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**REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE COUNCIL AND THE EUROPEAN
PARLIAMENT**

**Summary of the annual implementation reports for the operational programmes co-
financed by the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived in 2017**

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD)¹ addresses the worst forms of poverty in the EU, such as food deprivation, child poverty and homelessness. A total amount of €3.8 billion (current prices) is available from the fund. The EU provides up to 85% in matching funds to complement resources allocated by the Member States, bringing the total value of the fund to around €4.5 billion. Member States implement (i) a food and/or basic material assistance operational programme (OP I), and/or (ii) a social inclusion operational programme (OP II). Food and/or basic material assistance must be complemented by accompanying measures, for example a referral to social services. In accordance with Article 13(9) of Regulation (EU) No 223/2014 (the FEAD Regulation), this summary is based on the information contained in the 2017 implementation reports, as accepted by the Commission. Some limitations to data apply. In particular, values for a number of indicators have been determined on the basis of informed estimates, and cumulative values have to be treated with caution (see also Annex). Member States' reports are now more complete, but some gaps remain; for example, reporting on horizontal principles often fails to include information on measures taken to comply with these principles. As regards accompanying measures, reporting has improved but their contribution to the social inclusion objective is often still difficult to assess using the evidence provided, and obstacles and challenges to their delivery are not yet reported systematically. All Member States except the UK submitted an implementation report. In view of the time lag between implementation and reporting, this summary report also includes later developments if this information is available.

2. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AT EU LEVEL

While the proportion of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion fell from 23.5% to 22.4% in 2017, social exclusion risks, particularly for children, the homeless, people with disabilities and people with a migrant background, remain a challenge. The total number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion stood at 113 million, below the pre-crisis level, but still a long way from reaching the Europe 2020 targets. Severe material deprivation reached a new low level, but it remains high in several Member States. Homelessness has recently increased in almost all Member States. Poverty risks for children remain well above the figures for the general population. In this context, FEAD support for the most disadvantaged groups in society — by means of providing food and basic consumer items such as school supplies and toiletries, or by means of organising social inclusion activities — continues to be indispensable.

In 2018, the Commission adopted an ambitious proposal to establish the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) for the next programming period, merging the FEAD with the ESF and three other funding instruments². The proposal is currently under negotiation

¹ Regulation (EU) No 223/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 March 2014 on the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (OJ L 72, 12.3.2014, p. 1). The Regulation was amended in August, through a revision of the Financial Regulation: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1537946431022&uri=CELEX:02014R0223-20180802>

² The Youth Employment Initiative, the Employment and Social Innovation Programme and the Health Programme.

with co-legislators. The ESF+ Regulation³, supported by an impact assessment⁴, aims to ensure that resources under shared management focus on the key challenges, notably supporting the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights and the implementation of the European Semester recommendations. In light of the continuing challenges mentioned above, it intends to foster social inclusion using a significant share of national ESF+ allocations (at least 25%), and to address material deprivation by establishing an EU-level target of 4% and a minimum allocation of 2% per Member State. This will ensure that a minimum amount of resources targets those most in need; the Commission estimates that the support will remain at the same level as for the current FEAD. The ESF+ Regulation also addresses the stakeholders' request to maintain lighter requirements for this type of assistance and simplified data collection and monitoring and reporting requirements.

The **FEAD Expert Group**, which is composed of members of the managing authorities, met twice both in 2017 and 2018 to discuss implementation of the FEAD programme, including the development of measures for basic material assistance (specific objective XI) and the social integration of the most deprived (specific objective X) in ESF+. A roundtable provided information about the state of play regarding the complementarity between FEAD and the ESF. The Commission hosted **FEAD network meetings**, which also touched upon the future of FEAD in the new programming period. By the end of 2018, 13 events had taken place to exchange experience and good practices. Participants, particularly the host Member States, presented case studies and shared challenges and solutions on issues of common interest in relation to FEAD programme implementation. Meetings notably focused on accompanying measures, and on reducing homelessness and housing exclusion. For the first time, a network meeting was combined with the award ceremony for the FEANTSA (European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless) 'Ending Homelessness Awards 2018'. Annual meetings with **representatives of the partner organisations at EU level** were held in the second half of 2017 and 2018, focusing on implementation challenges and ideas for the new programming period and for communication activities.

The FEAD mid-term evaluation⁵ confirmed that FEAD delivers much needed assistance to the most deprived. On average, it supported 12.7 million people per year between 2014 and 2017. The Fund is coherent with and complementary to national poverty alleviation and EU Funds, not least the ESF. FEAD has a notable positive effect in nearly every Member State, particularly in terms of new target groups, new activities and greater territorial coverage. One notable impact was the increased capacity and professionalisation of partner organisations. However, there is consistent evidence of 'gold plating'⁶, leading to excessive requirements, such as the requirement imposed by most Member States to register end recipients. Lessons learned include the need to maintain the focus on the most deprived, to strengthen further synergies with the ESF and to keep implementation flexible. These have been addressed in the Commission's proposal for ESF+.

³https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/budget-may2018-european-social-fund-plus-regulation_en.pdf

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/budget-may2018-esf-egf-swd_en.pdf

⁵ Commission Staff Working document: Mid-term evaluation of the Fund for European Aid to the most deprived, SWD (2019) 148; and its Executive Summary, SWD (2019) 149.

⁶ Gold-plating is an expression which refers to Member States going beyond what is strictly required by EU legislation when they implement it at national level. This may enhance the benefits but can also add unnecessary costs for businesses and public authorities which are mistakenly associated with EU legislation.

In 2017, all Member States that implement OP I carried out structured surveys of end recipients, as required in the FEAD Regulation⁷. These surveys are also addressed in this report. The objective was to gain insights into end recipients' socio-economic background, current and past situation and their satisfaction with FEAD assistance, as well as to collect data from partner organisations on the distribution of material assistance and the type of accompanying measures provided.

3. PROGRESS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF OPERATIONAL PROGRAMMES

3.1. Financial implementation

Overall, the financial implementation of FEAD programmes continued to accelerate in 2017. On the ground, the total eligible public expenditure (national and EU) approved to support FEAD operations amounted to €637.3, up from €569.5 million in 2016 and significantly more than in 2015 (€444.2 million). This brought the cumulative committed expenditure for 2014-2017 to €1,973.5 million, or 44% of the total resources of the programmes (EU and national co-financing). The payments made to beneficiaries in 2017 were lower than the previous year (€405.2 million in 2017 as opposed to €434.9 million in 2016) but were slightly higher than in 2015 (€395.2 million). A detailed financial breakdown, also by Member State, is presented in Table I in the Annex⁸.

Significant progress was made in payment applications submitted to the Commission. In 2017, a total of €475 million in eligible public expenditure was declared by Member States, against €353.4 million in 2016 and €46.3 million in 2015.

In terms of financial execution, by 31 December 2018, the Commission had paid a total of €955 million as interim payments. By then, financial implementation expressed as the level of interim payments made by the Commission had surpassed 25% of the total 2014- 2020 allocation.

3.2. Physical implementation

In 2017, 26 Member States delivered assistance under FEAD, which represents substantial progress on the previous year. CY, HU and HR started distributing aid in 2017, and PT resumed food distribution, which had been halted in 2016. 22 of the 26 Member States distributed food and/or basic material assistance and provided accompanying measures (OP I; see Figure 1), and 4 implemented social inclusion programmes (OP II; see Figure 1). Besides the UK, the only Member State that did not deliver assistance in 2017 was RO, which had to redesign its operational programme following institutional changes.

Several operational programmes were amended in 2017 and 2018, demonstrating that the design of interventions or specific implementation arrangements can be made more effective. Changes most often concerned the way in which end recipients are targeted, the eligibility criteria for end recipients, and/or the composition of the food and material assistance provided. Some OP amendments were related to the use of flat rates, thereby simplifying the administration of the fund. Frequently, other changes were made that did not need a formal amendment, such as the expansion of accompanying measures or their adjustment to emerging needs.

⁷ Article 17(4) of Regulation (EU) No 223/2014.

⁸ Several Member States have updated certain values of FEAD common input indicators for 2015 and 2016. Therefore, the values reported in this section may differ from those published in previous years.

Figure 1: Type of assistance delivered in 2017

OP	Type of assistance	Member State
OP I	Food	BE, BG, CY, EE, ES, FI, FR, HU, IT, LT, MT, PL, PT, SI (14)
	Basic material	AT (1)
	Both	CZ, EL, HR, IE, LU, LV, SK (7)
OP II	Social inclusion	DE, DK, NL, SE (4)

12.9 million people were estimated to have benefited from FEAD assistance in 2017, which is more than the average of 12.7 million people reached per year between 2014 and 2017. Of those reached in 2017, over 12 million (95%) received food aid, and around 580,000 (4.5%) basic material assistance⁹, while some 36,600 (0.3%) participated in social inclusion programmes (OP II)¹⁰.

The four Member States that implemented social inclusion programmes reached 25% more individuals than in 2016. NL and SE showed outstanding year-on-year increases of 333% and 117% respectively by adopting different strategies for engaging end recipients in the social inclusion activities proposed (these are explained further below). All four met or exceeded most of their annual targets.

Half of the Member States reached more people than in 2016, although there was an overall fall in the total number of end recipients, from 16 million in 2016 to 12.9 million in 2017, mainly on account of RO's non-delivery of aid in 2017. In 2016, RO had supported 3.3 million people but needed to stop in 2017, as explained above. The fall was partially offset by 13 Member States (AT, BE, BG, CZ, DE, DK, FR, IE, LU, LV, NL, PL and SE) which together reached around 362,000 end recipients more than in 2016. Moreover, CY, HU, HR and PT launched the delivery of assistance in 2017, adding an additional 340,000 people to the total reached. In addition, IE, which until 2016 had provided food assistance only, in 2017 delivered basic material assistance to some 5,000 individuals.

Children represented 30% of the 12.9 million people who received food, basic material or social inclusion assistance in 2017. This means that 4 million children received support. As in the previous years, around half of all those assisted were women (6 million). 10% were migrants, people with a foreign background or minorities (1.1 million people). Moreover, 8% of end recipients were people aged 65 or above (1 million), 3% were people with disabilities (433,000) and 3% were homeless people (370,000).

The estimated number of homeless people who received FEAD assistance rose by 71% in 2017 to over 370,000. Around two thirds of the additional homeless people reached were in IT, which extended its programme of ready-meals provision to reach more people. BE and CZ also significantly increased the number of homeless people reached, BE with food assistance and CZ with both food and basic material assistance. BG, IE, LV, SE and SK also reported increases in this target group, and HR, HU and PT started assisting them for the first time using FEAD funds in 2017¹¹.

⁹ In OPs where both forms of assistance are provided, there may be a degree of overlap as the same people may be counted more than once.

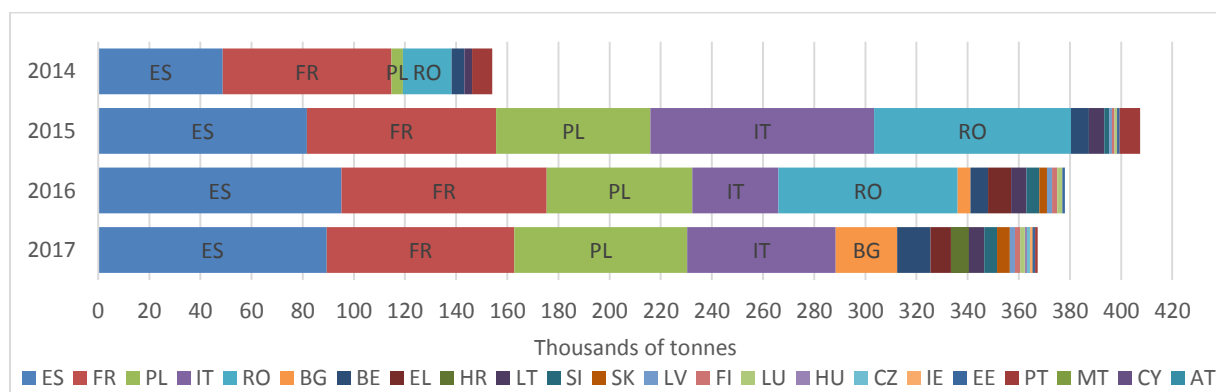
¹⁰ The figures presented were based on estimates made by the partner organisations. It is possible that end recipients were counted more than once.

¹¹ FR did not provide an estimate for indicator 14f (homeless people).

OP I – Food assistance

Most Member States increased the quantity of food delivered, despite an overall decrease in the total amount of food distributed in 2017, which fell by 3% compared to 2016; this was due mainly to RO not providing food assistance in 2017. 21 Member States delivered food aid in 2017. Five Member States (ES, FR, PL, IT and BG) were responsible for 85% of the total amount of food delivered in 2017 (see Figure 2). Two-thirds of food aid consisted of dairy products and flour, bread, potatoes and other starchy products. The highest increases in tonnes of food distributed in 2017 were in IT and BG, where the food aid programme was expanded. They distributed 24,000 and 19,000 tonnes more food (respectively) than in 2016. Moreover, thanks to the inclusion of additional food items and partner organisations in the programme, IE increased the amount of food distributed four-fold in 2017 (an additional 623 tonnes). Other Member States, including BE, CY, CZ, HR, HU, LT, LV, PL, PT and SK, also increased the amount of food they delivered.

Figure 2: Food assistance provided in 2014-2017 (thousands of tonnes)



Source: FEAD common output indicator (ID 11), 2014-2017

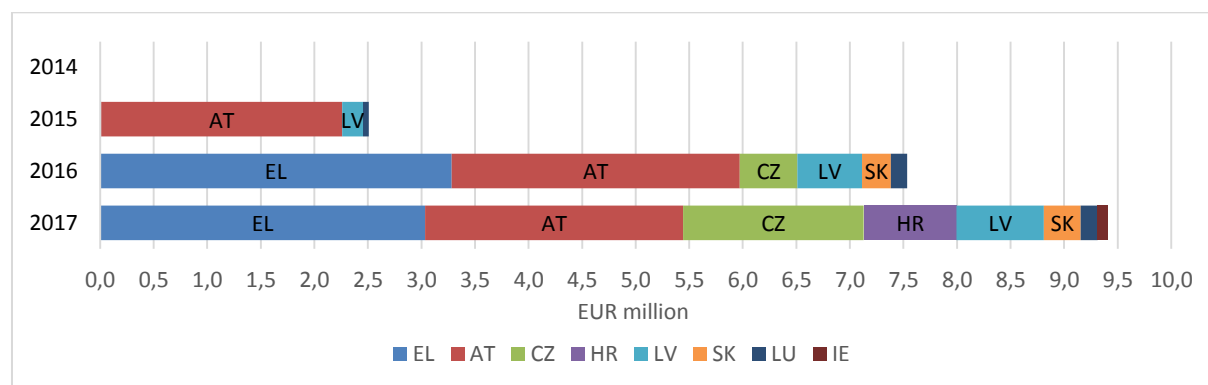
The majority of Member States that delivered food assistance opted to distribute a set of food items for home consumption, most often in the form of one or more types of standardised food packages. This included BG, BE, CZ, EE, ES, HU, LT, LV, MT, PL, PT and SK. In other Member States, partner organisations tailored assistance to target group needs (FI, HR, IE and SI). Some Member States also provided ready-made meals to school children (CY, CZ, HR and IT) or to homeless people (FI, HU, IT, LV, PL and SK). Food assistance delivered by partner organisations in BG, CY, HU and ES was entirely funded by FEAD. In the other Member States, partner organisations complemented FEAD food aid with food products funded or donated from other sources.

OP I – Basic material assistance

In 2017, Member States distributed 25% more basic material assistance than in 2016 (€9.4 million). The Member States that distributed basic material assistance were: AT, CZ, EL, HR, IE, LU, LV and SK. The majority of basic goods were distributed in three Member States: AT, CZ and EL (see Figure 3). Except for AT, all those Member States delivered basic material assistance in addition to food aid. The significant increase in basic material assistance was due mainly to CZ increasing the amount it provided by €1.1 million, to address the needs of the most deprived people in the country. Moreover, HR and IE, which provided basic material assistance for the first time in 2017, added about €1 million more in goods to the total. The value of goods distributed also rose in LV and SK. However, AT and EL distributed €530,000 less than in 2016.

Member States mainly distributed school supplies and hygiene products to families with children. CZ, HR and SK also targeted homeless people and provided them with hygiene products and other supplies. Items delivered to families with children included stationery and school equipment (AT, HR, IE and LV) and school bags (AT, HR and LV). LV and SK also included personal hygiene products, and HR included baby clothes and supplies, sports equipment and clothes. Homeless people received mainly personal hygiene products. In CZ they also received kitchen equipment, clothes and household linen, and in HR, sleeping bags/blankets and household linen.

Figure 3: Total monetary value of basic material assistance in 2014-2017 (EUR million)



Source: FEAD common output indicator (ID 15), 2014-2017. NB: there was no distribution of basic material assistance in 2014.

Member States identified eligible end recipients either through managing authorities using social security data or through partner organisations using their knowledge and understanding of target groups' socio-economic situation and needs. This is in line with the legal basis of the FEAD programme, as it is up to each Member State to decide how to identify the most deprived, on the basis of objective criteria and in consultation with stakeholders. In some Member States (IT, LT, LV and SI), the managing authority required end recipients to fill in an application form to be eligible. Other Member States used different methods. In LU, end recipients were assessed on a case-by-case basis by a professional, and in FI, partner organisations mostly held 'open delivery events' and provided food to anyone who requested it. Ready-made meals for homeless people were normally provided to anyone who requested them or came to distribution points (FI, HU, IT, LV, PL and SK).

OP I – Accompanying measures

Member States reported that accompanying measures provided together with food and/or basic material assistance helped to boost the social inclusion of the most deprived. The structured survey of end recipients showed that in IT, for example, food assistance and accompanying measures were essential for marginalised people and their families. The assistance received not only addressed their more basic needs and provided relief, but it also paved the way for social inclusion. In BG, the survey revealed that accompanying measures had enhanced end recipients' information on social and health services. They had also strengthened their ability to manage the family budget, and some end recipients had found jobs after engaging with the programme. Moreover, an important exchange of good practices took place at the 12th FEAD network meeting in October 2018, with seven Member States' authorities or partner organisations presenting and sharing their respective approaches.

Most Member States provided more than three types of accompanying measures, while a few chose to focus on one or two activities. Accompanying measures implemented in 2017 included¹²:

- **social counselling/psycho-social services** (BE, BG, CY, CZ, EE, FR, HR, HU, LV, SI and SK), such as free psychological support for children in public schools (if requested by parents/guardians) or counselling on difficult life situations;
- **nutrition counselling/healthy diet advice** (BE, BG, CZ, EE, FI, FR, HR, LU, LV, MT, PL, PT, SI and SK), including advice on food preparation, storage and recycling and organisation of cooking workshops and educational classes to promote healthy eating;
- **financial counselling/budget management support** (BE, BG, CZ, EE, HR, LV, MT, PL, SI and SK), to help with reducing end recipients' debts, for example;
- **referral to** other public institutions or NGOs for the social and medical services they provide (AT, BE, BG, CZ, EE, ES, FI, FR, HR, IT, LU and LV).
- **social and leisure activities** (EE, FI, FR, LT, LU, LV, MT and SI), such as social eating events, cultural activities and organised holidays, summer camps for children, Carnival/Christmas celebrations, and sports;
- **educational activities and skills-trainings/programmes** (EE, ES, FR, LV and SI), including labour market integration, language learning, or workshops on how to promote children's learning;
- **miscellaneous household skills** (BE, FR, HR, LU, LV, MT, PL and SI), mostly cooking but also cleaning, sewing, recycling, etc.; and
- **other services/activities** included providing advice on what to do in the case of an emergency/disaster (BG), organising renewable energy activities (LU and MT) and providing legal advice (SI).

Some Member States considered that accompanying measures were particularly important for specific groups among the most deprived. For example, for children aged 15 and below (AT), children in public schools (CY), single parents or large families (LT), socially disadvantaged elderly people (CZ), and those who were more isolated because they had mobility or health issues and/or a low level of trust in formal institutions (SK). In these cases, activities sought to connect them to specific social or health services that could help them further. Moreover, in some Member States, through the provision of accompanying measures, partner organisations were able to gather information on end recipients' needs and improve the assistance delivered to them (MT and SK).

OP II – Social inclusion

In 2017, social inclusion support was pursued by 4 Member States: DE, DK, NL and SE. After a difficult start in 2016, the project 'Elderly in the neighbourhood', in NL, performed very well in 2017. The project sought to alleviate social exclusion among disadvantaged elderly people. After intensifying contacts with the target group, NL succeeded in engaging with three times as many individuals as in 2016. Most importantly, after 1 year in the programme, around 52% of the elderly people reached were still involved, 39% said that they had improved their social network and 43% had strengthened their digital and financial skills.

¹² In BE, CY, EE, FI, FR, LT, MT and RO, the accompanying measures were not funded by FEAD.

DE was particularly effective at reaching newly arrived adults (mostly from the Roma community) and homeless people, and at improving their access to counselling and support measures. Over 80% of the newly arrived adults and homeless people reached were able to use social services after participating in the social inclusion activities in 2017. Good progress was also made on the target group of newly arrived children of kindergarten age and their parents, but additional action will be needed to reach the goal of 19,700 children and parents by 2020.

DK improved the conditions of homeless people by offering them access to shelters and social workers. By 2017, it had engaged with 958 individuals, which represented 68% of the target set for the 2014-2020 programming period (1,400). 15% more homeless people than expected used the social services offered through the programme.

SE doubled the number of transient EU/EEA mobile citizens reached in 2017 (from 505 in 2016 to 1 097). It focused on activities to foster community integration, such as providing information on the location of shelters and on migrants' legal rights and obligations, and offering translation services and health advice. In relation to the latter, 64% of those reached said that they were better able to take care of their health and hygiene thanks to the assistance received.

Obstacles to implementation

The close monitoring of the programme, as well as the strong cooperation established between the authorities and partner organisations, helped to overcome many of the obstacles that emerged. The evaluations and surveys carried out during 2017 also helped to flag problems and provided Member States with useful information for addressing these.

The obstacles encountered in some Member States were mainly:

- (i) difficulties in engaging with and/or collecting information from end recipients on account of legal constraints, cultural differences, and the risk of stigmatisation (DE, DK, IT, NL, SE and SK);
- (ii) complicated public procurement procedures and/or control systems that caused delays in distribution and/or onerous processes (ES, FR, IT, LU and PT);
- (iii) insufficient capacity of partner organisations, which prevented them from distributing assistance more often/widely or from participating in the programme (EE, ES and PT);
- (iv) poor quality or shortage of certain goods (EE, ES and FR);
- (v) problems in the planning and logistics of aid distribution which, in some cases, resulted in late distribution or undistributed goods (LV, MT, PL and SK);
- (vi) complaints from end recipients concerning the weight of food packages, limited diversity, a lack of certain goods, and absence of information on time/place of distribution (BE, ES, FI and MT); and
- (vii) issues with the collection of monitoring data by managing authorities or partner organisations; this resulted in Member States having to update the values of some indicators reported in 2015 and 2016 (HU, HR, ES, DE, DK and SE).

Two Member States faced other obstacles which had an impact on the total amount of food distributed and the total number of end recipients reached in 2017. In RO, food distribution was interrupted in 2017 because of institutional changes, and a subsequent redesign of the operational programme. PT resumed food distribution in 2017, but only in November, and was only able to cover the mainland of the country, not the autonomous regions.

A few countries reported a decline in the number of end recipients resulting from a decrease in poverty levels; this is positive news but is nevertheless challenging - in some cases, the country changed the parameters used for defining poverty and/or FEAD eligibility (EE, LV, SI and SK).

Horizontal principles

Member States considered that the European Social Fund (ESF) and FEAD were mutually reinforcing and/or complementary. BG reported that both the FEAD and ESF programmes contributed to achieving the Europe 2020 strategy goals of reducing poverty and social exclusion in the EU. In CZ, many FEAD partner organisations also worked on ESF-funded projects, and considered that their activities complemented each other. Moreover, in many cases, complementarity with ESF-funded initiatives resulted from accompanying measures (e.g. end recipients being referred to ESF activities). AT, CY, CZ, EE, HR, HU, IT, LU, MT and SI had coordination/working groups to ensure the complementarity of the programme with the ESF. DK, DE, FI, FR and LV had other forms of coordination. These mechanisms provided a solid foundation for coordination and avoided possible double funding. For instance, in DE one FEAD project was discontinued in 2017 because a new ESF project targeted the same group of people.

Some Member States adopted comprehensive approaches towards gender equality and non-discrimination and addressed this horizontal principle at various stages of the project cycle¹³. All Member States, for instance, ensured that assistance was solely needs-based and that there was no discrimination based on gender, ethnic origin, etc. Furthermore, some Member States developed gender-equality and non-discrimination guidelines or workshops for partner organisations (DE and LV), applying a gender-sensitive approach when selecting partner organisations or employees (DK, HR and SK) and/or considering the specific needs of target groups such as single parents or people with disabilities (CZ, ES, HU, MT, PL, SE and SK).

In SK, gender equality was an integral part of all project stages. The measures adopted covered: (i) selection of employees (no discrimination based on gender, age, ethnicity, religion or physical handicap); (ii) obligations of partner organisation (they were required to respect gender equality during the whole implementation period); and (iii) selection of food and basic material assistance taking into account the specific needs of end recipients, based on gender, age and family situation.

To reduce food waste, some Member States (mainly BG, EE, ES, IT, LT, LV, MT, PL and SI) distributed food with a long shelf life and redistributed excess food to other (charity) organisations or additional end recipients¹⁴. Other Member States focused on minimising the delivery of unwanted products by ensuring that the selection of food met target groups' needs and tastes (CY, IE, PT and SK). In addition, in LU and HR, 34% and 4% respectively of the food distributed was donated. The share of donated food used in the programme is still low, but improvements can be expected as a result of the additional simplifications which entered into force in August 2018.

Some Member States took broader climate and environmental aspects into consideration. They either opted for sustainable materials (AT, CZ, LU and PL), sought to

¹³ Article 5(11) of Regulation (EU) No 223/2014.

¹⁴ Article 5(13) of Regulation (EU) No 223/2014.

minimise transport and carbon emissions (FI, HU, LU and LV), set environmental requirements for suppliers (FR and HR), and/or organised educational workshops for end recipients on environmental issues (BE, LV and PL).

In most Member States, the types of food delivered to end recipients were selected in consultation with nutritional experts and/or partner organisations¹⁵. The needs and eating-habits of end recipients were also taken into consideration when decisions were made. To help end recipients achieve a balanced diet, many Member States offered food that was low in carbohydrates, salt, sugar and fat, and high in protein, fibre, vitamins and minerals (BG, CZ, ES, HR, LT, PT, SI and SK). Moreover, in LT the food selected for distribution had to comply with national regulations on nutritional value and suitability for distribution. Through accompanying measures, there were also many Member States that provided cooking classes/workshops to end recipients (BE, FR, HR, LU, LV, MT, PL and SI) and/or advice on a healthy and balanced diet (BE, BG, CZ, EE, FI, FR, HR, LU, LV, MT, PL, SI and SK).

ES carried out a thorough assessment of the food provided, to ensure that the distributed goods helped end recipients achieve a healthy and balanced diet. The food had to comply with several requirements such as: (i) satisfy end recipients' nutritional needs; (ii) contribute to a varied diet; (iii) meet the body's energy demands and maintain a healthy balance; (iv) reduce nutritional deficiencies in the population served; and (v) cover the needs of specific populations (children) that are most vulnerable. In addition, physical, chemical, microbiological, contaminant and labelling requirements for procured food had to be met. Moreover, the food was selected in consultation with nutrition experts.

Structured surveys of end recipients

The surveys of end recipients conducted in 2017 by Member States that implemented OPI revealed that the assistance provided by FEAD had made a difference to end recipients' households. End recipients generally considered that the assistance received had made a difference to them or to other members of the household. This was the case, for example, for 75% of end recipients in BE, 93% in EE, 93% in FI, 87% in IE, 76% in HR, and 73% in SK. In addition, most said that, a year before, they or their household would not have been able to buy the items distributed by FEAD. This was true, for example, for 64% in EE, 60% in FI, 52% in LU, and 80% in SK.

The surveys showed that in most Member States, accompanying measures were considered useful or very useful; there was also a positive correlation between the provision of accompanying measures and overall FEAD satisfaction. The surveys also showed that most of the programme's end recipients were citizens of the Member States where the assistance was distributed (90% in FI, 67% in FR, 70% in IT, 87% in SI), except in LU, where most were non-nationals. A few Member States also reported that most of the people assisted in 2017 had been assisted by FEAD in previous years too (85% said this in EE, 96% in ES, 76% in FI and 81% in FR).

The surveys also served to highlight some areas for improvement in the delivery of assistance, for example, in terms of the amount and variety of food provided and how it

¹⁵ Article 5(13) of Regulation (EU) No 223/2014.

was delivered to end recipients. In ES, end recipients asked for a greater variety of food, in line with their cultural diversity. In EE, some end recipients reported that they had experienced difficulties in obtaining the food aid, on account of the weight of food packages or the distance from the distribution centres. In IT, partner organisations stressed the high administrative burden that came from working with volunteers in delivering assistance.

Evaluations

Member States that implemented OP II conducted evaluations or research studies on the programme to assess the assistance system and gain insights into the situation of various target groups. DE examined the initial situation of the target groups and how the support provided by the FEAD had affected it. The results were used to design the second round of FEAD funding.

Some Member States that implemented OP I complemented the structured survey of end recipients with other evaluations or research studies. FR conducted a comparative study of the programme in six Member States that revealed that FR and CZ were the ones that delivered the greatest variety of food to end recipients. LT conducted a full assessment of the programme that served to identify some areas for improvement, including the need to strengthen complementarity of the programme with national labour, health and social policies and to encourage the exchange of best practices between partner organisations.

4. CONCLUSION

In 2017, the FEAD programme was on track as regards implementation on the ground. Most Member States had a well-established and properly functioning programme in place that was under constant review and improvement by managing authorities. The provision of basic material assistance, which had initially lagged behind, has recently emerged as a second important component of OP I support. A few specific target groups, and in particular the homeless, have been reached in higher numbers than previously. However, there are some Member States that by 2017 were still in an early phase of implementation and/or had experienced setbacks in delivery, resulting in an aggregate fall in food-aid delivery figures.

After 4 years of implementation, many of the most deprived people in the EU are receiving effective assistance. Despite its limited budget, FEAD complements national efforts to address material deprivation and combat poverty and social exclusion. Overall declining poverty risks in the EU show that considerable progress is being made towards reaching Europe 2020 targets. In some Member States, this has affected the way in which the eligibility of end recipients is defined. Overall, FEAD support reached 12.9 million people in 2017, according to data and estimates from partner organisations.

In many cases FEAD was able to reach specific groups among the most deprived, groups that would otherwise not receive any assistance. This is the case, for example, for people who do not receive government assistance because they are just above the poverty line, or people who are harder to reach because they are homeless, disabled, live in remote areas or do not speak the local language. The role of partner organisations has been key in this respect, as they have the knowledge and experience needed to reach these groups and provide them with relevant assistance. The mid-term evaluation highlighted the fact that FEAD had helped them become more professional.

Accompanying measures, the innovative component of FEAD compared to its predecessor fund, became more visible and more refined. They allow basic food and material assistance to be complemented with dedicated advice and guidance, and focused social inclusion activities, resulting in a more pronounced inclusion approach. This is independent of whether they are financed through FEAD or not. The structured surveys also confirmed the positive role played by accompanying measures.

The flexibility of FEAD, which allows Member States (and partner organisations) to make decisions in terms of how and when to reach target groups, was key to establishing relationships of mutual trust with end recipients. In various Member States, but especially in those implementing social inclusion activities, it took time for partner organisations to reach the target groups and relate positively with them. Different strategies were needed, and partner organisations had to adapt to different situations. The continued exchange of good practice in the FEAD network and the FEAD Expert Group, as well as consultations with partner organisations at EU and national level, have helped to further improve partner organisations' capacity to reach the target groups. The structured surveys of end recipients were also fundamental in allowing Member States to identify the weaknesses and strengths of the programme, as well as to become better acquainted with the target groups.

Several Member States made significant adjustments to the programme, seeking to make it more efficient and to ensure a greater impact on the target groups, but areas for improvement remain. Member States adopted long-term programming, reorganised partner organisations and/or the distribution process, and regularly collected feedback from end recipients. Some also carried out audits and evaluations of the programme. Moreover, various Member States increased the funding for ongoing projects that had proved to work well (instead of launching new projects), expanded the number or type of target groups covered, improved or expanded the types of goods provided to end recipients, and found new ways of engaging with end recipients and building their confidence. Remaining weaknesses regarding the completeness of annual reporting, ongoing delivery concerns, and related financial implementation issues should be addressed by the Member States, including through dedicated annual review meetings.