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Summary of the annual implementation reports for the operational programmes co-financed by the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived in 2020

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD)[1] **helps address the worst forms of poverty in the EU, such as food deprivation, child poverty and homelessness.** A total of EUR 3.8 billion (current prices) was available from the FEAD for 2014-2020. The EU provides up to 85% of funding, which is topped up by Member States' own resources. This brings the total value of the fund to around EUR 4.5 billion.

Member States can use the fund in two ways:

- for an operational programme providing food and/or basic material assistance (OP I); and/or
- for an operational programme promoting social inclusion (OP II).

Food and/or basic material assistance must be complemented by accompanying measures, such as educational activities to promote healthy nutrition and advice on food preparation and storage, facilitating access to healthcare, psychological and therapeutic support, skills programmes, advice on managing a household budget, social and leisure activities and provision of legal services.

In accordance with its legal basis[2]**, this summary is based on the 2020 national implementation reports**, which the Commission received from the Member States. As in previous years, the report also includes developments and financial information beyond 2020 where available.

According to the 2020 FEAD Annual Implementation Reports, the fund helped tackle the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the most deprived and alleviate the worst forms of poverty and social exclusion. Despite its limited budget, FEAD has shown that it successfully complements national efforts to address material deprivation and combat poverty and social exclusion. In particular, it addressed food deprivation, child poverty and homelessness. Thanks to the additional flexibilities for the FEAD programmes provided under the Cohesion's Action for Refugees in Europe (CARE), funding from the FEAD will also be crucial to provide much-needed food and basic material assistance to those fleeing Ukraine.

FEAD is consistent with the Europe 2020 Strategy and the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan (targeting a reduction of at least 15 million people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by end 2030), by aiming to promote social inclusion and protection. It complements other EU funds, notably the ESF and the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), by targeting other groups or providing complementary measures.

[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 2018, through a revision of the Financial Regulation: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1537946431022&uri=CELEX:02014R0223-20180802. Regulation (EU) 2020/559 amends Regulation (EU) No 223/2014 to enable Member States to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak and introduces measures to ensure that the most deprived people can continue to receive assistance under FEAD in a safe environment. Amending Regulation (EU) 2021/177 allows Member States to use additional funds made available for post-COVID-19 recovery under the REACT-EU initiative in 2021 and 2022.

[2] Article 13(9) of Regulation (EU) No 223/2014. The Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) No 1255/2014 of 17 July 2014 lays down the content of the annual and final implementation reports, including the list of common indicators.

The social situation in which FEAD operated in 2020 was characterised by increased challenges in terms of poverty and social exclusion due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion[3] in the EU was an estimated 96.5 million people in 2020, which represents 21.9 % of the total population. This equates to an increase of approximately 900 000 people compared to 2019. Some 6.3 million people experienced all three poverty and social exclusion risks simultaneously (being at risk of income poverty, being severely materially and socially deprived and living in a household with very low work intensity). In 2020, 38 million people in the EU could not afford a quality meal every second day[4] and today food assistance is still essential for part of the population in many Member States.

1.1 Future developments

For the current 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework, FEAD is integrated into the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) to simplify funding and improve synergies between the funds. To boost support for social inclusion, the ESF+ regulation[5] requires that at least 25% of the ESF+ shared management strand be allocated to social inclusion goals (compared to 20% under the 2014-2020 ESF), and with a further minimum allocation of 3% per Member State to address material deprivation, the current key objective of FEAD.

Specific rules apply to support for addressing material deprivation to keep it as streamlined as possible. As emerged in the mid-term evaluation of FEAD, stakeholders value and stress the need to preserve the fund-specific aspects such as (i) flexibility and the generally less stringent administrative requirements compared to the mainstream ESF programmes, and (ii) the established networks and operational delivery modes. Low thresholds allow aid to be provided to persons not reached by the social services such as the homeless, new or undocumented migrants or certain elderly people at risk of poverty. It also enables a swift response to emerging needs and crisis situations.

1.2 Coordination of the FEAD at EU level

As in previous years, the FEAD expert group remained the main forum for managing authorities to exchange information on the fund's implementation. The expert group met twice in 2019 and four times in 2020 to discuss aspects of the FEAD programme's implementation, notably accompanying measures, food donations, audits, coordination with other EU funds, simplified cost options and e-vouchers. In 2020, the agenda of the meetings also included the response to the crisis linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, including the relevant FEAD Regulation amendments. In October and December 2020, the FEAD expert group met jointly with the ESF technical working group.

To enhance stakeholder relations, in 2020 and 2021 mutual learning activities for the FEAD Community replaced the previous FEAD network meetings. Three online thematic seminars, three peer exchanges and two conferences were held during this period, in the

[3] The number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, which may be abbreviated as "AROPE", is the total number of people who are (i) at risk of poverty (as indicated by their disposable income); and/or (ii) face severe material and social deprivation (as gauged by their ability to afford a set of predefined material items or social activities); and/or (iii) live in a household with very low work intensity.

[4] This indicator is defined as the inability to afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish (or vegetarian equivalent) every second day. It is derived from the EU-SILC survey

[5] Regulation (EU) 2021/1057 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 establishing the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1296/2013

course of which the remaining implementation challenges and the opportunities offered by the ESF+ were discussed.

In particular, the seminars and peer exchanges discussed:

- the characteristics of the new end recipients of FEAD-funded measures and new practices implemented during the COVID-19 crisis;
- possible integrated approaches to support the social inclusion of end-recipients;
- monitoring and outreach;
- accompanying measures for social inclusion during and after the pandemic;
- the implementation of vouchers/e-voucher schemes;
- the involvement and role of stakeholders and end recipients.

2. PROGRESS IN IMPLEMENTING THE OPERATIONAL PROGRAMMES[6]

2.1. Financial implementation

The total eligible public expenditure committed to FEAD support stood at EUR 643 million in 2020, up from EUR 608 million in 2019. At the end of 2020, the cumulative amounts committed (for 2014-2020) amounted to nearly EUR 3.9 billion, or 85% of the total resources of the programmes (which include EU funds and national co-financing). An amount of approximately EUR 552.2 million was paid to beneficiaries in 2020, a notable increase compared to previous years' levels (EUR 478.5 million in 2019, EUR 501.2 million in 2018, EUR 412.8 million in 2017 and EUR 435.2 million in 2016). The increase is mainly due to the restart of operations in Romania in 2020[7]. It also reflects the increased demand due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to 2020 data, the COVID-19 outbreak resulted in lower expenditure declarations by Member States. During the second quarter of 2020, those represented EUR 51 million - less than half of the corresponding amount from 2019 (EUR 128 million). However, the situation improved in the second part of the year. In the end, the total FEAD amount declared during 2020 was only slightly lower than the total amount declared during 2019 (EUR 549 million compared with EUR 573 million in 2019). The total amount paid for FEAD in 2021 increased to EUR 621 million due to the extra resources (EUR 81 million) made available under REACT-EU.

FEAD has proven to be adaptable and responsive to emerging needs, such as the COVID-19 crisis. The FEAD Regulation was amended in April 2020[8] as part of the CRII+ initiative, making it possible to use indirect delivery modes, e.g. vouchers or cards (to lower the risk of contamination) and to buy personal protective equipment for organisations delivering FEAD support. Moreover, the amendments made it possible to provide a 100% co-financing rate to Member States for one accounting year. By the end of 2021, 12 FEAD

[6] Figures present the situation for the 2014-2020 programming period implemented up to 31 December 2020, as reported by 12 November 2021 in the annual implementation reports. All reports and data are collected in the System for Fund Management in the European Union – SFC2014 (https://ec.europa.eu/sfc/en/2014/fund/fead). SFC2014 is regulated by the Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 463/2014 of 5 May 2014.

[7] No provision of food assistance was reported by Romania in 2017-2019 due to delays in redesigning its operational programme following institutional challenges and problems with public procurement. These issues have since been addressed and FEAD support, including material assistance, restarted in 2020.

[8] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32020R0559

programmes had been amended: 8 of them to benefit from the 100% co-financing rate and 4 to introduce emergency measures to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

A further amendment to the FEAD regulation was adopted in February 2021 as part of the Commission's recovery plan under REACT-EU[9]. This amendment allows Member States to allocate additional funding to programmes under the ESF, FEAD and European Regional Development Fund. Additional resources can provide top-ups to existing support, such as food and/or basic material assistance or social inclusion projects. They should be in line with each Member State's specific needs, and take into account the increased number of deprived people since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Under REACT-EU 2021, 13 operational programmes (Belgium, Bulgaria, Estonia, Spain, France, Croatia, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Austria, Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia) have been amended, with a total top-up of EUR 506 million.

On 6 April 2022 the FEAD regulation was amended[10] as regards Cohesion's Action for Refugees in Europe (CARE). It now allows Member States and regions to have more flexibility to use the FEAD to provide emergency support to people fleeing Ukraine following the invasion by the Russian Federation. Specifically, it allows Member States to amend certain elements of the programme to address the crisis, where needed, and to simply notify the Commission, rather than requiring its approval for this. Moreover, it also provides for an earlier date of eligibility for these actions as from 24 February 2022. Finally, it extends the possibility of 100% EU co-financing for the accounting year starting on 1 July 2021 and ending on 30 June 2022. In addition, a regulation[11] to complement CARE was adopted on 12 April. This amendment will provide liquidity and speed up access to funds for beneficiaries by providing additional €3.5 billion pre-financing payments on the 2021 tranche of REACT-EU for FEAD and cohesion policy programmes benefitting from REACT-EU resources.

2.2 Implementation on the ground

Reach-out of the FEAD and profile of end recipients

In 2020, FEAD successfully delivered assistance in 27 Member States, making good progress in achieving its objectives. Most Member States (23 out of 27) distributed food and/ or basic material assistance together with accompanying measures (OP 1 – table 1). Four Member States continued to run social inclusion programmes (OP II – table 1).

Table 1. Type of assistance delivered in 2020

OP	Type of assistance	Member State
OP I	Food	BE, BG, EE, ES, FI, FR, MT, PL, PT, SI, SK (11)
	Basic material	AT (1)
	Both	CZ, EL, HR, HU, IE, IT, LT, LU, LV, RO (10)
OP II	Social inclusion	DE, DK, NL, SE (4)

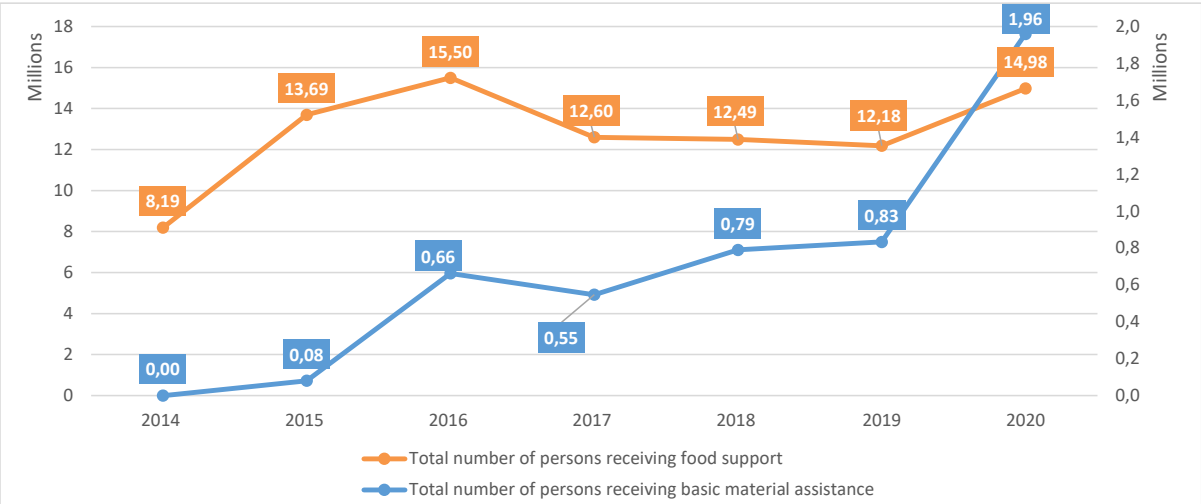
Source: SFC2014

In 2020, FEAD supported almost 15 million people with food (up from 12.2 million in 2019), approximately 1.96 million people with material assistance (up from 800 000 in 2019) and 30 000 people with social inclusion assistance, the same as in 2019. These increases are mainly due to the restart of operations in Romania. But they also reflect the

[9] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32021R0177
[10] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/HIS/?uri=uriserv:OJ.L_.2022.109.01.0001.01.ENG
[11] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/HIS/?uri=uriserv:OJ.L_.2022.115.01.0038.01.ENG

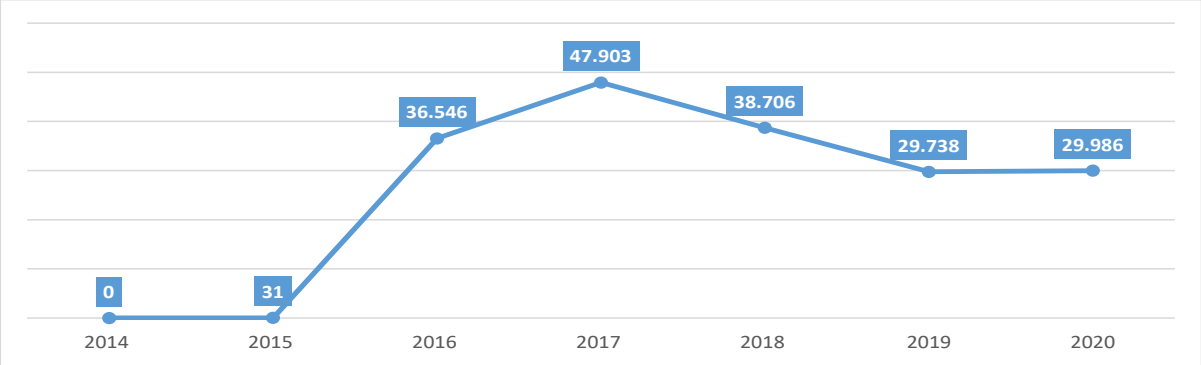
COVID-19 health crisis that worsened the conditions for existing vulnerable people in receipt of FEAD support, while new people also sought food aid, including people with precarious jobs (e.g. short-term contracts, temporary or informal work), independent workers and disadvantaged tertiary education students. The most significant increases in end-recipients were found in FR (714 000 more than in 2019), IT (597 000 more), ES (268 000 more) and HU (113 000 more). Conversely, 8 Member States[12] recorded a reduced number of end recipients, especially HR (a reduction of 175 000 recipients or 88% fewer than in 2019), SK (145 000 or 51% less[13]), and CY (1800 or 76% less), as well as DK and NL.

Figure 1. ***Number of people receiving food support and/or basic material assistance (millions)***



Source: SFC2014

Figure 2. ***Total number of people receiving social inclusion support***



Source: SFC2014

[12] In the case of Belgium, there was an error in the figures submitted in the Belgian 2019 annual implementation report (AIR), where it stated that the number of people supported was 413 058 whereas the correct figure was 358 726 people. As explained in previous reports, each year the Belgian Managing Authority notes an overestimation of the figures introduced by the organisations and in the 2019 AIR the figure was not revised. In 2020, the figure had increased compared to 2019 but remained lower than in 2018 (from 358 726 people assisted in 2019 to 381 951 people in 2020 = > + 23 225).

[13] However, the reduction in the total number of end recipients in Slovakia is due to the fact that material support was not provided in 2020, while the budget allocated to the distribution of hygiene packages was used up; in the meantime, the MA proceeded with public procurement for additional resources.

The profile of target groups remained broadly stable, albeit with some small changes. In 2020, according to estimations by partner organisations, some 47% of the end recipients were women (2 percentage points less than in 2019), 28% children aged 15 or below, about 10% migrants, participants with a foreign background or minorities, 10% people aged 65 years or over (2 percentage points more than in 2019), 6% homeless people and 6% persons with disabilities.

Children account for around 28% of those who received food, basic material or social inclusion assistance in 2020. This share has slightly decreased compared to 2019 when it was 30%. In several Member States, children received the largest share of food support – particularly in HR (93%), HU and MT (60%) and CZ (52%). Furthermore, children accounted for all basic material assistance in CY, HU and IE, while in AT they were the single largest group (85% of end recipients).

Around 10% of end recipients were migrants, people with a foreign background or minorities. However, this share can be underestimated as information on migrants receiving support is not always reported for data protection reasons (EL, FR and SK). Migrants in general are the largest group, followed by refugees and asylum seekers.

An estimated 6% of FEAD end recipients were homeless people, this proportion remaining broadly stable. However, the number of homeless people is particularly difficult to estimate as they are not registered and are often reluctant to provide any personal information. In IE, CZ and FR, more than 13% of end recipients who received food assistance were homeless people. In IT, the proportion of homeless people receiving food assistance was relatively low (3%) but it was the largest group receiving basic material assistance (66% of all end-recipients). CZ also had a relatively high proportion of end-recipients of basic material assistance who were homeless (21%).

Approximately 6% of end recipients were persons with disabilities. The largest share of persons with disabilities receiving food assistance was in BG and HU (31%), RO (20%), PL and LV (17%). In FR, IT, MT and PT this percentage was 1% or less. On the other hand, the share of persons with disabilities receiving material assistance was relatively high in LV, RO and LT (between 13% and 17%).

Box 1. ***National examples of reaching out to children***

Latvia: In continuity with 2019, in 2020 LV provides specific aid to children. This includes: i) three types of food packages for infants and young children based on age; ii) four different sets of hygiene products for infants and young children aged 0 to 24 months, according to their age; iii) individual teaching aids for children aged 5 to 10; and iv) individual teaching aids for children aged 11 to 16. To prevent discrimination, LV specifically ensures that school materials (such as school bags) do not include coloured shapes and drawings that encourage stereotypical perceptions of gender.

Romania: Children, particularly the most disadvantaged, constitute a majority of end recipients of FEAD programmes. They receive specific aid including: i) personal hygiene packages; ii) electronic vouchers for educational support (for eligible disadvantaged children), with the purpose of preventing drop-out and early school leaving in pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education. The provision of packages for newborn babies was also envisaged for 2020. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic the measure could not be implemented.

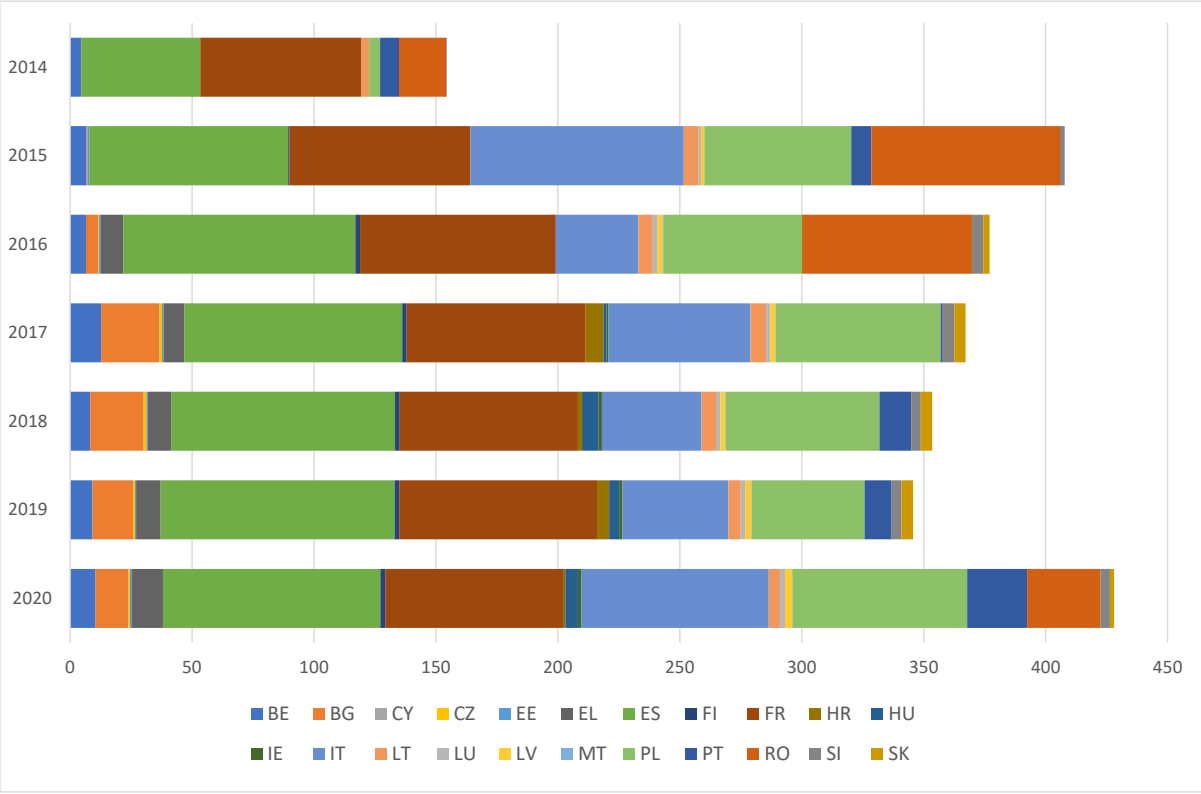
Cyprus: In February 2018, the process of delivering material assistance to recipients started with the implementation of the 'dowry of new-born baby' (prika tou morou) programme for

babies born after 1.1.2017. The programme is being implemented satisfactorily and as planned. Essential goods for new-born babies include beds, nappies and mattresses. Despite the Covid-19 challenges, the distribution of these essential goods was not interrupted but there were some changes in the way products are delivered to ensure the safety and health of all involved.

OP I – Food assistance

After three years when it slightly decreased in terms of quantity, food aid substantially increased in 2020, reaching 428 000 tonnes (up from 345 000 tonnes in 2019). The cumulative amount over the 2014-2020 period amounted to over 2 460 000 tonnes of food. Around two thirds of the 23 Member States implementing OP I either increased or maintained the quantity of food delivered. Increases in percentage terms were particularly strong in PT (+123%), IT (+77%), PL (+55%) and EE (+36%), on top of RO, which reported a positive amount for the first time since 2016. The biggest decreases, again in percentage terms, could be seen in HR (-79%) and SK (-64%)[14] while CY ceased the distribution of food aid. In 2020 Estonia implemented distribution of food donations for the first time, with the help of its partner organisation (Estonian Food Bank).

Figure 3. ***Food assistance provided in 2014-2019 (thousands of tonnes) by Member State***



Source: SFC2014

In 2020, over half the total food distributed (57%) consisted of dairy products, as well as flour, bread, potatoes, and other starchy products. The proportion of dairy products (31% of the total) was particularly high in FR (50%), ES (47%) and SI (46%). The proportion of flour, bread potatoes, and other starchy products (26% of the total) constituted the majority of

[14] In Slovakia, the decrease is related to the limited remaining resources at the end of the programming period. In the meantime, the FEAD budget has been increased with REACT-EU funds.

the food distributed in FI, SK, RO, LV and MT (ranging from 62% in FI to 50% in MT) while in IT at 49% it was the single biggest food group. Fruit and vegetables at 18% was the third category in percentage terms, with particularly high proportions in PT (38%), MT (36%), BG (33%), PL and IE (both at 28%). The remaining categories (meat, eggs, fish, and seafood; fats and oils; convenience food[15]) all constituted around 7 to 8% of the total while sugar stood at 3%[16]. The cost of food distributed per person varies quite significantly between Member States and from one year to another. This is mostly due to the amount and type of products distributed (e.g. a high rate of fresh produce) as well as the intensity of support.

The proportion of FEAD co-financed food products in the total volume of food distributed by the partner organisations was approximately 50% of the total. This proportion ranges from less than 25% in FR, LU and FI to all the food distributed in BG, ES and HU[17]. All 21 Member States that distribute food handed it out in the form of standardised food packages. Thirteen Member States provided meals as well: BE, BG, CZ, EL, ES, FI, HR, HU, IE, IT, LV, PL and SK.

OP I – Basic material assistance

12 Member States distributed basic material assistance in 2020. They were AT, CY, CZ, EL, HR, HU, IE, IT, LT, LU, LV and RO. The list is similar to that in 2019 with the exception of RO, which was not distributing basic material assistance and SK, which ceased to distribute it in 2020 as previously mentioned.

The amount of basic material assistance continued to increase significantly. In 2020, Member States distributed EUR 69.2 million in basic material, up from 19.2 million in 2019, (which had already increased by 42% compared to 2018 and by 44% compared with 2017). The increase is due to a rather widespread increase in providing material assistance in several Member States. Increases were particularly marked in AT, CZ, EL, LV and most importantly IT (with more than a five-fold increase) and in RO, which is responsible for the vast majority of material assistance distributed in the EU (EUR 41.2 million). Basic material assistance decreased markedly in HR (from EUR 2.2 million to EUR 368 thousands) and to a small extent in LT and LU, with SK ceasing the distribution[18].

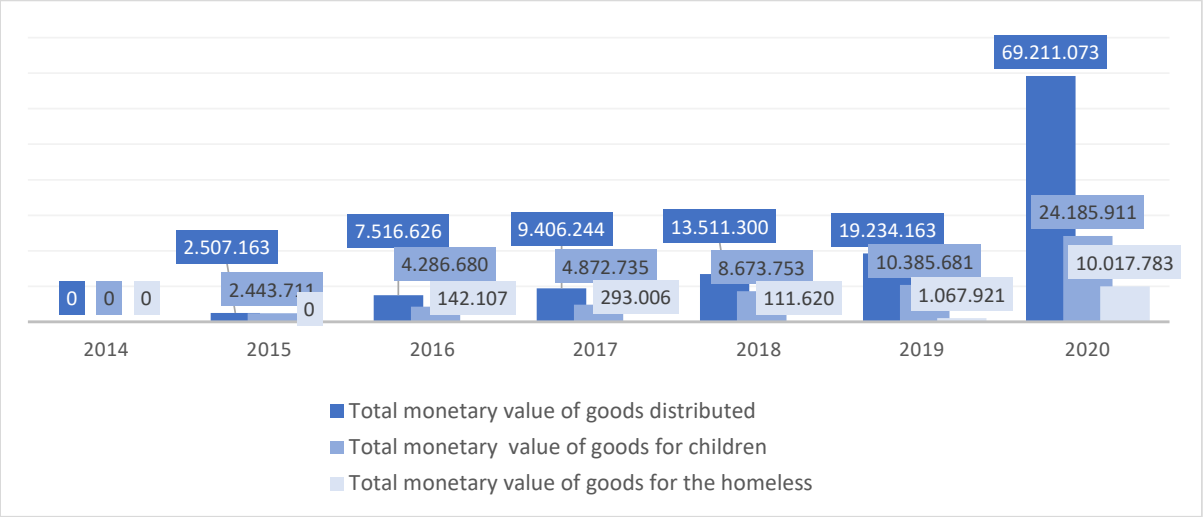
School supplies and personal care products for families with children continued to be the main basic material assistance items distributed through FEAD. In 2020, items delivered to families with children included stationery and school materials (AT, EL, HR, HU, IE and LV), school bags (AT, EL, HR and LV), baby-care packages (CY, EL, HR, HU, IE and LV), sports equipment (EL and HR) and clothes (EL, HR and IT). In EL, HU, LU and LV, items such as laundry detergent, cream and soap for babies and toddlers, wet wipes and diapers were also distributed. CZ, HR, HU, LT, LV, PL, PT and RO have included the provision of hygiene packages with protective equipment to prevent the spread of COVID-19, which included masks, sanitising products, etc.

Homeless people were especially targeted by the housing support measures in IT, but received assistance also in CZ and EL; they were provided with personal care products and other supplies. In CZ and IT, they also received kitchen equipment (those people who were

[15] Convenience foods include ready-to-eat dry products, shelf-stable foods, prepared mixes, and snack foods.
[16] For more details, see common output indicators 4 to 10 in the annex.
[17] See indicator 11b in the annex. Values for this indicator are established based on an informed estimation provided by the partner organisations.
[18] The interruption of material assistance in 2020 in Slovakia was due to lack of financial resources. In the meantime, the Managing Authority reallocated funds to this measure and initiated a new public procurement to re-launch material assistance in 2022.

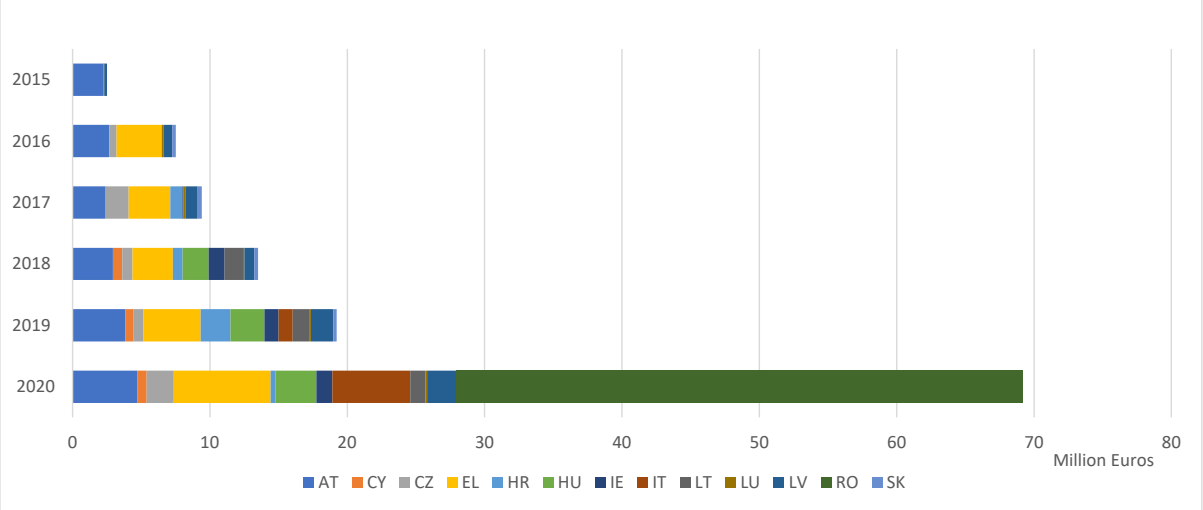
being re-housed or lived in precarious accommodation) and clothes, and in CZ, EL and IT they received sleeping bags and blankets.

Figure 4. ***Total monetary value of goods 2014-2020 by type***



Source: SFC2014

Figure 5. ***Total monetary value of goods 2014-2020 by Member State***



Source: SFC2014

OP I – Accompanying measures

In compliance with the FEAD Regulation, Member States that implemented OP I programmes in 2020 also provided accompanying measures. However, the COVID-19 crisis posed a significant challenge for delivering accompanying measures as part of FEAD programmes, and their implementation has generally been uneven between Member States. On the other hand, additional accompanying measures were implemented to address the current challenges due to the pandemic. For example:

- In a few Member States information on precautionary measures in the context of the pandemic was provided, including in AT, BG, EL, FI, HU and IT.

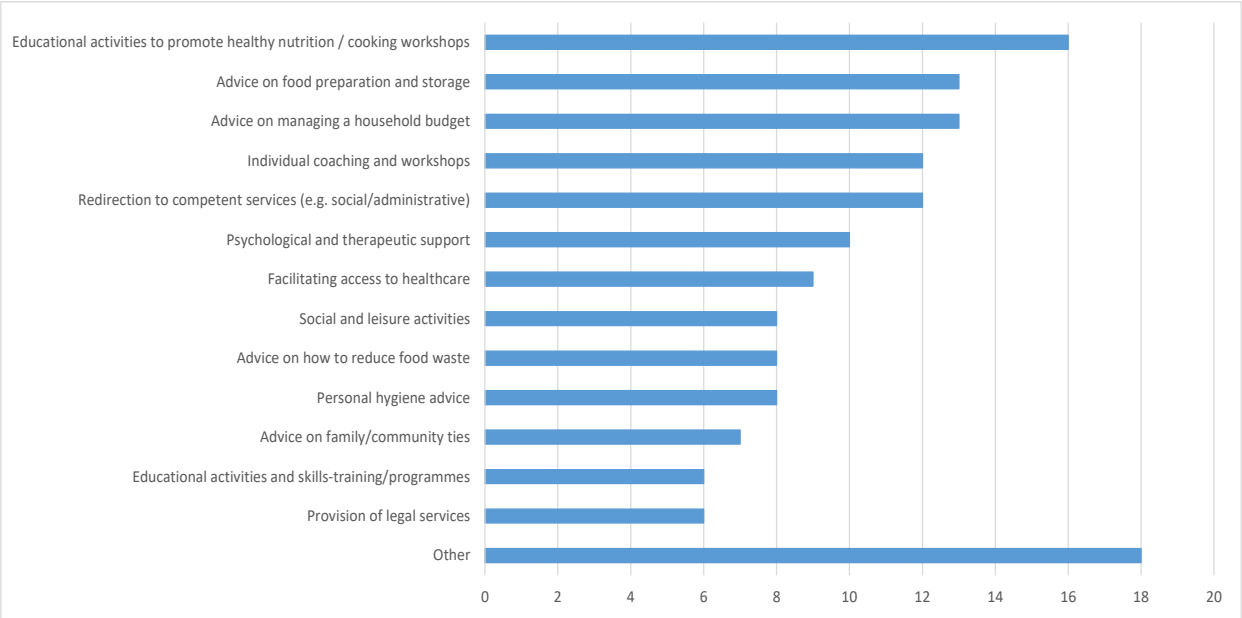
- In certain Member States, managing authorities have specifically included psychological support within accompanying measures to address the mental health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and of the related social restrictions (e.g. EL, FR, PL, RO and SI).
- Due to the widespread lockdowns put in place in the Member States, the role of digital technology became very important. HU, LT, MT and PL implemented activities to enhance digital skills in the field of education and employment, as well as to ensure the operation of social service, and maintain family and/or community ties.

In addition, most Member States continued to carry out a combination of accompanying measures, and only a few chose to focus on only one or two activities. However, it has been observed that in 2020 accompanying measures were reduced in a few Member States, such as EE and IE, because of COVID-19. On the other hand, in 2020 RO saw a significant increase in the provision of accompanying measures through FEAD. In LV, 2020 saw a 10% increase (112 more accompanying measures) than 2019, but an 11% decrease (677 persons) in recipients of the accompanying measures.

Accompanying measures implemented in 2020 included:

- advice on food preparation and storage (BE, BG, CZ, ES, FI, FR, HR, LT, LV, MT, PL, PT and SK);
- educational activities or information to promote healthy nutrition and lifestyle, e.g. cooking workshops (BE, BG, CZ, EL, ES, FI, FR, HR, IT, LT, LU, LV, PT, PL, RO and SK);
- advice on how to reduce food waste (BG, CZ, ES, FI, LU, LV, PL and PT);
- personal hygiene advice (BE, BG, EL, HR, HU, LV, RO and SK);
- referral to relevant services (e.g. social/administrative) (BE, BG, CZ, EE, FI, FR, IE, IT, LU, LV, PT and SK);
- coaching and workshops, especially to enhance integration in education or the labour market (BG, CY, CZ, EL, FI, FR, IE, IT, LT, MT, RO and SI);
- educational activities and skills training/programmes (EL, FR, MT, PL, RO and SI);
- facilitating access to healthcare (BG, ES, FI, FR, HU, IE, IT, LV and RO);
- psychological and therapeutic support (CZ, EL, FI, FR, HU, IT, LT, PL, RO and SI);
- advice on managing a household budget (BG, CZ, EL, FR, HR, IE, IT, LT, LV, MT, PL, PT and SK);
- specific advice on maintaining or restoring family/community ties, including conflict resolution, parental assistance, assistance for home care (BG, CY, FR, IE, LT, LV and PL);
- social and leisure activities (CZ, FI, FR, LV, LU, MT, PL and SI);
- provision of legal services (CZ, FR, IT, LT, PL and RO);
- other accompanying activities (AT, BE, BG, CY, CZ, EE, ES, FI, FR, IE, EL, IT, LU, MT, PL, PT, RO and SI), mainly including personal support services, adult care, social transport, facilitating access to housing or shelter, support for access to rights and school support.

Figure 6. Types of accompanying measures implemented in 2019 (n=23)



Box 2. ***Use of technical assistance funds in the context of the pandemic***

A number of Member States including **LT, LU, PL, RO, SI** have mobilised technical assistance funds specifically to address the various challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Managing authorities in **LT, BG** and **PL** decided to use part of the funds allocated to technical assistance to buy protective equipment for staff and volunteers directly involved in providing food aid.

In **LU**, technical assistance was used for carrying out the mid-term survey of FEAD operational programmes and end recipients, as well as adapting software for the purposes of remote purchases for recipients considered at risk during the pandemic.

In **LV**, technical assistance funds were mobilised to ensure continuity of work-life balance measures, as well as in regards to access to work, while safeguarding principles of gender equality and non-discrimination.

Member States including **RO** and **SI** have made specific use of technical assistance funds to support the implementation and operations of FEAD. In **RO**, technical assistance was used to support the general implementation of FEAD by providing logistical support; for instance, by hiring contract staff, providing necessary equipment for operations and protection of operating staff.

In a few Member States, it was also observed that part of the budget dedicated to a specific OP was also reallocated to specific measures. In **SK**, part of the unused budget originally allocated to other measures was reallocated to support the provision of hygiene packages to end recipients in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

OP II – Social inclusion

OP II[19] Member States (DE, DK, NL and SE) continued to implement social inclusion actions in 2020, despite the fact that the COVID-19 crisis had a marked negative impact on activities in all Member States.

DE continued to reach out to newly-arrived adults and homeless people and improve their access to counselling and support measures. Specific objective A supported 4.275 immigrant children of pre-school age up to 7 years of age. 3 767 immigrant children have taken up at least one early education offer. This corresponds to a result indicator of 88.11 %. Under specific objective B, 5 365 homeless people and people at risk of homelessness received advice. 4 373 people were able to receive assistance as a result of counselling and mentoring by at least one social service (81.56 % of the total).

In DK, activities were extended to improve conditions for homeless people – including those from other EU countries who have permits to stay in DK. While project activities continued throughout the periods of COVID-19 related restrictions, the pandemic proved to be a challenge, and the number of participants sharply decreased: from 757 in 2019 to 277 in 2020. COVID-19 has had the biggest impact for associations working with migrants as many returned to their country of origin.

In NL, the 'Elderly in the neighbourhood' project was strongly affected by the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis but proved particularly valuable. The project seeks to alleviate social exclusion among disadvantaged people over 65. The main contact points are the local libraries, but these were regularly closed. However, the digital skills activities that participants had previously taken part in paid off during lockdown and enabled online activities to continue. The project was thus successful in keeping existing participants feeling socially included. In some cases, the participants themselves even took the initiative to continue meetings in the open air. Eventually the participating libraries still managed to reach new participants though the number decreased from 579 to 366, with a total of 3 219 for the 2014-2020 period. They also stated their intention to continue with the project after the end of the FEAD financing, using their own resources.

The social inclusion programmes in SE include two types of support: health promotion, and provision of basic information on Swedish society, targeted at deprived people coming from other EU or EEA countries. In 2020, the number of participants sharply increased to 1 175 participants, up from 658 in 2019. The cumulative number of participants in 2014-2020 reached 3 849. The main target groups are homeless people (or people at risk of homelessness), migrants, people with a foreign background, minorities and women. Together these groups represent over 90% of end recipients of FEAD programmes.

2.3 Obstacles to implementation

FEAD is well on track to reach its objectives. However, a few obstacles to implementation persisted, such as capacity issues for partner organisations and logistical challenges mainly related to the COVID-19 pandemic. These were partly tackled through the increased flexibility and reduced administrative burden offered by the 2020 FEAD amendments, which allowed the use electronic vouchers to deliver food aid (PT, RO) and basic material assistance (LT, LU, RO), the provision of personal protective

[19] Meaning Member States implementing 'social inclusion of the most deprived persons operational programme' (also referred to as 'OP II'), who support activities outside of active labour market measures, consisting of non-financial, non-material assistance, aimed at the social inclusion of the most deprived persons.

equipment (thus lowering the risk of contamination) and the financing of measures at 100% for the accounting year 2020-2021. Strong cooperation between Managing Authorities and partner organisations also proved to be essential to address new challenges.

Implementation obstacles were reported by over 20 Member States. Most Member States (including BE, CY, CZ, EE, ES, EL, FI, FR, HR, IE, IT, LT, LU, LV, MT, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI and SK) reported that the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact at various levels caused significant obstacles to implementing FEAD programmes in 2020:

- **Suspension in the implementation of activities caused by lockdowns and restrictions was observed in a large number of these Member States.** In some cases, staff shortages resulted in the closure of some distribution centres (BE, IE, LU). However, in a majority of Member States, adaptations were made to enable the continuation of food distribution despite the restrictions. It was generally made possible for end recipients to collect food aid at a specific time and location, or through different means (in BE, CY, CZ, EE, ES, EL, FI, FR, HR, IE, IT, LT, LU, LV, MT, PL, PT, RO, SI, SK). For instance, food and material assistance was delivered to the end recipients' homes, or by individual appointments or via food vouchers (PT, RO), to prevent overcrowding at distribution centres. Similarly, in some Member States, accompanying measures were adapted to the new challenges (e.g. in NL, activities were conducted both physically and remotely), while in others (e.g. PL) they were discontinued.
- **Delays and difficulties in implementing food distribution and material assistance were caused directly by the pandemic in** BE, BG, CZ, DK, FR, EL, HR, MT, PL, PT and RO. Challenges were reported particularly regarding the delivery of specific food products (LU, PL), due to the limited availability of raw materials on the market and delays in the production process. Additionally, staff shortages in PL led to difficulties in implementing contracts, for instance with transport companies, resulting in difficulties providing certain products. SK reported difficulties in some occasional cases due to end recipients changing their permanent address and refusing assistance

As in previous years, the flexibility of FEAD and the strong cooperation between the managing authorities and partner organisations helped countries overcome many of these obstacles. In some Member States (such as BE, DE, DK, FR, IT, IE and SE), the managing authority held regular meetings, either in person or online, with partner organisations and relevant stakeholders to discuss and support the programme's implementation.

While Member States mostly reported on challenges linked to the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, additional challenges were related to:

- logistics, for instance, high costs of transport; destruction of products during transportation; non-compliance with the principles of rational stock management – 'first in, first out' (BE, EL, HR, LV, PL and PT);
- In PL, some programme operators reported cases of non-compliance with quality requirements, which had resulted in contractual penalties for the food supplier;
- lack of capacity among partner organisations (DK and PL); in particular in regards to the registration of target groups, or due to the Member States' territorial configuration (LT).

Box 3: Challenges around COVID-19

In **LT**, a problem of stigma became apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, as people who had not previously been in contact with the social assistance system also faced economic difficulties, some of whom had refused FEAD assistance even though they were entitled to receive it.

In **MT**, a stigma has also been observed as a result of the country's small size, where people from same localities know each other personally or are related. In this regard, FEAD beneficiaries, are being assisted further by being given the possibility to collect their entitlement from a distribution centre of their choice rather than collecting their entitlement from the local centre where they live.

In **BE**, the COVID-19 crisis has had a significant and far-reaching impact, and the Managing authority, the food aid sector and partner organisations all acted together to adapt quickly to the context, holding regular meetings to find solutions that met the needs of the beneficiaries, while trying to limit the impact of a sudden and unexpected lockdown.

In **PT**, between March and July 2020, measures were adopted to simplify some administrative procedures linked to distribution, namely for the confirmation of products delivery, essentially aiming at mitigating the risk of contagion and the spread of COVID-19.

In **CY,** due to the need to respect social distancing measures, the Annual Review Meeting could not be held. In 2020, officials of the Intermediate Body, the Managing Authority and the beneficiaries participated in a number of EU-level meetings**,** such as FEAD Community and FEAD Expert Group meetings, which took place online.

IT put in place extraordinary measures to respond to the pandemic. It widened the scope of the most deprived people receiving aid and introduced protective equipment for both the end recipients and the volunteers distributing the aid. Distribution was also adapted: municipalities were involved, to replace the partner NGOs, some of which had to close or no longer had enough volunteers due to the pandemic.

In **FI**, many older volunteers stopped participating in food allocation due to their fear of the virus. However, younger volunteers, often students, stepped in, thereby ensuring that service provision could continue.

2.4 General principles

Article 5 of the FEAD Regulation identifies principles that should be applied across the board when designing and implementing the Fund. These include complementarity of funding, gender equality, anti-discrimination, avoidance of food waste, a balanced diet, public health, and environmental and climate-related aspects. Member States should abide by these principles and report on them in their annual implementation reports.

Member States fulfil the complementarity principle by coordinating with other funding instruments to avoid double funding and increase the scope of assistance**.** For example, in **HU** managing authorities ensure that an operation receiving support does not receive support from any other operational programme or from any other EU instrument. In **LT**, the managing authority plays a key role in preventing double funding during the programming period, in preparing national legislation on the management of the operational programme and projects, and in the decision-making process on the financing of projects. The intermediate body plays a role in the prevention and control of double funding through the verification of payment claims, public procurement monitoring procedures and on-the-spot checks of projects. In **RO**, coordination with the ESF as well as with other EU policies,

strategies and instruments, in particular with EU initiatives on public health and the fight against food waste, has been guaranteed by placing this operational programme under the responsibility of the same Managing Authority, to avoid double funding and ensure measures covered by the FEAD are properly coordinated.

All Member States report compliance with gender-equality principles and anti-discrimination policies. Most Member States have defined objective eligibility criteria – i.e. an individual's socio-economic status – to identify the target group and the end recipients, preventing discrimination from occurring at any level of the aid distribution. In **FI**, the Managing Authority has instructed its partner organisations and distribution points on the main principles of the Fund, and a network of partner organisations covers organisations reaching out to different target groups, to ensure that support is available regardless of gender. In **LV**, measures have been taken to ensure compliance with the principle of accessibility, including in respect of the needs of people with functional disabilities (according to national standards). In particular, packages are delivered at the end recipients' home if they cannot reach the distribution site. People who have difficulty travelling, parents with young children and the elderly are given preference at distribution sites to receive the packages without queuing, and distribution points are located near public transport stops. **LU** uses the Europe 2020 indicator to identify people at-risk-of-poverty and social exclusion. Some of these vulnerable people are non-Luxembourgish who do not necessarily have all the permits enabling them to settle legally in the country; others were unable to provide all the information requested in time. The priority was to provide access to food aid also for these people and families and to include them in the programme.

Many Member States said that they distribute varied and nutritionally-balanced food, and implement measures to limit food waste. In all Member States, food selection took into account products supporting a varied diet as well as food safety. In addition, the selection of products took into account the transportability of food products, the limited storage capacity of the partner organisations and the durability of the products. In **LT**, long-life products were purchased, while precise lists of end-recipents were drawn up to identify the precise quantities needed. In **IE**, a connection between businesses and charities, offered by a social enterprise, also allowed for redistribution throughout the country, providing access to a variety of quality surplus food products, and resulting in considerable savings on food costs for the charities. In **ES**, the programme distributes food that is easy to handle and preserve, with a long shelf life. In addition, food is transported in a format suitable for the final destination, which makes it easier to handle, with a low risk of the packaging breaking and creating food waste.

All Member States ensure that the food and products distributed comply with national health and safety standards. Many Member States further support the health of end-recipients by means of accompanying measures that promote a healthy lifestyle. In **HU, RO, SK**, managing authorities have involved a dietary expert in the planning process, to ensure that warm meals distributed have been composed of optimal foods for healthy eating, rich in minerals and vitamins. **IT** continued to select products taking into account the need for adequate intake of proteins and carbohydrates typical of a Mediterranean diet. In **SI**, suppliers are required to submit, before each stage of the supply of food, an analytical report from an accredited laboratory with the analyses of the products to be supplied. In **RO**, meetings were also held with relevant stakeholders (Ministry of Health, National Institute of Public Health and the National Institute for Mother and Child Health; representatives of the Ministry of Labour and Social Justice) regarding the contents of hygiene products packages.

Most Member States report in their annual implementation reports that they carried out eco-friendly actions. In **FI**, as the volumes of products procured are relatively small, their centralised purchase and transport will have a lower environmental impact than if each partner organisation carried out the transport itself. In **LV**, additional environmentally friendly measures have been promoted, such as ensuring the possibility to recycle paper, limiting the number of printouts, reusing paper (including recycled paper) for notebooks, using, where possible, stationary products made from wood from FSC-certified forests.

Most Member States report that they apply the partnership principle in programming the FEAD. In **BG**, the partnership principle has been drawn up and implemented in the operational programme on the basis of a broad consultation of stakeholders; continuous interaction with partners allowed for a thorough identification of existing problems and the most appropriate way to address them. In **PL**, national organisations apply the partnership principle in their ongoing cooperation with their regional and local organisations, monitoring progress in the implementation of food distribution and accompanying measures and responding to reported difficulties. Managing authorities and organisations also organise regular meetings and training.

A few Member States report that they took action to reduce administrative burden. In **FI**, a centralised purchase and transport of procured products, allowed by the small volumes of products, helps reduce the administrative burden related to these operations. In **BG**, an analysis was conducted with regard to the 'efficiency' criterion to avoid unnecessary administrative burden at all stages of the programmes' implementation and a number of simplification rules were introduced. In **SK**, to reduce the administrative burden on partner organisations, the managing authority set a unit price for hot meals, with a different rate for self-prepared meals and hot meals purchased from the contractor. The unit price was shared for information with the Commission before approval.

2.5 Evaluations

In the mid-term evaluation of FEAD it was recommended that the future programmes continue focusing on those who are most in need and keep the flexibility to implement both social inclusion and material assistance programmes. The merger of FEAD with ESF will indeed allow synergies and open up potential pathways for basic support for social inclusion that lead to people getting training and finding work, when the target groups are the same. In addition, it was advocated that Member States be encouraged to follow the Regulation closely, to avoid introducing requirements at national level that go beyond the requirements of the Regulation, as much of the administrative burden stems from requirements imposed at Member States' level, such as narrow definitions on eligibility. The preliminary findings of the ongoing 'Study supporting the monitoring of FEAD – data collection systems implemented by Member States' confirms the findings of the mid-term evaluation of FEAD and will provide examples of good practices for monitoring systems.

Challenges to implementation were tackled in FEAD evaluation partnership meetings and in the 2021-2027 regulation, where FEAD operations are integrated with ESF. In addition, simplified monitoring requirements are applied for specific objectives targeting the most deprived. For output indicators, it will be no longer necessary to report which types of goods have been purchased and there will be no longer a distinction between the quantity of meals and food packages distributed. If data is coming from registers, Member States can use national definitions, they do not have to align with the toolbox definitions. Furthermore, there is an enabling clause allowing Member States to use registers or equivalent sources. There will be no annual implementation reports anymore. Instead, the reporting of data will be

made via the IT tool for regular exchanges between the Commission and the programme authorities, i.e. SFC2021. Evaluations are mandatory for all specific objectives.

In line with the Regulation requirements, Managing Authorities implementing a food and/or basic material assistance operational programme (Operational Programme I) carried out a structured survey on end recipients in 2017. These surveys, together with the findings of an external evaluation, and the results of the open public consultation were used for the Commission mid-term evaluation of FEAD and have fed into the negotiations for the 2021-2027 programmes. Furthermore, the second round of structured survey on FEAD end recipients is to be carried out by the Managing Authorities for type I programmes (i.e. providing food and/or basic material assistance and accompanying measures) in 2022. The results of this survey can be used by the Managing Authorities to conduct evaluations and draw lessons learned at national level, and will allow the aggregated survey results at EU level to feed into the FEAD ex-post evaluation, to be conducted by the Commission.

Box 4: Evaluation activities in BG, FI and SI

Bulgaria

The Managing Authority carried out an external evaluation to assess the performance of the operational programme for food and/or basic material assistance. The evaluation concluded that the quality criteria have been met, and that operational changes made to the programme have served to increase the programmes' effectiveness, efficiency, compliance, coherence and European added value. They further helped increase the number of end recipients in the distribution of hot meals, and in assistance under the programme to overcome poverty and social exclusion, through the provision of accompanying measures.

Recommendations underlined room for improvement with respect to communicating activities to the general public; improving the redirection of people able to work towards upskilling activities and active inclusion in the labour market; introducing alternative food support options to the current model, to assess the risks, prevent the restriction of access to aid for the most deprived persons and ensure the quality of the service provided; (with respect to the 2021-2027 programming period) considering introducing measures to finance additional forms of material assistance, to be provided together with food support; using the money from the Social Protection Fund mainly to finance projects to renovate and modernise public canteens.

Finland

An annual evaluation meeting with the Commission took place remotely in November 2020. The annual joint meeting of the partner organisations and the managing authority was also held remotely in January. The annual meeting has taken stock of topical issues, as well as feedback on the delivery and distribution of products. At the same time, it aimed to provide guidance and advice on how to fill in the forms and guide delivery points. Preliminary information on implementation in 2021 and on the state of play of the ESF+ preparation was also reviewed.

Slovenia

The mid-term evaluation of the IMO operational programme carried out in 2019 showed that the programme is implemented in a very cost-effective manner. There is room for improvement in the food procurement process, in particular in obtaining more favourable product prices. It was proposed to standardise systems or implement interlinkages of databases between partner organisations and the Social Work Centre. It was also proposed that the list of end recipients be drawn up by a competent organisation to relieve the burden

on partner organisations. There was no significant administrative burden on both the Managing Authority's (the Ministry of labour, family and social affairs – MDDSZ) and partner organisations' side, and optimisation could only be achieved by establishing a pool of aid beneficiaries.

1. CONCLUSIONS

In 2020, FEAD operations were affected by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The health crisis worsened the conditions for existing vulnerable people in receipt of FEAD support, while new people also sought food aid, thus increasing overall demand for food and material assistance. Also, partner organisations delivering support on the ground were affected by capacity issues and logistical challenges due to issues such as staffing shortages, disruptions in the distribution of food and material goods and health restrictions such as lockdowns and new hygiene requirements.

However, FEAD has proven to be adaptable and responsive to emerging needs. From a regulatory point of view, the FEAD Regulation was amended in three occasions in the last two years.

1. As part of the CRII+ initiative, amendments made it possible to use indirect delivery modes, e.g. vouchers or cards (to lower the risk of contamination) and to buy personal protective equipment for organisations delivering FEAD support. Moreover, liquidity in Member States was strengthened, making it possible to provide 100% co-financing rate for one accounting year.
2. As part of REACT-EU, amendments allowed Member States to allocate additional funding to FEAD to provide top-ups to existing support, such as food and/or basic material assistance or social inclusion actions. The knowledge of the target groups and outreach activities by partner organisations together with their strong cooperation with Managing Authorities also proved to be essential to address the pandemic-related challenges and exploit the new flexibilities.
3. As part of the CARE (Cohesion's Action for Refugees in Europe) initiative, the amendments allow Member States and regions to have more flexibility and liquidity to use the FEAD to provide emergency support to people fleeing Ukraine following the invasion by the Russian Federation.

The total eligible public expenditure committed to FEAD support stood at EUR 643 million in 2020, up from EUR 608 million in 2019. At the end of 2020, the cumulative amounts committed (for 2014-2020) amounted to nearly EUR 3.9 billion, or 85% of the total resources of the programmes (which include EU funds and national co-financing). An amount of approximately EUR 552.2 million was paid to beneficiaries in 2020, a notable increase with respect to previous years' levels, due to the resumption of operations in Romania and the increased demand during the pandemic. Thus, FEAD financial implementation appears to be on track.

In 2020, FEAD successfully delivered assistance in 27 Member States, making good progress in achieving its objectives. Most Member States (23 of 27) distributed food and/ or basic material assistance together with accompanying measures, while four continued to run social inclusion programmes. Almost 15 million people were supported with food aid, approximately 1.96 million people with material assistance and 30 000 people with social inclusion measures. The profile of target groups remained broadly stable, albeit with some

small changes: about 47% of the end recipients were women, 28% children, about 10% migrants, participants with a foreign background or minorities, 10% people aged 65 years or over, 6% homeless people and 6% persons with disabilities. All Member States implementing OP I programmes also provided accompanying measures that had to be adapted to the health crisis. The national annual implementation reports also showed overall compliance with the general principles.

As FEAD 2014-2020 draws to a close, for the 2021-2027 programming period FEAD will become an integral part of the ESF+, thus further integrating the attention paid to tackling the worst forms of poverty within broader social inclusion strategies and funding. The ESF+ programmes will be key to supporting economic and social recovery after the pandemic, and to promoting a fair transition to a climate-neutral economy in line with the ambitions of the European Green Deal and in combination with the Just Transition Fund. It will also be a key programme for delivering on the European Pillar of Social Rights.