



FEAD Community

Peer Exchange on Social Inclusion during and after the Pandemic

Online, 31 March 2021

Synthesis report

Peer Exchanges are part of a cycle of capacity-building activities aiming at improving the delivery of the [Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived \(FEAD\)](#) at national, regional and local level during the transition period from 2020 to 2021. Peer Exchanges aim for knowledge sharing between partner organisations involved in the implementation of the FEAD-funded measures.

During the first Peer Exchange, 12 practitioners from Belgium, Germany, Greece, Lithuania, Portugal, Spain and Sweden exchanged on concrete challenges and emerging practices of implementing accompanying measures and social inclusion programmes in light of the Covid-19 pandemic.

EU Funding to support the most deprived

The event took place in the context of the recent amendments in EU funding to address the social impact of the pandemic, as well as the merging of the FEAD into the upcoming European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) in the new funding period.

Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe (REACT-EU)¹

The REACT-EU initiative provides EUR 47.5 billion additional funding to current European funds (the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund the Cohesion Fund and the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived) in 2021 – 2022. This will enable Member States to top up their FEAD allocation to support organisations on the ground that are dealing with people suffering the social and economic consequences of the Coronavirus-related crisis. The changes introduced by REACT-EU for the FEAD include the possibility to use an EU co-financing rate up to 100%, in order to swiftly implement measures to assist the most deprived. Moreover, in alignment with the REACT-EU, 11% of the additional resources for 2021 will be pre-financed.

European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)²

In January 2021, the European Parliament and EU Member States in the Council agreed on the proposed European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) Regulation, under which the FEAD will operate in the future. All Member States will devote at least 3% of

¹ Regulation (EU) No 2020/2221 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 December 2020 amending Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 as regards additional resources and implementing arrangements to provide assistance for fostering crisis repair in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its social consequences and for preparing a green, digital and resilient recovery of the economy (REACT-EU). Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32020R2221&qid=1611824380100>

² European Commission, 2018, Proposal for a regulation establishing the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+): <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52018PC0382&from=en>

their ESF+ resources to provide food and basic material assistance to the most deprived as well as accompanying measures for their social integration.

Furthermore, the ESF+ will also support the most vulnerable by promoting social inclusion and tackling poverty. Member States will have to allocate at least 25% of their ESF+ resources to such measures. In addition, Member States with a level of child poverty above the EU average in 2017-2019 should use at least 5% of their ESF+ resources to address this issue and all other countries must allocate an appropriate amount of their ESF+ resources to targeted actions to combat child poverty with a view to contribute to the implementation of the European child guarantee.

This Peer Exchange discussed new approaches undertaken by partner organisations to overcome challenges triggered by the pandemic and on how to address the needs of new FEAD beneficiaries³. The key messages from the Peer Exchange can be summarised as follows:

Challenges for FEAD beneficiaries triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic

Increasing levels of poverty, isolation and domestic violence led to social exclusion across the target groups, which highlighted the importance of social inclusion practices. In addition to an increased need for food and basic material assistance, including hygiene products, FEAD beneficiaries are often severely excluded and need support to be included and to participate in society. However, social inclusion activities have been difficult to carry out due to social distancing measures and a reduced number of available staff members and volunteers.

Different FEAD beneficiaries face various types of challenges. People experiencing homelessness, for example, have been one of the most affected target groups during the Covid-19 pandemic. As libraries, public pools, washrooms and other amenities were closed, they had no access to shelter and sanitary facilities, which also worsened during cold temperatures in the winter of 2020-21.

In addition, people working in precarious jobs found it difficult to follow social distancing and hygiene guidance. In turn, the situation made some groups very dependent on their employer and increased the risk of labour exploitation.

Especially low-skilled or illiterate people lack accurate information related to Covid-19 and are also more susceptible to misinformation. This trend has been observed in Sweden, for instance, where rumours and conspiracy theories are rapidly spreading, therefore informing and awareness-raising activities are crucial.

One of the main difficulties for partner organisations during the pandemic was working with fewer and different types of volunteers. While previous to the health crisis these were typically older, retired people, in the past year the volunteering activities have been undertaken mostly by students.

Another important challenge for FEAD partner organisations is to maintain the level of cooperation between different stakeholders. While new cooperation initiatives emerged in 2020 to address the emergency of the situation, the urge to find solutions has faded in some countries. For instance, there were observations in Belgium and Spain that at the beginning of the pandemic the coordination between support services, NGOs and other organisations was stronger than in 2021.

³ In the context of this report, the term 'beneficiary' is used synonymously with 'end recipient', meaning an individual receiving food aid and other support funded through the Fund for European Aid for the Most Deprived (FEAD). Organisations receiving funding from FEAD to deliver food aid and other supporting measures are termed as partner organisations.

New types of FEAD beneficiaries

From 2020, FEAD partner organisations had provided increased support to the most vulnerable in society, often remotely or in an altered way of service provision to comply with social distancing regulations. In addition, they observed new groups who need help, such as people in precarious employment or newly unemployed – people who are often unaware of the type of assistance available or are afraid of stigmatisation. Especially women were more affected by unemployment and the added burden of household chores and home schooling.

Another new group are young people, especially students or young jobseekers. For instance, in Greece, many young people worked in the hospitality industry or have been performing undeclared work.

Furthermore, there have been also anecdotal observations of EU mobile citizens suffering from mental health issues who travelled to other countries to omit the COVID-19 related restrictions imposed by their national governments.

Supporting FEAD beneficiaries to enhance their skills and employment prospects

The instability of the labour market and the rise in unemployment highlight the importance for 'new' and 'old' FEAD beneficiaries to find suitable employment. For instance, partner organisations working with vulnerable, mobile EU nationals noted that most of these beneficiaries moved to a different country to find a job. Moreover, social workers confirm that FEAD beneficiaries most often request support to find employment. This is now especially the case for people who became unemployed during this health crisis.

While the current FEAD regulations do not provide a framework for employment activation measures, the ESF+ provides the opportunity to implement practices for labour market integration.

In that context, measures to support FEAD beneficiaries should consider their skills and education. In addition to formal education, it is also important to find ways of validating non-formal and informal skills acquired, for instance, by stay-at-home mothers who may have gained managerial or care skills or EU mobile citizens with various foreign work experience. One example are projects that encourage inactive women to enter the labour market. For instance, in Western Greece, a project funded by the FEAD and Erasmus+ worked with family care givers to increase and validate their skills.

Practitioners observed that supporting parents to gain skills and employment has also a positive impact on their children. In Sweden, for instance, language training was offered as part of the services, and the importance of education particularly for young children is stressed during information sessions.

Another aspect for future ESF+ funded measures would be to support the target groups with the basics of a job application process, such as preparing a CV, and help in understanding the main expectations of the local employers.

New ways of delivering social inclusion practices

Partner organisations found new ways to continue supporting vulnerable groups and, as a result, have increased cooperation with local municipal services or businesses. For instance, in Sweden, [Räddningsmissionen](#) (Gothenburg Rescue Mission) reach out to people experiencing homelessness and Roma citizens on the street. One of the goals of the projects is to empower them, allowing them to have a say in the development of the activities.

Po Drom, Räddningsmissionen (Gothenburg Rescue Mission), Sweden

The Po Drom practice is implemented through the work of mobile teams in the street and in temporary settlements where Roma citizens live, in Gothenburg, Malmö and Jönköping.

The mobile teams establish dialogues with vulnerable EU citizens and inform them of their rights and obligations in the Swedish society. Multilingual workers are also available to interact with the beneficiaries in their native language. They also put them in contact with other social actors, support them with information on safety and security issues.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, cooperation with the municipality has intensified, and meeting points were organised to provide health information. Furthermore, 'emergency workers' fitted with protective equipment are available to assist if needed.

A similar project, the Social Bridge Hamburg supports mobile citizens from EU Member States living in precarious conditions in Hamburg.

Social Bridge Hamburg, Germany

The *Social Bridge Hamburg project* seeks to improve the social inclusion of EU mobile citizens (mostly from Bulgaria, Poland, Romania) who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in Hamburg, Germany. The project acts as a mediator with other support services in the provision of help to its target group. The project's three key objectives include i) the improvement of the living situation of EU mobile citizens; ii) empowerment and strengthening independent action; iii) mediation in existing support services for the target group.

The project established a network of organisations and engaged multilingual staff with intercultural competences, which is key to the success of the project.

In the Covid-19 pandemic, beneficiaries were supported in telephone consultations, attended by the multilingual worker and the counsellor. Another initiative were partnerships with hotels, allowing people experiencing homeless to be placed in single room accommodation in hotels, in order to help minimise the spread of coronavirus.

In the Western Greece region an online open platform has been launched, that offers an innovative integrated approach to inform, train and empower all citizens, however it is especially targeted to vulnerable groups (e.g. elderly, people experiencing mental health problems, children with autism, patients with chronic diseases, as well as FEAD beneficiaries).

Support line “We Strengthen Together” and open online platform in Greece⁴

The platform includes distance learning, skills enhancement, physical and mental empowerment, organised by the Western Greece region and Patras Holy Diocese. The use of the platform is disseminated through the psychological and social support line “We Strengthen Together”. The support line was created to assist beneficiaries in building up mental resilience during the Covid-19 crisis with the aim of strengthening the sense of self-care and care for the weakest members, avoiding and preventing social exclusion, as well as promoting social cohesion.

As social distancing measures hindered the face-to-face delivery of counselling and other accompanying measures, partner organisations are offering these via telephone or other digital platforms. However, some of the target groups do not have access to IT equipment and often lack the necessary skills, therefore field work and meetings in smaller groups are still necessary, also allowing social workers to build trust in their relationships with the beneficiaries.

Furthermore, the local collaboration on the ground allows beneficiaries to feel included in local communities. For example, in Sweden, homeless families were housed on a church ground, which enabled them to build up a social network.

Monitoring and evaluation of FEAD-funded measures

The evaluation of FEAD-funded measures, specifically qualitative evaluation gives opportunity to learn from project outcomes and to assess the impact on social inclusion. In Germany, for example, a third-party evaluation was conducted, which involves also expert groups and stakeholders. The results are used for a national exchange on lessons learnt between project implementors.

Conclusion and opportunities provided by the ESF+

The social and economic crisis linked with the Covid-19 pandemic led to a series of unprecedented challenges for both FEAD beneficiaries and partner organisations. Furthermore, new and existing beneficiaries also encounter additional types of needs, such as safe accommodation and access to sanitary facilities, accurate information about health and hygiene, and increased psychological support.

The ESF+ offers the opportunity to support beneficiaries in a holistic way, looking at social, health, employment or housing related solutions. In terms of employment, projects could potentially help beneficiaries by bridging initial support with measures related to education, skills validation or career counselling.

⁴ www.menoumedytkiellada.gr