.

Overall, FEAD support has generated **EU added value** in Italy in producing beneficial effects that would otherwise not have taken place, complementing existing policies in the country. In particular, FEAD support has led to a re-evaluation of food aid by the European Commission as an emergency measure that must always remain accessible to people in difficulty, shifting the focus from social inclusion to material assistance. Thanks to FEAD, cooperation between national partner organisations, the Managing Authority, and the intermediate body AGEA was strengthened in developing and fostering support structures, establishing a working relationship between the public and third sector while also increasing synergies between the different actors at the national and local level and enhancing the local welfare services.

Finally, the fact that the support they receive comes from FEAD and the EU is more or less **visible** to partner organisations and end recipients, given the requirement for partner organisations to display a logo with reference to FEAD aid at their distribution points and websites, and the mandatory labels on food products provided to recipients. Overall, the physical food package with an EU logo represents an irreplaceable and tangible form of support that enters the recipient's household.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Methodology

This case study is based on the analysis and assessment of a mixture of qualitative and quantitative sources, including stakeholder interviews, desk research, and descriptive statistical analysis. Four interviews were conducted to consult stakeholders directly involved in the delivery of FEAD and active in the field of poverty alleviation and social inclusion. Among the stakeholders interviewed were representatives from the intermediate body AGEA, three coordinating partner organisations, and one additional research institute. Representatives from the Italian Managing Authority, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, were contacted several times (via email, telephone) to take part in the evaluation but did not respond.

The lack of information directly shared by the FEAD Managing Authority represents the main limitation of this case study. A variety of primary and secondary sources were also analysed, including national working documents and annual reports of FEAD in Italy.

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Interviews with stakeholders:

- Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation in Italy, conducted in September, 2023.
- Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation in Italy, conducted in October, 2023a.
- Interview with a representative of an implementing organisation in Italy, conducted in October, 2023b.

Appendix 3: FEAD indicators

Table A. 78 – General financial data for the implementation of FEAD in Italy in 2014-2022

Indicator	Total amount of eligible public expenditure approved in the documents setting out the conditions for support of operations (EUR)	Total amount of eligible public expenditure incurred by beneficiaries and paid in implementing operations (EUR)	Total amount of eligible public expenditure declared to the Commission (EUR)
2014-2022	930 583 786.90	588 553 066.13	496 302 507.85

Source: SFC 2014 database.

Table A. 79 – FEAD common output indicators in Italy in 2015-2022

Output indicators on food support distributed	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Quantity of fruits and vegetables (tonnes)	12 196 .90	455.05	4 986.28	1 360.19	1 169.37	2 994.32	5 159.40	5 881.55
Quantity of meat, eggs, fish, seafood (tonnes)	1 305.60	0	814.32	631.18	1.418.88	1.947.10	2 126.96	6 312.31
Quantity of flour, bread,	20 634.30	14 042.85	37 443.00	20 842.94	22 371.19	37 589.66	33 892.43	32 121.17

Output indicators on food support distributed	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
potatoes, rice and other starchy products (tonnes)								
Quantity of sugar (tonnes)	3 776.98	0.00	34.75	539.76	2 617.36	650.08	3 720.18	4 865.16
Quantity of milk products (tonnes)	33 822.51	19 264.30	3 590.25	8 501.64	7 680.21	22 945.51	20 642.62	24 261.31
Quantity of fats, oil (tonnes)	4 641.15	0.00	4 067.09	2 499.21	1 207.35	5 302.71	4 262.94	2 549.52
Quantity of convenience food, other foodstuff (not falling in abovementioned categories) (tonnes)	11 139.87	0.00	7 196.83	6 433.38	6 934.34	5 495.03	17 211.53	23 764.23
Total quantity of food support distributed (tonnes)	87 517.31	33 762.20	58 132.52	40 808.30	43 398.70	76 924.41	87 016.06	99 755.25
Proportion of FEAD co-financed food products in the total volume of food distributed by the partner organisations (%)	62.70	62.74	70.00	68.92	67.40	69.94	51.37	60.18
Total number of meals distributed partly or totally financed by the OP	16 981 240	17 809 135	17 307 881	18 801 412	24 044 183	19 416 787	14 887 130	16 478 979
Total number of food packages distributed partly or totally	51 876 352	51 085 610	49 647 761	11 595 378	12 223 673	9 747 527	12 225 565	12 734 924

Output indicators on food support distributed	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
financed by the OP								

Source: SFC 2014 database.

*Please note that there was no expenditure in 2014.

Table A. 80 – FEAD participations in Italy in 2015-2022

Result indicators on food support distributed	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Total number of persons receiving food support	2 809 131	2 778 207	2 700 012	2 678 264	2 079 209	2 656 579	2 983 801	2 907 307
Number of children aged 15 years or below	856 879	890 560	454 901	501 596	437 822	539 924	602 179	638 559
Number of persons aged 65 years or above	309 205	248 892	197 756	225 324	182 267	301 133	337 425	333 750
Number of women	1 334 337	1 320 000	860 537	1 037.555	970.918	1 304.806	1 538 268	1 491 820
Number of migrants, participants with a foreign background, minorities (including marginalised communities such as Roma)	1 348 383	1 055 718	379 446	616 693	554 828	680 835	687 802	773 480
Number of persons with disabilities	50 564	50 077	38 501	39 338	30 338	32 998	33 209	33 660
Number of homeless	112 365	111 000	217 407	112 533	68 910	88 034	111 547	93 335

Source: SFC 2014 database.

*Please note that there was no expenditure in 2014.

X.9 The Netherlands

16. Context and background

The Netherlands, despite being a small country, **faces significant social challenges**, as indicated by the at-risk-of-poverty and social exclusion (AROPE) rate. This composite indicator, which accounts for the risk of relative monetary poverty, severe material deprivation, and individuals living in households with very low work intensity, provides a nuanced understanding of the country's socio-economic context (Janković-Milić et al., 2019). Between 2015 and 2022, the AROPE rate in the Netherlands averaged around 16.4, meaning on average, 16.4% of the Dutch population was at risk of poverty and/or social exclusion. In 2020 the AROPE rate fell from 16.5 to 16.0, only to rise again to 16.6 and 16.5 in the following years (2021-2022). It should be noted that the AROPE rate remains below the EU average of 22.23%. Nevertheless, an AROPE rate above 0 indicates vulnerabilities within the Dutch society.

Table A. 81 provides a quantitative overview of the socio-economic context in the Netherlands between 2014 and 2022 including the AROPE rate, Severe Material Deprivation and, Severe Material and/or Social Deprivation rate.

Table A. 81 – Socio-economic context in The Netherlands

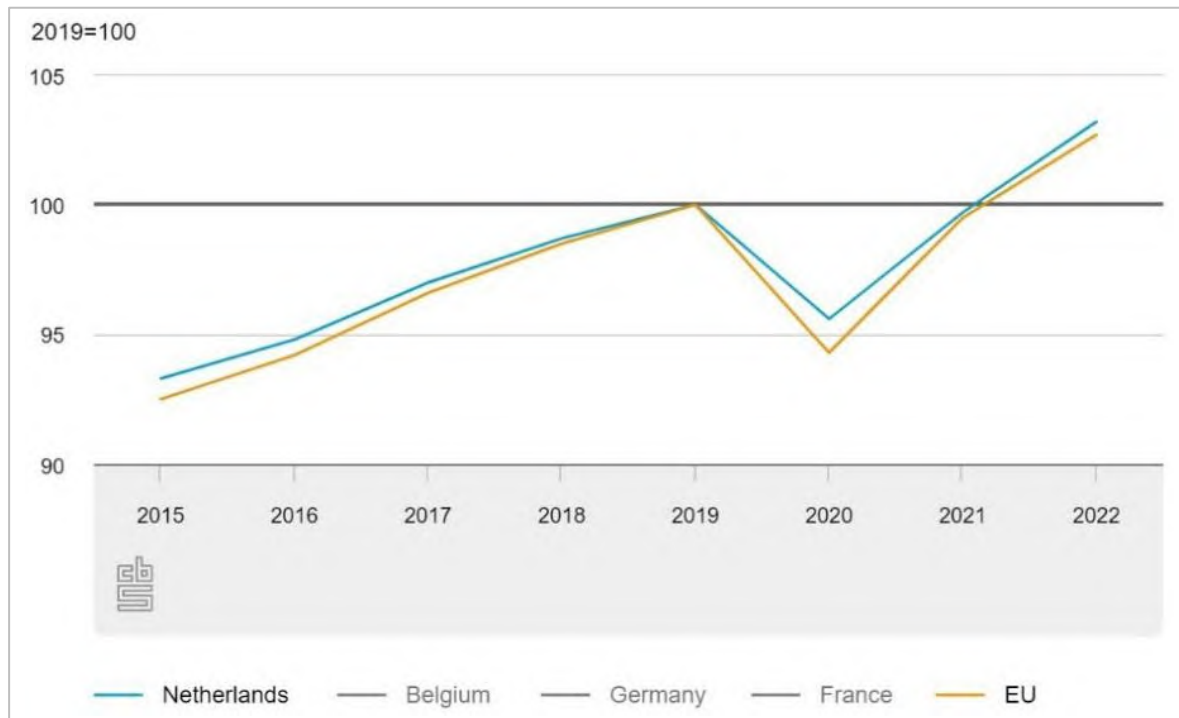
Netherlands	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Trend	
1. At-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate (AROPE) Total		16,4	16,3	16,6	16,5	16,5	16,0	16,6	16,5		
2. AROPE Children		16,8	16,8	16,0	14,9	15,3	16,1	14,8	13,5		
3. Severe material and social deprivation rate (SMSD)		3,2	2,6	2,6	2,6	2,6	2,8	2,2	2,1	2,5	
4. Severe material deprivation rate (SMD)	3,2	5,8	2,6	2,6	2,4	2,5	2,1	0,0	0,0		
5. Inability to afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish (or vegetarian equivalent) every second day	2,8	2,2	2,3	1,9	2,1	2,4	2,0	1,8	2,1		
6. Impact of social transfers (other than pensions) on poverty reduction % reduction of AROPE	45,5	48,0	42,5	39,7	39,0	38,3	36,8	36,6	33,8		
7. Housing cost overburden	15,4	14,9	10,7	9,4	9,4	9,9	8,3	12,5	21,7		
8. Self-reported unmet need for medical care % of population 16+	0,5	0,1	0,2	0,1	0,2	0,2	0,2	0,2	0,2		
9. Households with very low work intensity		10,0	9,5	9,4	8,4	8,9	8,7	8,6	8,4		
11. Population in the EU could not afford unexpected financial expenses	23,7	22,9	22,5	20,7	21,5	21,9	19,1	15,1	14,6		
13. Share of total population having neither a bath, nor a shower in their dwelling	0,0	0,1	0,1	0,1	0,1	0,1	0,1				
14. No indoor flushing	0,0	0,1	0,1	0,1	0,1	0,1	0,1				
17. Persons who cannot afford a telephone	0,0	0,0	:	:	0,0	:	:				
18. Persons who cannot afford to replace worn-out clothes	5,3	6,0	5,4	5,0	5,8	5,6	4,9	4,8	5,1		
20. Persons who cannot afford to get-together with friends or family (relatives) for a drink or meal at least once a month	3,3	3,7	2,7	2,9	3,3	3,4	3,2	2,2	3,4		
21. Persons who cannot afford internet connection for personal use at home	1,4	1,4	1,1	0,8	0,6	0,5	0,4	0,4	0,5		
22. In-work risk of poverty	4,6	4,4	4,8	4,3	4,7	3,8	3,9	3,8	3,7		
23. Long-term unemployment	2,7	2,7	2,3	1,7	1,2	0,9	0,7	0,8	0,7		
25. Employment rate	74,6	75,6	76,4	77,4	78,7	79,7	79,3	80,1	81,8		
26. Children (aged less than 18) living in households with very low work intensity		6,4	7,8	6,6	5,8	6,6	7,2	7,0	6,7		
27. At-risk-of-poverty rate for children		14,0	14,8	14,4	13,1	13,6	14,1	13,8	12,7		
28. Severe material and social deprivation rate (SMSD) for children		3,0	2,4	2,6	2,4	2,4	2,0	1,7	2,4		

Source: Eurostat.

The Netherlands is one of the **wealthier countries of the global North**. With a gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of €53.000, the Netherlands was ranked fourth within the European Union (EU) in 2022. According to Netherlands Statistics, this follows consecutive growth with a 3.5% increase from 2021 to 2022 and 4.5% from 2020 to 2021 (CBS, 2023).

The figure below illustrates the **change in GDP per capita** of the Netherlands against the average EU trend in the period **between 2015 and 2022**. The trough in the graph is largely informed by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure A. 85 – GDP per capita of the Netherlands and the EU



Source: CBS, Eurostat.

Despite the relatively strong overall economic situation, **many Dutch citizens face the hardship of poverty and social exclusion on a daily basis**. A 2017 study on in-work poverty found that 5% of the Dutch population live below the poverty line. This risk is further exacerbated in larger cities such as the Dutch capital, Amsterdam, which counted between 25.000 and 26.000 working poor in 2005 (Snel, 2017). In 2021, 3% of the Dutch working population lived in poverty, which amounts to approximately 220,000 working poor across the country (Sociaal Economische Raad, 2021).

Coumans et al., consider homelessness as an indicator for social exclusion and conclude that men are more likely to experience the latter than women. This coincides with the relatively **larger fraction of homeless men in the Netherlands**. Furthermore, the findings emphasise that **individuals between the ages of 30-39** are exceptionally vulnerable to social exclusion through homelessness, as are **people with a non-Western background** (2017).

The **elderly population** is often overlooked in the discussion on poverty and social exclusion, while this group is in fact extremely vulnerable. According to the National Institute of Public Health and the Environment, 1 in 8 (12%) of all pensionable seniors living in the four biggest cities in the Netherlands – Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht and The Hague – are in social isolation and/or deal with some form of poverty (Baâdoudi et al., 2021).

The silent risk of material and social poverty threatening seniors was emphasised across all interviews. One of the interviewees pointed towards the over-dependence on fixed incomes such as pensions which are often insufficient to keep pace with the increasing cost of living. Another interviewee mentioned the shrinking social circles due to retirement, sickness and death: *“the realities of growing old.”*

Thus, this shows that the peril goes beyond material poverty and that **loneliness and isolation pose real threats for the elderly population**. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the vulnerabilities while simultaneously exacerbating them.

17. Reconstructing the intervention logic

17.1. National policy framework

The Netherlands has a **social security system in place to support the livelihood of vulnerable citizens**. This includes wide-ranging social benefits, state pension, and healthcare. According to a respondent from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, this, combined with the relatively small budget, was the main reason to opt for OP II for the FEAD activities implemented in the Netherlands. The emphasis on the socio-emotional component of poverty alleviation under OP II allowed FEAD to complement the Dutch government's existing material and monetary efforts to push back poverty and better complemented the goals of ESF. Furthermore, the Netherlands had reservations against the use of public money for the purchase and distribution of food, especially because national schemes aimed at poverty reduction, with a larger budget, were already in place.

In the Netherlands, FEAD was aimed at addressing the pressing problems of social poverty such as loneliness and social exclusion. In doing so, the FEAD activities effectively promoted engagement and interaction opportunities among seniors, thus contributing to strengthening or enlarging their social network. This is in line with the national social inclusion objectives.

17.2. Objectives and target groups

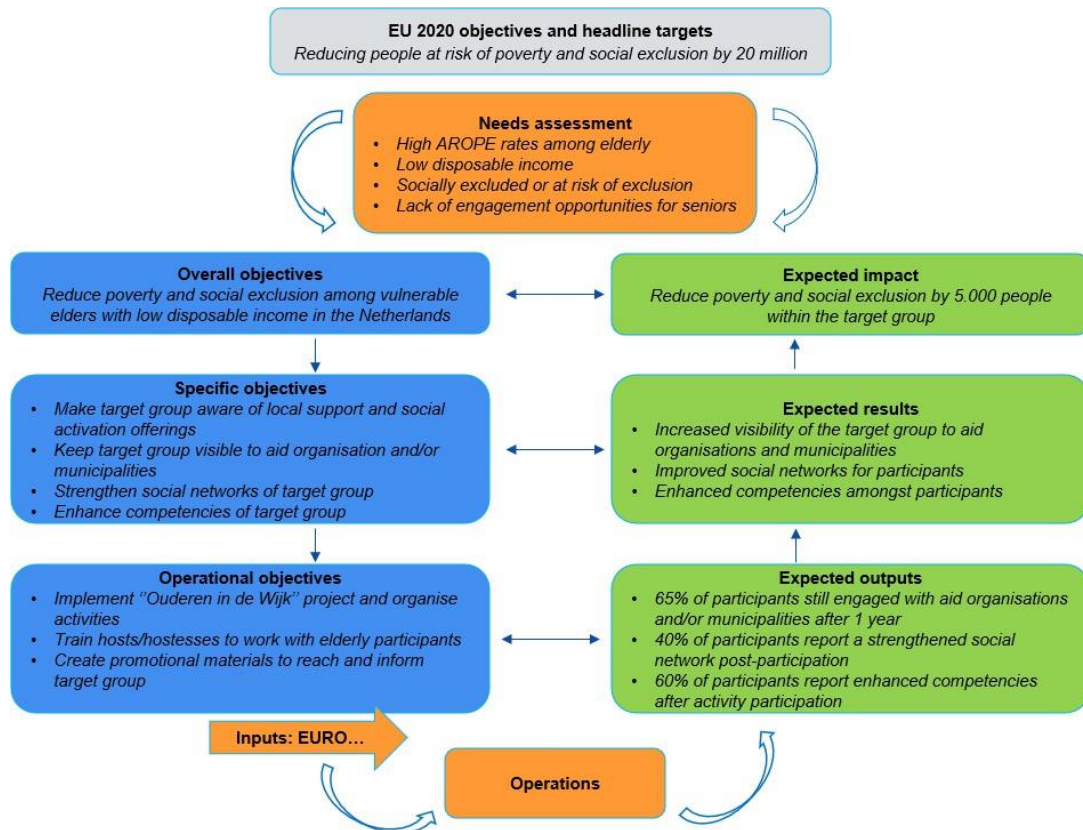
The general objective of the FEAD operational programme in the Netherlands was to reduce the social exclusion of elderly people with a low disposable income (European Commission, n.d.). Accordingly, the **target group included people aged 65 and over at risk of poverty or isolation**. Seniors living below or on the edge of the social minimum income level are considered to be at risk of poverty. The main indicators were incomplete AOW (General Old Age Pension) entitlements, AIO (Supplementary Income Provision for the Elderly) supplement and problematic debts. The target was set to reach 5000 persons.

Multiple interviewees pointed out that the **needs and challenges of the elderly population have largely been underestimated and overlooked**. Due to this, seniors often fall through the cracks of the existing support system. This is one of the most prominent underlying reasons for targeting vulnerable seniors.

The **FEAD activities in the Netherlands provided social inclusion assistance to the most vulnerable seniors and support in becoming self-reliant** (Baâdoudi et al, 2021). In order to attain this goal, the **specific objectives included guidance to existing local services, improving seniors' social network, and increasing their competences in financial, health, and digital skills**. These objectives are clearly captured in the intervention logic.

Initially, the budget was solely allocated for the most vulnerable and deprived seniors with strict monetary cut off points for receiving FEAD support. However, the **complexity of quantifying loneliness** emerged as a significant challenge. One interviewee recalled numerous instances where vulnerable seniors were ineligible to receive FEAD support as they surpassed the upper-income limit. Recognising the need and impact of socialisation and human contact on seniors, the **eligibility criteria were softened, expanding FEAD's support to those in need**. According to the hostesses working with elderly participants, the mix of people and backgrounds was eventually an asset in fostering a more inclusive and positive environment.

Figure A. 86 – Intervention logic of FEAD in The Netherlands



Source: adapted from FEAD mid-term evaluation.

17.3. Implemented operations

Ouderen in de Wijk (OIDW), which translates to “Seniors in the Neighbourhood”, indeed **targeted vulnerable seniors at risk of social exclusion and poverty**. OIDW was implemented in four cities, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht, and The Hague, and was carried out between 2015 and 2022 by the respective public libraries with the main objective of fighting social exclusion amongst vulnerable seniors with low disposable incomes (Baådoudi et al., 2021).

Specific categories were considered to help identify the **target group** of elderly individuals with a high likelihood of having low disposable incomes and facing social exclusion. According to the Operational Programme, this included **seniors with incomplete AOW payments, those receiving AIO supplement, and indebted elderly individuals attributing debt assistance or legal debt restructuring programmes and using food banks**.

In order to **reach the target group**, OIDW initially **collaborated with third parties** such as SVB (Social Insurance Bank), **municipalities** responsible for debt assistance and the **Legal Aid Board** which already have administrative knowledge of the potential beneficiaries (Operational Programme FEAD, 2014). Other outreach methods included the **city pass scheme** in collaboration with municipalities, **local partnerships** with e.g. doctors, community houses, elderly transport companies, migrant organisations and churches, **marketing campaigns** including distribution of flyers and activity calendars, and **word of mouth advertising** by participants.

In collaboration with the libraries, OIDW essentially aimed to mimic existing community centres for seniors. As such, the **libraries became a space where seniors could come together, socialise and engage in various activities**. These activities included digital skills training for the elderly (Klik&Tik), diverse workshops and classes, shows, games, coffee hours, and movie screenings amongst others. Despite a number of recurring activities such as the coffee hours, the activities varied per library.

The **needs of the elderly in the neighbourhood were taken into account** as much as possible in the range of activities offered as well as the activities offered by existing organisations. This was done by regularly assessing what type of activities the target group would like to partake in and by forming collaborations with local organisations. Furthermore, the activities were low-threshold and easily accessible to promote social interaction and push back loneliness amongst the seniors.

OIDW was the only FEAD activity in the Netherlands. According to an interviewee, focussing on one project was a very deliberate decision to maintain simplicity and ensure feasibility within the boundaries of the budget.

17.4. FEAD governance and delivery system

At the start of the FEAD subsidy period, the **public libraries** in the four major cities in the Netherlands (G4) – Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht- **collectively applied** for FEAD to finance and launch OIDW to support vulnerable seniors. It should be noted that the application was led by the Public Library of Utrecht. **The Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, responsible for the allocation of FEAD funds, granted the entire budget (€4.6 million) to OIDW.**

The **governance structure was headed by a steering group of executive directors from the four libraries**, with a rotating chairmanship initially held by the Director of Utrecht, followed by The Hague and then Rotterdam. **Each city had a project leader who managed teams consisting of networkers and hostesses, and controllers for financial oversight.** Considering Utrecht's leading role in OIDW, Utrecht's controller played a key role throughout the programme period. Accordingly, Utrecht's controller was in direct contact with OIDW's MA.

Initially, **Mira Media** was appointed as the **external project leader** to oversee the administration of the project. However, the administrative process proved challenging. In 2019, **FFIQS**, an external organisation with expertise in European subsidies, was brought in to effectively support and improve OIDW's administration and overcome the challenges posed.

The **Ministry's Policy Implementation Department worked closely with the project**, involving regular meetings with project leaders and an annual supervisory committee to oversee the project and ensure proper use of EU funds. Both the **Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment and State Audit Service audited the ministry's activities**, providing an additional check on the management of the funds. This was meant as an extra assurance to the Committee.

18. Key findings on the implementation of FEAD

In this section the **key findings on the implementation of FEAD are presented.** For this, OIDW – the sole FEAD activity in the Netherlands – is subject to the evaluation framework and is assessed based on five criteria: **1) efficiency, 2) coherence, 3) relevance, 4) EU added value and, 5) visibility.** The results are based on all available evidence including quantitative data, screening of FEAD operations, results of interviews and additional desk research.

18.1. To what extent was FEAD support successful – or not – and why?

Overall achievement of FEAD objectives [*criterion: effectiveness*]

Loneliness is a serious problem amongst seniors, negatively impacting their quality of life and overall well-being. Research conducted by TNS/NIPO reveals that among the 2.9 million individuals aged 65 and over, nearly 900,000 (31%) experience feelings of loneliness (Operational Programme FEAD, 2014). In an attempt to tackle this, **OIDW facilitated socialisation opportunities.** As highlighted above, the programme's main objectives were to help seniors prevent and overcome social isolation, engage in social activities and in/with society at large, create and expand their social network and, facilitate access to support services such as financial support services, social work and counselling to help the seniors cope with personal, emotional or social issues.

OIDW successfully reached an estimated 4.400 seniors of which roughly 75% corresponded to the envisaged target group. These explicit FEAD beneficiaries are senior participants who fully comply with all

FEAD criteria including the income threshold. It should be noted that the participation of the remaining 25% of the seniors was not funded by FEAD, instead the incurred costs were independently financed by the libraries.

OIDW was considered a successful project amongst all interviews, including Managing Authorities, project managers, hostesses, and beneficiaries. According to them, the **seniors generally reported to be very happy with OIDW and its activities**. This was reflected in the return rate within the project. According to one of the hostesses, *“the opportunity to talk and tell their stories that they have been holding in for so long because they have no one to talk to really sparked joy amongst the seniors.”*

Initially OIDW was designed as a one-year rotating programme, however most seniors kept coming back to the libraries even after a year. For this reason, the intended target of 5000 was not attained. This led to a shift in focus from quantity to quality of support. The main reason for this was acknowledging and accommodating the needs of the participants who were already involved with OIDW. However, this should not be interpreted as a lack of recruitment for potential newcomers. Instead, outreach remained relevant throughout the entire duration of the programme. The activities organised by OIDW facilitated new encounters and social interaction. In many cases, the seniors stayed in touch and established actual friendships. This proved to be especially valuable during COVID-19 as lockdowns and social distancing measures further aggravated the existing risk of social isolation amongst seniors. To ensure continuity despite the outbreak of **COVID-19, OIDW adapted its programme delivery**. Accordingly, digital and hybrid alternatives were implemented to cope with the pandemic and comply with national safety Covid restrictions. (Annual Implementation Report, 2022)

Besides successfully alleviating thousands of seniors from social isolation, **OIDW has been a frontrunner in acknowledging and addressing the specific vulnerabilities of seniors**. As such, many other local organisations followed with similar initiatives and projects in line with OIDW’s target and objectives of supporting vulnerable seniors and combatting loneliness.

Reach of target groups [*criterion: effectiveness*]

OIDW is targeted at vulnerable seniors living in the Netherlands. In accordance with Operational Programme (OP) II, these are elderly people of state pension age of 65 and over with a low disposable income who are (at risk of being) socially isolated (Witkamp & de Ruig, 2018; Baâdoudi et al., 2021). **Senior participants were only eligible to the programme if they did not exceed the social minimum income threshold**. However, the lines regarding social exclusion were much fuzzier due to the unquantifiable and subjective nature of loneliness and isolation.

In practice, the **strict income requirements triggered moral questions whether or not to admit someone to the programme**. There have been numerous instances where seniors were turned down for earning slightly more than the upper limit, sometimes only by a mere €50 per month. One of the interviewees explained that this was due to the strict rules and regulations of FEAD and the conditions for using EU money. However, some cities such as Amsterdam, took a more relaxed approach thereby granting access to OIDW to a wider audience, which eventually inspired the admission process of OIDW in Utrecht, Rotterdam and The Hague as well. To remain compliant with the European Commission's rules and regulations, only the participants meeting the specific requirements were eligible for funding through FEAD. As for the remaining participants, their participation was funded by the libraries themselves, unless they determined otherwise.

Initially, OIDW was intended as a rotational programme of one year. Meaning that there would be a continuous flow- of participants coming in and going out. However, **most participants kept coming back long after a year**. One of the beneficiaries expressed the joy and pleasure OIDW sparked, even describing it as *“a blessing.”* Another beneficiary, who has been part of the programme since its establishment in 2015, mentioned how busy her social life is nowadays with all the different activities and friends from the library.

One of the reasons for not attaining the target of 5000 beneficiaries was the lack of rotation and recurrence of participants. However, the programme did **provide long term support to over 3000 registered participants**. In other words, OIDW allowed for over 3000 vulnerable seniors to feel seen and heard, to establish new social contacts, and in many cases even build real friendships while also raising awareness of the wide range of activities available to them. Additionally, OIDW has been a crucial point of contact to touch base and refer relevant support and care services in line with participants' specific needs.

Vulnerable seniors are a difficult target group to reach. This became evident across all interviews as outreach remained challenging, especially at the beginning of the project. One interviewee also identified the significance of psycho-emotional obstacles such as fear and mistrust. The latter was further reinforced by inquiring directly

into one's financial situation as part of the intake process. To overcome this, building a relationship and gaining trust was prioritised. Thereby shifting the focus from quantity to quality.

As highlighted above, **various communication channels and outreach methods were used to attract participants** such as spontaneous library walk-ins, neighbourhood "find spots", radio advertisements, service provider referrals, and word-of-mouth advertising (Witkamp & de Ruig, 2018). Later, the libraries collaborated with the respective municipalities to identify and recruit vulnerable seniors through so-called *stadspas* or city pass in English. This is a type of municipal discount card offered to residents to access activities, cultural events and services against reduced tariffs. Collaborating with municipalities was recognised by an interviewee as a smart move and that the use of the city passes proved to be a highly effective recruitment strategy. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment was never involved in the outreach process and that the libraries took full responsibility of recruiting participants and FEAD beneficiaries.

Adjustments to FEAD to address new challenges [*criterion: effectiveness*]

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused global disruption, leading to widespread fear and uncertainty. While everyone was affected by COVID-19 in one way or another, the elderly population was exceptionally vulnerable, being at risk of both the virus itself as well as the consequences of the prevention measures such as social distancing which exacerbated social exclusion (Brooke & Jackson, 2020; Inouye, 2021). As a result, **the pandemic emphasised and further exacerbated the risk of social exclusion and loneliness amongst seniors.**

The libraries were quick to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak. This effective crisis management enabled the programme to continue uninterrupted. Furthermore, an interviewee accredited the OIDW project managers for their timely communication of the intended project changes amidst the pandemic with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment.

All activities remained accessible throughout the pandemic, albeit in adapted and often less robust ways. (Annual Implementation Report, 2022) Most prominent was the **transition from a physical to a digital space**. The digital implementation of OIDW included hostesses calling the participants, telephone circles amongst groups of participants and online lessons to learn how to video call or watch videos on YouTube for example. While the digital component was indeed a big asset for the participants, it was also an obstacle due to lack of competency. Digital illiteracy was not only something OIDW tried to tackle and take on during the pandemic, but also in the years pre-COVID-19. The newly acquired knowledge and skills proved especially useful in maintaining social contact during the pandemic (Baâdoudi et al., 2021). While the groups were downsizing to comply with COVID-19 guidelines, the workload for hostesses increased due to more one-on-one interactions. This was not only strenuous for the hostesses in terms of time and effort, but also in terms of money, adding extra pressure on the budget.

As **COVID-19 restrictions were eased, OIDW resumed physical activities** as before but in smaller groups and in compliance with the National Institute of Public Health and Environment (RIVM) guidelines such as physical distancing and wearing face masks.

COVID-19 did showcase the success of OIDW's impact on combatting social exclusion and loneliness. Firstly, this was evident as most seniors expressed that they missed coming to the libraries and taking part in OIDW activities on site. Secondly, during the pandemic numerous participants stated that they were able to rely on the social networks and friendships established pre-COVID-19 (Baâdoudi et al., 2021).

The Netherlands did not make use of any of the flexibilities offered in response to the crises (CRII+, REACT EU and CARE). This was mainly due to the libraries remaining open during the pandemic, unlike most other public facilities. Furthermore, the flexibilities would be redundant since all public libraries are government-funded in the Netherlands.

Horizontal principles of FEAD [*criterion: effectiveness*]

It is difficult to quantify OIDW's contribution to the horizontal principles of FEAD (Witkamp & de Ruig, 2018). However, **OIDW has been successful in ensuring cultural diversity** by reaching and accommodating participants with different ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Accordingly, 27% of all participants in 2021 had a migration background (Annual Implementation Report, 2022). This is in line with Article 9.1 of the subsidy scheme which states that all activities should be easily accessible, considering the cultural diversity of the target group, avoid direct or indirect discrimination, and guarantee equal treatment of men and women.

OIDW actively sought to enhance diversity and inclusion. One of the efforts was to employ multilingual hostesses to make the programme more accessible for non-Dutch speaking participants. (Annual Implementation Report, 2022) Another interviewee consulted shared an anecdote of an Iranian beneficiary who was thrilled to speak in her native tongue with one of the hostesses.

In certain cities, reaching seniors with a migration background was considered challenging, specifically Turkish and Moroccan participants were difficult to reach (Witkamp & de Ruig, 2018). The latter was mainly due to cultural differences. Furthermore, the group composition strongly depended on the neighbourhood. As such, certain neighbourhoods are more diverse which is in turn reflected in the local libraries.

In terms of gender equality, OIDW has reached a vast majority (75%) of female participants. However, all men and women were treated equally throughout the programme. The gender imbalance is not uncommon: while older men are often at greater risk of loneliness, they may have less interest in these types of social activities or perceive higher socio-emotional barriers to partake in them. However, the wide range of diverse activities ensured that there was always something suitable for the participants, both male and female.

In terms of **age**, one interviewee highlighted that *‘It’s easy to disregard the diversity of this group by generalising them as old. But there is a big difference between someone who has just retired at the age of 67 and someone who is 90.’* **OIDW attracted all types of seniors – young, old, male, female, Dutch, non-Dutch, etc –** each with their own underlying motivations to take part in the project.

Success and hindering factors [*criterion: effectiveness*]

The evaluation report commissioned by the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport identifies **five key factors contributing to the success of OIDW.** These are: **1) the commitment of the hostesses, 2) getting to know each other and building trust, 3) offering a wide range of accessible activities, 4) providing tailor-made assistance; and 5) the referral and warm handover to other support services** (Baådoudi et al., 2021).

The interviews also highlighted the **hostesses’ added value** with all interviewees emphasising their significant impact through the time, effort, and personal attention invested in the seniors. Accordingly, **human contact and interaction** contributed to the effectiveness of the programme, and its goal to push back loneliness amongst vulnerable seniors.

Based on the interviews, **accountability and administration burden were the biggest obstacles.** This was mainly due to the stringent EU requirements conditional to the attribution of FEAD. The excessive level of accountability and accompanying administrative burden was a substantial shift in the way of working for a party unfamiliar with European subsidies. Since the **libraries involved were not accustomed to the rules, regulations, and administrative process of EU funds, this posed initial challenges.**

Furthermore, **the administrative burden hindered the effectiveness of OIDW as the level of detail and precision was very time-consuming.** This included e.g. logging the exact time participants arrived and departed, their full names, a checklist to confirm eligibility to FEAD, and all internal meetings. As a result, the hostesses had to allocate a large amount of their time to admin-related work, *‘time that could have been better invested in the participants,’* states one of the hostesses.

Besides the administrative burden, the hostesses were confronted by the **emotional strain of supporting vulnerable seniors.** According to the various interviewees, this all in all heightened the hostesses’ risk of burnout and discontinuing their work at OIDW.

In consultation with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment and the European Commission, the **strict eligibility criteria were relaxed to relieve pressure from the beneficiary organisations.** One of the positive side effects of this was the diversification of the participants. **OIDW was expanded to include not only the most vulnerable and deprived seniors, but all seniors in need of socialisation opportunities.** The expansion of the target group allowed for a mixed and diverse group of seniors and contributed to an uplifting environment and an enriching and educational experience.

OIDW is widely recognised for **inspiring many other initiatives targeting (vulnerable) seniors.** While this is certainly a positive development, there is a downside to it as well. One of the interviewees highlighted that this had led to **unnecessary competition between OIDW and other local organisations targeting seniors.** The different initiatives should instead collaborate to broaden the scope of support.

Due to the limited scale and relatively small budget, it is difficult to determine OIDW’s socio-economic impact. However, the evaluation report affirms OIDW’s positive social influence on seniors, reaching beyond the most

vulnerable and financially restricted participants. As such, **OIDW has effectively contributed to reducing (imminent) social isolation and loneliness amongst the elderly** (Baâdoudi et al., 2021).

Overall cost-effectiveness of FEAD operations [*criterion: efficiency*]

OIDW's overall cost-effectiveness was largely impacted by the administrative burden. This was emphasised across all interviews. Accordingly, it is estimated that at least 30% of all resources were spent on administration and accountability of the FEAD subsidy. As mentioned before, most respondents agreed that this time, effort, and money did not benefit the activities nor the commitment toward the target group and could thus have been spent more effectively.

Administration was especially problematic in the early stages of OIDW. Its required extensiveness was claimed to strain a sizeable amount of the resources and in turn hamper the cost-effectiveness of the project. This was further exacerbated due to the hostesses' lack of administrative experience and precision.

In 2018 an overarching project manager was hired to turn the tide of the OIDW's cost-effectiveness. According to him, the most effective measure was **softening the participant's inclusion criteria**. This **significantly facilitated the administrative process and in turn boosted cost-effectiveness**.

Beyond the criticism, numerous interviewees also highlighted the **positive side-effects of the administrative requirements**. They encouraged the hostesses to work in a more organised way and to adopt a systematic approach, which enhanced their level of professionalism. Furthermore, the initial extensive administration was crucial to tackling the challenges of COVID-19 from the outset.

The most cost-effective activities were often the simplest. For instance, the regular coffee hours were an effective means of fighting loneliness and facilitating social inclusion. This was affirmed by both the hostesses and the beneficiaries. The coffee hours were planned on set days and times, providing the seniors with a sense of structure. With many familiar faces returning to the libraries for their coffee catchups, the hostesses were on a first-name basis with the seniors, fostering valuable relationships and friendships. *"Coming together, feeling seen and heard is what really matters for this group,"* says one of the hostesses.

Although the substantial FEAD subsidy of € 4,408,740 allowed for the opportunity to get OIDW off the ground, the **budget was insufficient to finance the entire project** (Witkamp & de Ruig, 2018). EU countries are expected to allocate at least an additional 15% to their national programmes (European Commission, n.d.) However, the total cost of OIDW was roughly €8 million, nearly double the size of the fund. This was because many costs were disapproved by FEAD after already having been incurred such as costs for non-FEAD beneficiaries. This illustrates the high level of accountability and the need for extensive administration required from FEAD.

Administrative burden of monitoring and reporting requirements [*criterion: efficiency*]

As mentioned above, the **administrative burden posed a serious challenge to OIDW's effectiveness, straining both time and monetary resources**. The respondents estimated that 25-35% of the project's resources were dedicated to administrative tasks.

The administration required **extensive monitoring and reporting of participant details and activities**. This included recording participant's attendance times, full names, and eligibility as well as minor things such as the number of coffee cups or pieces of cake consumed. This resulted in it being a time-intensive process.

This was further aggravated due to the **libraries being unfamiliar and inexperienced with managing European funds such as FEAD**. As a result, OIDW initially struggled to comply with FEAD's stringent accountability requirements. To address these issues, a **cooperative approach was adopted to improve compliance with FEAD's rules and regulations**. This included expert advisory support, increased oversight, and comprehensive guidelines for integrating correct monitoring and reporting practices.

While the depth of accountability was seen as excessive and impractical, it was also crucial. This was because it not only needed to comply with FEAD's requirements, but also because the administrative details directly influenced staff remuneration. If a certain percentage of participants met FEAD criteria, it would proportionally increase the hostesses' salaries. **Over time, as administrative requirements were relaxed, the process became more efficient, allowing staff to concentrate more on the OIDW's objectives and create a greater impact.**

Simplification measures [*criterion: efficiency*]

The interviewees recommended several simplification measures for OIDW and points of improvement for handling European funds in the future. Considering the inefficiencies in the administrative approach and such meticulous attendance tracking, the **recommendations** are mainly aimed at **simplifying the administration process**.

Firstly, **shifting towards streamlined accounting protocols and obtaining clear accountant's statements would help reduce the administrative burden**. In addition, this would improve clarity in responsibility allocation, particularly between FEAD and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment.

Secondly, for **organisations engaging with FEAD for the first time** – as was the case for the public libraries involved with OIDW – **there is a strong need for comprehensive guidelines, pre-training sessions, etc to better understand expectations and prepare for the administrative load**.

Lastly, **flexibility (e.g., adaptable plans) is important for long-term projects like OIDW**. Accordingly, this allows for learning and making necessary adjustments over time, rather than being bound to rigid, multi-year plans.

Coherence of FEAD with other interventions [*criterion: coherence*]

There are **synergies between OIDW and other national actions and policies aimed at poverty alleviation and social inclusion amongst seniors in the Netherlands**. OIDW's unique focus on addressing the socio-emotional challenges faced by seniors such as loneliness and isolation, complements existing material aid programs. By focusing on these often-overlooked aspects of senior well-being, the project enhances the impact of the Dutch government's support system.

While the comprehensive pension system and healthcare policies provide a solid foundation for financial and health security, OIDW enriches this approach by catering to the social and emotional needs of seniors. This holistic method is essential in fully addressing their diverse challenges, especially those living in poverty and (at the risk of) social isolation. **OIDW's role in the Dutch system is not just supplementary, but is integral, filling gaps that material aid alone cannot cover**.

Furthermore, **OIDW aligns closely with the national objective of fostering social inclusion**. The public libraries function as community hubs that facilitate social connection and promote active participation amongst seniors. This effectively counters the social exclusion often experienced by the elderly, enhancing their overall quality of life. The success of OIDW lies precisely in this dual approach of providing spaces for interaction while simultaneously contributing to the emotional well-being of the participants.

OIDW also provides synergies with broader European initiatives aimed at social inclusion and poverty alleviation such as the European Social Fund (ESF) and the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). Accordingly, OIDW aligns with ESF's goals in enhancing social inclusion and education, offering a platform for senior engagement and learning through educational activities, workshops, and skills development. Additionally, OIDW also supports AMIF's objective by aiding the inclusion and integration of elderly migrants and refugees.

18.2. Is FEAD still relevant?

Relevance to target groups [*criterion: relevance*]

OIDW's main objective was fighting (impending) social isolation amongst seniors from vulnerable groups (Baâdoudi et al., 2021). As mentioned before, this vulnerability was defined as experiencing poverty and loneliness. The latter is especially problematic as the risk of loneliness increases with age due to functional limitations, decreasing social integration, and lower income levels (Jylha et al., 2004; Luhmann et al., 2016). Poverty may exacerbate loneliness by limiting social participation and provoking the feeling of shame and humiliation (Hudson, 2016; Batsleer & Duggan, 2020). Along these lines, vulnerable seniors are stuck in a vicious cycle of monetary and social poverty.

In collaboration with the public libraries in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht and The Hague, **OIDW aimed to tackle this heightened risk of loneliness**. The goal was to create a safe space for seniors to come together

and be surrounded by “friendly and familiar faces.” To attract seniors to the programme, OIDW was designed to be low threshold and easily accessible. OIDW’s activities were intended to overcome isolation, promote social engagement, expand social networks, and facilitate access to support services (Baadoûdi, 2021). This is **in line with the needs of the target group.**

While OIDW targeted the general risk factors of social exclusion amongst vulnerable seniors, there is a **lack of awareness in diversity amongst seniors**: “A 67-year-old woman who just retired and a 90-year-old man in a wheelchair are very different. Yes, they’re both seniors but they live different lives, with different needs and challenges, and require an entirely different approach.”

The risk of social exclusion amongst seniors was not yet widely acknowledged, nor were their specific vulnerabilities. **OIDW helped raise awareness of these needs and challenges which in turn sparked more efforts and initiatives targeting vulnerable seniors.**

Relevance of FEAD now and in the future [*criterion: relevance*]

All interviewees agreed that **FEAD is highly relevant to the current and future needs in the Netherlands, especially considering ageing demographic trends.** Like many other countries in Europe, the Netherlands is seeing a shift towards an older population. The percentage of those aged 65 and over is expected to rise from 20% to 25% by 2035 (PBL, 2022). This increase means that the problem of social exclusion amongst vulnerable seniors will become more severe and pressing over time, making the continuation of FEAD-type activities and initiatives even more critical.

“We need to think what this [ageing population] means for our social support and care system. The library has a lot of potential here,” notes one of OIDW’s project managers, referring to the libraries’ potential role in mitigating the challenges of ageing. This involves the increased **demand for social support and care systems** which are already under significant pressure. Initiatives such as **OIDW are necessary to help alleviate this pressure and simultaneously address the needs of the seniors.** According to one of the hostesses, the success of the project is evident in the appreciation expressed by the participants and the decision of almost all libraries to continue and independently finance OIDW activities post-FEAD funding. This demonstrates both the success and the sustainability of the FEAD approach.

18.3. Did FEAD make a difference and to whom?

EU added value [*criterion: EU added value*]

FEAD has played a crucial role in firstly, **raising awareness regarding the needs and challenges of seniors** and secondly, **initiating and upscaling activities aimed at supporting this vulnerable group.** “Without FEAD, OIDW wouldn’t have been so successful,” claims one of the project managers. Another interviewee credits FEAD for “finally putting the seniors on the map.”

Most of the libraries involved with OIDW have **continued their activities independently**, even after the conclusion of FEAD funding. The ongoing commitment demonstrates the lasting impact of the initial funding. OIDW has even inspired libraries in other cities and municipalities to implement similar programmes and activities.

OIDW has increased government attention towards the needs of seniors, particularly within the Ministry of Health, Welfare, and Sport. Consequently, this may point towards future governmental initiatives and support targeting vulnerable seniors. This trend extends beyond government circles as an increasing number of organisations are actively investing more in social inclusion projects for seniors. This is a notable change, as seniors were often overlooked in the past.

The libraries’ evolution from ‘a focus on collections to fostering connections’ represents a significant change in their approach to serving the community. This underscores the **evolving role of libraries in addressing the needs of vulnerable groups such as seniors** which is a direct result of OIDW. This evolution reflects a broader trend of libraries becoming more active and socially engaged community centres.

As a result, **public libraries** – especially in Amsterdam, Utrecht, Rotterdam and The Hague – **have gained recognition from various ministries and non-governmental organisations for their broad social potential.** This in turn has led to forming **new partnerships and collaborations** at both city and national levels.

Visibility [visibility]

OIDW is often simplified to a library initiative in common parlance. Some of the senior participants even consider OIDW and the libraries as synonymous. While the programme is indeed carried out by the libraries, it is in fact a collaboration between various public libraries and Mira Media, funded by FEAD. The latter is **openly communicated**. Accordingly, FEAD and the EU are incorporated in all logos and communication channels such as the email signature, banners, flyers, etc.

It is **unlikely that the participants are aware of FEAD and its role in OIDW**. It is more likely that the participants look towards the libraries, (e.g., the municipality or the government) instead. However, the EU and FEAD may be too far away and intangible for the target audience.

However, there have been **efforts to raise awareness regarding the role of FEAD**. For instance, during the intake interviews with the participants, it is explained that OIDW is largely financed by European funds. When one of the beneficiaries was asked to elaborate on the programme's funding structure, she highlighted that the quality of activities was notably better during FEAD than after- thereby insinuating awareness and acknowledging FEAD's contributions to the programme.

19. Good practices

The use of the so-called **city passes as part of the recruitment strategy** was considered a good practice. These city passes – Stadspas (Amsterdam), Rotterdampas (Rotterdam), U-pas (Utrecht), and Ooievaarspas (The Hague) – are offered by the municipality to increase accessibility to cultural and recreation activities often aimed at people with lower incomes or limited resources. The overarching objective of this is to enhance quality of life by making leisure and cultural activities more inclusive and accessible.

Collaboration with municipalities and the respective city passes were successful in promoting awareness of OIDW and reaching seniors. This was mainly because most seniors were already familiar with it and often already made use of the local city passes.

From an administrative perspective, **outreach through city passes ensured that the seniors generally met the eligibility criteria for FEAD**. This is mainly because the city passes are restricted to people with a low disposable income. This in turn facilitated administrative efficiency.

Another good practice was the **regular coffee hours**. Although simple, the consistency of these socialisation opportunities created a sense of familiarity and community amongst the seniors. According to one of the hostesses less is often more to effectively address the needs and challenges of the vulnerable target group. *“Usually, the seniors just want someone to talk to,”* she highlighted. The coffee hours helped to build relationships and incentivised seniors to return to the programme which in turn effectively alleviated social isolation.

The **expansion of FEAD eligibility** was also recognised as a good practice. Expanding the reach of FEAD's support to a wider audience created a greater impact. *“Loneliness is a real threat for all seniors, not only those in poverty,”* a project manager highlighted. Additionally, relaxing the eligibility criteria helped to mitigate the challenges associated with the extensive accountability and administrative burden.

20. Conclusions and lessons learned

OIDW has proven successful in **effectively combating loneliness amongst vulnerable seniors and improving their quality of life**. Fundamental to OIDW's success was the program's focus on fostering social interaction and the role of the hostesses. The skills developed and relationships established during the initial stages of OIDW were especially effective during the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to the pandemic, OIDW adapted its implementation including the transition to digital platforms. This adaptability was crucial, enhancing the program's effectiveness despite facing challenges such as administrative burdens and the emotional strain on staff. An important lesson learned is the value of flexibility in program objectives and methods. Particularly in times of crisis, this flexibility and adaptability can boost effectiveness.

Regarding **efficiency and simplification**, the biggest obstacle was the **demanding administrative burden** which consumed roughly 30% of OIDW's resources. In order to overcome this, OIDW eventually relaxed the

eligibility criteria and expanded the programme beyond the most vulnerable and deprived. Simple, low-cost activities such as regular coffee hours were particularly effective, emphasising that sometimes the simplest solutions can be the most impactful. This highlights the necessity for streamlined and simple administrative processes balancing both compliance with accountability criteria and operational practicality.

In terms of **coherence**, OIDW showed **alignment with national and European initiatives aimed at social inclusion and poverty alleviation**. OIDW complements the Dutch welfare system by addressing the socio-emotional needs of seniors, an area often underserved by traditional aid programmes. In doing so, OIDW has been a key part of a larger strategy to tackle the various challenges seniors face. This underlines the importance of integrating local initiatives with broader national objectives to enhance the overall impact and coherence of social support programmes.

OIDW remains highly relevant, especially with the Netherland's ageing population. OIDW's main objective to alleviate social and monetary poverty is justified considering the increased risk of loneliness and social exclusion among seniors. In collaboration with public libraries, OIDW created accessible and low-threshold environments to respond to the needs of vulnerable seniors. Accordingly, the activities were designed to foster social engagement, network expansion, and access to support services. However, OIDW also brought to light the need for recognising and addressing the diverse needs of the elderly population. To maintain relevance, the programme requires continuous adaptation to the evolving needs and diversity of the target group.

Regarding **EU-added value and visibility**, **FEAD's involvement in OIDW was instrumental in enhancing the support and visibility of seniors' needs**. This collaboration led to sustainable impacts and inspired similar initiatives, demonstrating the transformative power of FEAD's support. Despite these successes, a notable challenge was the gap in the seniors' awareness of FEAD's role, reflecting the broader challenge of effectively communicating the EU's involvement in local initiatives. Therefore, the key lesson learned is the critical importance of developing effective communication strategies to ensure that the target audience recognises and appreciates the role of EU funding in local initiatives.

To conclude, the success of OIDW demonstrates how effectively addressing the nuanced needs of vulnerable seniors can lead to meaningful and lasting social impact.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Methodology

The methodology for the FEAD ex-post evaluation is two-fold and included desk research and in-depth interviews with stakeholders. The Operational Programme, mid-term evaluations, other relevant documents, and reports were reviewed during the desk research. Relevant stakeholders were initially identified through stakeholder mapping, this was later followed by snowball sampling and requesting referrals to other potential respondents during the interviews. All respondents were briefed about the scope of the study and voluntarily participated in the interviews. The interviews were held online via Microsoft Teams which allowed for scheduling flexibility and increased accessibility and convenience. The findings from the interviews were triangulated with the desk research as well as other interviews to enhance credibility. It should be noted that data saturation was attained.

The table below provides an overview of the stakeholders interviewed as part of the evaluation. For privacy reasons, the names of the respondents are not disclosed.

Table A. 82 – Overview of interviewees

Organisation	Role
Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment	Co-project leader FEAD
Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment	Policy officer
Public Library Utrecht	Overarching project manager OIDW
Public Library Amsterdam	Project manager OIDW
Public Library Amsterdam	Hostess OIDW
OIDW participant	Recipient of FEAD
OIDW participant	Recipient of FEAD

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Appendix 3: FEAD indicators

Table A. 83 – Input indicators for the implementation of FEAD in The Netherlands in 2014-2022

Indicator	Total amount of eligible public expenditure approved in the documents setting out the conditions for support of operations (EUR)	Total amount of eligible public expenditure incurred by beneficiaries and paid in implementing operations (EUR)	Total amount of eligible public expenditure declared to the Commission (EUR)
2014-2022	8 817 480.00	4 972 966.00	4 403 056.00

Source: SFC 2014 database.

Table A. 84 – Participants of FEAD in The Netherlands in 2014-2022

Indicator	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Total number of persons receiving social inclusion assistance	281	1 211	769	579	366	93
Number of children aged 15 years or below	0	0	0	0	0	0
Number of persons aged 65 years or above	281	1 211	769	579	366	93
Number of women	210	912	613	443	282	79
Number of migrants, participants with a foreign background, minorities (including marginalised communities such as the Roma)	87	301	181	183	124	29
Number of persons with disabilities	3	175	134	149	55	17
Number of homeless	0	0	0	0	0	0

Source: SFC 2014 database.

* Please note that there were no participations in 2014, 2015 and 2022

X.10 Portugal

21. Context and background

Over the evaluation reference period, Portugal's socio-economic context improved substantially. These advancements were particularly evident in key indicators, including the at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) rate, the severe material deprivation rate, child poverty, and food insecurity.

The AROPE rate, a significant measure of socio-economic wellbeing, served as a reflection of the nation's commitment to addressing poverty and social exclusion. In 2014, it stood at 26.4%, indicating that a considerable portion of the population was grappling with socio-economic vulnerabilities. However, a notable reduction subsequently occurred, with the rate declining to 20.1% in 2022. This reduction signifies an improvement in the accessibility of economic opportunities and social resources for the population. Nonetheless, the poverty gap indicator in 2022 was notably high at 21.7%, highlighting that those in poverty/material deprivation were substantially poorer than the median citizen.

The AROPE indicator for child poverty has experienced a significant transformation. In 2014, the AROPE rate for children was alarmingly high at 31.0%. By 2022, this rate had dropped to 20.7%, highlighting a shift towards ensuring that the nation's children have access to opportunities and resources that enhance their wellbeing. The severe material and social deprivation (SMSD) rate, which reports an enforced lack of necessary and desirable items to lead an adequate life, has experienced a noteworthy decline. In 2014, it was 10.9%, but by 2022, it had decreased to 5.3%. This reflects substantial improvements in addressing material and social deprivation.

Despite the previous economic and financial crisis, Portugal's socio-economic context evolved positively over the reference period. As illustrated in Table A. 85 below, the reduction in poverty and social exclusion, alongside improvements in child wellbeing and material living conditions, showcased the country's commitment to addressing these critical issues. While challenges remained, such as the need to maintain consistent access to nutritious meals, the overall trend was one of progress and improved wellbeing for the population.

Table A. 85 – Socio-economic context in Portugal

Portugal	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Trend
1. At-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate (AROPE) Total		26,4	24,9	23,4	21,6	21,1	20,0	22,4	20,1	
2. AROPE Children		31,0	26,8	23,0	21,7	20,9	20,8	22,5	20,7	
3. Severe material and social deprivation rate (SMSD)		10,9	9,1	8,0	6,6	5,6	5,4	6,0	5,3	
4. Severe material deprivation rate (SMD)	10,6	5,8	8,4	6,9	6,0	5,6	4,6	0,0	0,0	
5. Inability to afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish (or vegetable)	4,0	3,5	3,4	3,0	2,4	2,3	2,5	2,4	3,0	
6. Impact of social transfers (other than pensions) on poverty	27,0	26,1	24,0	22,5	23,8	24,2	26,0	20,0	23,7	
7. Housing cost overburden	9,2	9,1	7,5	6,7	5,7	5,7	4,1	5,9	5,0	
8. Self-reported unmet need for medical care % of population	3,5	3,0	2,4	2,3	2,1	1,7	1,6	2,3	2,9	
9. Households with very low work intensity		10,2	8,5	7,7	6,9	6,2	5,0	5,3	5,6	
11. Population in the EU could not afford unexpected financial	42,2	40,7	38,3	36,9	34,7	33,0	30,8	31,2	29,9	
13. Share of total population having neither a bath, nor a shower	1,3	1,5	1,3	1,2	0,9	0,8	0,6			
14. No indoor flushing	1,3	1,5	1,3	1,2	0,9	0,8	0,6			
17. Persons who cannot afford a telephone	0,8	0,9	0,7	0,5	0,3	0,4	0,0			
18. Persons who cannot afford to replace worn-out clothes	19,0	15,8	12,5	11,2	9,3	7,7	8,1	8,6	7,4	
20. Persons who cannot afford to get-together with friends or	15,5	11,2	10,2	9,9	8,1	7,1	7,8	7,2	6,3	
21. Persons who cannot afford internet connection for person	8,9	7,3	5,7	5,4	4,5	3,9	3,7	3,4	2,8	
22. In-work risk of poverty	9,1	9,6	9,5	9,1	8,5	9,9	8,4	10,5	9,6	
23. Long-term unemployment	8,7	7,5	6,4	4,6	3,2	2,8	2,3	2,9	2,7	
25. Employment rate	61,2	62,8	64,2	67,0	69,0	69,8	68,5	70,1	71,7	
26. Children (aged less than 18) living in households with very		8,7	6,4	6,0	5,5	5,2	3,8	4,1	5,3	
27. At-risk-of-poverty rate for children		24,8	22,4	20,7	19,0	18,5	19,1	20,4	18,5	
28. Severe material and social deprivation rate (SMSD) for children		14,2	11,8	8,6	7,1	5,8	5,4	4,9	4,9	

Source: Eurostat.

Nonetheless, against the backdrop of these advancements, persistent challenges were notable, especially in the domain of food insecurity. While there has been an overall improvement, as evidenced by a decline from 4.0% in 2014 to 3.0% in 2022, in the inability to afford regular meals with meat, chicken, fish, or their vegetarian equivalents every second day, there was a slight upturn in 2022 compared to 2019 (2.3%). This increase can likely be attributed to the post-COVID-19 pandemic difficulties and, notably, mounting inflation, which surged to 7.83% in 2022, from 6.57% in 2021.

In terms of target groups, food insecurity was generally higher in households without children (Peralta, S. et. al. 2023b). As illustrated in Table A. 86 below, 2.9% of households experienced hunger, and 8.7% could not eat healthily. Single-adult households faced more insecurity, with 4.3% experiencing hunger due to financial reasons. In households with children, 1.9% experienced hunger, and 7.3% worried about insufficient food. In 2021, 15.3%

of single-parent families worried about food shortage and 8.2% reported eating less than deemed necessary. A total of 8.6% of large families also had concerns about food shortage, with 4.4% reporting eating less than desired.

Table A. 86 – Food insecurity by type of household (in %)

In the last 12 months, due to lack of money or other means	Worried about not having enough food to eat	Couldn't consume healthy and nutritious food	Ate less than thought necessary	Felt hungry but didn't eat
Total, without children	7.2	8.7	6.3	2.9
One adult	9.0	10.5	8.3	4.3
Two adults both under 65 years old	8.0	9.0	7.0	3.1
Two adults, at least one aged 65 and older	4.9	8.3	5.1	2.0
Other households without children	7.5	7.8	5.6	2.7
Total, with children	7.3	3.7	4.0	1.9
One adult with at least one child	15.3	6.0	8.2	3.1
Two adults with one child	5.3	3.4	3.0	0.6
Two adults with two children	2.7	2.0	1.3	1.1
Two adults with three or more children	8.6	1.8	4.4	1.5
Other households with children	10.0	5.2	5.9	3.4

Source: National Institute of Statistics (INE) Inquérito às Condições de Vida e do Rendimento (ICOR 2021).

22. Reconstructing the intervention logic

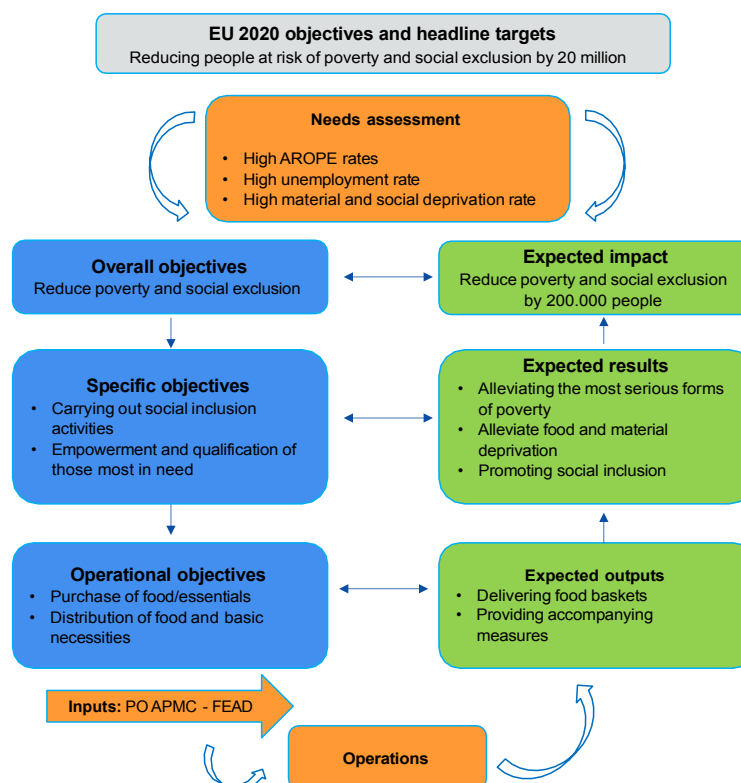
22.1. National policy framework

The overall integration of FEAD operations in Portugal demonstrates alignment with the national policy on social inclusion and poverty alleviation. The programme's planning process designed a balanced and equitable distribution of resources, considering factors such as food variety, nutritional requirements and distribution regularity. While FEAD's eligibility criteria were in harmony with national policies, it is acknowledged as a complementary initiative, primarily focusing on addressing food needs. The programme sheds light on the existing limitations in anti-poverty measures, emphasising the persistent challenge of insufficient incomes for individuals. Despite complementarity with some national policies, there remains room for greater integration and

clarity between FEAD and the broader national poverty strategy, particularly concerning overall strategy implementation.

Recent initiatives, such as the Decent Work Agenda (2023), were integrated into the Portuguese Recovery and Resilience Plan⁶²¹, which aims to reduce working poverty, address precarious employment, and promote collective bargaining, active employment policies, and life-long training. This underlined the necessity of a multifaceted strategy to tackle the intricate challenges posed by poverty and social exclusion.

Figure A. 87 – Intervention logic of FEAD in Portugal



Source: adapted from FEAD mid-term evaluation

22.2. Objectives and target groups

The central objective of FEAD in Portugal was to contribute to the alleviation of the most serious forms of poverty, by providing non-financial assistance to the neediest people, by providing food (food baskets) and carrying out accompanying measures aimed at increasing social inclusion and integration. Approved by the European Commission in 2014, FEAD operates under the *Programa Operacional de Apoio às Pessoas Mais Carenciadas* (PO APMC). The PO APMC programme was funded by FEAD and the State Budget and was aligned with the objectives of Europe 2020 in relation to the poverty reduction target. It aims to contribute to responding to forms of poverty, in order to have an impact on the target of reducing the number of people in poverty or social exclusion by at least 200,000 people by 2020. Portugal has fulfilled this commitment, as

⁶²¹ Ministério do Planeamento (2021), Recuperar Portugal, Construindo o futuro. Available at: <https://recuperarportugal.gov.pt/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/PRR.pdf>

reported by the Portugal Social Balance report⁶²², in 2019, there were 721,000 fewer people in poverty or social exclusion compared to 2007. However, the pandemic significantly impacted living conditions and income in Portugal. In 2020, the at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate reached 22.4%, making Portugal the country in the EU27 with the 8th highest proportion of people facing this vulnerability. This represents an increase of 256,000 people compared to 2019, leaving over 2.2 million people at risk, accounting for more than a fifth of the population. This increase was also felt in the operations of the (PO APMC), having nearly doubled the number of people supported on the mainland, and almost 50% more in the Madeira Autonomous Region from 2021 to 2022.

The programme originally encompassed the following types of operations:

- Acquisition of food products and/or essential goods by a public entity;
- Distribution of food products and/or essential goods by partner organisations;
- Acquisition of food products, preparation, and distribution of prepared meals by partner organisations;
- Technical assistance.

The specific regulation PO APMC incorporates acquisition and distribution of food products/essential goods in Measure 1 (Acquisition and distribution of food and/or essential goods) while addressing the acquisition and delivery of prepared meals in Measure 2 (Provision of free daily meals). However, Measure 2, intended to provide daily free prepared meals to the most deprived individuals by coordinating existing kitchens and canteens, was never implemented and was removed from the programme. The amendment⁶²³ concentrated EU resources on a single measure for food acquisition, excluding European support for widespread provision of prepared meals. This decision reflects the belief that focusing on food acquisition encourages autonomy and personal responsibility. Finally, the "Technical Assistance" Measure includes activities such as preparation, management, control, monitoring, evaluation, information dissemination, as well as actions to strengthen the administrative and technical capacity of entities involved in execution.

The target group of FEAD operations in Portugal comprises support to the most deprived people. To ensure that the programme effectively assists those in socio-economic need, eligibility criteria were established, taking into account factors such as housing stability (i.e. whether or not the beneficiary had a residential address), food storage (e.g. having a fridge), and documentation (e.g. proof of residence).

Vulnerable groups, including the Roma community, were generally covered by the programme. Despite the FEAD regulation at the national level specifically mentioning migrants and homeless people as final beneficiaries, interviews with stakeholders highlighted that migrants and homeless individuals were more likely to receive support through other national initiatives, such as the 'social canteen' within the 'Programa de Emergência Alimentar' (Food Emergency Programme), due to the FEAD requirements being based on documentation and food storage possibilities. In addition, PO APMC also had, for eligibility, an economic evaluation of the household based on Social Security criteria, where households had to prove their condition every 3 months to keep support. These criteria were removed during COVID and later reinstated, resulting in fluctuations in the number of beneficiaries.

⁶²² Portugal, Balanço Social 2022 Relatório Annual (2023). Available at: https://www.novasbe.unl.pt/Portals/0/Files/Reports/SEI%202023/NSBE-Relat%C3%B3rio_Balan%C3%A7o_Social_2022.pdf

⁶²³ By Ministerial Order no. 51/2017, of 2 February, which revoked article 41(2) of Ministerial Order no. 190- B/2015.

As reported by the results of a survey carried out in 2018 (Ministério do Trabalho, Solidariedade e Segurança Social, 2020), among the approximately 25,000 beneficiary households receiving food baskets, 28% were single adults, 22% couples with children, 19% childless couples, 15% single-parent families, and the remaining 16% represent other households with or without children. Within households with children, couples with two adults and one child (20.4%) were the most common, followed by households with two or more adults and one child (14.9%) and households with two adults and two children (14.8%). Breaking down the age groups, as illustrated in the table below, over half (54%) of food basket recipients were aged 19-60.

Table A. 87 – Number of people in the household, by age group in 2018

Number of People in the Household	Number of Households	Percentage
1 to 4 years	3,167	5%
5 to 11 years	8,209	13%
12 to 18 years	10,551	16%
19 to 60 years	35,029	54%
Over 60 years	8,126	12%

Source: Resultados dos questionários efetuados aos beneficiários em 2018, *Ministério do Trabalho, Solidariedade e Segurança Social*

Regarding accompanying measures, the 2022 FEAD Structured Survey highlights a broad spectrum of services provided to FEAD recipients, including those under 15 years old, who make up 26% of the total beneficiaries. The survey indicates that 92% of recipients receive guidance on food preparation, nutrition, and reducing food waste, emphasizing the promotion of healthy eating habits and efficient resource management. Additionally, 86% benefit from advice on managing household budgets, indicating efforts to enhance financial literacy among beneficiaries. Approximately 55% of recipients were referred to relevant social or administrative services, facilitating access to wider support networks. Furthermore, 51% participate in personalised coaching and workshops designed to equip them with practical skills and knowledge. Notably, 23% receive psychological and therapeutic support. Similarly, 23% receive guidance on personal cleanliness, addressing fundamental hygiene concerns.

Implemented operations

In Portugal, FEAD focuses on procuring, storing, and delivering food to the most deprived individuals and families. Additionally, the Operational Programme incorporates support measures to enhance the self-sufficiency, responsibility, and qualifications of these individuals, with the goal of alleviating their difficulties and fostering social inclusion. Despite the fund's intended broader support, 91% of the expenses were directed towards food aid.

According to the results of questionnaires distributed in 2018 (Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security 2020⁶²⁴) to the partner organisations and beneficiaries, these measures encompass empowering families in food selection, waste prevention, and optimising family budget management. However, within the PO APMC, only three types of actions were funded: optimising family budget management, preventing waste, and selecting food items. Among the support measures, 92% of organisations emphasise providing advice on nutrition, while 86% focus on guidance for family budget management. Referrals to services, individual follow-ups, and workshops were also common. Approximately a quarter mention guidance on personal hygiene and psychological support. However, the impact of accompanying measures on poverty reduction and social inclusion remains uncertain, as reported by the Court of Auditors (2020).

22.3. FEAD governance and delivery system

In Portugal, the FEAD programme operates within the Programa Operacional de Apoio às Pessoas Mais Carenciadas (PO APMC), with coordination from both the Ministry of Labour, Solidarity, and Social Security and the Ministry of Planning and Infrastructure (MPI) to ensure alignment with government policies and objectives. The Agency for Development and Cohesion (AD&C) takes charge of technical coordination and acts as certification authority of partner organisations. Additionally, the Inspection General of Finance (IGF) was designated as the authority responsible for auditing the programme. They oversee the financial aspects and compliance with established rules and regulations. Partner organisations such as the Social Security Institute play a role in implementing and managing the programme, e.g. delivering services, managing resources, or ensuring compliance with program guidelines in their respective areas.

FEAD support was operated through the division of the country into 135 districts in which over 600 partner entities play a central role as intermediary beneficiaries in the food distribution operation. These entities were categorised into those receiving, storing, and coordinating the delivery operation (coordinating entities - *entidades coordenadoras*) and those directly distributing goods to end recipients, preceded by eligibility verification of households (intermediary entities - *entidades mediadoras*). The distribution was carried out as follows:

- At partner organisations' locations, where the most deprived individuals and families receive the food baskets to prepare at home.
- At the residences of the most deprived individuals and families by partner organisations, particularly for those living in remote areas with limited transportation access or those who, due to dependencies or other valid reasons, were unable to travel.

Further, intermediary entities were tasked with implementing accompanying measures and ensuring adherence to specific storage conditions, thereby facilitating the efficient delivery of products to the end recipients.

According to the Court of Auditors (2020), the management and control model of the PO APMC was well-defined but has shown weaknesses in terms of coordination in implementation, supervision of delegated management by the ministries, and on-site verifications.

⁶²⁴ Ministério do Trabalho, Solidariedade e Segurança Social (2020), Cabazes Alimentares Resultados dos questionários efetuados aos beneficiários em 2018

23. Key findings on the implementation of FEAD

23.1. To what extent was FEAD support successful – or not – and why?

Overall achievement of FEAD objectives [criterion: effectiveness]

Portugal has made significant strides in combating poverty and social exclusion, evidenced by a reduction in the risk of poverty and improvements in family incomes. This positive shift can be attributed to increased earnings in the lowest income bracket, improved labour market conditions, sustained wage growth, and enhancements in social benefits, including pension reinstatements. The AROPE rate, a crucial measure of socio-economic well-being, highlights Portugal's commitment to addressing these issues, decreasing from 26.4% in 2014 to 20.1% in 2022.

From 2014 to 2019, there was a generally positive trend, with a decreasing percentage of households facing the inability to afford specified meals. However, in 2020, there was a slight increase to 2.5%, likely attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly impacted economic conditions worldwide, leading to financial challenges for many households. In 2021, the percentage remained stable at 2.4%, while in 2022, there was a more noticeable increase to 3.0%, indicating potential ongoing challenges or new economic conditions affecting households during that year. The data reflects the complex interplay of economic factors and external shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the subsequent energy crisis and high inflationary pressures, which affected the ability of households in Portugal to afford essential meals over the specified time period.

In response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the energy crisis, the programme demonstrated effective adaptation by expanding its operations. Beneficiaries increased from 60,000 to 120,000, leveraging the flexibility provided by CRII and CRII+, including 100% financing and the purchase of protective equipment. When it comes to accompanying measures (e.g. support measures to enhance the self-sufficiency, responsibility, and qualifications of end beneficiaries.), the effectiveness of FEAD remains uncertain, as 91% of the expenses were directed towards food aid, and no evidence on the results of these initiatives can be found in official reports and from the interviews. FEAD's impact on micro-economic stability for beneficiaries was confirmed by existing evidence (2022 FEAD Structured Survey) and from the interviews, enabling families to redirect savings towards essential costs, and whereas 88% of the interviewed mention the positive impact of FEAD on their household. However, challenges such as delayed implementation of accompanying measures and food distribution complexities relating to the COVID-19 and the following inflationary period, have affected effectiveness. The need for clarity and evidence from evaluations and reports on the outcomes of accompanying measures was crucial for a comprehensive evaluation of FEAD's overall impact. This need for clarity was underscored by survey perceptions of beneficiaries regarding accompanying measures: 69% found them very useful, while 29% found them relatively useful.

Reach of target groups [criterion: effectiveness]

As the target group were the most deprived people, regardless of their gender, age or social condition, there was **no differentiation in terms of the distribution of food, or accompanying actions**. The programme's final beneficiaries were individuals or families facing economic hardship, either temporarily, due to unexpected events, or persistently due to structural or economic reasons. The concept of economic hardship, as per the Institute of Social Security (ISS), considers individuals/families at risk of social exclusion, with a per capita income below the annual updated pension threshold (€210.32 in 2019), based on the 'Indexante dos Apoios Sociais' (IAS), which was €435.76 in 2019.

The eligibility criteria for target groups were defined to ensure that the programme effectively reached those in socio-economic need while also considering practical factors such as housing stability and documentation.

Marginalised groups such as the Roma community were generally included, while migrants or homeless individuals were supported through other national initiatives (e.g. ‘social canteen’ within the ‘*Programa de Emergência Alimentar*’ - *Food Emergency Programme*) as they often lacked the necessary documentation to access the programme and the ability to store food. Consulted stakeholders considered FEAD as a complementary instrument to Portugal's social protection measures, providing an opportunity to implement a programme that might have been challenging to finance solely with national funds.

The table below illustrates a growing demand for food aid over the years, with women making up approximately 54% of the aid recipients throughout this period. The annual execution reports revealed the following gender distribution among people who received food:

Table A. 88 – Gender distribution among FEAD recipients (2017-2022)

Indicator	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Total number of people receiving food aid	37 761	79 021	92 635	148 561	170 383	154 023
Number of women	20 275	42 009	60 486	80 261	92 323	83 841
% of women	54%	53%	65%	54%	54%	54%

Source: Annual implementation reports.

However, it is worth noting that there was limited information available regarding the exact breakdown of beneficiaries. **The extent to which FEAD support has reached these specific groups**, such as the homeless, children at risk of poverty, Roma, and other vulnerable groups, **remains unclear due to the lack of available information**. This knowledge gap posed a challenge, as **organisations did not have the necessary data to assess the local or regional reach of the programme**. In order to gain a more accurate understanding of the programme's effectiveness, collecting and analysing data on the beneficiaries within these groups at the local or regional level would be essential.

Adjustments to FEAD to address new challenges [*criterion: effectiveness*]

Portugal's **FEAD programme effectively adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic and the energy crisis**.

Portugal's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent energy crisis involved several adjustments to its Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived programme. These changes were aimed at accommodating **increased demand and ensuring support for those in need**. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Portugal took several steps to adapt its FEAD programme. The primary criteria for eligibility, based on socio-economic conditions, remained unchanged. However, there was a substantial increase in the number of beneficiaries, with coverage doubling on the mainland (from 60 to 120 thousand) and substantial expansions in Madeira and the Azores. Expanding the programme's capacity and logistics was necessary to accommodate this increased number

of beneficiaries. This included enlarging warehouses and improving distribution infrastructure. Portugal utilised the flexibilities provided by CRII and CRII+ to enhance FEAD delivery in the following ways:

- **Reprogramming funds for 100% financing:** Portugal leveraged the option to reprogramme funds, allowing them to achieve 100% financing. This likely ensured that they had the necessary resources to address the increased demand for aid during the COVID-19 pandemic and other crises.
- **Purchase of protective equipment:** Thanks to the flexibilities granted by CRII and CRII+, Portugal was able to purchase protective equipment such as gloves and hand sanitizer for distribution during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To ensure uninterrupted support during the pandemic, the assessment of the socio-economic condition of beneficiaries, which was previously conducted every three months, was temporarily halted while the transition from food distribution by organisations to direct delivery to end recipients was noted as a positive aspect, enhancing privacy and safety during the pandemic. These **adjustments have generally been seen as effective in providing support to the target groups during these crises**. However, the lack of clear data to evaluate the coverage and impact on all those in need highlights the importance of ongoing monitoring and data collection to ensure that support remains comprehensive and targeted where necessary.

Horizontal principles of FEAD [criterion: effectiveness]

Available information suggests that **efforts have been made to achieve the stated horizontal principles**, particularly in terms of waste prevention and respecting the dignity of beneficiaries.

With regard to the issue of food waste, there were accompanying measures carried out by the partner organisations that were directly related to the issue of "waste prevention". In this regard, it should be noted that by 31 December 2023, according to the data published in the implementation report, 1,230 training actions had been carried out by the partner organisations on the theme of "waste prevention", covering 60,239 final recipients. Regarding partnership agreements, relevant stakeholders⁶²⁵ have been consulted throughout the programme's implementation, both at an early stage to gather input for the assessment and composition of the food basket and in defining the concept of economic deprivation. In addition to these contributions, they were also consulted on the content of the annual implementation reports, and more recently were informed about the electronic card system to be implemented in Portugal (see below). However, a more comprehensive assessment with quantifiable data and specific examples would provide a clearer understanding of the programme's effectiveness in upholding these principles.

Success and failure factors [criterion: effectiveness]

The **FEAD support programme has had a positive impact in several ways**.

One of the notable positive effects of the FEAD programme, confirmed by all interviewees, is its micro-economic impact on beneficiary families. Through the provision of essential food support, families have been able to save on food expenses, which they can then redirect towards other crucial costs and bills. This increased financial stability within these families contributed to the overall well-being of the recipients and, in turn, society. According to a survey⁶²⁶, the introduction of a monthly food basket for beneficiaries has led to notable improvements in their financial situation. For example, a significant percentage of recipients can now pay their household utility bills on time (72.1%), meet rent and mortgage payments (53.2%), purchase prescribed medications (42.9%), and handle unexpected expenses (33.5%). A considerable proportion can also afford new

⁶²⁵ Including EAPN Portugal - European Anti-Poverty Network; Portuguese Red Cross; Portuguese Federation of Food Banks Against Hunger; Portuguese Caritas; Union of Portuguese Misericórdias (UMP); Union of Portuguese Mutualities; Order of Nutritionists; International Medical Assistance Foundation (AMI); National Association of Parishes (ANAFRE); National Association of Municipalities

⁶²⁶ PO APC M (2020), Cabazes Alimentares Resultados dos questionários efetuados aos beneficiários em 2018. Available at: [PO APMC | Cabazes Alimentares](#)

clothing or shoes (26.9%) and adequately heat their homes (18.4%). Some beneficiaries can invest in books or training (15.2%), while 8.5% of children in these households could regularly participate in extracurricular or leisure activities.

However, the programme has encountered challenges that have negatively impacted its effectiveness. One critical issue underlined by consulted stakeholders is the delayed implementation of accompanying measures. The delay can be attributed to significant logistical challenges encountered throughout the programme, diverting attention away from the accompanying measures. The situation exacerbated with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the following energy/ cost of living crisis. These delays hampered the timely execution of critical aspects of the programme. Additionally, many intermediary beneficiaries did not receive feedback on accompanying measures, making it difficult to assess the programme's true impact.

The FEAD programme also faced challenges related to food distribution, including administrative issues and the variety of food products distributed. The end recipients and entities involved in the distribution of food faced difficulties and additional costs in storing and preserving the food, especially frozen items, due to the package containing an excess of frozen vegetables. However, monthly distribution, instead of weekly, aimed to shift responsibility to intermediary beneficiaries, alleviating pressure on household storage capacity (Court of Auditors, 2020). Administrative hurdles, such as complex procurement procedures, and administrative appeals from suppliers, resulted in several delays or difficulties in distributing the full range of food items initially planned. To address this, the programme adapted by conducting surveys to better understand the needs of recipients and subsequently adjusting the variety of food products. This demonstrates the programme's flexibility in responding to challenges but also highlights the initial difficulties in efficient food distribution.

Overall cost-effectiveness of FEAD operations [*criterion: efficiency*]

In Portugal, **FEAD operations were generally cost-effective**. This was due to the bulk purchase of food by public institutions responsible for social security (ISS - Institute for Social Security), which allowed costs to be reduced compared to market prices. This made it possible to buy more products and distribute them to a greater number of people, except during the period following the start of the Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, when there was a widespread increase in prices and difficulties in the supply of products. Regarding the type of FEAD activities and the target group, there was no significant differentiation in terms of costs, as the target group is the most deprived people, regardless of gender, age, or social condition. Therefore, the cost associated with each activity was similar.

Nevertheless, the cost-effectiveness of FEAD operations was affected by several factors, some of which were well-recognised by consulted partner organisations. The main factors affecting the cost-effectiveness of FEAD operations included compliance with public procurement standards and legal acts, which, in the case of disputes or challenges, resulted in delays in the procurement and distribution of products. Furthermore, the energy crisis and the widespread price increases resulting from the Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine caused constraints, such as the need for price revisions by suppliers, shortages of raw materials, and disruptions in production and distribution lines. This resulted in delays or failures in the delivery of some items and increased costs in some cases. Noteworthy challenges also revolved around the transportation of food baskets to the most vulnerable recipients. These complications were exacerbated by the considerable quantities of products per delivery and the prevalence of frozen items, often resulting from retroactive deliveries and supplier-related complications. The managing organisations struggled to cope with the demands of storing and preserving these products, thereby underscoring the specific logistical, health-related, and financial hurdles faced by intermediary beneficiaries.

In addition, the decision to opt for direct food distribution introduced supplementary financial commitments for participating organisations. These included expenditures related to equipment procurement or rental, energy usage, and general handling and storage outlays. The approach required valuable technical expertise, thereby

inflating costs and diverting essential resources that might have been more judiciously directed towards aiding families and communities. The management of storage, record-keeping, and distribution, while necessary, encroached upon the executing organisations' capacity, thereby compromising the core support objective of the FEAD programme.

Discussions were underway regarding the future implementation of an electronic card system for food distribution (e.g. vouchers). According to interviewees, this transition has garnered minimal opposition following consultations with partner organisations and the public. The electronic card system promises benefits such as simplifying logistical challenges in procurement, distribution, and storage, potentially reshaping the roles within public administration. It is expected to reduce the need for legal experts in procurement matters, while enhancing overall efficiency. Additionally, beneficiaries will experience a streamlined and user-friendly process, alleviating administrative burdens. This system aims to empower recipients by providing autonomy and choice, while removing barriers of social shame in access to food packages. However, some limitations and budget constraints may apply as available funding may limit the quantity and variety of products that can be purchased, especially when compared to bulk procurement.

Administrative burden of monitoring and reporting requirements [*criterion: efficiency*]

The **administrative requirements of the FEAD programme were considered burdensome** both by the managing authority (MA) and partner organisations. On average, and as an estimate for the MA, **administrative tasks** relating to the monitoring, following up and providing information system support, **amount to 400/ 500 hours each month**, which can vary depending on time of year, such as reporting periods, evaluations, audits, on-the-spot checks. For an overall figure for the programme, it would be necessary to add the hours of each partner organisation and intermediate body. Among the most burdensome tasks, the following were cited:

- **The MA considered the audit requirements out of line with the size of the programme**, and the number of audits (77) very high in relation to the number of operations and the approved budget. As an example, the number of audits carried out on PO APMC, which has an allocation of €208 million and only 297 operations, is very high when compared, for example, with the 136 audits for the POISE (*Programa Operacional Inclusão Social e Emprego* - Social Inclusion and Employment Operational Programme), which has an allocation of €2,568 million and 4,896 operations.
- The process of **designing operational programmes required substantial administrative effort** from the MA as it included defining the concept of economic deprivation, shaping the food basket, conducting public consultations, and planning a territorial strategy. The need to create separate instruments and procedural manuals added to the administrative complexity.
- Both the MA and partner organisations agreed that the **logistics associated with direct distribution were very demanding**, starting with the need for warehouses for the different types of products, as well as the human resources to carry out the distribution (frozen, fresh and dry). Despite periods of crisis (COVID-19 and the Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine), the intermediaries and partner organisations were able to mobilise to ensure the continuity of direct distribution to recipients.

These administrative requirements demanded a considerable allocation of resources, including time and effort. It is worth noting that in some organisations, funds from the FEAD programme were used to support their own operations, which added to the complexity of managing administrative responsibilities. Overall, there was scepticism about the excessive administrative costs and burdens associated with programmes like FEAD and ESF, with the belief that a more streamlined and efficient approach could be adopted to reduce administrative complexities and optimise the programmes' impact. As affirmed by stakeholders, some **potential partner organisations preferred not to engage with FEAD due to its bureaucratic nature, which requires time and resources that volunteers find burdensome**: *"It should be considered that FEAD constitutes only around a third of the total support for food aid that organisations receive. It's a key part but not essential."*

Flat rates, as defined in Article 26(2)(c) of the Regulation, were employed to cover various costs for partner organisations. These flat rates were utilised primarily during the initial phases of the operations. The use of flat rates, in conjunction with the implementation of the information system, yielded several benefits, particularly in terms of streamlining administrative processes and reducing the workload associated with financial reporting. No information was provided as to why the use of flat rates was stopped.

Simplification measures [criterion: efficiency]

The potential transition from direct food delivery to an electronic card system for FEAD distribution has been under discussion in recent years. This change, although not yet implemented, has received minimal opposition after consultations with partner organisations and the public, with no significant objections raised during the public presentation of the proposal.

The shift to an electronic card system offers several advantages. It simplifies various logistical challenges associated with the procurement, distribution, and storage of food, which were previously linked to manual processes. This system is expected to enhance the efficiency of public administration and may lead to changes in the roles and tasks of certain personnel. For instance, it could reduce the need for legal experts to handle procurement-related issues. Overall, the electronic card system is anticipated to increase efficiency. On the beneficiaries' side, the electronic card system is expected to streamline the process and improve user-friendliness, reducing administrative burdens for recipients and the distribution chain. This transition is seen as a positive step in enhancing the programme's effectiveness and, most importantly, in granting people greater autonomy and choice.

Coherence of FEAD with other interventions [criterion: coherence]

The implementation of FEAD activities in the country demonstrated a fair level of coherence with both national policy initiatives and regional funding approaches aimed at addressing poverty and social exclusion. However, there is still room for improvement in terms of coordination between different national initiatives.

The programme's implementation was preceded by a strategic territorial planning process. This planning was conducted meticulously to ensure equitable and balanced distribution across the territory, taking into consideration factors such as the type and diversity of food to be distributed, nutritional requirements to be met, and the regularity of distribution. The planning process involved several key steps, including determining the budget allocated to the programme, calculating the composition of the food baskets, estimating the number of beneficiaries who could be supported, and conducting a study based on local indicators, such as the resident population and unemployment levels in various municipalities. This comprehensive approach allowed for the division of the national territory into 135 regions, with 560 NGOs involved to ensure that a minimum of 150 beneficiaries would be supported in each region. In this context, FEAD operations appear to align effectively with national and regional policies. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that FEAD primarily focuses on food support, emphasising the need for broader anti-poverty measures. This requirement is exemplified by recent initiatives, such as the Decent Work Agenda (2023) integrated into the Portuguese Recovery and Resilience Plan⁶²⁷. This agenda aims to reduce the working poor and precarious employment and to promote collective bargaining, active employment policies, and training. These measures underscore the importance of adopting a comprehensive and coordinated approach to address the complex challenges posed by poverty and social exclusion.

⁶²⁷ Ministério do Planeamento (2021), Recuperar Portugal, Construindo o futuro. Available at: <https://recuperarportugal.gov.pt/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/PRR.pdf>

23.2. Is FEAD still relevant?

Relevance to target groups [*criterion: relevance*]

The design of **FEAD in Portugal appears to be relevant in addressing the needs of the most deprived.**

The FEAD programme has been tailored to meet 50% of the food needs of households experiencing economic hardship. As for whether there were groups whose needs were not addressed by FEAD, it is perceived that no specific groups were excluded from FEAD support. However, considering the programme's design and eligibility criteria, some target groups such as migrants and homeless people received no or limited assistance. Regarding FEAD's ability to support new target groups and address emerging needs, the COVID-19 crisis and the decrease in household income led to a higher number of individuals and families experiencing economic hardship. Through the PO APMC, FEAD was able to increase the number of beneficiaries, extending support to more than 100% on the mainland, 50% in Madeira, and 10% in the Azores. This margin for expansion was identified in collaboration with the respective social security institutions.

The design of FEAD appears to effectively reach specific target groups in the country. It has also displayed adaptability in response to the heightened needs resulting from the COVID-19 crisis, the energy crisis, and the arrival of migrants from Ukraine due to the Russian aggression. Although certain groups may have received more constrained support due to the programme's design, FEAD has proven its capability to adjust and broaden its scope when required.

Relevance of FEAD now and in the future [*criterion: relevance*]

The objectives and **operations of FEAD in the country were considered highly relevant** for meeting the needs of the target groups.

Several current and future trends have the potential to affect the relevance of FEAD support in the future.

The ongoing Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has led to a significant increase in food prices, impacting the programme due to its limited budget. This affected both the quantity of food that can be procured and the number of people who can be supported. Additionally, the current high interest rates may result in the emergence of new groups facing economic hardship. People with existing bank loans, such as mortgages, have experienced a substantial increase in monthly payments. Similarly, people renting have seen significant increases in their housing expenses, leading to a significant reduction in disposable income and potentially expanding the pool of those in need. Other stakeholders affirmed that climate change poses a significant risk in the southern region of Portugal, which is already grappling with high poverty rates. Climate-related factors, such as extreme weather events and changing patterns of resource availability, can impact food distribution and procurement due to supply shortages, price increases and delays. Partner organisations have noted a growing demand for water, which is not currently covered by FEAD. It is anticipated that addressing this need will become increasingly crucial. Climate-induced water shortages can impact not just access to drinking water but also the capacity to prepare specific food items.

Finally, Portugal, like many other European countries, is facing challenges related to housing access, largely influenced by tourism and migratory flows. The increase in migration, both from other countries and within Portugal, has driven up housing costs and created overcrowding in urban areas. This situation can pose difficulties for people living in small, overcrowded spaces, affecting their ability to manage, store, and cook food effectively, especially if a similar programme in the future does not adapt to varying contexts. Additionally, organisations on the field report a significant increase of people in homelessness, particularly in the urban centres, many with migratory backgrounds, which can pressure the food support systems in the short and medium-term.

23.3. Did FEAD make a difference and to whom?

EU added value [criterion: EU added value]

FEAD was designed with specific goals to promote social inclusion and combat poverty, which would not have been achieved without EU-level intervention. These goals include:

- Mitigating food insecurity to reduce instances of social inequality.
- Providing a predictable food distribution system that offers non-monetary support, making a significant impact on the monthly budgets of families.
- Ensuring balanced coverage across the entire national territory, including the mainland and the Autonomous Regions, through careful advance planning to reach areas with higher needs.
- Offering effective, regular, and ongoing food support that addresses approximately 50% of the nutritional needs of each recipient, contributing to a balanced diet for the most vulnerable populations.

It is essential to note that all entities involved in food distribution (intermediaries/partner organisations) were responsible for developing social support and assistance activities for the most deprived individuals in their areas of operation. In the case of FEAD, leveraging the capabilities of these intermediaries has resulted in innovative and distinctive measures of support. These measures include empowering recipients in various aspects, such as optimising family budget management, waste reduction, and food selection. Moreover, the way the programme was designed to cover the entire national territory has led to various partnerships between different entities that have organised ways to reach even the most challenging areas.

This cooperation and institutional coordination were particularly evident during the COVID-19 crisis, ensuring that even during the pandemic, with all the constraints and limitations in place, recipients continued to receive food support. This demonstrates the considerable benefits that national authorities and partner organisations have derived from their involvement in FEAD operations, including enhanced cooperation.

Several partner organisations emphasised the significance of establishing the FEAD Network⁶²⁸, which was considered an innovative approach and a valuable addition to the programme. The network facilitated the exchange of best practices, the discussion of pertinent issues, and the generation of knowledge among representatives from national agencies, public entities, and civil society organisations from various countries. This European initiative should be emulated on a national scale, as it could serve as a crucial platform for fostering cooperation and sharing ideas and insights. The FEAD Network spurred critical reflections on what food support should entail, the inclusion of alternative options and practices, and even brought to the discussion the experiences of cards/vouchers in food/material support, which was, for several countries and organisations involved in FEAD, an opening for reflection and practices, especially in the context of a pandemic.

Visibility [visibility]

The awareness among the general public and end recipients that support came from FEAD and the EU varied. While there was formal information provided during the application process and indications at FEAD distribution points, most of the beneficiaries were not aware that the support they received was funded by the European Union. However, there have also been efforts to showcase FEAD/EU-funded operations through television channels, as evidenced by a report from Euronews⁶²⁹.

⁶²⁸ More info here: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1207&langId=en>

⁶²⁹ Video: Europa debate risposta social à pandemia (min 2.20). Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=REkfvcvXpvQ>

24. Good practices

When faced with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, FEAD showcased high adaptability. Doubling its recipients' coverage and adjusting infrastructure for more effective logistic, the programme demonstrated resilience and responsiveness to unprecedented demand.

As confirmed by the MA and POs, one of the good practices refers to the **effective transition from organisation-based food distribution to direct delivery during the pandemic**. Direct food delivery temporarily enabled the implementation of stringent safety and health measures as minimising direct contact between individuals became a priority. Delivering food directly to recipients' homes reduced the risk of exposure to COVID-19 compared to traditional organisation-based distribution where people may gather in larger groups. As confirmed by partner organisations, this shift in the food distribution also highlighted a commitment to the privacy and dignity of the recipients, ensuring that people in need could access food assistance without the potential stigma or discomfort associated with receiving aid in a public setting.

25. Conclusions and lessons learned

Effectiveness

Portugal's significant strides in reducing poverty and social exclusion are evident through decreased AROPE rates and improved socio-economic conditions. While the programme adapted well to the COVID-19 pandemic, the effectiveness of accompanying measures remains uncertain, lacking evidence on outcomes. In terms of target groups, FEAD demonstrated inclusivity, targeting the most deprived individuals without differentiation. However, a knowledge gap exists regarding the specific breakdown of beneficiaries, hindering a comprehensive evaluation.

The lack of clear data for evaluation emphasises the importance of ongoing monitoring and data collection.

Efficiency

FEAD operations in Portugal were generally cost-effective, leveraging bulk purchases by public institutions. The ability to buy more products at reduced costs allowed wider distribution, though challenges during the Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine affected prices and product supply. Factors influencing cost-effectiveness included compliance with procurement standards, energy crisis constraints, and logistical challenges in transportation, especially for frozen items. Discussions on implementing an electronic card system aim to enhance efficiency, but potential budget constraints may arise.

The administrative requirements of the FEAD programme were considered burdensome, consuming significant time and effort of intermediate authorities as well as beneficiaries. Tasks related to monitoring, reporting and information system support were estimated to be 400/500 hours per month at the MA level.

Coherence

The FEAD programme in Portugal has shown coherence with national policy initiatives and regional funding approaches, aligning with strategic territorial planning. The lessons learned emphasize the significance of adopting a comprehensive and coordinated approach to tackle the multifaceted challenges of poverty and social exclusion, going beyond immediate food support.

Relevance

FEAD in Portugal has proven its relevance by effectively targeting specific groups facing economic hardship. The programme's design, aimed at fulfilling a significant portion of food needs, aligns with its objectives. The flexibility displayed during the COVID-19 crisis was key in expanding coverage based on increased needs.

Lessons learned highlight the importance of continual assessment and responsiveness to emerging challenges. Recognising the future relevance of climate-related factors, such as extreme weather events, and the increasing demand for water (not currently covered by FEAD), is pivotal. Additionally, challenges tied to housing access influenced by tourism and migratory flows warrant careful consideration. The adaptability of FEAD's approach to diverse contexts and its responsiveness to emerging trends will be indispensable for maintaining relevance in future scenarios.

EU Added Value

The programme's multifaceted impact, spanning from alleviating food insecurity to implementing accompanying measures, highlights the distinctive contributions facilitated by EU support. Lessons learned underscore the significance of harnessing intermediary capabilities for innovative measures and the advantages derived from national cooperation and coordination, particularly in times of crises. The innovative approach of the FEAD Network stands out as a model for fostering collaboration, exchanging ideas, and generating knowledge on a European scale. However, having more opportunities for dialogue with other national organisations would be highly beneficial, fostering increased cooperation and knowledge sharing.

Visibility

FEAD's visibility to the general public and beneficiaries remains a challenge. While formal information processes exist, there is room for improvement in communicating EU support. Efforts to showcase operations through media, such as television channels, provide a valuable avenue for increasing visibility. Lessons learned stress the importance of ongoing efforts to enhance awareness, ensuring that beneficiaries recognise and appreciate the EU's role in supporting initiatives like FEAD.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Methodology

The researcher employed a comprehensive methodology to gather evidence and insights involving extensive desk research, utilising reports such as the mid-term evaluation of the programme, annual execution reports, and documents from national ministries. Quantitative data played a pivotal role in explaining the socioeconomic context during the implementation period, including percentages, numerical breakdowns, and detailed statistics on people at risk of poverty or with difficulties in securing a meal. The results of the questionnaire conducted in 2018 by the Ministry of Labour, Solidarity, and Social Security provided valuable and complementary information, indicating the use of survey instruments to directly collect data from beneficiaries. The main primary evidence comes from stakeholder consultations and interviews were integral components of the research methodology, offering qualitative insights into the perception of FEAD as a complementary instrument to Portugal's social protection measures. Interviews involved managing authorities, partners organisations, anti-poverty NGOs as well as experts in the field of social protection.

Additionally, the researcher incorporated information from the Court of Auditors, indicating an integration of external audit findings and assessments into the evaluation process. This diverse and comprehensive methodology, encompassing quantitative data, official reports, stakeholder interviews, questionnaires, and external audits represents the evidence for this case study.

Appendix 2: References

Desk research sources listed alphabetically.

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Appendix 3: FEAD indicators

Table A. 89 – Input indicators for the implementation of FEAD in Portugal in 2016-2022

Indicator	Total amount of eligible public expenditure approved in the documents setting out the conditions for support of operations (EUR)	Total amount of eligible public expenditure incurred by beneficiaries and paid in implementing operations (EUR)	Total amount of eligible public expenditure declared to the Commission (EUR)	Implementation rate (expenditure declared as share of allocated budget)
2014-2022	243,793,742.47	157,067,850.59	149,628,520.25	61%

Source: SFC 2014 database.

Table A. 90 – Common Output Indicators in Portugal in 2014-2022, per year

Output indicators on food support distributed	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Quantity of fruits and vegetables (tonnes)	1 217.00	1 368.00	0	128.12	5 344.54	3 391.82	9 450.89	10 306.85	7 624.50
Quantity of meat, eggs, fish, seafood (tonnes)	859.00	984.00	0	72.86	2 019.01	1 894.51	2 086.81	3 153.54	1 890.71
Quantity of flour, bread, potatoes, rice and other starchy products (tonnes)	1 758.00	1 928.00	0	108.89	1 436.26	1 503.16	4 848.11	5 518.16	2 821.36
Quantity of sugar (tonnes)	442.00	539.00	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Quantity of milk products (tonnes)	2 510.00	2 982.00	0	267.84	3 507.35	3 265.12	7 144.80	7 938.66	9 049.89
Quantity of fats, oil (tonnes)	921.00	449.00	0	19.20	152.15	173.58	566.94	646.33	294.67

Output indicators on food support distributed	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Quantity of convenience food, other foodstuff (not falling in abovementioned categories) (tonnes)	0	0	0	8.47	486.67	827.77	508.33	341.87	847.40
Total quantity of food support distributed (tonnes)M	7707.00	8250.00	0	605.38	12945.98	11055.96	24605.88	27905.41	22528.53
Proportion of FEAD co-financed food products in the total volume of food distributed by the partner organisations (%)	50	50	0	0.05	73.89	87.52	94.17	94.83	93.75
Total number of food packages distributed partly or totally financed by the OP	448686	408737	0	19725	279050	281266	452543	613154	531127

Source: SFC 2014 database.

Table A. 91 – Number of FEAD participants in Portugal in 2014-2022

Result indicators on food support distributed	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Total number of persons receiving food support	448686	408737	0	37761	79021	92635	148561	170383	154023

Result indicators on food support distributed	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Number of children aged 15 years or below	111 522	96 529	0	10 939	21 114	30 384	41 610	46 375	41 907
Number of persons aged 65 years or above	45 040	42 630	0	1 865	4 752	7 399	9 170	11 681	12 062
Number of women	195 043	173 853	0	20 275	42 009	60 486	80 261	92 323	83 841
Number of migrants, participants with a foreign background, minorities (including marginalised communities such as the Roma)	0	0	0	6 945	8 809	18 722	12 637	14 000	14 823
Number of persons with disabilities	0	0	0	921	1 103	2 139	1 180	1 310	1 343
Number of homeless	0	0	0	21	16	96	76	84	0

Source: SFC 2014 database.

X.11 Romania

1. Context and background

Romanian society has made major progress in reducing the risk of poverty and social exclusion during the 2014-2022 period (see AROPE indicator in Table A. 92 below). Despite the progress, the share of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion⁶³⁰ at the national level is still high. In 2022, Romania ranks the first among the EU countries in terms of the share of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion. More than one in three Romanians (34.4%) were at risk of poverty and social exclusion in 2022 (Table A. 92) compared to more than one in five at the EU level (21.6%).⁶³¹

Table A. 92 – Socio-economic context in Romania

Romania	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Trend
1. At-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate (AROPE) Total		44.5	46.0	42.5	38.7	36.1	35.6	34.5	34.4	
2. AROPE Children		52.8	55.3	48.0	44.3	37.8	40.5	41.1	40.7	
3. Severe material and social deprivation rate (SMSD)		34.0	35.9	32.4	28.3	24.5	25.3	23.1	24.3	
4. Severe material deprivation rate (SMD)	25.9	5.8	23.8	19.7	16.8	14.5	15.2	0.0	0.0	
5. Inability to afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish (or vegetarian equivalent) every second day	22.7	19.7	21.8	19.2	16.3	14.2	14.7	19.2	22.1	
6. Impact of social transfers (other than pensions) on poverty reduction % reduction of AROPE	12.9	13.3	14.2	16.6	16.1	15.3	15.8	17.9	16.5	
7. Housing cost overburden	16.2	15.9	14.4	12.3	10.3	8.6	7.1	7.6	8.5	
8. Self-reported unmet need for medical care % of population 16+	9.8	9.4	6.5	4.7	4.9	4.9	4.7	4.4	4.9	
9. Households with very low work intensity		6.2	6.4	5.4	6.0	4.5	4.7	3.5	4.2	
11. Population in the EU could not afford unexpected financial expenses	52.7	51.4	54.5	52.5	45.9	44.3	47.3	47.3	47.9	
13. Share of total population having neither a bath, nor a shower in their dwelling	32.5	30.8	30.5	27.8	26.0	22.8	21.6			
14. No indoor flushing	32.5	30.8	30.5	27.8	26.0	22.8	21.6			
17. Persons who cannot afford a telephone	5.7	4.6	3.6	2.2	1.4	0.9	0.6			
18. Persons who cannot afford to replace worn-out clothes	32.4	30.3	38.8	36.8	32.8	29.8	29.0	24.9	24.3	
20. Persons who cannot afford to get-together with friends or family (relatives) for a drink or meal at least once a month	35.7	32.0	29.5	26.6	23.0	22.2	21.1	21.3	22.5	
21. Persons who cannot afford internet connection for personal use at home	30.0	25.1	25.7	24.3	21.3	21.1	19.8	11.7	9.1	
22. In-work risk of poverty	15.0	14.7	14.3	13.3	11.2	12.3	11.2	12.4	12.2	
23. Long-term unemployment	3.4	3.6	3.4	2.4	2.2	2.0	1.8	2.0	2.2	
25. Employment rate	53.7	54.9	55.8	58.0	59.0	60.2	60.2	61.9	63.1	
26. Children (aged less than 18) living in households with very low work intensity		7.6	8.1	5.8	7.1	5.0	5.7	3.2	4.7	
27. At-risk-of-poverty rate for children		38.1	37.2	32.2	32.0	30.8	30.1	29.8	27.0	
28. Severe material and social deprivation rate (SMSD) for children		40.2	43.5	37.0	31.5	25.8	29.7	28.2	30.8	

Source: Eurostat.

Among the EU Member States, the highest share of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion was reported for Romania (34.4 %), where 24.3% of population lives in severe material and social deprivation. These rates were notably higher compared to other EU countries.⁶³²

⁶³⁰ The risk of poverty and social exclusion represents the aggregation of three indicators: ‘risk of poverty, severe material and social deprivation and/or living in a household with a very low work intensity’.

⁶³¹ Eurostat, (2023). People at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2022.

⁶³² European Commission (2023). Key figures on European Living Conditions 2023 edition. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/15216629/17704280/KS-HC-23-001-EN-N.pdf>

Further data from the world bank published in 2020, shows that during 2015-2020, economic growth in Romania translated into a substantial decline in the poverty rate too: from 27.8% in 2015 to 10.7% in 2020. This is supported by the steady increase in the employment rate (as shown in Table A. 92). However, again, poverty rates remained high compared to countries with similar income levels.⁶³³

According to the Eurostat data presented in the Table A. 92, the rate of people who were in-work and at risk of poverty in Romania decreased from 15% in 2014 to 12.2% in 2022. However, in 2022 approximately 22.1% of people were unable to afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish (or vegetarian equivalent) every second day, the highest rate among EU countries. Compared to 2014, there has only been a decrease of 0.6 percentage points (from 22.7%), showing modest progress for this indicator. Whereas, in terms of access to internet at home, the progress is notable, in 2014 there were 30% people were unable to afford an internet connection for personal use at home, while in 2022 the rate was much lower: 9.1%.

Vulnerable groups at particular risk of poverty included the elderly (65 years and over). According to Eurostat data, the at risk of poverty rate for 65 years or over in Romania in 2012 was 35.7%, although this had decreased to 19.50% by 2022. Roma were also particularly vulnerable, with an AROPE of 78% in 2021, an even higher figure than in 2016, the previous point of comparison.⁶³⁴ Homeless people are another vulnerable group who are poorly addressed by social policies (also due to the lack of identity documents and weak monitoring mechanisms at the level of social services). According to the socio-economic analysis for the programming of European funds 2014 – 2020 (published in 2013), experts estimated between 2004 and 2007 there were between 11,000-14,000 homeless people, of which around 5,000 were living in Bucharest. *'The majority become homeless after leaving a fostering centre or another institution (either upon turning 18/finishing studies, or under other conditions) [...]. So, the homeless shelter seems to be the second "stop" in an institutionalised route that starts in children's homes/fostering centres. For the most part, homeless people in Romania are men aged 21-30/51-60. The majority do not work because they are not able to work, as they have severe health problems. A large proportion of homeless people do not have identification, and most do not have health insurance. Access to medical and social services is extremely low.'*⁶³⁵

Romania was among the Member States with a larger allocation of FEAD funds and determined that the **most relevant target group of the FEAD interventions in the country were children**. Despite the decrease of AROPE rate of children from 52.8% in 2015 to 40.7% in 2022, the level of this indicator remains above the AROPE indicator for the general population (34.4%) – as indicated in Table A. 92. A representative from an international NGO mentioned that *'[...] Because the programme [FEAD(POAD)] had interventions that specifically addressed children from marginalised communities, it would be interesting to see why, on the one hand, we have important, significant progress in the [ARPE] indicator for the general population, but when we look at children,⁶³⁶ we still have a huge percentage'*.⁶³⁷

According to a recent UNICEF study⁶³⁸ *'for families and children in the EU, the cost-of-living crisis is being experienced primarily through higher prices for food and energy. [...] There is a long-standing need to address persistently high rates of child poverty in the EU, which the COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated. The recent records of EU-27 countries show how reducing child income poverty has been a difficult task. Overall, between 2011 and 2021, the average child income poverty rate in the EU fluctuated between around 18 and 21 %.'*

⁶³³ Poverty & Equity Brief: Romania (2023). Available at: [Global_POVEQ_ROU.pdf f](#)

⁶³⁴ FRA (2021) Roma Survey

⁶³⁵ National Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights and Adoption, 2015. Statement from the FEAD version 7.0, 2021

⁶³⁶ In Romania, the children target group is between 0 – 18 years old.

⁶³⁷ Interview with representative from UNICEF, conducted in October 2023

⁶³⁸ UNICEF (2023). Children and the cost-of-living Crisis. Available at: [UNICEF Innocenti | Innocenti Global Office of Research and Foresight](#)

Romania has a resident population of 19 million,⁶³⁹ out of which 3.62 million are children. Since 2015, the number of children has been decreasing due to external migration and declining birth rate. Over 47% of children live in rural areas, with lower living standards and more precarious access to quality social services as compared to the urban population. Three in 10 children in Romania (28.2%) are affected by severe material and social deprivation.⁶⁴⁰ Moreover, Romania has the highest rate of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the European Union (41.5%) and it increased for the second consecutive year, almost doubling the EU average (23.8%).⁶⁴¹

Both prior to the EU accession and after, the effects of the multiple economic crises that Romanian society went through following the transition from a totalitarian system, in the 1990s, to democracy manifested themselves unfairly for a majority of the population.⁶⁴² *‘The population of Romania is the one that has borne a disproportionately high part of the economic and social costs of the crises; in other words, almost every generation has known a period of “sacrifice”; the costs were unevenly distributed, pressing especially on the shoulders of those with medium and low incomes’.*⁶⁴³ This social reality has been fuelled by a desire to make Romania an attractive country for foreign investments, which has resulted in high GDP levels compared to other Eastern European countries. Unfortunately, the quality of life of the population has not developed in accordance with the economy.

⁶³⁹ National Institute of Statistics (NIS) (2023). Romania in Figures. Available at: <https://insse.ro/cms/en/tags/romania-figures>

⁶⁴⁰ European Commission (2023). 2023 Country Report – Romania, p.60. Available at: https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-05/RO_SWD_2023_623_en.pdf

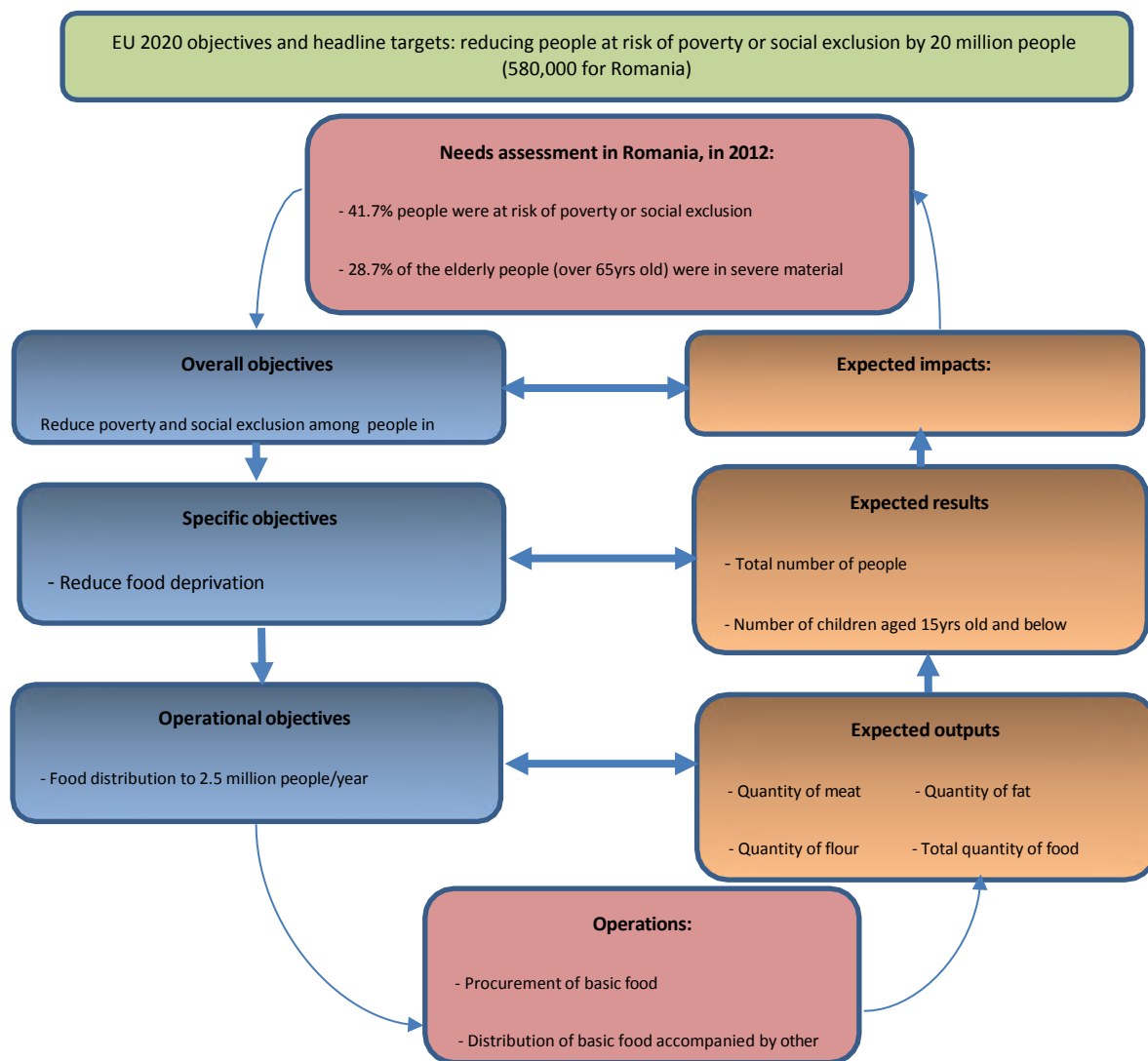
⁶⁴¹ UNICEF (2022). Country Office Annual Report: Romania. Available at: [RAM3 COAR.rdl](#)

⁶⁴² The transition period in Romania is between 1990-2007, after the Communist fall in December 1989 and the entrance of Romania in EU in 2007.

⁶⁴³ Cătălin Zamfir (coord). The Research Institute for Quality of Life (ICCV), Social Report 2020 - The Pandemic and the Standard of Living. Social protection policies.

2. Reconstructing the intervention logic

Figure A. 88 – Intervention logic of FEAD in Romania⁶⁴⁴



Source: Adapted from FEAD mid-term evaluation.

2.1. National policy framework

The national Managing Authority (MA) of the FEAD Operational Programme (OP) in Romania, which is part of the institutional framework of the former Ministry of European Funds (currently, Ministry of European Investments and Projects – MIPE) has taken all necessary steps to ensure compliance with legislative requirements for both the ESF Operational Programme Human Capital – OPHC (POCU) and the Operational Programme Aid to the Most Deprived in Romania FEAD (POAD). All EC provisions aimed at ensuring results orientation were followed during the preparation of the programme or immediately after.

The national regulatory framework was developed to enable the effective implementation of EU requirements, as part of the accreditation process the MA undergoes at the beginning of the programming period. Operational

⁶⁴⁴ No baseline and target indicators were established for POAD/FEAD 2014-2020.

procedures are perceived to be very useful both for the monitoring process and for all other functions and they are the backbone of all activities carried out by the MA.

Overall, the FEAD programme is connected with a) the Operational Programme Human Capital OPHC (POCU) indicating the complementarities and synergies that must be pursued, in the form of accompanying measures, with ESF; and with b) other state programmes that finance complementary interventions for the same target groups as the FEAD (POAD), such as the *'Every Child in Kindergarten'*, *'Highschool money'* or *'Euro 200'*.⁶⁴⁵ In addition, FEAD is coherent with other programmes implemented by NGOs: *'This programme [FEAD (POAD)] targeted an immediate need; it was a quick response to a need that vulnerable groups had. The less good part of this programme is that there are no complementary services around this material assistance. . FEAD was a particularly good programme, especially at a time of crisis for the most vulnerable groups, but it did not help them to get out of poverty.'*⁶⁴⁶ Examples of programmes initiated by NGOs are provided in Annex 4.

Changes to the regulatory framework for FEAD (POAD)

In June 2022, the Romanian government issued the Emergency Decree (EOG) no. 63/2022 to put in place temporary measures to grant material support to individuals at risk of material deprivation and/or at risk of extreme poverty, partially supported by non-reimbursable external funds, as well as some measures regarding the distribution of this support. The package of material support, called *'Support for Romania'*, was in place, until 31 December 2023. The budget for these measures granted through social e-vouchers for the period 1 June 2022 – 31 December 2023, was 3,100,000,000 lei (EUR 623,449,860). This amount increased to the value of 6,281,200,000 lei (EUR 1,263,230,085), by EOG no. 165/2022 of 8 December 2022, which amended EOG no. 63/2022.⁶⁴⁷ Another change was made by EOG no. 113/2022 regarding some necessary measures for the implementation of the FEAD intended for the new target groups, including Ukrainians fleeing Russian military aggression (see Section 3).

2.2. Objectives and target groups

The 2014-2020 Operational Programme Aid to the Most Deprived in Romania FEAD was designed to support the distribution of food and basic material assistance for the most deprived persons, referred to in Article 2(5) of EU Regulation no. 223/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 March 2014, regarding FEAD. The programme complies with the strategic direction of the Europe 2020 Strategy as well as the Partnership Agreement for Romania 2014-2020, which aimed to reduce the risk of poverty and fight social exclusion. The interventions financed by FEAD contributed to the achievement of the objective set in the framework of the Europe 2020 Strategy and the National Reform Programme, namely by reducing the number of people in Romania at risk of poverty and social exclusion (estimated 580,000) by 2020, compared to 2008. All FEAD measures, including those aimed at social inclusion, were designed to eliminate poverty manifested by the lack of possibilities to ensure a basic level of food and material support.

Target groups⁶⁴⁸

According to the Emergency Decree (EOG) no. 63/2022, the following categories of persons and families may benefit from material support in the form of social e-vouchers:

- individuals benefitting from the public pension system, individuals in the records of sectoral pension houses and beneficiaries of rights granted on the basis of special laws, paid by territorial pension houses/sectoral pension houses, whose net monthly income is less than or equal to with 1,500 lei (EUR 301).

⁶⁴⁵ For more national programmes coherent with FEAD see Annex 4 - National schemes addressing food or material deprivation (FEAD version 9, 2023)

⁶⁴⁶ Interview with World Vision International representatives conducted in October 2023.

⁶⁴⁷ MA FEAD (2022). Annual Implementation Report.

⁶⁴⁸ For more information regarding the mechanism of the final recipient's eligibility conditions see Annex 6 - Target Groups (FEAD version 9, 2023)

- persons - children and adults - classified as severely, severely or moderately disabled, whose net monthly income is less than or equal to 1,500 lei (EUR 301).
- families with at least two dependent children whose monthly net income per family member is less than or equal to 600 lei (EUR 120).
- single-parent families whose net monthly income per family member is less than or equal to 600 lei (EUR 120).
- families that have established the right to social assistance under the conditions of Law no. 416/2001, with subsequent amendments and additions.
- homeless people as they are regulated according to the legal provisions in force.

The **Guaranteed Minimum Income – GMI (VMG)** represents the most important means of support for people who lack the necessary mechanisms to get out of poverty and is regulated by Law 416/2001. Although GMI (VMG) provides a small amount, it has a considerable impact on reducing absolute poverty among beneficiaries. However, **GMI (VMG) beneficiaries** remain among citizens with extremely low incomes, among whom almost one in three live in absolute poverty even after receiving social assistance.⁶⁴⁹ *‘All these categories of deprived people have been clearly defined in the legislation - elderly people with a minimum income below 1500 lei, there were some eligibility conditions established for children from single-parent families or from families with a dramatic situation in the labour market, mothers who received newborn kits, including mothers who fled from Ukraine. We have applied the provisions of the legislation in force.’*⁶⁵⁰

2.3. Implemented operations and accompanying measures

Romania implemented FEAD through OP I: ‘food and/or basic material assistance operational programme’ and provided food and basic material assistance to the most deprived persons,⁶⁵¹ combined, where applicable, with accompanying measures, aimed at alleviating the social exclusion of most deprived persons.

In Romania, (as in some other Member States) implementation was delayed due to the late adoption of the FEAD Regulation and consequently late approval of the OP. In Romania, distribution of food packages and hygiene products were distributed, as well as the provision of warm meals, educational vouchers for children and kits for newborns. These measures were accompanied by accompanying measures which are described in the Applicant’s Guide. *‘In principle, accompanying measures were provided by the entities distributing the aid, either administrative-territorial units or school inspectorates or schools in the case of educational support, together with other non-profit organisations. These measures are social and educational, and they refer for example to access to education, and attendance of educational activities. There was also a medical component, so we had the whole spectrum of integrated services to ensure the inclusion of people.’*⁶⁵²

The accompanying measures included the following: educational measures on encouraging school attendance, ensuring personal hygiene and housing, school and/or career guidance and personal finance management advice, facilitating access to health services, facilitation of access to educational and cultural local activities. The partner organisations, together with the affiliated establishments directly supplying school materials, carried these measures out themselves or in cooperation with other organisations. The measures set out above were not exhaustive and were planned and implemented according to the individual needs of the target group, without prejudice to the dignity of the person.

During the school year of 2017-2018, the Ministry of Education distributed school supplies to children in pre-school education and in primary school. *‘Basically, we purchased about 52,000 packages [school supplies] for pre-schoolers and 308,000 backpacks that were distributed to children in schools from 1st grade to 8th grade, as a complementary support to the national programme⁶⁵³ supported by the Romanian government.’*⁶⁵⁴

⁶⁴⁹ FEAD version 9 (2023).

⁶⁵⁰ Group interview with MA FEAD staff conducted in 2023.

⁶⁵¹ For more information regarding the measures implemented see Annex 5 – Detailed description of FEAD actions.

⁶⁵² Group interview with MA FEAD staff conducted in October 2023.

⁶⁵³ Annex 4 provides detailed information the support provided by the national programme.

⁶⁵⁴ Interview with a representative from the central authority beneficiaries - Ministry of Education.

Accompanying measures are part of OP I, and Romania, is one of the 6 EU countries⁶⁵⁵ which decided to not draw on the EU budget for accompanying measures, rather choosing to finance these itself.⁶⁵⁶ These measures include [...] *counselling and information on available social services or other public and private assistance, basic counselling activities and workshops*’’.⁶⁵⁷

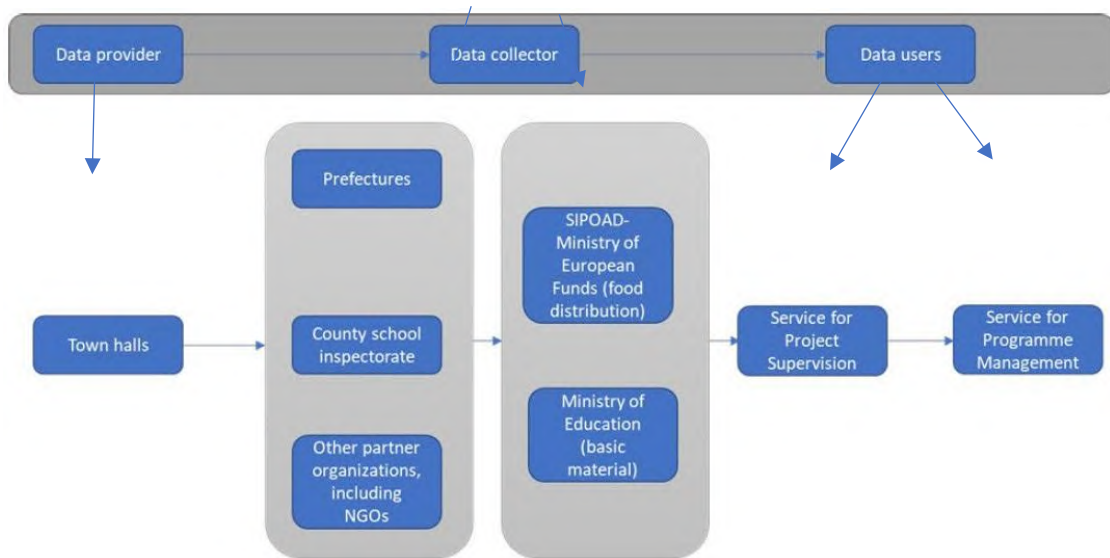
Priority was given to those facing severe material deprivation (rather than those at risk of poverty and social exclusion), which FEAD was already addressing through supporting the socio-economic integration of the most vulnerable people. Unfortunately, FEAD is the only programme addressing poverty in Romania and its capacities are limited.

2.4. FEAD governance and delivery system

The main actors involved in the monitoring of FEAD funded projects are: (1) the MA; (2) certifying authorities; (3) audit authorities; and (4) partner organisations. The two beneficiaries of FEAD are the MIPE (the former Ministry of European Funds) and the Ministry of Education (MoE), which are responsible for the implementation of operations and data collection. For the food distribution component, the structure in charge of implementing operations is the FEAD Implementation Service (SIPOAD) within the MIPE, and the MoE for the basic material assistance component (school supplies).

The Directorate-General for the European Human Capital Programme (DGPECU) is responsible for both the OPHC (POCU) and the FEAD – both of which are entities under the coordination of the MIPE. This means that a few staff representatives in the OPHC MA also have FEAD-related responsibilities, to varying degrees, from 5% to 80%.⁶⁵⁸

Figure A. 89 - Institutional structure of FEAD in Romania⁶⁵⁹



Source: World Bank, evaluation report, May 2021.

The FEAD MA is responsible for data validation, aggregation, and reporting. There are no intermediary bodies (IBs), nor a Monitoring Committee for the FEAD (POAD). The FEAD institutional network for implementation includes partner organisations, public bodies and/or non-profit organisations that distribute food and/or basic

⁶⁵⁵ Together with Belgium, Cyprus, Estonia, France, and Hungary.

⁶⁵⁶ DG EMPL (2018). FEAD Mid-Term Interim Evaluation Report.

⁶⁵⁷ Interview with the Research Institute for Quality-of-Life representative conducted in October 2023.

⁶⁵⁸ World Bank (2021). Functional Assessment of FEAD (POAD)

⁶⁵⁹ World Bank (2021). Functional Assessment of FEAD (POAD)

material assistance and provide accompanying measures⁶⁶⁰ directly or through other partner organisations. They also provide data for monitoring to the MIPE and MoE (as beneficiaries). The main partner organisations are County School Inspectorates (under the MoE) and County Prefectures (under the Ministry of Interior – MoI), as well as NGOs (such as the Red Cross) and religious institutions. At county level, prefectures were responsible for setting up working groups for the implementation of the POAD. Prefectures are also in charge of sending to the beneficiaries the annual reports on POAD implementation at county level (Figure A. 89).⁶⁶¹

Compliance is also regularly checked by the Audit Authority (AA) and EC. The AA may issue recommendations to improve institutional structure, process, and procedures, as appropriate. Most recommendations are implemented as issued. If significant deficiencies are identified in the programme’s management and control system, payments from the EC may be blocked until the situation is rectified.⁶⁶²

3. Key findings on the implementation of FEAD

3.1. To what extent was FEAD support successful – or not – and why?

Overall achievement of FEAD objectives [criterion: effectiveness]

The FEAD OP was approved by the European Commission in November 2014 – Decision no. C (2014) 9102. Later, it had a series of changes, to respond as best as possible to the challenges faced by deprived groups, the last change being in September 2022 through Decision no. C (2022) 6638, to make the mechanisms more flexible in implementation and facilitate the access of target groups to aid facilities through the following measures:

- granting social e-vouchers both for food products and for prepared food.
- expanding the eligibility criteria regarding final recipients to include individuals vulnerable over the age of 65 (for food aid).
- changing the target group for delivery of newborn kits by including foreign citizens or stateless persons originating from the zone of armed Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine.
- Expanding the use of social e-vouchers to cover the purchase of food aid as well as basic material assistance for the homeless.

Overall, the 2014-2020 Operational Programme Aid for Most Deprived Persons FEAD contributed to **strengthening social cohesion and reducing extreme poverty** by distributing basic food (in the form of food packages and prepared food), school supplies for children, kits for newborns, clothing and footwear and hygiene products to the most disadvantaged people. In addition to this type of assistance, the partner organisations (e.g. World Vision Romania, SERA Foundation, Ovidiu RO Association etc.) also offered accompanying measures⁶⁶³ aimed at encouraging the social integration of these people. European aid through POAD is complemented by national schemes targeting people in extreme poverty (details in Annex 4).

Nearly 283,600 tons of food were distributed in Romania between 2014 and 2022.⁶⁶⁴ By the time of the mid-term evaluation, in Romania the coverage rate was above 80%, with intensity of support at around 20kg per participant per year.⁶⁶⁵ In terms of material support a total of 2.3 million people⁶⁶⁶ benefited from material support

⁶⁶⁰ These measures are provided with FEAD funds as well as with national funds (see Annex 4).

⁶⁶¹ World Bank (2021). Functional Assessment of FEAD (POAD)

⁶⁶² World Bank (2021). Functional Assessment of FEAD (POAD)

⁶⁶³ Such as: advice on personal hygiene, advice on food preparation and storage, referral to the social and administrative services, counselling for managing the family budget etc.

⁶⁶⁴ MA FEAD (2022). Annual Implementation Report

⁶⁶⁵ DG EMPL (2018). FEAD Mid-Term Interim Evaluation Report

⁶⁶⁶ Cumulative value, according to the MA FEAD (2022). Annual Implementation Report

between 2020 and 2021 (the only two years when this type of support was active in Romania). As for the social e-vouchers, between 2021 and 2022, there were over half a million people⁶⁶⁷ benefiting from this measure.

In Romania, **FEAD addressed the changing needs by adjusting the type of food products provided and how they were distributed**. For example, in 2014, vouchers were sent to eligible people, which enabled them to collect their food packages. This approach proved not to be effective, as the packages were pre-defined. The delivery mechanism was thus adapted – in this way the responsibility for food delivery changed from Ministries to the local level.⁶⁶⁸

According to the MA staff, the effectiveness of FEAD in providing non-financial assistance to the most deprived is considered to be good, *‘[...] because the most deprived people are the ones who have been targeted by our measures. But more than that, given the support provided, the administrative-territorial units, inspectorates and schools have identified at community level the most disadvantaged people, issued documents so they can get their due rights from the Romanian state, in addition to FEAD support. An inventory was done by granting these types of support at community level, and this is how FEAD has contributed and brought added value: the most deprived people received the attention and care of community leaders.’*⁶⁶⁹

Furthermore, Romania appears to invest relatively more resources in relation to both their population at risk of poverty and social exclusion and their poverty reduction target, thus highlighting the important role FEAD plays in the country to fight absolute poverty and material deprivation. Even though investment seems to be higher, no progress in distribution of goods is registered in Romania, where problems have been experienced in procurement procedures.⁶⁷⁰

Despite the administrative burden which affects the programme’s effectiveness, there are stakeholders who consider that *‘if we refer only to the severe material deprivation part, the programme has really had a positive impact’*⁶⁷¹ and, in terms of improvement, various collaborations are encouraged, meaning that the OP *‘should be combined with other measures at national level. We also had OPHC (POCU) that addressed marginalised communities and social inclusion and services.’* The collaboration should not only be in terms of material support, but as well in terms of *‘social services and the old social benefits component. Only when all these three components are brought together for a sufficient time, stable results may occur in terms of reducing the risk of poverty and social exclusion.’*⁶⁷²

Reach of target groups [criterion: effectiveness]

- Regarding reaching the target groups, **Romania implemented various changes to better address the needs of the target groups** and to fine tune FEAD, especially the updating of eligibility criteria and improve targeting.

EOG no. 113/2022 put in place necessary measures for the implementation of the FEAD intended to reach the most deprived people, account for the expenses related to the support of Ukrainians fleeing Russian military aggression, as well as provide grants from external non-refundable funds for investments intended for the technological modernisation of small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Further vulnerable groups were identified and categorised as eligible to benefit from material support based on social e-vouchers. This included newborns, mothers who have given birth since 2022, foreign citizens or stateless persons from the zone of armed Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine. This measure grants financial support in the form of a voucher worth 2,000 lei (EUR 420) for a mother of a newborn in order to

⁶⁶⁷ 521,631 people - cumulative value, according to the MA FEAD (2022). Annual Implementation Report

⁶⁶⁸ For more national programs correlated with FEAD see Annex 4 - National schemes addressing food or material deprivation (FEAD version 9, 2023)

⁶⁶⁹ Group interview with MA FEAD staff conducted in October 2023

⁶⁷⁰ Group interview with MA FEAD staff conducted in October 2023

⁶⁷¹ Interview with UNICEF representative conducted in October 2023

⁶⁷² Interview with UNICEF representative conducted in October 2023

purchase products necessary for the care of the newborn. Social e-vouchers for newborns, were financed by FEAD within the limits of the budget available for this measure, in accordance with the rules of eligibility.⁶⁷³

According to the most recent Annual Implementation Report (2022), the programme had the following achievements in terms of target groups:

- Total number of people receiving support through vouchers, cards or other indirect delivery instruments: 521,634 out of which 221,196 were children under 15 years of age; 296,822 persons over 65; 363,713 women and 5,502 homeless.
- At the mid-term point of the programme implementation, Romania was among the countries with the highest quantity of food distributed (about 70%).⁶⁷⁴ Overall, Romania was also among the countries with the higher allocations of funds for this form of support, thus the progress of this output indicator tends to match the expectation - 283,595 tons of total food distributed between 2014 and 2022.⁶⁷⁵
- As for the outcome indicators referring to the food support, in cumulative numbers, between 2014 and 2022 there were 11,350,951 people who received food support. Out of this total, 2,272,600 were children under 15 years of age; 2,308,912 were persons over 65; 3,997,369 were women; 192,044 were migrants, participants of foreign origin, minorities (including marginalised communities such as Roma); 1,753,496 were people with disabilities, and 8,639 were homeless people.⁶⁷⁶
- In terms of the outcome indicators referring to the basic material assistance, in cumulative numbers, between 2014 and 2022 there were 2,310,223 people who received this type of support. Out of this total, 722,663 were children under 15 years of age; 249,017 were persons over 65; 680,171 were women; 129,275 were migrants, participants of foreign origin, minorities (including marginalised communities such as Roma); 422,959 were persons with disabilities, and 2,164 were homeless people.⁶⁷⁷

As regards the implementation of operations, during 2017 the MA's actions were focused on the modification of the OP and, implicitly, on the elaboration of new implementation documents required by the beneficiaries (implementation partners). Although the procedure for amending the FEAD was launched in August 2016, the European Commission's approval for this amendment was issued on 20 February 2017, by Commission Decision C (2017) 1086 final.

- Despite all the efforts for adjustment to the needs, the evidence indicates that **Romania addressed the needs of homelessness people, migrants and other minorities less effectively**. Homeless people were recipients of hot meals provided through the 'Support for Romania' programme. According to MA staff, they *'discussed with NGOs that have social canteens and provide services to homeless people. It was not a matter of the types of documents that are needed for homeless people. They do not need the social security number. The implementing partners (i.e. NGOs) were not interested to apply for these calls because we could not include eligible expenses for the staff providing support, just as we did cover any costs with the staff from the territorial units, schools, ANEPIS (National Agency for Social Inspection) or from the National House of Pensions, who dealt with the support measures. We could not pay NGO salaries using FEAD'*.⁶⁷⁸

There were **additional challenges in reaching the target groups**, especially children, which were generated by the pandemic period. MA staff found solutions to overcome these bottlenecks by allocating the unspent amounts to other types of expenses. *'[...] As far as I remember there were certain amounts from school materials and kits which were reallocated. We found ways to make things work. There were no big challenges to which we could not adapt and for which we did find a solution every time'*.⁶⁷⁹

Despite the challenges in terms of the bureaucratic procedures, overall, it is perceived that the programme had an impact on targeted groups and there is a certain progress. *'[...] If we analyse Eurostat data on the severe material deprivation rate in Romania, we notice that from 26% in 2014 we have now reached 5.20% in 2021. In*

⁶⁷³ Management Authority of FEAD (2023). FEAD Annual Implementation Report 2022

⁶⁷⁴ DG EMPL (2018). FEAD Mid-Term Interim Evaluation Report and FEAD Annual Implementation Report 2022

⁶⁷⁵ At the end of 2022, according to the FEAD Annual Implementation Report 2022

⁶⁷⁶ FEAD Annual Implementation Report 2022

⁶⁷⁷ FEAD Annual Implementation Report 2022

⁶⁷⁸ Group interview with MA FEAD staff conducted in October 2023

⁶⁷⁹ Group interview with MA FEAD staff conducted in October 2023

terms of severe material deprivation in Romania, we are still far behind the European Union average, but [...] I think the programme had an important impact in terms of the positive progress in Romania [...].⁶⁸⁰

Adjustments to FEAD to address new challenges [*criterion: effectiveness*]

- In Romania, according to a representative from a beneficiary organisation ‘[...] the pandemic has left its mark, forcing us to totally change the project implementation strategy. It also had a negative impact on spending money and even on some of the results assumed at the level of each project... But with all the difficulties, the programme had to continue. The school supplies continued to be distributed every school year, until the beginning of each school year.’ [...] and in 2020 the voucher scheme was launched’.⁶⁸¹

- In fact, in Romania, the **categories of people who have been affected** were the following:

The already most disadvantaged students were strongly affected by the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to high school dropout rates. The measure aimed to provide educational support⁶⁸² and encourage the return to school. The initial estimated targets were 300,000 children enrolled in school, however data collected in 2020 during COVID-19 resulted in the estimated target being much higher (400,000 children enrolled in school).

New mothers, in an already financially precarious situation were further negatively affected by the effects of COVID-19. According to the National Agency for Payments and Social Inspection (ANPIS) records, in 2018, 2019 and 2020, the average number of children born in socioeconomically deprived environments was 15,000 newborns per year. In the COVID-19 period, one of the most affected categories of people were mothers who gave birth in 2021, with the right to a guaranteed minimum income, who are part of families receiving family support allowance, including single mothers, who are at risk (e.g. with disabilities), temporarily in critical life situations (victims of calamities, domestic violence, dependent people, etc.) and/or who are in particularly vulnerable situations (e.g. no longer have a home). This also included mothers who do not have identity documents and cannot access civil rights, as well as mothers from another minority. For all these groups social support services were necessary.⁶⁸³

- In 2022, the crisis of Ukrainians fleeing Russian military aggression led to Romania providing newborn kits for Ukrainian mothers and children.

- Thus, the FEAD measures for these target groups found within the OP for basic material deprivation (P.2): namely P2.1 - basic material deprivation (school materials) and P2.2 - basic material deprivation (kits for newborns) were financed by REACT-EU, and these programmes were adapted to the pandemic context from the perspective of the size of the target group, the financial allocation, as well as from the perspective of the implementation mechanism.⁶⁸⁴

- Thus, the measure P2.1 - basic material deprivation (school materials) had an allocation of EUR 44,000,000 from REACT-EU, and measure P2.2 - basic material deprivation (kits for newborns) an allocation of EUR 12,000,000 from REACT-EU. At the same time, the financial line of the existing measures within the programme was strengthened in relation to the size of the interventions already financed (e.g.: supporting the most disadvantaged categories of people who benefit from hot meals based on social e-vouchers), as well as those measures launched in 2021 (such as the provision of clothing and footwear, sleeping bags, etc. for the homeless). The measures taken at the level of the EU, as well as in Romania, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, allowed for changes in the legislation concerning social e-vouchers, and determined the needed to update the implementation mechanism by transposing it in accordance with social distancing norms.⁶⁸⁵

The amendment of the Operational Programme from 2017 onwards mainly aimed at diversifying the target group and the aid offered through the FEAD and the products offered have been supplemented to address more types of deprivation and precariousness, such as: the introduction of hot meals through canteens, the introduction of pre-school supplies, hygiene kits to both food assistance recipients and homeless people, kits for newborns,

⁶⁸⁰ Interview with UNICEF representative, conducted in October 2023

⁶⁸¹ Interview with Ministry of Education representative, as central authority beneficiary, conducted in October 2023

⁶⁸² For more information regarding the measures implemented see Annex 5 – Detailed description of FEAD actions

⁶⁸³ Management Authority of FEAD (2023). POAD Annual Implementation Report 2022

⁶⁸⁴ Management Authority of FEAD (2023). POAD Annual Implementation Report 2022

⁶⁸⁵ Management Authority of FEAD (2023). FEAD Annual Implementation Report 2022

clothing, shoes and sleeping bags for homeless people. The change to the programme also related to an increase in the frequency with which FEAD support was/is provided.

The operations foreseen in the programme and the total financial allocation for each operation were:

- Food aid distribution (basic food) – EUR 409,496,933
- Distribution of school supplies (school materials) – EUR 27,000,000
- Distribution of newborn kits – EUR 12,000,000
- Distribution of clothing and footwear etc. for the homeless – EUR 6,000,000
- Distribution of hygiene products – EUR 38,400,000.

During 2018, the MA's actions focused on the harmonisation of the national legal and procedural framework, as well as the development of new implementation documents required by the beneficiaries, which were necessary following the amendment of the FEAD in 2017.

This resulted in new specific Guidelines as part of the Government Decision no. 784/ 04.10.2018 which was approved for the establishment of measures necessary for the implementation of FEAD.

The elements of novelty introduced by GD no. 784/2018 mainly concern:

- **Restricting the categories of target group** (end recipient) eligible for food support. This occurred because of economic measures that led to some categories of people no longer being considered “vulnerable”.
- The **introduction of a new intervention to support disadvantaged people** in their difficult times, namely the provision of hygiene products for the whole family falling into one of the target group categories. This measure was necessary because, in Romania, the lack of personal and household hygiene products has negative effects on health and the ability to access education, or a job.
- **Increasing the frequency** with which support funded by the FEAD is provided.

Horizontal principles of FEAD [*criterion: effectiveness*]

The **horizontal principles were part of the applicant's guidelines, and they were a cross-cutting concern for the implementation of all programme activities**. From this perspective it is hard to quantify them in the absence of specific indicators, but there is qualitative data supporting this finding. *‘[...] The difference from OPHC (POCU) is that there were percentages allocated, and all these provisions were later found in the evaluation grid. And this was a separate criterion where the applicant had to explain how the project contributes through the proposed activities to the promotion of horizontal principle in the FEAD (POAD). How was compliance with these principles subsequently pursued in implementation? - we do not know very well, but we have made sure that the applicant takes them into account from the moment of writing the application.’*⁶⁸⁶

Overall, the horizontal principles took into consideration the dignity and do-not-harm principles, gender equality, non-discrimination, accessibility for people with disabilities, demographic change, and sustainable development. According to MA staff, FEAD was designed and implemented without any discrimination regarding the needs of the target groups and the eligibility criteria stipulated in legislation. *‘[...] We collect data to see how many women, men, children, and elderly benefit from these measures. When we provided food packages, all people had access regardless of gender, age and so on. Moreover, we did not collect data on ethnicity to avoid stigmatization. We collected only the data necessary to provide support for reducing material deprivation.’*⁶⁸⁷

In some of the activities, regarding the food distribution, the NGOs hired a nutritionist, in order to establish a balanced diet, but the impact was very low. For example, there are no coherent policies within the programme to monitor food access, (as one of the Sustainable Development Goals is Goal 2, about creating a world free of hunger by 2030). *‘World Vision also has warm meals in many schools [...] If we give only flour, sugar, and oil, how do you ensure a balanced diet? When we advocate for healthy nutrition, we often hear this line: ‘Let's be realistic, we're talking about the most vulnerable.’ We have a big problem: many children go to bed hungry.*

⁶⁸⁶ Group interview with MA FEAD staff conducted in October 2023.

⁶⁸⁷ Group interview with MA FEAD staff conducted in October 2023

*We should have nutritionists; we should know the community and the target groups. And speaking of partners, we should select the partners more carefully who are capable to implement specific measures, instead of having the Ministry of Education giving the same packs to everyone’.*⁶⁸⁸

Besides receiving the support from a nutritionist, people should be taught how to use the vouchers. Even though the programme is supposed to reach all target groups in need, quite often these people must receive support for having access to these measures, because they either do not have the information about aid opportunities, or do not know in practice how to get it.

Success and failure factors [criterion: effectiveness]

Overall, the **FEAD was successful** in Romania. This is supported both by the perception of the stakeholders who were interviewed as part of this case study and the vast majority of respondents to the FEAD end recipient satisfaction survey. In the absence of a comparable social inclusions and poverty reduction programme in Romania for the programming period 2014-2020, it can be inferred that FEAD has been fairly successful in its objectives. The success is mainly due to the **direct support which was provided before the pandemic**, and more recently by the **implementation of the electronic voucher system (e-vouchers)**, which is more flexible in terms of the products people may purchase, and at the same time, facilitates the monitoring process: ‘[...] *We track consumption on these cards and the level of consumption is very high, which means there is great interest for this food support measure. [...] In this way we have ensured that people have easy access to a type of support which is tailored to their individual needs’.*⁶⁸⁹

It is important to note a **gap in implementation between 2017 and 2019**, as illustrated by the dynamic of input and performance indicators of food distribution in Romania (see Annex 7). Romania, like other countries, managed a smooth transition between the old (within the EU CAP policy) and the new programme, sometimes through ad-hoc measures, but more generally by relying on the already existing framework for food support, which had a good start between 2014 and 2016. The gap that followed meant in some instances that the innovations brought about by FEAD were gradually embedded through successive refinements of the OPs. In the case of Romania, for example, a full redraft of the programme to better serve the purposes of FEAD took place between 2017 and 2019, which were transition years with no implementation.

It is in this period that the **e-voucher system** was piloted, the **process of which not an easy one**, as it required to have knowledge regarding the local supply chains in rural and urban areas. In this context, there were negotiations with Sodexo and Lidl for access to the most vulnerable and isolated areas. The preferred option was Sodexo, having larger regional coverage. Even though the **social e-vouchers** ensure easy and tailored support, the shift from in-kind, direct support to indirect voucher-based support was not easy, but it was necessary mainly because of the difficulty of the procurement procedures for food and hygiene packages, which was inefficient, i.e. very time consuming, as well as hindering access to FEAD by persons living in remote and isolated areas.

When it comes to distributing **food and hygiene products, the social e-vouchers simplified the procedures** and diversified the access to desired products, but when it comes to the **school supplies**, the providers came up with very low prices in response to the public procurement procedure. This type of practice, which is used by the providers to be sure that they will be awarded the contract, generates certain savings, but the quality of the products distributed is low. For example, the backpacks were reported as being of a very modest quality, even though the products were formally meeting the standards. ‘*We are talking about achieving the results from a quantitative point of view, not qualitatively. It is one thing if you can offer a child a backpack of 50 lei and another to offer a backpack of 30 lei. We asked the bidders to meet all the norms imposed by the Ministry of Health regarding the size of the backpack, the weight etc., Formally, they all met them, because otherwise the public procurement procedure could not have been carried out. Normally, if it had been a good backpack, it*

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Interview with World Vision International representative conducted in October 2023

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Group interview with MA FEAD staff conducted in October 2023

could have been used for a year or two, but many of them broke down in the first year of use. We do not know how the children used them, but still, if the economic operator brings you a backpack for 30 lei, an amount which also included the company's profit. In the end that indicates a low quality of the product. So, we can say that we were efficient, but who knows when those children will have the opportunity to get a new backpack to go to school... And until then, they are left with nothing, because what they received did not last.'

In terms of **supporting the FEAD beneficiaries⁶⁹⁰ in the long term** the MA organised meetings at the ministry level, with the participation of representatives of several stakeholders, such as NAPS (ANEPIS) – the National Agency for Payments and Social Inspection, *GDSACP* (DGASPC) - Child Protection DG, the Red Cross, the Romanian Patriarchate. Despite the positive feedback regarding FEAD *'unfortunately, no project was submitted within these calls, and we have submitted the request to the European Commission to relocate the unspent EUR 6 million. So, although we made all the efforts and had all the openness to inform potential beneficiaries, probably, one of the reasons was the lack of a financial allocation for personnel.'*⁶⁹¹

A **further weak point** identified by MA staff was the provision of support for homeless people. This is because *'for these calls for projects to provide clothing, shoes, sleeping bags, we launched eight competitive calls. No comments were made to the guide during the consultation period, no clarifications were requested regarding the programmatic documents related to these calls.'*⁶⁹²

As for how the programme responded to the **changing needs of the target groups**, this was updated according to the dynamic of the context (e.g. response to the COVID-19 pandemic and Ukrainians fleeing Russian military aggression) and, there was flexibility in adapting the programme to the socio-economic or geopolitical crisis. Even if target groups were clearly defined in the legislation, the intervention and implementation of measures took time. *'[...] perhaps because of bureaucratic, administrative reasons, for example, if we talk about social e-vouchers or vouchers to cover energy costs. The problem behind social e-vouchers was the rising inflation and prices of basic foods. We should have responded more quickly, although it was a big plus that the programme was able to cover these costs for beneficiaries in the context of the volatile social problems.'*⁶⁹³

If we consider the **socio-economic impact** of the POAD program, this can be seen at the level of the final recipients, implicitly at the community level, but as well at the level of services and goods' providers. For example, people were educated to access modern payment methods, but also to be accountable for the support that they received, by updating their personal IDs and registering their domiciliary situations.

However, it is perceived that in Romania the highest budget allocation was/is on direct material support (food and social e-vouchers), which provides only short-term solutions. In the long run, the vision of the OP should be revised. *'[...] Material/ financial assistance should be combined with educational measures, otherwise the impact is zero. ...Instead of adapting the programme to reach a long-term impact, i.e. long-term improvement of the situation of vulnerable groups, we have adapted it to simplify the implementation, and we ended up simply giving these vouchers.'*⁶⁹⁴

Overall cost-effectiveness of FEAD operations [*criterion: efficiency*]

From 2021 onwards, instead of receiving direct support, end recipients of FEAD could also receive indirect support through a voucher system, which, as explained above, proved to be more efficient. The NGOs had

⁶⁹⁰ In Romania the partner organisations are called 'beneficiaries' and they are different from the end users of the FEAD funds.

⁶⁹¹ Group interview with MA FEAD staff conducted in October 2023

⁶⁹³ Interview with UNICEF representative conducted in October 2023

⁶⁹⁴ Interview with World Vision international representative conducted in October 2023

⁶⁹² Group interview with MA FEAD staff conducted in October 2023

access to private funding, as well as European funding, such as through ESF and the OPHC (POCU), the CARE programme for refugees resulting in easier collaboration. One such example is the UNHCR's service hub at RomExpo, Bucharest, when 16 partners from different UN agencies, authorities and NGOs assisted refugees with various protection services, as well as with documentation, cash assistance and healthcare.⁶⁹⁵ During that time, 90% of the material assistance was supported by World Vision Romania, from international funding programmes. Moreover, the assistance, was not only directed to the Ukrainian refugees, but to Romanian people as well, '[...] *At the beginning of the programme, the focus was on distributing food, sanitary products etc. This meant a colossal infrastructure and more than that, we were always thinking that perhaps the target groups do not find in the package what they need. We carried out many interviews with them to check the level of satisfaction. This complicates your life if you do not have a mechanism for collecting feedback on the needs. We always had 20 people sitting around, applying questionnaires to see what people needed. We realized that it is extremely complicated to cover all the needs, and we introduced cards, an equivalent of the voucher*'.⁶⁹⁶ The flexibility of having a voucher and the possibility to buy products according to the tailored needs is not only more efficient, but it brings satisfaction to the final recipient.

In terms of the average cost of food support, there are large variations in the unit cost per person and per kg. In Romania there is a low cost per kg and the programme prefers to provide financial aid, with less logistics and implementation costs. Overall, although there is scope for reduction of administrative costs the **delivery costs are considered high**, but necessary to reach those who are the most in need.⁶⁹⁷

Administrative burden of monitoring and reporting requirements [*criterion: efficiency*]

Overall, **FEAD appears to be less burdensome compared to other operational programmes**. There are procedures in place for programme and project monitoring, Annual Implementation Report - AIR (RAI) drafting, programme revisions etc. All these procedures have appendices and templates. Monitoring is initiated once the project is approved and contracted. Then, the data found in the application (goals, results, targets, and financial values) become the baseline and reference for project implementation and monitoring. Beneficiaries are responsible for observing, documenting, and reporting project progress based on information received from partner organisations. The monitoring process starts from the moment of signing the financing contract and ends three years after the completion of the project.

Each project has assigned a monitoring officer who is the "interface" between the MA and the beneficiary. For verification, using the principle of four eyes, when verifying the technical reports submitted by the beneficiary, another project manager is appointed (the two officers are called Officer 1 and Officer 2), and the results of their verification are validated or reconciled by the Project Supervision Service (SSP) administrator. The monitoring data is aggregated, analysed, and included in reports which are presented to the management of the MA, Minister of Investments and European Projects, EC and other interested parties. According to a survey conducted in 2022 on the FEAD end recipients' satisfaction for the period 2017-2021 **more than three quarters of the representatives of FEAD partner organisations found the administrative requirements rather easy to comply with**.⁶⁹⁸

Despite being less burdensome, according to the mid-term evaluation of FEAD,⁶⁹⁹ there were **high monitoring costs** for written evidence (e.g. long documents with evidence on final recipients), there were **too many forms to fill out and too many database updates** to do, driving up costs. The evaluation report highlights the fact that the identification of end recipients is mainly based on income criteria, and in countries such as Romania, when these criteria are used, income is verified through declarations that end recipients must provide to the relevant authorities and upload into national or local databases (including databases on social benefits or guaranteed

⁶⁹⁵ <https://reliefweb.int/report/romania/unhcr-romania-ukraine-refugee-situation-update-weekly-update-75-04-december-2023>

⁶⁹⁶ Interview with World Vision international representative conducted in October 2023

⁶⁹⁷ DG EMPL (2018). FEAD Mid-Term Interim Evaluation Report

⁶⁹⁸ Metro Media Transylvania (2022). Survey Report on the POAD Final Recipients' Satisfaction for the period 2017-2021

⁶⁹⁹ <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=1089&newsId=9331&furtherNews=yes>

minimum income), as well as based on social inquiries carried out by social workers or local authorities to identify the end recipients.

The MA FEAD staff perceives the FEAD monitoring and evaluation procedures as relevant and compliant, but some of the monitoring forms are considered by the partners quite complicated to use and there is no clear consensus on the capacity at MA level to collect and analyse data. As a solution, training, additional guidelines and more realistic timelines should be considered. MA staff considers the data collected to be generally complete and reliable, but there are mixed views among the partners on the quality of the verification process.⁷⁰⁰

On the other side, SMIS is considered easy to use and good for submitting data, but not good enough for aggregating, reviewing and validating it. It would be useful to work on the interconnection between different databases (for example FOREXEBUG - Ministry of Finance or SIIIR (Integrated Information System of Education in Romania) - Ministry of Education, as well as local level databases) and to avoid unnecessary administrative burden both for the beneficiaries and the MA staff.

Concerning the staff members, at the EC's recommendation the MA assigned approximately two-three people to each department, dividing the responsibilities of FEAD and OPHC (POCA). Over time, this labour division has been put into practice to ensure the necessary resources for the FEAD and avoid situations when the MA staff was mostly focusing on the tasks related to the OPHC (POCA), which is a more demanding programme, and was overlooking the FEAD -related tasks.⁷⁰¹

Based on a rough estimation of the working time of the MA FEAD staff, out of the total working time allocated to POAD by one staff member, at least **15% is allocated to the administrative responsibilities** and the rest to the beneficiary and audit requirements. *‘‘Currently, when the pressure is very high on the beneficiary to report and submit the payment requests, we allocate about 30-40% from our working time to the beneficiary to advise them how to proceed with these documents.’’*⁷⁰²

An estimation from beneficiary’s perspective (partner organisations who are implementing the FEAD funds) indicates that for example for monitoring and reporting the cost is the following: one person working approximately 40 hours per month multiplied by approximately EUR 20. In their project, they had to temporarily hire an external consultant to prepare the documents.⁷⁰³

In addition, there are **projects financed from POAD technical assistance carried out by a specific structure within the Ministry of Investments and European Projects**. These projects include (1) support for MIPE on POAD management and implementation by providing logistics, (2) support for the MIPE regarding the conduct of POAD 2018–2021 tenders - auxiliary services; and (3) continuous training of the MIPE staff involved in the coordination, management, and implementation of the POAD.⁷⁰⁴

There are three administrative activities which are the most burdensome:

- In Romania the MA required copies of the lists of end recipients with signature for receiving food packages, although these could be checked by sampling at the local authority’s level. The provision of a database with the final recipients was the most complicated requirement and could not be attained since the list was in physical format at the administrative territorial units and was not centralised or accessible to all the parties involved.
- The eligibility of each individual was difficult to be established, therefore instructions were issued to establish the precise reporting modalities for the beneficiaries; to comply with these instructions the beneficiaries (i.e. public authorities) had to adapt their activities and follow the procedures imposed both by the programme and by the internal audit authority’s staff who very often have no idea about the nature of the programme and the reality at the grassroots level.

⁷⁰⁰ World Bank (2021). Functional Assessment of FEAD (POAD)

⁷⁰¹ World Bank (2021). Functional Assessment of FEAD (POAD)

⁷⁰² Group interview with MA FEAD staff conducted in October 2023

⁷⁰³ World Bank (2021). Functional Assessment of FEAD (POAD)

⁷⁰⁴ World Bank (2021). Functional Assessment of FEAD (POAD)

- Partner organisations in charge of monitoring aid delivery must copy hundreds of sheets of paper containing data about the aid recipients. In addition, monitoring visits to the delivery sites are not covered by the regular work schedule and travelling budget of the partner organisations.⁷⁰⁵

However, due to the digitalisation at the level of public authorities, the burden decreased to a certain extent for the MA staff: *'[...] the data is corroborated, verified, concatenated, correlated, and checked by the Special Telecommunications Service⁷⁰⁶ - that manages all databases of public authorities in Romania. Thus, we receive databases with people who are eligible at the level of central institutions. We no longer need to ask for documents from people who receive support, because the institutions that provide the database have already checked the accuracy of the data. We also check if the products or the services purchased were those compliant with the measures we supported through that call. We no longer have such an administrative burden as we had in 2020 and before.'*⁷⁰⁷

Simplification measures [criterion: efficiency]

Romania is one of the countries implementing indirect support through vouchers. The lessons learned by the FEAD MA from the use of e-vouchers can be summarised on three levels: (1) the delivery mechanism, (2) the use of the card by final beneficiaries, and (3) the management system and control. *'[...] In our country, the schemes are already complete, they are well established, and voucher schemes are regulated by legislation, and the success is maximum, in the sense that people benefit from support with a certain frequency.'*⁷⁰⁸

The purchase of the products and services was made according to national legislation and could be controlled from the beginning. However, during the early years of FEAD implementation all people, no matter their age, received the same products, which is considered to be efficient, but not necessarily effective. *'[...] The content of the packages was standard, thus we managed to efficiently respond to the needs of the disadvantaged people.'*⁷⁰⁹ *'[...] The target groups were different, with different needs and distributing packages with a standard content, the same for everyone, it might not have been effective'*⁷¹⁰

Delivering vouchers to end recipients has proven to be faster, cheaper and lead to fewer problems than the in-kind form of support. Expenses related to large purchases of products, storage and distribution were no longer needed, but the delivery of auxiliary measures was more difficult to achieve. Due to the electronic social voucher schemes the end recipients have access to a greater variety of products, adapted to their needs and preferences, they no longer faced the possibility of products expiring, but, in isolated areas the use of vouchers is more difficult, a larger network of operators is needed, and the use of voucher cards by the elderly population has proven to be more difficult. Nevertheless, this approach of delivering support based on cards and vouchers protected the end recipients from stigmatisation. *'[...] Moreover, we are talking about not stigmatizing this category of people: if they walk on the street with a package of 25 kg the stigma is visible. However, having a plastic card in your pocket that you can use in the store and pay like any normal person is different. There is no stigma attached to it.'*⁷¹¹

In terms of programme monitoring and management of implementation, purchases of this type proved to be **less exposed to the risks of financial corrections**, the beneficiaries can monitor in real time the consumption of the support received, the number of supporting documents is reduced, and the reimbursement is made only on the amounts used by the end recipients.⁷¹²

Overall, the FEAD measures pay only for certain services and goods, which can lead to **the demand for certain products to increase artificially** (e.g. for certain school supplies in the case of social e-vouchers). *'[...] There is a network of commercial entities involved in implementation: distributors, partner stores etc. In theory this is good for their business because they are growing. But after the support schemes end, the business goes down. It is not clear how they manage such fluctuations.'*⁷¹³

⁷⁰⁵ DG EMPL (2018). FEAD Mid-Term Interim Evaluation Report.

⁷⁰⁶ <https://sts.ro/ro/despre-noi/>

⁷⁰⁷ Group interview with MA FEAD staff conducted in October 2023.

⁷⁰⁸ Group interview with MA FEAD staff conducted in October 2023

⁷⁰⁹ Group interview with MA FEAD staff conducted in October 2023

⁷¹⁰ Interview with World Vision representative conducted in October 2023

⁷¹¹ Interview with World Vision representative conducted in October 2023

⁷¹² FEAD Annual Implementation report, 2022

⁷¹³ Interview with UNICEF representative conducted in October 2023

Coherence of FEAD with other interventions [*criterion: coherence*]

FEAD was **designed to be complementary to the state and civil society's support**. Furthermore, to avoid double funding and to coordinate with interventions funded for marginalised communities and disadvantaged people, the FEAD (POAD), OP Human Capital, OP Social Inclusion, and OP Employment and Education were all placed under the coordination of the Ministry of European Investment Projects (MIPE).

*'The role of FEAD is complementary to the national policies [OPHC (POCU)] in the field of poverty reduction. FEAD complements the measures taken at national level, the legislation with measures identified through a needs assessment financed from European funds.'*⁷¹⁴

However, overall, the complementarity with other programmes/activities is insufficiently ensured, and there are **opportunities for development of the complementarity** of FEAD with other support measures in the country, such as:

- supplementing the food stock by developing partnerships with stores and social projects (food banks, partnerships encouraged by food waste reduction policies, etc.),
- partnerships with social enterprises that can involve end recipients (gardens that can provide fresh fruits and vegetables, local farms, storage and/or distribution services, etc.),
- the involvement of volunteers at the local level,
- the collaboration of partner organisations with the public social assistance system and with other projects in the sphere of social inclusion, through which additional services can be offered to the end recipients,
- correlation of interventions with activities financed from other sources (e.g.: “fruit and milk” distribution programme in schools, LEADER programme, etc.).⁷¹⁵

In the case of the school supplies support, the first round of FEAD was based on complementarity between the school supplies purchased through FEAD and the ones that children received through the national aid scheme, which started in 2001. For FEAD the eligibility criteria were defined in the legislation to have the same end recipients who receive the incentive of 500 Ron (EUR 100) for school supplies from the national aid scheme.

However, *'FEAD is [also] an outdated programme if we look at it together with the other national policies and programs. FEAD is very helpful in a country with so much poverty, but there is a need for complementary of the programs. For example, we have different interventions providing food to the children in schools, but every year we have the same problem – there is not enough money. Why not join these measures and have a real impact on school dropout, school attendance, nutrition?'*⁷¹⁶

It is important to look at coherence at central level, but FEAD is an **intervention which is designed to address needs and to be implemented at local level**. For this reason, the programme's coherence and complementarity is a matter of dialogue and cooperation among the central government, local authorities, and civil society. For example, it is not clear how the measures planned and implemented through FEAD were correlated with the anti-poverty measures foreseen in the Local Development Strategies and Plans of Action. Every national programme which is designed to address and implement measures at the grassroots level should consider these local level strategies in order to increase effectiveness and impact.

It is widely recognised that reducing the poverty rate in Romania based only on the European funds is difficult and not realistic, however, **currently at the local level the EU funds tend to represent the main source of funding/investment for the local authorities to cover the costs for development of services and infrastructure**. In the future, these funds will be reduced, which is why a profound social protection reform is much needed. This should address not only the legal framework, but also to what extent the institutional network (from central to the very grassroots level) gives support to the most vulnerable people. The current approach tends to increase dependency on support, rather than giving the most vulnerable in society the means to be socially and professionally integrated in their communities. In addition, as it has been widely proven that individuals are most vulnerable in times of crisis and so far, the social systems in the country have provided only ad hoc support. *'[...] We see what it is about, what resources we have at our disposal, and we decide at the moment to what*

⁷¹⁴ Group interview with MA FEAD staff conducted in October 2023

⁷¹⁵ FEAD Annual Implementation report, 2022

⁷¹⁶ Interview with World Vision International representative conducted in October 2023

*extent we want to address the needs of those people who are affected by the crisis at that moment, and then we offer a type of support in parallel with the protection system. This is the problem, the benefits are granted in parallel and, sometimes are implemented by institutions which are not responsible with the social protection in Romania. In this matter, we have the MIPE - Ministry of European Investments and Projects, former Ministry of European Funds responsible with the implementations of FSE funds in Romania, than the Ministry of Internal Affairs who managed the programme for the Ukrainian refugees, with no preparation or responsibility in social protection, only internal security and civil defence, while the central authority responsible with the social protection policies in Romania is the Ministry of Labour, but with no involvement in FEAD actions.*⁷¹⁷

For more details, see Appendix 4 - National schemes addressing food or material deprivation.

3.2. Is FEAD still relevant?

Relevance to target groups [*criterion: relevance*]

Different approaches were used to understand and define the needs of the target groups, such as: testing the aid provided on a sample of end recipients or conducting surveys, by additionally consulting partner organisations and experts, usually on health and nutrition issues. Moreover, in Romania, FEAD is the only or primary source of food aid. In this manner it provides an essential service. Regarding basic material deprivation, even though winter clothes for homeless people were needed they were not distributed.

The relevance of the programme for children from the most deprived communities refers to the prevention of school dropout. Romania still has a high rate of school dropout compared to other EU countries. In addition, there is a high poverty rate in employment and '[...] *there are studies showing that the early school dropout rate is strongly correlated with the poverty rate in employment. Children who leave the education system prematurely will mainly get lower-paid jobs or will work illegally. Any intervention which addresses this problem in disadvantaged, rural, marginalised communities, is welcome.*'⁷¹⁸

In addition to the original target groups defined under FEAD (POAD), new target group categories have emerged over the programming period, such as pre-school children, mothers and babies at risk of abandonment, homeless people, and people in temporary crisis situations. When asked about new target groups, MA staff confirmed that is not about new groups or categories of people who need these types of interventions, but about the volume of the target groups. This refers to the people who were not ex-ante identified as eligible to receive support but were identified by the social inquiry conducted within the frame of the programme. Even though the new people identified by social inquires (who are for the first time end beneficiaries of FEAD) do not have permanent income, they either are embarrassed to go to the local authorities to apply for social support or simply do not have the information about the opportunities for support.

Relevance of FEAD now and in the future [*criterion: relevance*]

In Romania, there is a sort of stigma regarding any form of state aid, especially for children from vulnerable communities who sometimes are bullied by their peers at schools.⁷¹⁹ To expand the aid in the case of educational vouchers, which addressed this problem, the MA worked closely with the social assistance directorates in administrative-territorial units or schools. However, it should be mentioned that the school staff involved did not receive any financial bonus to motivate them to be more actively involved in the identification of children in need. In some instances, this was perceived as unfair because the social assistance staff received bonuses within the frame of complementary interventions such as the OPHC (POCA) ones. '*We had schools where the school staff - the principal and the accountant, and the computer scientist - had to do all this social inquiry work and did not want to communicate to everyone, they only communicated to those they knew were deprived.*'⁷²⁰

The MA staff made efforts to increase the number of end users among children. A potential main bottleneck was the transition of the programme from the Ministry of Education to the MIPE. The cooperation between MA/MIPE and the schools was not always very good. In such circumstances the MA had to ask for the NAPSI (ANPIS) intervention, or to rely on parents' cooperation to increase the number of children covered by the programme.

⁷¹⁷ Interview with UNICEF representative conducted in October 2023

⁷¹⁸ Interview with UNICEF representative conducted in October 2023

⁷¹⁹ Interview with UNICEF representative conducted in October 2023

⁷²⁰ Group interview with MA FEAD staff conducted in October 2023

However, complying with the procedure to fill in the file⁷²¹ was costly and time consuming, and often the parents considered that they were spending more than the children were getting. In the end it turned out that the involvement of Ministry of Education was highly instrumental because it was very important to have a high eligibility rate, first for increasing the coverage of the programme and including as many children as possible, but also from the perspective of engaging the funds and reducing the expenditure from the state budget, especially in times of crisis.

For the future, it is important to connect aid support with social services. In view of decreasing FEAD support after 2027, more efforts should be made to undertake major structural reforms of the tax system, public administration, administrative-territorial and to set in place an investment mechanism to support the social domain both in the long term and in times of crisis. In the future, FEAD will continue to have an important role in Romanian society overall and the target groups will still benefit from FEAD type of support.

3.3. Did FEAD make a difference and to whom?

EU added value [criterion: EU added value]

In Romania, due to FEAD (POAD), **vulnerable people who would otherwise have gone unnoticed were brought to the attention of the authorities.** In particular, in the town hall social services in the larger towns and Bucharest, these people received information about their rights and the services they were entitled to. The most popular accompanying measures end recipients benefited from, were advice on personal hygiene, followed by advice on food preparation and storage.

FEAD was also considered to have a good influence on the staff involved in the programme implementation, as organisational skills (database, accounting, public procurement, procedure, monitoring, auditing etc) were increased in Romania. Overall, the **programme brings together local administrations and other public institutions** to share information on issues and make proposals for the benefit of the programme and, ultimately, of the end recipients. *'We explained the partnerships we needed to have with the administrative-territorial units, for example, to collaborate with ANPIS. They started to report more to central institutions, to pay more attention to reporting and identifying people.'*⁷²²

FEAD increased the collaboration among various ministries (e.g. Ministry of Labor, MIPE and ME), **state and private institutions, social society and local administrations.** The partnership with civil society was instrumental, especially in providing warm meals, and demonstrated its value at the community level. The relationship between the Social Assistance Directorate and the end users increased, and vulnerable people became more aware of their social rights and obligations.

As for the **measures addressing the Ukrainians fleeing Russian military aggression, it was easier to work with the traditional partners**, such as the Red Cross Response Programme, because they have experience in delivery goods and vouchers. This may have led to a less transparent selection of partner in this crisis situation, *'[...] there should have been from the very beginning a criterion regarding what percent of the resources to be allocated to accompaniment services to discourage traditional partners. The impact might have been greater. I am part of the MA OPHC (POCA) Monitoring Committee where we discussed how to coordinate our interventions. This is because we also had assistance, for example, in OPHC (POCA) and ESF, but it did not work out very well, because even now, if I look at the monitoring reports of FEAD and OPHC (POCA), I cannot cross-check which of the beneficiaries who received support in one programme did not receive in the other. FEAD was complementary, but we also did double funding many times through other programmes, through assistance, subsidies etc., for example, OPHC (POCA).'*⁷²³

⁷²¹ The parents had to fill in a file with the child details regarding the inscription to FEAD aid

⁷²² Group interview with MA FEAD staff conducted in October 2023

⁷²³ Interview with World Vision international representative conducted in October 2023

Although FEAD support for the most disadvantaged people in Romania has been modest compared to the needs of the target group, both in quantity and in frequency, it is estimated that **stopping the FEAD support would contribute to a decrease in the quality of life of those supported**.⁷²⁴ Unfortunately, the impact of different types of financial support is not analysed, nor how these measures contribute to innovative aspects and, ultimately, to the wellbeing of the end recipients.

Visibility [visibility]

The FEAD programme in Romania has its own logos inscribed on the packages and more recently on vouchers, thus all end recipients are informed that the support they receive is EU-funded. *‘Children had the possibility to use vouchers. The children and parents know who the funder is.’*⁷²⁵ Despite this optimistic perception at the level of MA, at grassroots level it appears that the situation is different in the sense that if the beneficiaries are asked who provided the support they received the answer was often *“the city hall”* or *“the schools”*. *‘[...] When we offered supplies in schools, we asked them, ‘where do you think this support comes from?’, and all of them said, “from the local authorities”.’*⁷²⁶

Moreover, all the school supplies and packages had only the EU logo to avoid children feeling stigmatised. The visual identity measures were respected, in a manner less obvious and to produce as little discomfort as possible to those who use the backpacks, for example. *‘[...] Many parents refused the backpacks and school supplies packages because they do not want their children's classmates to mock their children.’*⁷²⁷

4. Good practices

One of the most popular EU-funded measures in Romania is the **"Hot Meals"**⁷²⁸, which aims to provide hot meals to elderly people with low income and to homeless people. The measure, managed by the Ministry of Investments and European Projects, offers to vulnerable people social e-vouchers with a value of 180 lei (approx. EUR 35) per month. To date, more than 11,000,000 hot meals have been provided to the elderly with modest incomes and to the homeless, and more than 8,000 restaurants and canteens from all over the country were involved in providing the food. In rural areas, where many beneficiaries of social e-vouchers for hot meals are concentrated, the usage rate of this form of aid is almost 100%.

The programme also stimulated the end recipients' social and financial inclusion, with a surprising effect: the elderly, with an average age of 82, learned very quickly to use the voucher card, which was the first voucher card for many of them. More than 300,000 cards have been issued and used, and more than 2,000 POS (Points of Sale)⁷²⁹ have been introduced in rural areas, laying the foundation for a digitisation model with immediate positive effects in the local community. At the same time, the programme helped small restaurant owners to maintain their business during the pandemic, given that the COVID-19 crisis had negatively affected the hospitality sector. For some of them, this project was even an opportunity to increase their turnover.

Another good example comes from the legislative framework, regarding the Emergency Decree of the Government no. 63/2022 establishing the national mechanism for granting **social e-vouchers**⁷³⁰.

The sum of 3.1 billion lei (EUR 623 million) has been allocated for the implementation of the measure. The objective was to support disadvantaged people in the above categories by providing social e-vouchers for food and hot meals. This measure was implemented from 1 June to 31 December 2022. The expected result was an increase of the net incomes of disadvantaged people in the context of rising food and energy prices worldwide. Please see the findings presented in the previous sections (i.e. Section 3.1 Success and failure factors, regarding the social e-vouchers) explaining in detail how this type of aid was developed in Romania and why it was considered effective and efficient.

⁷²⁴ Interview with the Research Institute for Quality-of-Life representative conducted in October 2023

⁷²⁵ Group interview with MA FEAD staff conducted in October 2023

⁷²⁶ Interview with World Vision International representative conducted in October 2023

⁷²⁷ Interview with Ministry of Education representative, as central authority beneficiary, conducted in October 2023

⁷²⁸ <https://mfe.gov.ro/programul-mese-calde-exemplu-de-bune-practici/>

⁷²⁹ POS - Point-of-Sale is an electronic device that can retrieve, store and transmit card payment information.

⁷³⁰ <https://www.fonduri-ue.ro/vouchere>

5. Conclusions and lessons learned

The FEAD needs an intervention framework which invites and encourages collaboration with all the stakeholders involved, from ministries and local authorities to civil society and private investors. Without this framework, the aid process can be hindered by a lack of support, which can be bureaucratic and needs creativity to put in place innovative solutions. There are several actions which should be taken to improve FEAD in the future, such as:

- Developing accompanying/complementary services, such as counselling measures, a minimum level of psychological support, in addition to material and basic food aid.
- Planning and carrying out an impact analysis, to capitalise the support measures by the direct beneficiaries.
- The FEAD measures should be complementary to all the programmes dedicated to the most vulnerable people in Romania. FEAD covers just a small part of the support for the targeted group, besides the support that the Romanian state frequently gives. A closer collaboration with the territorial administrative units (local administration) and NGOs is very important because they are in direct contact with the end recipients. It should be noted that for an aid programme to be sustainable and effective it must not allow end recipients to become dependent on it. Unfortunately, in Romania, FEAD creates this dependency because of the way it is implemented (e.g. financial support without additional support for access to the labour market). FEAD should go hand in hand with integration and insertion measures, in order to effect positive sustainable change on end recipients' lives.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Methodology

The case study was drafted based on the analysis of the data collected from five interviews (of which one was a group interview and four individual interviews) with key national stakeholders of FEAD in Romania and the desk review of the programme document (different versions until the most recent one dated 2023), annual implementation reports, other relevant reports and studies, and EUROSTAT data.

In terms of limitations, the low level of accessibility and stakeholder interest in participating in the evaluation was a significant constraint to data collection. This was largely due to the pressure perceived by all stakeholders given the approaching end of the programming period. However, considerable efforts have been made in terms of updating contact details and conducting intensive correspondence by phone and e-mail, to obtain the support of beneficiaries in data collection, including obtaining updated documents for the desk study. By extending the data collection period, we were able to conduct interviews and document study, sufficient to achieve triangulation of data from different sources and a more accurate analysis.

With reference to the impact measurement, it should be noted that some projects are still under implementation or have recently been completed, which makes it challenging to realistically estimate the impact of interventions. For the same reason, it is difficult to analyse the real status of achievement of the indicators. The status of indicators presented in the most recent Annual Implementation Report (i.e. from 2022) is even less relevant to the current situation of the projects.

Appendix 2: References

- Cătălin Zamfir (coord). The Research Institute for Quality of Life (ICCV), Social Report 2020 - The Pandemic and the Standard of Living. Social protection policies
- DG EMPL (2018). FEAD Mid-Term Interim Evaluation Report
- Eurostat, (2023). People at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2022
- Management Authority of FEAD (2023). FEAD Annual Implementation Report 2022
- FEAD version 7 (2021)
- FEAD version 9 (2023)
- UNICEF (2023). Children and the Cost-of-living Crisis
- World Bank (2021). Functional Assessment of FEAD (POAD).

Appendix 3: FEAD indicators

Table A. 93 – Input indicators for the implementation of FEAD in Romania in 2014-2022

Indicator	Total amount of eligible public expenditure approved in the documents setting out the conditions for support of operations (EUR)	Total amount of eligible public expenditure incurred by beneficiaries and paid in implementing operations (EUR)	Total amount of eligible public expenditure declared to the Commission (EUR)	Implementation rate (expenditure declared as share of allocated budget)
2015-2022	621 928 241.99	321 356 014.99	222 411 315.28	36%

Source: SFC 2014 database.

Table A. 94 – FEAD output indicators in Romania in 2014-2022, per year

Output indicators on food support distributed	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Quantity of fruits and vegetables (tonnes)	0	0	0	0	0	0	2 561.52	2 567.73	2 509.78
Quantity of meat, eggs, fish, seafood (tonnes)	4 451.70	17 758.30	3 381.91	0	0	0	0	0	0
Quantity of flour, bread, potatoes, rice and other starchy products (tonnes)	9 190.50	36 663.50	47 512.19	0	0	0	16 365.25	16 404.94	16 034.70
Quantity of sugar (tonnes)	2 872.00	11 457.00	16 654.84	0	0	0	2 371.78	2 377.53	2 323.87
Quantity of milk products (tonnes)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Quantity of fats, oil (tonnes)	2 872.00	11 457.00	25 925.37	0	0	0	4 743.55	4 755.06	4 647.74
Quantity of convenience food, other foodstuff (not falling in abovementioned categories) (tonnes)	0	0	3 710.97	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total quantity of food support distributed (tonnes)	19 386.20	77 335.80	97 185.28	0	0	0	30 074.12	30 147.06	29 466.67
Proportion of FEAD co-financed food	100.0	100.00	85.00	0	0	0	0	0	0

Output indicators on food support distributed	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
products in the total volume of food distributed by the partner organisations (%)									
Total number of meals distributed partly or totally financed by the OP	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	11 027 838	0
Total number of food packages distributed partly or totally financed by the OP	1 436 019	5 743 190	7 903 190	0	0	0	1 185 888	1 188 764	1 161 935

Source: SFC 2014 database.

Table A. 95 – Number of FEAD participants in Romania in 2014-2022

Result indicators on food support distributed	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Total number of persons receiving food support	612 262	2 449.049	4 432 214	0	0	0	1 185 888	1 485 586	1 185 952
Number of children aged 15 years or below	123 275	493 959	602 629	0	0	0	356 577	359 512	336 648
Number of persons aged 65 years or above	144 028	589 296	867 851	0	0	0	129 521	426 800	151 416
Number of women	285 571	1 142 282	1 264 728	0	0	0	351 206	600 707	352 875
Number of migrants, participants of foreign origin,	0	0	0	0	0	0	55 059	69 345	67 640

Result indicators on food support distributed	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
minorities (including marginalised communities such as Roma)									
Number of persons with disabilities	99 054	408 627	469 603	0	0	0	238 581	250 263	287 368
Number of homeless	0	0	0	0	0	0	825	6 794	1 020

Source: SFC 2014 database.

Appendix 4: National schemes addressing food or material deprivation⁷³¹

P1 - food deprivation (basic foods)

National schemes:

From 2007 to 2013, Romania benefited from the same type of programme, addressed to the most deprived people, financed by the *European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF)* - "Ensuring a food surplus for the poorest population in the European Union" (PEAD). The EU aid took the form of food for approximately 2.5 million people. **The Agency for Payments and Intervention in Agriculture (APIA)** provided the management of this programme.

In the period 2007-2013, the EU allocated funds and goods to Romania from the stocks of intervention amounting to a total of approx. EUR 260,000.

The added value that FEAD brings refers to focusing and increasing the aid offered to deprived people, considering the amounts made available by EAGF and the government of Romania which are two times higher than those in PEAD, the introduction of accompanying social inclusion measures and the encouragement of school attendance by introducing aid in the form of school supplies, which indirectly leads to the social inclusion of children.

The Romanian Red Cross started, in September 2009, the **Food Bank Project**, the purpose of this project being to support families/single persons who cannot meet their daily food needs with basic food. Currently, the Food Bank operates through the Red Cross and has more than 150,000 end recipients.

Emergency Decree no. 115 of 16 July 2020, regarding some measures to support the most deprived categories of people who benefit from hot meals based on social e-vouchers, granted from non-refundable external funds, as well as some measures for their distribution.

P2 - basic material deprivation

P2.1 - basic material deprivation (school materials)

National schemes:

Law 272/2004 transfers to local budgets amounts for ensuring social protection measures. This law covers approx. 40,000 children, the minimum funding limit is on average 600 lei/year/child.

‘‘Highschool money’’ (HG 1488/2004) outlines the methodology for applying the programme aimed at students from high schools and vocational schools from families whose monthly gross income per family member is max. 150 lei. In total, 98,000 students benefited from this programme. The scheme had an annual value of approx. 17 million lei.

Euro 200 Law 269/2004 grants financial aid for the purchase of a computer to families with pupils and/or students of accredited state or private education, up to the age of 26 who come from families with a maximum

⁷³¹ FEAD version 9 (2023)

gross monthly income of 150 lei per member by family. The total number of beneficiaries in 2014 was 15,794 people, worth approximately EUR 3,150,000.

Law 248/2015 national programme “Every Child in Kindergarten” allocates social e-vouchers worth 50 lei/child/month conditional on the child's attendance at kindergarten. Disadvantaged children from families with an income below 284 lei/family member/month benefit from social e-vouchers.

Law 34/1998 (Art. 5) grants subsidies from public budgets for associations and foundations authorised as providers of social services. The state budget can cover part of the expenses with the salaries of care and social assistance staff, food for the beneficiaries of social canteens or other food provision services, for the beneficiaries of residential centres, fuel for the means of transport of day centres, care units at home and social canteens. The local budget granted subsidies for current operating expenses of the social assistance units, approved by decision of the local council. The total amount granted in 2016 was EUR 4,066,000, for 138 associations and foundations and 9587 beneficiaries.

Emergency Ordinance no. 133 of August 7, 2020, regarding some measures to support the most disadvantaged categories of students who benefit from educational support based on social e-vouchers for educational support granted from non-refundable external funds, as well as some measures for their distribution, with the amendments and subsequent additions.

P2.2 - basic material deprivation (kits for newborns)

National schemes:

Law 272/2004 transfers to local budgets amounts for ensuring social protection measures. This law covers approximately 40,000 children, the minimum funding limit is on average 600 lei/year/child.

Law 34/1998 (Art. 5) granted subsidies from public budgets for associations and foundations authorised as providers of social services. The state budget can cover part of the expenses with the salaries of care and social assistance staff, food for the beneficiaries of social canteens or other food provision services, for the beneficiaries of residential centres, fuel for the means of transport of day centres, care units at home and social canteens. The local budget granted subsidies for current operating expenses of the social assistance units, approved by decision of the local council. The total amount granted in 2016 was EUR 4,066,000, for 138 associations and foundations and 9587 beneficiaries.

The legal provisions regarding some measures to support the most disadvantaged categories of mother-newborn couples who benefit from material support based on social vouchers on electronic support granted from non-refundable external funds as well as some measures for their distribution.

P2.3 - basic material deprivation (clothing and footwear, sleeping bags, etc.)

National schemes - there are none.

P2.4 - basic material deprivation (hygiene products)

National schemes - there are none.

[Appendix 5: Detailed description of FEAD actions⁷³²](#)

P1 - food deprivation (basic foods). Food deprivation is managed by MIPE.

The actions carried out for the distribution of food packages.

The food packages were delivered to the headquarters of the partner organisations and distributed by these to the final beneficiaries in compliance with visibility measures. The activity of providing food aid packages was coordinated by the beneficiary and was carried out in accordance with the contractual terms and established delivery times. In the case of immovable persons, the packages with food aid were distributed at the home of the end recipients, with the support of the partner organisations (territorial administrative units, i.e. local administration) that provided the necessary infrastructure for transport. The beneficiary and the partner organisations followed the inclusion of people in the target group, including for persons/families temporarily in critical life situations, defined according to EOG no. 84/2020, and in other similar situations established by social investigations and who are in particularly vulnerable situations, as well as people who live in informal settlements. Providing support to people belonging to this category can be achieved only if there were:

- food stocks, after exhausting all stages of distribution for family members and single persons to whom it is established, by written provision to the mayor,

⁷³² Management Authority of FEAD (2023). POAD Annual Implementation Report 2022

- the right to a GMI (VMG) granted based on Law no. 416/200, with subsequent amendments and additions, also for the members of families receiving the allowance for family support granted under Law no. 277/2010 regarding the support allowance to the family, republished, with subsequent amendments and additions, as defined by EOG no. 84/2020 for the establishment of necessary measures for the implementation of the Operational Programme Aid to the most deprived people – FEAD (POAD).

Within the project with SMIS code 125099 entitled "Granting food aid packages within the POAD 2018-2021, until 2022, a number of three tranches, were distributed, out of the six, provided in the financing application. The third distribution took place between 01.10.2021 –28.02.2022 for a number of 1,187,849 packages.

The food package contained the following amounts: oil (4 litres); sugar (2 kg); white wheat flour (5 kg); sorghum (4 kg); rice (4 kg); pasta flour (800 g); canned pork (900 g); canned beef (1.5kg); canned liver pate (1 kg); fruit compote (1.44kg); fruit jam (360 g); dietary jam (360 g).

Actions carried out for the distribution of social e-vouchers for hot meals.

Social e-vouchers for hot meals were distributed from the issuing unit to the prefect's institution, according to the centralising tables communicated by each prefect's institution.

The partner organisations distributed, in accordance with the lists provided and in compliance with EOG no.115/2020 social e-vouchers for hot meals to eligible people from the target group, respectively, people who have reached the age of 75 or over, who benefit from a pension or other rights by special laws, paid by territorial pension houses and homeless persons/families, including persons/families who have been evicted, and families with children who do not have a stable residence, especially single-parent families.

The ticket holder benefited from a hot meal, provided by the affiliated units that accepted social e-vouchers for hot meals, as defined in national legislation applicable, respectively in EOG no. 115/2020 regarding some measures to support the categories of the most disadvantaged people who benefit from hot meals via social e-vouchers, granted through non-reimbursable external funds, as well as some measures of their distribution.

In 2022, the call "The granting of social vouchers on electronic support for products, food and hot meals" was launched, aimed at P1 - food deprivation (1 basic food) with a total eligible value of EUR 57,730,000. Within this call, the project was approved with SMIS code 157929, with the title "Material support based on social e-vouchers for the purchase of food products and/or for the provision of hot meals for the categories of persons at risk of material deprivation and/or risk of extreme poverty - "Support for Romania", whose beneficiary is the Ministry of Investments and European Projects/Directorate General POAD implementation, with a total eligible value of EUR 57,704,674.52.

The nominal value of a social e-voucher for hot meals is 180 RON (almost EUR 36).

P2 - basic material deprivation

Actions carried out for the distribution of school materials.

The implementation mechanism is carried out through the purchase of social e-vouchers for educational support for eligible disadvantaged children. The MIPE purchases from social e-vouchers for educational support and distributes them to the partner organisations who, in turn, distribute them to the end recipients.

The partner organisations are the Ministry of Education, state preschool units, primary and gymnasium units, the county school inspectorates and the School Inspectorate of the Municipality of Bucharest, the institution of the prefect and local public administration authorities.

The role of the partner organisation is to identify and compile the list of end recipients and distribute social e-vouchers to parents/legal representative/guardians of eligible children from the target group.

The nominal value of a social voucher on electronic support for educational support is 500 lei.

In 2022, the project with SMIS code 152590 with the title "Educational support based on social e-vouchers for the most disadvantaged student categories", had a total value of 331,371,550 lei.

Within the project, 224,809 educational vouchers were distributed for the school year of 2021-2022. Also, the project was modified to allow it to continue into the school year of 2022-2023.

Actions regarding the granting of kits for newborns

The implementation mechanism is carried out through the purchase of social e-vouchers for newborns.

MIPE purchases social e-vouchers for newborns from the accredited issuing unit and distributes them to partner organisations who, in turn, distribute them to end recipients.

In August 2022, the call "Granting kits for newborns - measure P2.2 kits for newborns within the POAD" with a total eligible allocation of EUR12,000,000. Within this call, the project SMIS code 156834, with the title "Granting of kits for newborns" had a total eligible value of EUR 6,094,230.17 (30,070,150.50 lei), and the beneficiary was the Ministry of Investments and European Projects/Directorate General Implementation POAD.

[The actions carried out for the distribution of clothing and footwear, sleeping bags etc.](#)

The mechanism for implementing this type of support for basic material deprivation was run in three ways:

1. The Ministry of European Investments and Projects, through the General Directorate of Implementation POAD, together with partner organisations purchases clothing items and shoes and sleeping bags intended mainly for the homeless, mainly over winter.
2. Purchase of social e-vouchers – by the Ministry of Investments and European projects.
3. NGOs accredited as providers of social services, alone or in partnership with institutions central and/or local, county and/or regional public, as partner organisations to purchase clothing and footwear sleeping bags and other intended items for homeless people, mainly for the winter. This implementation represented the changes that were proposed for 2023.

[The actions carried out for the distribution of hygiene products.](#)

This type of support for basic material deprivation is managed by the Ministry of Investments and European Projects, through the General Directorate of POAD Implementation.

The implementation mechanism followed the delivery to the headquarters of the partner organisations of the packages with hygiene products and distribution to final beneficiaries in compliance with visibility measures.

The partner organisations involved in carrying out this activity were the town halls, as well as the institutions of the prefect from 41 counties, respectively the institution of the prefect of the municipality of Bucharest, these had the obligation to follow the inclusion of people in the target group.

The categories of the most deprived who benefited from basic material assistance were:

- family members and single persons to whom it is established, by written provision of the mayor, the right to a guaranteed minimum income granted based on Law no. 416/2001 regarding the guaranteed minimum income, with subsequent amendments and additions.
- members of families receiving family support allowance granted under Law no. 277/2010 regarding the allowance for family support, republished, with amendments and subsequent additions.
- persons/families temporarily in critical life situations, respectively victims of crises, dependent persons, defined according to this emergency decree, and in other similar situations established by social surveys and who are in special situations of vulnerability, as well as people living in informal settlements.

Providing support to people belonging to this category was achieved by distributing hygiene products after the exhaustion of all distribution stages for categories a) and b), as they are defined by EOG no. 84/2020 for the establishment of necessary measures for POAD implementation.

The hygiene package that was distributed contains the following products and quantities: toothbrush (5 pcs); toothpaste (300 ml); liquid soap (500 ml); children's shampoo (800 ml); adult shampoo (500 ml); laundry detergent (2700 g).

To make aid more efficient, the distribution of these products intended to contribute to personal hygiene and home hygiene was accompanied by accompanying measures.

[Appendix 6: Detailed description of FEAD target groups⁷³³](#)

The eligibility conditions of the end recipients were established based on the following mechanism:

⁷³³ FEAD version 9 (2023)

For P1. A food deprivation (basic food) – food packages and P 2.4 material deprivation (hygiene products):

1. Families in severe poverty who benefit from Law 416/2001 on the guaranteed minimum income or whose monthly income and assets, according to independent income declarations, would fall within the limits established by Law 416/2001.
2. Families with children who benefit from Law 277/2010 for family support or whose monthly income per family member, according to independent income declarations, is below the minimum threshold established by this law (threshold in 2016: maximum 200 lei/ family member/month).
3. elderly people who benefit from social allowance for pensioners, according to Emergency Decree no. 6/2009 regarding the establishment of the social allowance for pensioners.
4. Homeless persons/families (including persons/families who have been evicted and families with children who do not have a stable residence, especially single parents).
5. Persons temporarily in critical life situations, namely victims of crises, dependent persons (defined as persons with serious and pronounced disabilities, adults and children, who do not benefit from care in residential, public or private social services), other people in particularly vulnerable situations determined by social surveys, as well as people who are part of informal settlements (as they are defined in annex 2 to Law no. 350 of June 6, 2001, on territorial planning and urban planning, with the amendments and subsequent additions). The temporary situation of vulnerability will be justified by the public authorities with duties in the field of social assistance.

For P1. B food deprivation (basic food) – food products and hot meals granted through social e-vouchers, the categories of people the most deprived beneficiaries are:

- a) people who have reached the age of 65 or over, who benefit from the social allowance for pensioners or other rights through special laws, paid through territorial pension houses. If the end recipients benefit from several allowances or income from pensions in payment and their cumulative value exceeds the value of the social allowance for pensioners, they do not benefit from social e-vouchers for food products and hot meals.
- b) homeless persons/families (including persons/families who have been evicted and families with children who do not have a stable residence, especially single-parent ones).

For P2.1 basic material deprivation (school materials)

- a) children enrolled in state, primary and secondary education, who meet the income criteria established in the National School Supplies Programme, according to Law 126/2002, respectively who are dependent families whose average monthly net income per family member, achieved in July of each year, is a maximum of 50% of the gross minimum basic salary per country.
- b) preschool children enrolled in state education, who are eligible for Law 248/2015.

For P2.2 basic material deprivation (kits for newborns)

- a) mothers who gave birth in 2021, but no later than three months after the birth of the child and for whom the right to a guaranteed minimum income is established, by written order of the mayor, based on Law no. 416/2001 on the guaranteed minimum income, with subsequent amendments and additions.
- b) mothers who gave birth in 2021, but no later than three months after the birth of the child and who are part of families receiving family support allowance granted under Law no.277/2010 regarding the family support allowance, republished, with subsequent amendments (including minors).
- c) mothers who gave birth in 2021, but no later than three months after the birth of the child and who are in a risk situation (example: people with disabilities).
- d) mothers who have given birth since 2021, but no later than three months after the birth of the child, who are temporarily in critical life situations (victims of crises, domestic violence, dependent persons, etc.) and/or who are in particularly vulnerable situations. Example: they no longer have a home, have been evicted from their own home or any other situation of vulnerability that the partner organisation considers would fall under this point. The temporary situation of vulnerability will be justified by the partner organisations.
- e) any other category of mothers who gave birth starting in 2021, but no later than three months after the birth of the child and who do not have identity documents and cannot access civil rights.

- f) mothers who are minors, but no later than three months after the birth of the child.
- g) mothers who gave birth in 2022, but not later than three months after the birth of the child, foreign citizens or stateless persons from the zone of armed Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

According to Emergency Decree of the Government no. 113/2022 regarding some necessary measures for the implementation of the FEAD, settlement of expenses regarding supporting refugees from Ukraine, as well as giving grants from external funds non-reimbursable for investments intended for digitalising SMEs, the end recipients of these measures are:

- a) mothers who gave birth in 2022,
- b) mothers who gave birth in 2022,
- c) mothers with disabilities who gave birth in 2022, but no later than three months after the birth of the child.
- d) mothers who gave birth in 2022, but no later than three months after the birth of the child, temporarily in critical life situations (victims of crises, domestic violence, dependent persons and/or who are in particularly vulnerable situations, determined by the investigation of a social assistance drawn up by public authorities with duties in the field of social assistance or on the basis of a social investigation report drawn up by public authorities with attributions in the field of social assistance at the request of the person or the report of a third party;
- e) mothers who gave birth in 2022, but no later than three months after the birth of the child and who do not have identity documents and who, for this reason, cannot benefit from civil rights.
- f) mothers who are minors who gave birth in 2022
- g) mothers who gave birth in 2022.

For P2.3 basic material deprivation (clothing and footwear, sleeping bags, etc.)

- a) homeless persons/families (including persons/families who have been evicted and families with children who do not have a stable residence, especially single parents).
- b) persons temporarily in critical life situations, i.e. victims of crises, dependent persons (drug or alcohol addictions that create a situation of vulnerability, elderly persons in a situation of dependence on assistance), and in other similar situations established by social evaluations. The temporary situation of vulnerability will be justified by the public authorities with attributions in the respective field/accredited NGO managing the implementation/accredited social service providers.

X.12 Sweden

1. Context and background

Throughout the evaluation reference period (2013-2022), Sweden's socio-economic indicators have been relatively stable at a level above the European average. There have been minor fluctuations, but a general negative development can only be seen in 2022.

Sweden's at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate (AROPE) was at 18.2% in 2014, compared to the European average of 24.0%. Over time, the AROPE levels have dropped in Sweden but rose again to 18.6% in 2022. The indicator for child poverty is also significantly below the European average of 24.6%. In 2014, it stood at 19.2%. After a peak at 22.7% (almost at the EU average of 24%) in 2019, it declined to 18.9% in 2022.

The severe material and social deprivation (SMSD) rate is significantly below EU average. In 2014, it was 1.1% compared to the EU average of 9.7%. However, the SMSD rate increased in Sweden to 2.4% in 2022, compared to the EU average, which dropped (albeit to 6.7%) in 2022. The SMSD rate for children shows a similar development, from 1.2% in 2014 to 3.0% in 2022. This reflects increased challenges regarding material and social deprivation in Sweden, albeit at low levels in a European perspective.

The indicator regarding the inability to afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish (or vegetarian equivalent) every second day shows that the situation in Sweden is significantly less challenging than in most European countries. In 2014, this indicator was at 1.6% compared to the EU average of 9.7%. This level has been relatively consistent over the years but showed a slight increase in 2022 to 2.4%.

The two areas where the socio-economic context in Sweden is most challenging from a European perspective are Households with very low work intensity and Housing cost overburden. In 2015, the percentage of households with a very low work intensity was 7.8%. It has since risen to 8.2%, in contrast to the EU average, which has dropped from 10.1% to 8.3% over the period. The same situation can be seen for Children (aged less than 18) living in households with very low work intensity. In 2022, the percentage in Sweden (7.4%) is at the EU level (7.6%). In terms of housing cost overburden, the level in Sweden has been constant at approximately 8.5-9% over the reference period. After a positive development at the European level, Sweden is at the same level as the EU average, with 9.2% in 2022 for this indicator.

Sweden's socio-economic context can be seen as the background for choosing an operational programme for social participation (OP II) under FEAD 2014-2020. According to the indicators, results show that Sweden has fewer challenges regarding material and social deprivation as well as inability to afford a meal than most European countries. In line with the Swedish welfare model, there are several efforts at national and local level aimed at reducing social and economic exclusion, which could be extended through FEAD support.

Table A. 96 – Socio-economic context in Sweden

Sweden	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Trend
1. At-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate (AROPE) Total		18,2	17,7	17,2	17,7	18,4	17,7	17,2	18,6	
2. AROPE Children		19,2	19,1	18,3	20,5	22,7	19,6	19,0	18,9	
3. Severe material and social deprivation rate (SMSD)		1,1	0,7	1,0	1,4	1,5	2,0	1,4	2,3	
4. Severe material deprivation rate (SMD)	1,0	5,8	0,8	1,1	1,6	1,8	1,8	0,0	0,0	
5. Inability to afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish (or vegetarian equivalent)	1,6	1,8	1,3	1,8	1,5	2,0	1,9	1,6	2,4	
6. Impact of social transfers (other than pensions) on poverty reduction	48,0	45,3	45,8	46,1	43,3	40,8	42,7	44,5	39,9	
7. Housing cost overburden	8,6	8,7	8,5	8,4	8,3	9,4	8,3	8,5	9,1	
8. Self-reported unmet need for medical care % of population 16+	1,7	1,3	1,6	1,4	1,5	1,4	1,5	1,3	1,8	
9. Households with very low work intensity		7,8	7,8	8,2	8,3	8,3	7,9	8,8	8,2	
11. Population in the EU could not afford unexpected financial expenses	20,4	19,8	20,7	19,7	20,2	20,5	19,8	18,4	21,2	
13. Share of total population having neither a bath, nor a shower in their home	0,5	0,7	0,1	0,0	0,1	0,1	0,1			
14. No indoor flushing	0,5	0,7	0,1	0,0	0,1	0,1	0,1			
17. Persons who cannot afford a telephone	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0			
18. Persons who cannot afford to replace worn-out clothes	2,7	2,0	2,4	1,9	2,2	2,5	3,1	2,7	3,8	
20. Persons who cannot afford to get together with friends or family (renting a room)	1,0	1,1	1,1	1,4	1,6	1,3	1,5	1,0	2,0	
21. Persons who cannot afford internet connection for personal use at home	1,3	1,2	0,7	0,6	0,6	0,3	0,5	0,5	0,7	
22. In-work risk of poverty	6,2	6,7	5,3	5,6	5,6	6,0	5,2	4,2	5,9	
23. Long-term unemployment	2,3	2,3	2,0	2,0	1,7	1,5	1,8	2,0	1,9	
25. Employment rate	74,4	75,0	75,7	76,3	76,8	76,6	74,9	75,4	77,1	
26. Children (aged less than 18) living in households with very low work intensity		8,4	8,1	8,0	9,2	9,2	8,8	8,5	7,4	
27. At-risk-of-poverty rate for children		18,1	18,7	18,6	19,3	21,5	18,7	18,1	17,2	
28. Severe material and social deprivation rate (SMSD) for children		1,2	0,6	1,2	1,9	2,5	3,3	1,7	3,0	

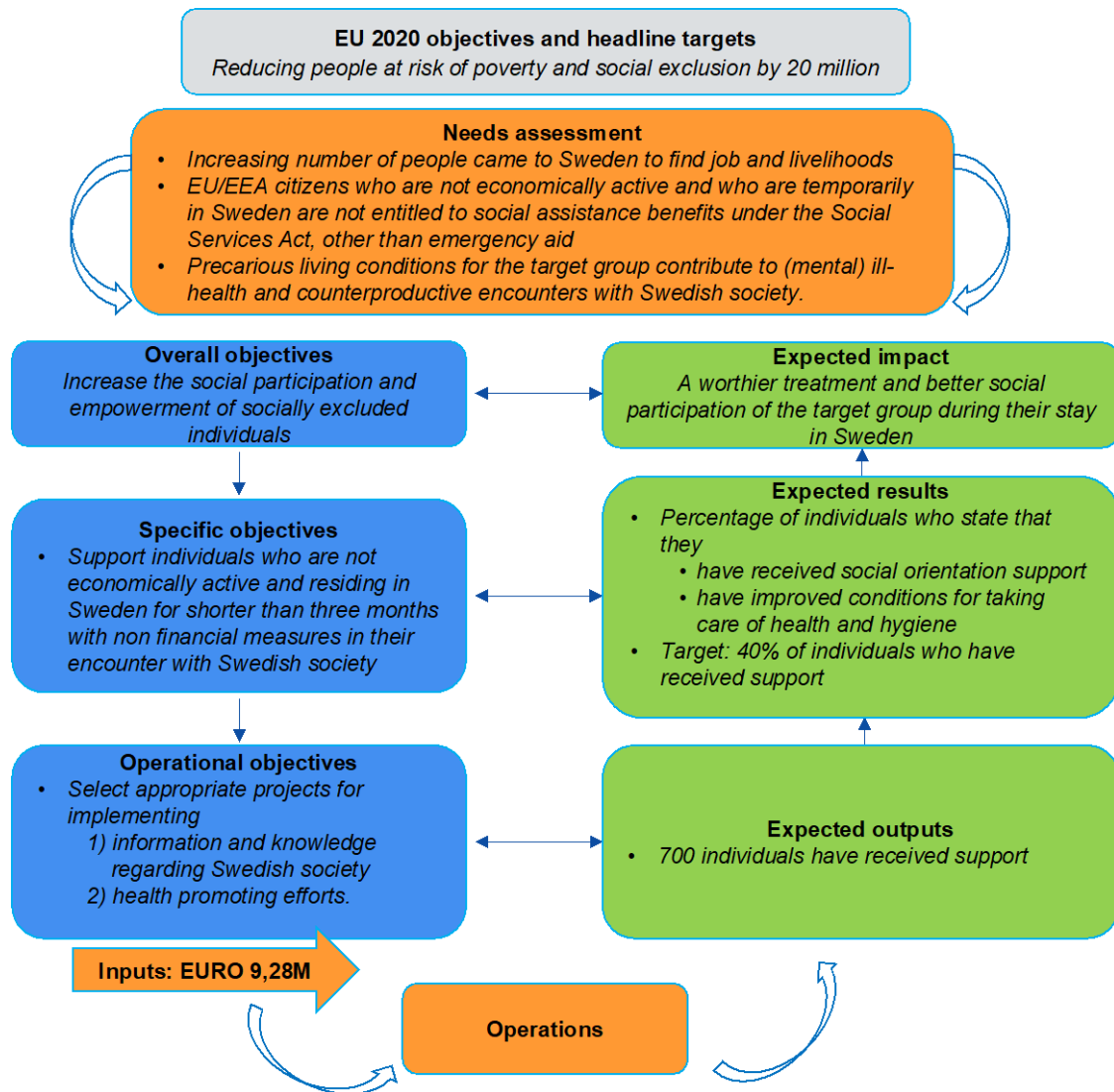
Source: Eurostat.

2. Reconstructing the intervention logic

At the time of the development of FEAD 2014-2020, an increasing number of people moved to Sweden to find work and livelihoods. This was due to the free movement of EU/EEA citizens and their family members, one of the cornerstones of EU cooperation. The right to move freely throughout the EEA has had many positive effects on employment, growth and competitiveness. However, many EU/EEA citizens who came to Sweden had a hard time finding a job. Also, they were occasionally subjected to emergency distress, as they did not qualify for shelter or livelihood support in Sweden. This is because EU and EEA citizens who are not economically active and who are temporarily in Sweden are not entitled to social assistance benefits under the Social Services Act, other than emergency aid.

Analyses that were conducted by The National Board of Health and Welfare showed that the need for support and assistance varied, and that needs often differed from the needs of other homeless people. EU/EEA citizens who are not economically active were deemed to have specific problems, and the conclusion drawn was that efforts aimed at this group of people should be tailored to their specific circumstances.

Figure A. 90 – Intervention logic of FEAD in Sweden



Source: adapted from FEAD mid-term evaluation

For FEAD 2014-2020, Sweden chose the Operational Programme for social participation (OP II) aiming to assist socially vulnerable individuals who are not entitled to support and assistance under the Social Services Act. This way, measures financed by FEAD would complement regular national efforts. In Sweden, there are several efforts at national and local level aimed at reducing social and economic exclusion and helping disadvantaged groups to enter employment. Efforts that stimulate low unemployment and high employment rates are central to general welfare policy in Sweden. Non-economically active persons residing in Sweden for a shorter period than three months lack corresponding basic support. They only have a right to emergency aid, and there are no regular initiatives for this target group. It was estimated that this group consisted of about 3,000 to 4,000 people.

FEAD 2014-2020 in Sweden planned to reach a minimum of 700 unique individuals from the target group during the programming period. Actions were primarily focused on preventive measures, such as reproductive and dental health, along with basic social information regarding Swedish society.

The ex-ante evaluation of the FEAD OP in Sweden was conducted by The National Board of Health and Welfare. It was concluded that the allocated budget resources were small in relation to the specified targets and the size of the target group. The analysis further showed that a large majority of the target group resided in a small number of municipalities, not evenly distributed over the country. Therefore, it was proposed that the programme should primarily be aimed at the municipalities that hosted the most people from the target group.

In terms of the intervention logic, The National Board of Health and Welfare assessed that the proposed actions in the Swedish FEAD OP were well motivated based on current legislation in Sweden, survey results regarding homelessness among EU citizens, and public and civil sector experiences from working with the target group. It was concluded that health initiatives are important, and that such measures should be provided based on the specific needs of the individual.

2.1. National policy framework

In Sweden, there are several efforts at national and local level aimed at reducing social and economic exclusion and helping disadvantaged groups to enter employment. Efforts that stimulate low unemployment and high employment rates are central to Swedish welfare policy. All individuals considered to be residents in Sweden have access to health care and education in accordance with the Health Care Act (1982: 763) and the School Act (2010:800). Non-economically active persons residing in Sweden for a shorter period than three months do not have corresponding rights to basic support.

The target group for the Swedish FEAD OP is individuals who are not eligible for support and assistance under the Social Services Act, i.e. individuals who do not have a residence permit or reside in the country. These individuals are subsequently not included in the target group of the national Social Fund programme. Thereby, complementarity was achieved between the FEAD OP and the Social Fund OP in Sweden.

2.2. Objectives and target groups

The main objective of the Swedish FEAD programme (OP II) was to increase the social participation and empowerment of socially excluded individuals. The target group was individuals who are not economically active and residing in Sweden for a shorter period than three months. There were no exact numbers regarding the size of the group, as the number of individuals varied during the year. An estimation was made that during some periods of the year, there were approximately 3,000–4,000 people in the country that could be included in this target group.

The specific objective of FEAD was to support the target group with non-financial measures in their encounter with Swedish society. The expected results of the measures under the FEAD programme were that individuals in the target group had received 1) information and knowledge regarding Swedish society, and 2) health promoting efforts.

The output indicator that was used was the total number of individuals who received support within the FEAD OP. The target was to support 700 individuals during the programming period 2014-2020. Result indicators used were the percentage of individuals who at the end of participation stated that they 1) had received support (information, interpretation, guidance, etc.), and 2) had improved conditions for taking care of health and hygiene. Baseline was zero as there were no previous data regarding such measures in Sweden. The target was set to 40% of individuals who received support from FEAD.

2.3. Implemented operations

Implemented operations within the FEAD programme in Sweden have had 1) a social, community-oriented nature, and 2) a health-promoting nature. Funded projects have had an emphasis on one or the other orientation or could consist of operations of both orientations. In total, 8 projects were funded under the Swedish FEAD OP.

Examples of operations with a community-oriented character implemented in the projects are:

- Information regarding conditions, rights, and obligations in Swedish society.
- Interpretation and translation of crucial information.
- Directions to street kitchens or shelters.
- Basic language teaching.
- Efforts to promote e-inclusion.
- Learning social venues.
- Social outreach activities.

Examples of operations with a health-promoting character are:

- Efforts to provide opportunities for personal hygiene and maintenance of daily routines.
- Information and other actions aimed at improving health or preventing ill health.

2.4. FEAD governance and delivery system

The Managing Authority (MA) and Certifying Authority (CA) of the FEAD Operational Programme in Sweden was the Swedish ESF Council, by appointment of the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs. Payments by the European Commission were made to the Swedish National Debt Office, and the audit authority for FEAD was the Swedish National Financial Management Authority.

The MA was the same as for ESF 2014-2020. Benefits have been reported in terms of existing experience and knowledge about managing EU funds within the Swedish ESF Council. Routines have also been established to avoid double financing by FEAD and ESF. These benefits are confirmed by the interim evaluation of the implementation of FEAD in Sweden.

The MA has had 22 partner organisations for the implementation of FEAD, covering a majority of the public and non-profit organisations that encounter the target group in their work. The assistance in the Swedish FEAD OP has been delivered through 8 specific projects. These projects were based on partnerships between civil society organisations and public authorities, primarily emanating from the three major cities in Sweden. The projects had national or regional coverage, focusing on areas where most of the target group resided.

3. Key findings on the implementation of FEAD

3.1. To what extent was FEAD support successful – or not – and why?

Overall achievement of FEAD objectives [criterion: effectiveness]

Sweden chose a FEAD operational programme for social participation (OP II), aiming to assist socially vulnerable individuals who are not entitled to support and assistance under the Social Services Act. Specifically, FEAD activities were directed towards non-economically active EU/EEA citizens residing in Sweden for a period shorter than three months. This was because at the time of the development of FEAD 2014-2020, an increasing number of people moved to Sweden to find work and livelihoods.

There were no numbers regarding the size of the target group, as the number of individuals varied during a given year. It was estimated that during some periods of a year, there were approximately 3,000–4,000 people in the country that could be included in the target group. Focus for FEAD was on non-financial measures for social inclusion of the target group, where activities for social orientation and health-prevention were offered. Subsequently, the Swedish FEAD OP has not been directly focused on eradicating poverty, but on making the situation better for the target group during their stay in the country. There are no other EU, national or regional

initiatives in Sweden with similar or complementary objectives, and the support offered by FEAD has not been otherwise provided in national social inclusion policies. The FEAD OP was planned to complement regular national efforts and operations within ESF. The FEAD OP had an adjacent, but not overlapping, target group with ESF.

The FEAD OP in Sweden was based on the assumption that the severe living conditions for the target group contributed to ill-health and counterproductive encounters with Swedish society. By providing non-financial support to the target group, it was expected that the living conditions and empowerment of the target group would increase. Experiences from the implementation of the FEAD OP, as stated in interviews and in the programme evaluation, support the underlying assumption of the programme. The aid provided by the Swedish FEAD OP is seen as relevant but limited in terms of participants' basic needs.

Even if FEAD support is perceived to be limited, the aid provided through FEAD is still seen as relevant as there was no other support offered to the target group in regular national policy. The overall assessment of the programme evaluation is that FEAD has made a difference for vulnerable EU/EEA citizens in Sweden, primarily by alleviating distress, remedying urgent needs and contributing to increased quality in the current life situation. The assessment is summarised in four points:

- Projects have contributed to the participants' increased understanding and ability to navigate in Swedish society. Efforts have generated knowledge of the rights, opportunities, and obligations that exist in Sweden.
- Projects have supported participants in practical matters, for example linked to measuring blood pressure, access to contraceptives, or filling out forms. Projects have also helped the participants to access support outside project activities, primarily by guiding them to care and other available support agencies in the local community, such as shelters, soup kitchens, and labour market information for vulnerable EU citizens.
- Projects have increased participants' knowledge of health-related issues, for example how health problems can be prevented through simple measures.
- Projects have contributed to empowerment in terms of making the participants feel seen, taken seriously and treated as fellow human beings.

FEAD primarily contributed to alleviating the distress of participants rather than changing their life situation in a long-term perspective. It was not possible to measure the long-term impact, as EU/EEA citizens do not need to register if they do not stay in the country longer than 90 days. This means that there is no statistical basis for measuring any long-term impact.

Overall, it is concluded in the programme evaluation as well as in interviews that FEAD in Sweden was designed as a relatively independent initiative, without connection to national policies or existing initiatives for the target group. The overall assessment is that FEAD made a difference for vulnerable EU citizens, primarily by alleviating distress, responding to acute needs, and contributing to increased quality in the current life situation. Projects have contributed to the implementation of new working methods, to newly developed cooperation, and have increased the knowledge of the target group in Sweden.

Reach of target groups [criterion: effectiveness]

Sweden chose a FEAD operational programme for social participation (OP II) aiming to assist socially vulnerable individuals who are not entitled to support and assistance under the Social Services Act. This includes non-economically active persons residing in Sweden for a period shorter than three months, which at some periods of the year was estimated to be 3,000–4,000 individuals.

The FEAD OP was implemented through 8 projects based on partnerships between civil society organisations and public authorities. The projects emanated from the three major cities in Sweden but generally had a national coverage. Operations were primarily focused on preventive measures, such as reproductive and dental health, along with basic social information regarding Swedish society. The underlying assumption was that increased

knowledge and improved health would lead to increased conditions for social participation and empowerment among the participants.

The programme evaluation indicates that the overall implementation of FEAD was effective in terms of reaching the target group. The general assessment of the evaluation is that FEAD has made a difference for vulnerable EU citizens in Sweden, primarily by alleviating distress, remedying urgent needs and contributing to increased quality in the current life situation. Crucial for reaching the target group were competent project employees who were successful in building trust with the target group, well-functioning cooperation between agencies, needs-based interventions, and a high degree of participant involvement.

In terms of hindering factors, this mostly refers to the design of the FEAD programme in Sweden. In the programme evaluation, it is stated that FEAD's construction in Sweden seems to have been primarily based on the boundaries of the programme and what FEAD should not contribute to, rather than the fund's actual goals and intended mode of operation. At the beginning of the programme period, there were challenges linked to different interpretations of what would be classified as eligible expenditure in the projects. Consequently, the implementation of the programme was initially limited by a lack of appropriateness of activities, high staff turnover, and differences in approach and collaboration.

According to FEAD financial data and indicators, a total of 4,290 individuals received support through FEAD in Sweden. Almost all (96%) were homeless, 62% were women, and 1% of registered participants were children. In Sweden, records of people with Roma background are not kept. According to interviews with stakeholders, EU/EEA citizens who came to Sweden to find jobs were primarily Roma. Subsequently, the target group reached by FEAD interventions was reportedly to a large extent Roma. In the programme evaluation, it was concluded that the target group mainly consisted of people from Romania and Bulgaria without permanent residence rights who supported themselves by, for example, begging.

Adjustments to FEAD to address new challenges [*criterion: effectiveness*]

There were no substantial changes to FEAD in Sweden. Many of the funded FEAD operations were finalised when CRII+, REACT EU, and CARE had already been introduced. In the programme evaluation, it is concluded that after the outbreak of COVID-19, ongoing projects functioned as an information channel in the work to increase the target group's knowledge of the disease and to clear up misunderstandings and rumours linked to vaccination.

The primary changes that were made concerned the monitoring system. The plan for monitoring and evaluation had to be revised as participants were reluctant to state their name and other personal information required for the monitoring system. At project level, there were uncertainties regarding when an individual has completed participation, as well as how questions regarding result indicators should be asked. Subsequently, routines for participant registration were clarified in the middle of the programme period. Also, the case management systems, EBS2020 and the e-archive Public 360°, were developed so that they could correctly and efficiently handle cases based on laws and regulations.

Horizontal principles of FEAD [*criterion: effectiveness*]

A recurring theme in the interviews has been that operations focusing on preventive reproductive health have highlighted the situation for women and issues relating to gender equality. This is also a conclusion in the programme evaluation. It is the overall assessment of the evaluation that FEAD projects are largely imbued with the horizontal criteria. This assessment is based on four factors.

Special adaptations have largely been made to accommodate participants with illiteracy or cognitive challenges.

Project activities were carried out in accessible premises, which lowered the thresholds for participation for individuals with physical functional variations or physical ill health. Projects have also conducted outreach activities, in which field workers supported individuals in their own environment. This further lowered the thresholds for participation.

Several projects worked actively to reach women. The work has included the recruitment of female field workers and the implementation of group activities for women only, linked to themes such as sexual and reproductive health and violence in close relationships. In some projects, volunteers or other staff have supported with childcare during the implementation of activities to make it easier for mothers to participate.

Gender and equality issues were addressed in discussions with the participants. The importance of consent and the right to decide over one's own body has repeatedly been raised as a theme in information initiatives about sexual and reproductive health.

The conclusion that FEAD has been successful in reaching women in the target group is supported by output indicators, which show that 62% of the total number of participants in FEAD were women.

Success and failure factors [*criterion: effectiveness*]

The overall assessment of the programme evaluation is that FEAD has made a difference for vulnerable EU/EEA citizens in Sweden, primarily by alleviating distress, remedying urgent needs, and contributing to increased quality in the current life situation. Central success factors in the implementation especially include competent project employees who have been successful in building trust with the target group, well-functioning cooperation between actors from different sectors, needs-based interventions, and a high degree of participant involvement. The fact that funded projects have been well implemented was also confirmed by the interviews with stakeholders. The experience conveyed is that health-oriented operations are a suitable base for addressing issues regarding social orientation.

Unintended results particularly concern knowledge creation about the target group, specifically through researcher and project meetings. This is highlighted in interviews but is also a prominent finding in the programme evaluation. It is concluded that it concerns general knowledge of the degree of vulnerability of the target group and how it is expressed in different ways, an increased knowledge of what lack of trust means for the individual and how a lack of trust can be bridged, an increased knowledge of the situation of vulnerable EU citizens in their home country, and a deeper insight into why they seek to come to Sweden. Representatives of the funded projects have been able to pass this knowledge on to decision-makers, officials and collaborating parties, especially through researcher meetings organised as a part of the FEAD OP.

Hindering factors primarily stem from the design of the programme. The programme evaluation states that the construction of the FEAD OP in Sweden seems to have been primarily based on what the fund should not contribute to, rather than the fund's actual goals and intended mode of operation. The target group was narrow and the general conception is that FEAD should have had a wider target group and several different types of interventions. Stakeholders mention that it has been problematic to have a fixed, limited target group over such a long period of time as needs vary over time. Also, stakeholders state that project activities were designed based on assumptions about the needs of the target group, rather than the actual needs of individuals.

Interviewed stakeholders generally portray a political scepticism with regard to the implementation of FEAD in Sweden. One stakeholder stated that *"It says something about politics, it was a vulnerable group that ordinary authorities should not deal with. Civil society should work with them. That limitation also indicates that the will to assist the target group is very small. It was a political choice"*.

Given the limitations in the design of the programme, there is still a perception that there have been efforts that have had an effect for individuals in the target group. Health-oriented interventions and social-oriented information are reported by stakeholders to have had a positive effect since they have been implemented alongside other efforts that were financed with other means, not visible in FEAD reporting. To meet basic needs with the target group, other means in the regular activities of engaged NGOs have been used to satisfy basic needs. *"What you want is a job, housing, and food for the day. And those were the things you weren't supposed to offer in FEAD. Social inclusion through education, what you could apply for was not what the target group needed"*. The notion conveyed is that FEAD operations alone have not been enough, but they have been useful since they have been supplemented by regular efforts in civil society. *"The combination is the key. They have received important information and social activities. They have received help to get in contact with authorities, information about their rights. But they would not have gotten that if there had not been other interventions"*.

A hindering factor, reported by stakeholders in interviews, is that NGOs have found it difficult to meet the limiting definitions of the target group. For instance, many NGOs do not have specific operations for specific target groups, as they apply an inclusive perspective where anyone at risk is welcome. This ultimately meant that they refrained from applying for FEAD funding.

The programme evaluation sums up by stating that FEAD has to a lesser extent improved participants' long-term life situation. This is partly due to the scope of the programme, which has not allowed for activities such as education or labour market initiatives with greater potential to make a difference in a longer term. Another important explanation is the target group's exposed situation in their home countries, which can only to a very limited extent be solved through temporary project activities in Sweden.

Overall cost-effectiveness of FEAD operations [*criterion: efficiency*]

There is little data regarding the cost-effectiveness and efficiency of FEAD in Sweden. The interim evaluation of FEAD in Sweden concluded that there was a complementarity between FEAD and ESF. It was also stated that ESF can provide knowledge and experience to FEAD and FEAD can provide knowledge and experience to ESF, not least through the research meetings that were organised. The complementarity between FEAD and ESF was also highlighted in stakeholder interviews. It was stated that The Swedish ESF Council was able to use experience, systems, and procedures from the management of the European Social Fund to effectively implement the FEAD OP. It was nonetheless reported that it would have been better if the small FEAD programme in Sweden had not been organised as a programme that was separate from ESF. The programme evaluation also concluded that at the beginning of the programming period, there were challenges linked to different interpretations of what would be classified as eligible expenditure in the projects.

The Swedish FEAD OP includes non-financial measures for social inclusion, where activities for social orientation and health prevention were offered. Within these operations, experiences show that preventive measures for reproductive health were particularly successful. This was a specific intervention which proved to be of utmost relevance for the target group, especially for women. It was also reported that health-oriented operations were a suitable ground for addressing issues regarding social orientation.

The Swedish FEAD OP was based on the distribution of support by non-governmental organisations in daily contact with the target group. This is seen as an optimal delivery mechanism, due to the neutral role of the civil society which generates more legitimacy with the target group.

Administrative burden of monitoring and reporting requirements [*criterion: efficiency*]

There is little data regarding administrative burden of monitoring and reporting requirements. Any burdens stemming from the requirements of monitoring and reporting have not been highlighted in stakeholder interviews or in evaluation reports. There is no support for further simplification of the FEAD OP. According to stakeholder interviews, there is no evidence of gold-plating when implementing FEAD. This is supported by the interim and final evaluation of the FEAD OP in Sweden.

There is, due to difficulties in the implementation of the monitoring system, no data regarding impact of FEAD in Sweden. The primary changes that were made concern the monitoring system. The plan for monitoring and evaluation was revised during the programming period. Some participants were reluctant to state their name and other personal information required in the monitoring system. At project level, there were uncertainties regarding when an individual had completed participation, as well as how questions regarding result indicators should be asked. Subsequently, routines for participant registration had to be clarified during the programming period.

The programme evaluation concludes that there were challenges in the monitoring system, as a base for evaluating the impact of the programme. When the programme was launched, the idea was that all participants would answer a survey. In the interim evaluation, several problems with this model were identified. Lack of trust in authorities, along with reading and writing difficulties, meant that many participants did not want to complete the survey. As a result, several projects constructed their own follow-up schemes. As the design differed between projects, results could not be aggregated. Participant evaluations have also been challenged by the mobility of the target group.

Simplification measures [*criterion: efficiency*]

There is not much data on the theme of simplification of FEAD in Sweden. Based on interviews with the Managing Authority for the Swedish OP, there was no need for further simplification of FEAD. It has been beneficial for the implementation of the programme that the MA has been able to provide knowledge and experience from its work with ESF. The complementarity between FEAD and ESF was also highlighted in stakeholder interviews. It is generally stated that the Swedish ESF Council was able to use experience, systems, and procedures from the management of the European Social Fund to effectively implement the FEAD OP.

It was also reported that it has been counterproductive to implement FEAD as a specific OP, separated from ESF. In the stakeholder interviews, it was stated that this need for simplification has been solved by the integration of FEAD in ESF+.

Coherence of FEAD with other interventions [*criterion: coherence*]

In Sweden, there are several efforts at national and local level aimed at reducing social and economic exclusion and helping disadvantaged groups to enter employment. Efforts that stimulate low unemployment and high

employment rates are central to Swedish welfare policy. Non-economically active persons residing in Sweden for a shorter period than three months do not have corresponding rights to basic support. Subsequently, the Swedish FEAD OP has not in itself been focused on eradicating poverty, but on making the situation better for the target group during their stay in the country. There are no other EU, national or regional initiatives in Sweden with similar or complementary objectives, and the support offered by FEAD is not otherwise provided in national social inclusion policies.

Since the target group for the Swedish FEAD OP was individuals who do not have a residence permit or reside in the country, these individuals are not included in the target group of the national ESF OP. Therefore, there has been a complementarity between FEAD and ESF in Sweden. Operations within the FEAD OP were planned to complement regular national and regional operations within ESF. The target group for FEAD is non-economically active EU and EEA citizens who are temporarily in Sweden and are not entitled to social assistance benefits under the Social Services Act. Thereby, the has had an adjacent, but not overlapping, target group with ESF. The latter was aimed at individuals covered by actions in national labour market policy and already employed. The interim evaluation of FEAD in Sweden concluded that there was a complementarity between FEAD and ESF. It was also stated that ESF could provide knowledge and experience to FEAD and FEAD could provide knowledge and experience to ESF, not least through the research meetings that were organised.

3.2. Is FEAD still relevant?

Relevance to target groups [*criterion: relevance*]

FEAD in Sweden was an operational programme for social participation (OP II) aiming to assist socially vulnerable individuals who are not entitled to support and assistance under the Social Services Act. This included non-economically active persons residing in Sweden for a period shorter than three months, which at the time of the programming was estimated to be 3,000–4,000 individuals at some periods of the year. In the programme evaluation, it was concluded that the target group mainly consisted of people from Romania and Bulgaria without permanent residence rights who supported themselves by, for example, begging and returning cans in order to redeem the deposit.

Operations were primarily focused on preventive measures, such as reproductive and dental health, along with basic social information regarding Swedish society. Central success factors in the implementation especially consist of competent project employees who have been successful in building trust with the target group, well-functioning cooperation between actors, needs-based interventions, and a high degree of participant involvement.

The overall assessment of the programme evaluation is that FEAD's focus on social information and health promotion efforts is relevant to the target group, and that the projects addressed the needs of the participants. This assessment is based on several factors. Firstly, both interviewed project staff and participants expressed a view that physical and mental ill-health is widespread in the target group, and that knowledge of the rights, opportunities, and obligations that exist in Swedish society was often low. The fact that the projects actually had participants can in itself be seen as an indicator that project activities met the needs of the participants. Participation in the projects has – unlike many ESF projects where participants are formally assigned – been voluntary. The projects have neither been able to set requirements nor offer compensation for participation in the form of material assistance but have been referred to the fact that the support given is perceived as valuable by the target group.

FEAD meant that the target group gained access to interventions to which they otherwise would not have had access. Social information and health-promoting efforts were to a limited extent offered to the target group outside the framework of FEAD. According to programme evaluation and stakeholder interviews, outreach activities in FEAD projects led to contact with new groups of individuals that were otherwise hard to reach. A positive aspect of this is that after the outbreak of COVID-19, projects functioned as a channel for information in the work to increase the target group's knowledge of the disease and to clear up misunderstandings and rumours linked to vaccination.

At the same time, there is a consensus that FEAD's focus on social information and health promotion has only covered parts of the target group's needs. There is a basic need for material support, such as food and shelter, that the project efforts could not meet. Secondly, there is a need for labour market support. Both needs are perceived as great by the target group. Subsequently, the aid provided by the FEAD OP has been relevant but limited. Allocated funds are small in relation to the objectives of the programme and the size of the target group. The aid is relevant as there is no other support offered to the target group in regular national policy. Most individuals are assumed to return to their home country, and the support offered by FEAD initiatives contribute to a worthier treatment and better social participation of the target group during their stay in Sweden. Multiple sources have concluded that FEAD to a lesser extent has improved participants' long-term life situation. This is partly due to the scope of the programme, which has not allowed for activities such as education or labour market initiatives with greater potential to make a difference in the long term. Another important explanation is the target group's exposed situation in their home countries, which to a limited extent can be solved through temporary project activities in Sweden.

Relevance of FEAD now and in the future [criterion: relevance]

The design of FEAD in Sweden was a response to an increasing number of EU/EEA citizens who came to Sweden to find work and livelihoods. This was a new situation for national actors, and these individuals were not entitled to social assistance benefits under the Social Services Act, other than emergency aid. In this context, FEAD was used as an instrument to offer support to non-economically active persons residing in Sweden for a shorter period than three months and therefore not entitled to regular welfare support. *“It was a different time when the FEAD programme was written. Sweden was taken aback when migrants came and started begging in public. FEAD became a response targeting efforts to people who were not eligible for welfare support”*. Since then, the situation has changed and there are not as many non-economically active EU/EEA citizens in Sweden as at the time of the programming of FEAD. Therefore, FEAD is not perceived to be as relevant now as when the programme was designed. Nevertheless, there are aspects of FEAD support that have a general relevance in the future, in terms of addressing needs for vulnerable individuals and the implementation of ESF+.

Even though FEAD efforts are finished, the programme evaluation calls for national, regional, and municipal actors to have a strategy for how vulnerable EU citizens should be supported. It is also concluded that there is a great demand for increased transnational cooperation with countries such as Romania and Bulgaria, to contribute to changed conditions in the target groups' home countries.

A result from FEAD In Sweden is the knowledge creation concerning the target group, specifically through researcher and project meetings. The programme has contributed to the general knowledge of the degree of vulnerability of the target group and how it is expressed in different ways, increased knowledge of what the lack of trust means for the individual and how a lack of trust can be bridged, an increased knowledge of the situation of vulnerable EU citizens in their home country and a deeper insight into why they seek to come to Sweden. Representatives of the funded projects have been able to pass this knowledge on to decision-makers, officials and collaborating parties, especially through researcher meetings that were organised as a part of the FEAD OP. Interviewed stakeholders state that this knowledge is transferrable to future work in poverty, social exclusion and discrimination.

3.3. Did FEAD make a difference and to whom?

EU added value [criterion: EU added value]

The primary EU added value resulting from the Swedish FEAD OP is the expanded scope of national actions directed at socially excluded individuals. If it had not been for FEAD, there would be no corresponding support for the target group.

FEAD can be seen to have generated role effects in that health promotion interventions for the target group were developed in new collaborations between public authorities and civil society organisations. However, as the operations implemented within FEAD were based on temporary partnerships not included in national policy, the chances for the mainstreaming of local and regional innovations are slim. The interim evaluation of the

implementation of the FEAD OP in Sweden also highlights barriers for the mainstreaming of methods and partnerships at a national level (process effects).

The programme evaluation concludes that FEAD in Sweden lacks objectives at an organisational and structural level. Projects have developed structures for implementing FEAD efforts in short perspective, primarily by strengthening cross-sectoral co-operation with other organisations and contributing to increased knowledge of the target group by using new methods. Thereby, the programme evaluation verifies the finding in the interim evaluation in terms of process effects. The long-term organisational footprint is deemed to be more uncertain as it is unclear to what extent continuing activities for the target group could be financed after the project ends. This is because there is no other support offered to the target group in regular national policy. The evaluation does not estimate that the programme contributed to any lasting structural effects, in terms of making an impression on policy or legislation outside the projects' local or organisational context. Stakeholder interviews show that possible role effects are most likely to be found at partner organisations in civil society. This is described as a result of the participation in network activities with FEAD. *“It has been educational, not least taking part in the international exchanges. We have worked with material support, and FEAD has meant that we got to talk to others about how they work with material support. We have received information of experiences from the projects. They have been mapping and a knowledge contributor. We have gained knowledge about the target group's needs and situation, and we have had dialogues with the EU Commission and the government office in Sweden”.*

Visibility [visibility]

There is little data regarding the general visibility of FEAD in Sweden. This theme is not covered in evaluations of the programme. Interviewed stakeholders lack knowledge of the visibility of FEAD amongst the general public. It is stated that there has been sufficient awareness of FEAD interventions with relevant actors in the system and with the target group. It is also reported that there has been an awareness that FEAD actions have been funded by the EU.

4. Good practices

An example of good practice in the Swedish FEAD OP is the knowledge creation process concerning the target group. This is generated by researcher meetings organised under FEAD in collaboration with The Migration Studies Delegation (Delmi), the Research Council for Health, Work and Welfare (Forte) and the Swedish Research Council. The networks provided a platform to produce knowledge regarding the needs of the target group; EU and EEA citizens who are not economically active and who are temporarily in Sweden are not entitled to social assistance benefits under the Social Services Act, other than emergency aid.

The purpose of the researcher networks was to facilitate meetings between researchers and practitioners in the funded projects. Researcher networks were organised twice a year, and they are focused on different themes. The first meeting in 2016 was held on the theme of migration and work, and the second theme was minorities, vulnerability and equality.

In Sweden, there is a general lack of knowledge regarding the needs of the target group, and the researcher network has been identified as an arena for learning between researchers, public officials, and practitioners from the civil society. Representatives of the FEAD OP state that such learning processes are perceived to contribute to capacity building of civil society regarding how to provide information to vulnerable individuals outside society. Correspondingly, project practitioners are contributing to general knowledge creation regarding the information needs of the target group. Thus, the researcher networks are seen as an arena for dissemination of research as well as practitioner experiences regarding EU and EEA citizens who are not economically active and who are temporarily in Sweden and are not entitled to social assistance benefits under the Social Services Act, other than emergency aid.

The interim evaluation concluded that the researcher meetings are likely to have contributed to strengthening programme implementation by raising awareness of poverty alleviation. It is then stated in the programme evaluation that knowledge creation concerns general knowledge of the degree of vulnerability of the target group and how it is expressed in different ways, an increased knowledge of what the lack of trust means for the

individual and how a lack of trust can be bridged, an increased knowledge of the situation of vulnerable EU citizens in their home country, and a deeper insight into why they seek to come to Sweden. Representatives of the funded projects have been able to pass this knowledge on to decision-makers, officials and collaborating parties, especially through researcher meetings that have been organised as a part of the FEAD OP. It is also reported in the stakeholder interviews that FEAD have resulted in actors gaining knowledge about the target group's needs and situation and having contributed to a developed dialogue concerning material support to the specific target groups in Sweden.

5. Conclusions and lessons learned

For FEAD 2014-2020, Sweden chose an operational programme for social participation (OP II) aiming to assist socially vulnerable individuals who are not entitled to support and assistance under the Social Services Act. At the time of the development of FEAD 2014-2020, an increasing number of people moved to Sweden to find job and supply. Therefore, FEAD specifically targeted non-economically active EU/EEA citizens residing in Sweden for a period shorter than three months.

The focus for FEAD in Sweden has been on non-financial measures for social inclusion of the target group, under which activities for social orientation and health prevention were offered. Efforts that stimulate low unemployment and high employment rates are central to Swedish welfare policy, and there are several efforts at national and local level aimed at reducing social and economic exclusion and helping disadvantaged groups to enter employment. Non-economically active persons residing in Sweden for a period shorter than three months do not have corresponding rights to basic support. Subsequently, there are no other EU, national, or regional initiatives in Sweden with similar or complementary objectives, and the support offered by FEAD is not otherwise provided in national social inclusion policies. This means that the Swedish FEAD OP was not directly focused on eradicating poverty, but rather on making the situation better for the target group during their stay in the country.

Overall, it is concluded that FEAD in Sweden been designed as a relatively independent initiative without connection to national policies or existing initiatives for the target group. Even if FEAD support is perceived to be limited, the aid provided through FEAD is still perceived as relevant as there is no other support offered to the target group in regular national policy. The overall assessment of the programme evaluation is that FEAD has made a difference for vulnerable EU/EEA citizens in Sweden, primarily by alleviating distress, remedying urgent needs, and contributing to increased quality in the current life situation.

FEAD targeted socially vulnerable individuals who are not entitled to support and assistance under the Social Services Act, which includes non-economically active persons residing in Sweden for a period shorter than three months. At some periods of the year, it was estimated that the group consisted of 3,000–4,000 individuals. FEAD was implemented through 8 projects based on partnerships between civil society organisations and public authorities. The overall implementation of FEAD is reported to have been effective, in terms of reaching the target group. A total of 4,290 individuals received support through FEAD in Sweden. Almost all (96%) were homeless, 62% were women, and 1% of the registered participants were children. The target group reached by FEAD interventions was largely Roma.

It was reported that operations focusing on preventive reproductive health have highlighted the situation for women and issues relating to gender equality were particularly relevant. Central success factors in the implementation especially consist of competent project employees who have been successful in building trust with the target group, well-functioning cooperation between actors from different sectors, needs-based interventions, and a high degree of participant involvement.

Hindering factors in the implementation of FEAD largely stem from the design of the programme. The construction of FEAD in Sweden was reported to focus on what the fund should not contribute to, rather than the fund's actual goals and intended mode of operation. The target group was narrow, and the general view is that FEAD should have had a wider target group and several different types of interventions. A problem was that the programme had a fixed, limited target group over a long period of time as needs vary. Partner organisations also stress that programme activities were based on assumptions about the needs of the target group, rather than the actual needs of individuals.

Given the limitations in the design of the programme, there is still a perception that there have been efforts that have had an effect for individuals in the target group. The collaboration with partner organisations (NGOs) has been crucial in this aspect. Health-oriented interventions and social-oriented information are reported to have had a positive effect since they have been implemented alongside other efforts that were financed by other means, not visible in FEAD reporting. To meet basic needs in the target group, other means in the regular activities of engaged NGOs have been used to satisfy basic needs not covered by FEAD. The conclusion is that FEAD operations alone were not sufficient, but they have been useful since they have been supplemented by regular efforts in civil society.

- There is little data regarding cost-effectiveness and efficiency, administrative burden, and the theme of simplification of FEAD in Sweden. It is generally stated that the Managing Authority (The Swedish ESF Council) has been able to use experience, systems, and procedures from the management of the Social Fund to effectively implement FEAD. However, it was perceived as counterproductive to implement FEAD as a specific OP separate from ESF. The integration of FEAD in ESF+ is seen as a more suitable design for the implementation of the programme.

There were no substantial changes to FEAD in Sweden. Many of the funded FEAD operations were finalised when CRII+, REACT EU, and CARE had already been introduced. The primary changes that were required concerned the monitoring system, which created several challenges. The plan for monitoring and evaluation had to be revised as participants were reluctant to state their name and other personal information required for the monitoring system. Also, a lack of trust in authorities, along with reading and writing difficulties, meant that many participants did not want to complete the survey used to measure the impact of the programme. Therefore, there are no data regarding impact at individual level.

- The overall conclusion is that FEAD's focus on social information and health promotion efforts was relevant to the target group, and that project activities addressed the needs of the participants. FEAD resulted in the target group gaining access to interventions to which they would otherwise not have had access. Social information and health-promoting efforts are to a limited extent offered to the target group outside the framework of FEAD. Outreach activities in FEAD projects led to contact with new groups of individuals otherwise hard to reach.

- At the same time, the conclusion is that FEAD's focus on social information and health promotion only covered parts of the needs of the target group. Project operations could not meet a basic need for material support, such as food and shelter. Nor could they offer labour market support. Both needs are perceived as great by the target group. Subsequently, the aid provided by the FEAD OP has been relevant but limited.

- FEAD has contributed to a raised awareness of poverty alleviation in Sweden. For this purpose, researcher networks have been an arena for learning between researchers, public officials, and practitioners from the civil society. However, the future needs of actions implemented by FEAD are different. The design of FEAD in Sweden was a response to an increasing number of EU/EEA citizens who came to Sweden to find job and supply. Since then, the situation has changed and there are not as many non-economically active EU/EEA citizens in Sweden as at the time of the programming of FEAD. Therefore, FEAD is not perceived to be as relevant now as when FEAD was designed. Nevertheless, there are aspects of FEAD support that have a general relevance in the future, in terms of addressing needs for vulnerable individuals and the implementation of ESF+. In this perspective, FEAD is seen to have contributed to strengthened cross-sectoral co-operation and an increased knowledge of the target group by using new methods where health promotion interventions for the target group were developed in new collaborations between public authorities and civil society organisations. However, as the operations implemented within FEAD are based on temporary partnerships not included in national policy, the chances for mainstreaming of local and regional innovations are slim.

Overall, it is concluded that FEAD 2014-2020 in Sweden was designed as a relatively independent initiative, without connection to national policies or existing initiatives for the target group. FEAD has made a difference to vulnerable EU citizens, primarily by alleviating distress, responding to acute needs, and contributing to increased quality in the current life situation. Funded projects have contributed to the implementation of new working methods, and have developed cooperation, and projects have increased the knowledge of the target group in Sweden. It is less likely that the programme contributed to any structural effects, in terms of making an impression on policy or legislation outside the projects' local or organisational context.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Methodology

This case study has been carried out on the basis of desk research, as well as stakeholder interviews with the Managing Authority and partner organisations of FEAD in Sweden.

Desk research has covered:

- Amendments and changes to FEAD OP in Sweden (FEAD OPs, all adopted versions from 2014 to 2023).
- Description of interventions by country by type of operation and evaluation criteria (Annual implementation reports 2014-2022, considering qualitative and quantitative information)
- Information from national ex ante, interim, and final programme evaluation of FEAD OP in Sweden.
- Input, output, and result indicators for FEAD as reported by Member States (annual)
- Evolution of main indicators from 2013 (=baseline) to 2019 and from 2020 to 2022 for each type of FEAD support:
 - Individuals at risk of poverty (Eurostat / EU-SILC);
 - Child poverty;
 - Homelessness (FEANTSA reports 2014-2021)
- For the case study, four interviews have been carried out with five individuals.
- One representative of the Managing Authority, The Swedish ESF Council.
- Two representatives of the FEAD Monitoring Committee, from the Ministry of Social Affairs.
- Two representatives of the FEAD Monitoring Committee, from partner organisations (NGOs).
- The interviews were conducted as digital interviews using Microsoft Teams. They had a semi-structured approach based on the evaluation criteria set up for the case study. Interviews were assessed to be sufficient in terms of providing data for the case study, when analysed in relation to national evaluations conducted. For the case study, service providers in the projects were not interviewed. This was not possible as projects had been finalised for some time. Such data was instead collected in the national evaluations.

Appendix 2: References

Desk research sources listed alphabetically.

- Socialstyrelsen (2014). Förhandsutvärdering av programförslag angående fonden för europeiskt bistånd till dem som har det sämst ställt (FEAD).
- Oxford Research (2017). Utvärdering av FEAD – Fonden för de som har det sämst ställt.
- Strategirådet (2022). Programutvärdering av FEAD i Sverige.
- Metis (2018) FEAD Mid-Term Evaluation. Available at: http://publications.europa.eu/resource/cellar/51421b36-54f8-11e9-a8ed-01aa75ed71a1.0001.01/DOC_1

Appendix 3: FEAD indicators

Table A. 97 – Input indicators for the implementation of FEAD in Sweden in 2014-2022

Indicator	Total amount of eligible public expenditure approved in the documents setting out the conditions for support of operations (EUR)	Total amount of eligible public expenditure incurred by beneficiaries and paid in implementing operations (EUR)	Total amount of eligible public expenditure declared to the Commission (EUR)
2014-2022	8 052 035.00	7 722 579.00	7 404 829.67

Source: SFC 2014 database.

Table A. 98 – FEAD participants of social inclusion assistance in Sweden in 2016-2021

Indicator	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Total number of persons receiving social inclusion assistance	505	1 097	414	658	1 175	441
Number of children aged 15 years or below	25	25	6	1	2	0
Number of persons aged 65 years or above	3	0	1	20	20	13
Number of women	325	777	328	380	633	228
Number of migrants, participants with a foreign background, minorities (including marginalised)	504	1 041	413	658	1 175	367

Indicator	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
communities such as the Roma)						
Number of persons with disabilities	0	0	0	0	0	0
Number of homeless	497	1 049	410	596	1 133	429

Source: SFC 2014 database.

*Please note that there were no participations in 2014, 2015 and 2022.