



FEAD Community

Peer Exchange on 'Designing and implementing accompanying measures and social inclusion programmes by actively involving stakeholders and end recipients (experts by experience)'

Online, 5 October 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 managing authorities and partner organisations involved in the implementation of the FEAD-funded measures on the ground.

During this third Peer Exchange, 17 practitioners from Belgium, Croatia, Poland, Greece, Slovenia, Ireland, Bulgaria, France, Portugal, Spain and the European Commission, exchanged on concrete challenges and emerging practices of involving stakeholders and end recipients in the design and implementation of accompanying measures and social inclusion programmes.

Advantages of a bottom-up approach in designing accompanying measures and social inclusion programmes

According to the [European Code of Conduct on Partnership](#), partnership is one of the key principles of European Union funds and implies close cooperation between public authorities and other relevant stakeholders. In this sense, the FEAD community seeks dialogue and active participation of end recipients and stakeholders more broadly for mutual exchange of information – end recipients can communicate their experiences with poverty to those working on FEAD-funded measures and these same end recipients receive recognition and value.

Local Councils of Citizens in EAPN Portugal

In 2009, EAPN Portugal implemented key structures at local and national level to promote the direct involvement of people experiencing poverty. They created local councils of citizens (18 in each district of the country and 1 in Madeira) and established a national council of citizens composed of one representative from each local council. For further involvement of people experiencing poverty and promoting participation in the organization's internal life, members of the local councils of citizens became members of EAPN Portugal in 2015. EAPN Portugal made an amendment to its Statutes in order to integrate these members as inherent members they do not have to pay membership fees.

The local councils are working groups composed of people who live or have lived in poverty and/or social exclusion. They serve as a platform to:

- Comment on their realities;
- Identify difficulties and strategies to face their problems;
- Have an active voice for participation in political life;
- Actively participate in EAPN Portugal by identifying new strategies to assess social policies/measures and lobby authorities;

- Work with EAPN on monitoring and evaluation of national measures through information, training, research, and planning.

Each regional network in EAPN Portugal has a board (*General Council Board*) that must be composed of a member representing an association, an individual member, and an inherent member (people experiencing poverty).

Members experiencing poverty are involved through regular meetings to discuss and assess social policies and measures and enhance EAPN Portugal's lobbying work. EAPN Portugal relies on its members to collect information that is relevant to their lobbying work. For instance, EAPN Portugal recently approved a project in Aveiro aiming to design tools to enhance the right to food, as previously discussed in the local councils. Stakeholders will be directly involved in its implementation. EAPN Portugal has sought to understand what participation means for people experiencing poverty themselves and provide information to close knowledge gaps on FEAD measures. Many people experiencing poverty were unaware of the services and measures available to them and where benefits could be obtained. Through workshops, EAPN Portugal has empowered people experiencing poverty and equipped them with information to promote meaningful participation. Moreover, council members suggested the creation of a manual containing information on the councils and their aims, the profile of members, as well as their rights and duties.

EAPN Portugal's bottom-up approach enables it to:

- Share power with end recipients;
- Develop more innovative responses to the needs of people experiencing poverty;
- Contribute to inclusive and effective systems and policies;
- Have a say on issues and decisions;
- Improve the quality of services, projects, and programmes;
- Develop skills and empower people.

Yet, challenges remain in the effective involvement of end recipients and stakeholders, especially among civil society organisations. Internally these civil society organisations deal with a lack of human and material resources that hinders the reach and representation of extensive and diverse communities. The participatory processes of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion are particularly demanding in terms of resource consumption due to the immense and diverse difficulties they face in their daily lives. In addition, these bottom-up approaches are still not part of a wider strategy for change and it is hard to show their successes. Externally and in general, this kind of processes are not resourced and the value of involving end recipients and stakeholders is not recognised. EAPN Portugal receives public financial support to maintain the Councils' participatory work, but the financing of these practices is still a global challenge at the sector level. Moreover, EAPN Portugal notes that structures in the sector currently lack power or authority to make real decisions.

Experts by experience in PPS Social Integration (Belgium)

The department of experts by experience within the federal public planning service for social integration (PPS SI) in Belgium fights against poverty and social exclusion by removing inequalities in access to fundamental rights. To this end, the department incorporates the perspective of people living in poverty into partner services through experts by experience – people who have experience in poverty and/or social exclusion. Through this approach, they improve access to public services for all citizens, especially those living in poverty.

The methodology is based on a strong network of experts by experience, partner services, and the PPS SI coordination team. Experts by experience play a crucial role in poverty reduction strategies. They work full-time and receive a salary and training from PPS SI. Experts are dispatched to partner services – federal institutions – to make these services more accessible to all citizens.

Experts work on three levels of intervention. The first level (micro) involves work that is close to the citizen. For instance, a person who has lost their job and home during the COVID-19 crisis received help from an expert by experience to find a place to sleep in a shelter. The second level (meso) consists of work in support of a department or organisation. An example of this level is the use of complicated forms and questionnaires by institutions for people who are experiencing poverty and/or social exclusion. In this case, experts by experience edit the forms to make the language more easily accessible for users, which facilitates administrative procedures. The third level (macro) involves work with several institutions. An example of this is the sickness benefit (state allowance) for people who can no longer work due to an illness that is sometimes lower than the living wage. As it is not allowed in Belgium to receive benefits under the living wage, people have the right to ask for an additional compensation to get to the minimum wage. Some experts by experience noted that a lot of people were not aware of this right and, as such, many did not make use of it. The department of experts by experience communicated this situation to policymakers, who decided to automatically reimburse this compensation to those that had not enjoyed the right. Thus, the intervention of experts by experience simplified a governmental procedure which, in turn, will enable more people to enjoy this right.

During 2020, there were 91 observations from experts by experience from the meso or macro level, and 36 projects launched covering several topics such as health care, the COVID-19 pandemic, and access to public services.

Needs and challenges for meaningful participation of stakeholders and end recipients in the decision-making process

The discussion among participants raised several important points. FEAD managing authorities and beneficiaries need to better understand not only the importance of involving citizens and stakeholders in decision-making, but also their willingness and capacity to be involved. Consequently, participation processes should be accessible by establishing an open and welcoming environment. For this purpose, information-sharing using plain language is crucial to build the capacity of stakeholders and end recipients, particularly through trainings.

Moreover, political commitment from decision-makers and clear commitment from the public sector and the non-profit sector to meaningful participation of stakeholders and end recipients is key. There needs to be a concrete work plan for the participation of stakeholders and end recipients in FEAD with detailed goals and the dissemination of results. At the same time, this process should also be monitored and evaluated.

Further, it was perceived that the quality of participation should continue to be developed. To this end, participation processes could be included in the operational programmes with clear guidelines on outreach, strengthening engagement, and showing results. End recipients and stakeholders should also have a strong and flexible team who can support them in their work through the issues they may be facing, e.g. long-term illnesses or mental health problems. Additionally, end recipients and stakeholders could also attend FEAD meetings as a forum to speak about their experiences with poverty and improve representation of the most deprived people. Stakeholders and end recipients should have a clear understanding of the purpose of their participation and be able to see the impact of their ideas and suggestions in the programmes developed through positive changes in policies and practices. The use of digital platforms, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, can be used as hubs to collect ideas.

Training stakeholders in how to participate meaningfully is an important step to strengthen their participation. Bottom-up approaches require skills and their recognition, as well as financial and material resources and time.

Conclusions and opportunities provided by the ESF+

Participants noted that during the new ESF+ period, the participation and collaboration with stakeholders and end recipients should be further developed and supported. Existing processes such as participatory meetings and exchanges of experiences can be carried into the new ESF+. At the same time, promoting training and capacity-building activities for stakeholders and end recipients is crucial for their meaningful participation. Moreover, it is also up to the FEAD Community to promote participative processes, also through adequate financial and human resources available via the ESF+ and other national funding streams to support non-governmental organisations (NGOs) who are the key actors in promoting the engagement of end recipients, but who lack the means to do so. Likewise, it is also important to finance the development of innovative and experimental projects of alternative food and material support responses that use a socially inclusive approach. Such projects would include bottom-up experiences and participative methodologies to improve the engagement of end recipients based on concrete instruments and indicators. As underlined by the European Commission, accompanying measures are compulsory and must benefit from the ESF+ financial support to further promote the social integration of end recipients through a more integrated approach. It was also highlighted in the discussion that the involvement of end recipients and other stakeholders in activities developed by the FEAD Community may require managing authorities and partner organisations to rethink approach and provide financing to increase participation in the design, planning, implementation and monitoring as measures to foster the social and labour market inclusion of end recipients.