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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE EVALUATION

**Ex Post Evaluation of the 2014-2020 Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived
(FEAD)**

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This executive summary presents the main findings of the ex-post evaluation of the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) for the period 2014-2022. In line with the Better Regulation Guidelines, the evaluation looked at the Fund's effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence, EU added value, and visibility. The evaluation also aims to provide lessons learned relevant for the support to the most deprived under ESF+ in the programming period 2021-2027 and to contribute to the design of future programmes beyond 2027.

I. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) was created in 2014 with the objective to *“promote social cohesion, enhance social inclusion and therefore ultimately contribute to the objective of eradicating poverty in the Union by contributing to achieving the poverty reduction target of at least 20 million of the number of persons at risk of poverty and social exclusion in accordance with the Europe 2020 strategy, whilst complementing the Structural Funds”* and is implemented through two types of operational programmes:

- 'food or basic material assistance for the most deprived persons combined with accompanying measures' (OP I), implemented in 23 Member States;
- 'social inclusion of the most deprived persons' (OP II), implemented in 4 Member States.

The evaluation was launched in 2023 in accordance with Article 18 of FEAD Regulation (EU) No 223/2014. It identified the following main findings and lessons learnt at the level of each evaluation criterion.

II. MAIN FINDINGS

II.1 Effectiveness

FEAD has been highly effective in alleviating poverty and social exclusion among the most disadvantaged groups in the EU. With a budget of €5.2 billion, FEAD supported food distribution, basic material assistance, and social inclusion activities, addressing the immediate effects of poverty and social exclusion while strengthening the ecosystem of actors providing these services. Moreover, the programme successfully reached vulnerable groups, including children, women, and homeless people, and adapted to emerging needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, energy crisis, and war in Ukraine.

A correlation analysis estimated that FEAD contributed to reducing poverty rates, with a one-million-euro increase in FEAD expenditure associated with a reduction of 2,650 people at risk of poverty or social exclusion.

Despite these achievements, challenges were faced in reaching groups with complex needs due to eligibility criteria, practical obstacles, and limited awareness. Additionally, areas for improvement were identified, including reducing food waste, ensuring balanced diets, and implementing gender equality and non-discrimination principles.

Factors facilitating effectiveness included strong collaboration and direct involvement of civil society organisations, extensive networks of partner organisations, outreach measures, flexibility to define the target groups and to adapt to their needs, while hindering factors included lengthy public procurement processes, administrative burdens, limited resources, and external events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, and inflation.

Overall, FEAD has also had unintended positive results, such as creating spaces for interaction between recipients and providers, fostering new collaborations, increasing capacity to support vulnerable groups, and improving knowledge of target groups' vulnerability. However, there is still room for improvement in addressing the multifaceted obstacles faced by vulnerable people and reducing dependency on FEAD-type support as end-recipients may become too reliant on the support and not address the underlying issues.

II.2. Efficiency

A full cost-effectiveness assessment was not possible to carry out because of lack of data. Available evidence nonetheless suggests that FEAD was overall cost-effective, with a cost per person of EUR 31 for food support, EUR 19 for basic material assistance and EUR 527 for social integration measures. Academic studies indicate that the cost of providing food support is significantly lower than the cost of hospitalisation due to malnutrition and that free school meals have excellent cost-effectiveness, leading to improved educational attainment and health outcomes. In most cases, food distribution was used to invite end recipients to accompanying measures, which has likely led to a substantially increased take-up of social inclusion offers by people who would not have found out about these opportunities without the food provision. Hence, the combination of provision of food/material support and accompanying measures was considered to be most effective. Furthermore, innovations in supply chain management, such as centralised procurement systems, intermediate distribution centres or the involvement of volunteers have significantly reduced costs.

However, the implementation of FEAD has also been affected by administrative burdens, particularly with regards to monitoring requirements and eligibility verification processes. To address these challenges, the increased use of digital tools, simplified eligibility verification or audit processes as well as the introduction of 5% flat-rate and vouchers have been effective in reducing costs and administrative burdens as well as in streamlining the distribution process over time. The contribution of partner organisations has also been crucial, as they have leveraged their local knowledge, existing networks, and experience to reduce costs and improve delivery of the support. Overall, the evaluation highlights the importance of balancing the need for the fulfilment of necessary requirements with reducing administrative burden and implementing simplification measures to ensure the successful implementation of similar programmes in the future.

II.3 Coherence

FEAD was complementary to national, regional and local actions and policies for poverty reduction and social inclusion, at the level of both design and implementation reaching out to target groups that would not otherwise be covered by national or local measures. Moreover, FEAD contributed to leverage policy attention to these policies, provided stability and continuity of assistance, and extended the support to a broader range of individuals. This complementarity was effectively promoted through close collaboration between FEAD Managing Authorities, partner organisations, and national stakeholders.

FEAD operations were also complementary to support provided by other EU instruments, such as the European Social Fund (ESF), the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). Examples of good practices have been observed in several Member States, where ESF and FEAD operational programmes have been designed to complement each other, and food aid recipients have been actively informed and supported to access ESF-funded training and employment measures. Importantly, there is no evidence of overlaps or duplication between FEAD and other EU or national support measures.

FEAD support was also complementary to wider EU policies, including the European Semester and EU policies in areas such as poverty reduction, fundamental rights, public health, and agricultural policy. However, there could be room for improvement, advocating for a more coherent, holistic, and joined-up EU strategy to tackle poverty.

II.4 Relevance

FEAD demonstrated high relevance to the needs of the most deprived, focusing on immediate poverty relief and reducing their social exclusion. Member States effectively defined target groups, primarily using income-based eligibility criteria, which ensured that FEAD support reached relevant groups in need. However, this approach sometimes inadvertently excluded the most vulnerable populations, such as the homeless and Roma, who often fell outside social security systems. People living in rural areas were broadly reached by FEAD although geographical disparities in support were identified, with some areas receiving less frequent assistance due to remoteness and limited resources. Accompanying measures were also highly relevant, serving as a key entry point to activities outside of FEAD and fostering trust between end recipients and social workers. Although their implementation varied across Member States, the fund's flexibility allowed Member States to adapt operations to address emerging needs and target groups, such as responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, and the energy crisis. Looking ahead, this type of support remains relevant. There is some concern among FEAD stakeholders that if not incremented, resources may be insufficient to address future trends and concerns, including the cost-of-living crisis, demographic changes, increased migration, and climate change, which are expected to increase the size and needs of the 'most deprived' target groups.

II.5 EU added value

The evaluation has demonstrated significant beneficial effects of FEAD in terms of volume, scope, role, and process effects. The principal EU added value of FEAD was alleviating the direct effects of poverty and food insecurity for an average of 14.2 million individuals, every year, between 2014 and 2022. FEAD made up a large share – sometimes up to 60% – of the support provided by Member States to the most vulnerable. FEAD increased the volume of support provided to those in need, enabling Member States to reach more end recipients, while also broadening the range of services available to end recipients, enhancing the social dimension of food aid, and addressing new target groups (e.g. homeless people and newly arrived EU migrants).

Specifically, it also strengthened community-level structures by fostering new collaborations among organisations delivering FEAD operations locally, and helped mainstream innovative approaches that linked food aid with social inclusion measures. Additionally, FEAD played a crucial role in bringing vulnerable groups into contact with professionals, providing a simple yet effective way to reach the most deprived persons and facilitate access to other social inclusion measures. Overall, the FEAD programme has demonstrated significant EU added value, making a positive impact on the lives of millions of individuals in need.

II.6 Visibility

Various visibility and awareness-raising activities were carried out to inform the general public and end recipients about the EU's involvement in the FEAD programme. Traditional media, websites, and social media were the primary channels used by most Member States to promote FEAD information to the public, with some effectiveness, but overall awareness of the EU's role in FEAD remains limited. OP II countries had less focus on visibility and communication to the public, partly due to concerns about stigmatising participants. In terms of visibility

towards end recipients, actions were more effective in ensuring they knew the support came from the EU, with methods such as posters, leaflets, EU logos on packages, and text messages being employed. However, there is still room to increase visibility of FEAD-type actions among end recipients, particularly among certain target groups such as the elderly, homeless, and migrant populations who may face barriers such as limited technology access, language skills, or low levels of literacy. Challenges and risks include stigmatisation of end recipients and factors such as lack of interest, limited technology access, and language barriers hindering the effectiveness of visibility actions.

III. LESSONS LEARNT

Effectiveness

The evaluation found that the provision of food and basic material assistance has proved to be a successful, easy-to-access type of support that alleviated some of the direct effects of poverty and brought vulnerable individuals in contact with social services. As such, funding to the provision of food and basic material assistance for vulnerable groups under ESF+ remains important. However, this type of aid is insufficient by itself and would require additional extensive complementary measures to help address the multiple challenges faced by those most in need.

Even if FEAD successfully reached the most deprived, flexible eligibility criteria beyond income metrics could allow partner organisations to help individuals, who fall just outside the strict criteria based on income but are still in need. In addition, as marginalised groups such as Roma were harder to reach with FEAD support, national authorities could more explicitly target these groups when designing the operations and so better tailor the support to their specific needs.

To create synergies, it was found important to prioritise long-term, tailored social inclusion measures alongside the provision of food and basic material assistance. Additionally, dedicated resources could be increased by Member States to strengthen staff and volunteers' competences in partner organisations. Moreover, these organisations could be more systematically consulted by managing authorities when organising support for the most deprived. Flexibility remains important to respond to emerging trends and ensure that support is tailored to the specific needs of vulnerable groups.

Efficiency

To enhance the cost effectiveness of FEAD type of support, implementing a comprehensive support system e.g. by establishing one-stop-shops that combine food and material assistance with other services, such as training, guidance, and financial advice, appears as the most effective approach. Cost effectiveness may also benefit from simplified eligibility verification processes, and a more flexible approach to eligibility, allowing local discretion. Implementing efficiency measures such as facilitating mutual learning opportunities between Member States or exploring the use of vouchers could contribute to this objective. Furthermore, capacity building could be prioritised, with a focus on providing partners with the necessary time, resources, and training to develop their competences and expertise.

Additionally, to adequately assess cost-effectiveness, gathering data on the actual impact of FEAD on end recipients could be beneficial. To further optimise FEAD-type operations, a robust monitoring and evaluation framework could be established, utilising quasi-experimental studies and administrative data to assess the impact on end recipients without imposing additional burden on organisations.

Coherence

To ensure coherence, complementarities and synergies with national and regional policies, measures should continue being strategically planned and implemented, as well as regularly monitored. This would also involve mapping national, regional, and local stakeholders including Partner Organisations to identify potential synergies and encourage their development. To this end, fostering a culture of collaboration, clear communication and awareness-raising on the benefits of EU funding, and sharing inspiring practices are considered essential. Further synergies could be achieved by setting up close working relationships through formal mechanisms like advisory/monitoring committees, regular meetings, and mutual learning opportunities. Additionally, synergies with other EU instruments could be actively fostered, ensuring access to follow-on support and complementary forms of assistance.

To foster a better understanding of opportunities for assistance offered by FEAD-type support and oversight of its implementation a comprehensive EU strategy could be explored, bringing together different EU policy measures to tackle poverty and social exclusion.

Relevance

To increase the relevance and increase take-up of FEAD type of support, a multifaceted approach is key for managing authorities. This would allow local organisations to address the specific needs of their target groups and involve end recipients in the design process through structured involvement and consultation. More concerted outreach efforts to reach groups that are reluctant to engage with social services but often face the highest poverty risk would increase relevance and take-up of support. Successful social innovation examples of structured and systematic involvement of end recipients themselves in the design of the support could be examined. Additionally, consideration could be given to the diverse needs of target groups, including cultural and dietary requirements, migratory flows, and the needs of elderly people, such as home delivery options.

EU-added value

The FEAD programme has provided valuable lessons for enhancing EU added value in supporting vulnerable groups. To build on these insights, continued support through the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) for all vulnerable groups, including those rarely or not previously covered by national mechanisms, remains important. This can be achieved by maintaining and further developing collaborations between national authorities, civil society organisations, and local actors working with the most deprived, and by providing specific resources for capacity-building of civil society organisations involved in delivering EU social inclusion funding programmes. Moreover, leveraging strengthened community-level networks can facilitate experimentation with socially innovative approaches to tackling poverty, allowing for the development of innovative solutions to address the complex and evolving needs of vulnerable groups. To maximise the added value of these initiatives, it is crucial for Member States to conduct rigorous evaluations of future FEAD-type interventions, considering the use of (quasi-) experimental approaches to assess causal relationships between interventions and outcomes,

Visibility

Two key lessons related to visibility are that improved communication and accessible information are crucial for effective FEAD-type support. Firstly, national authorities could

increase efforts to communicate about EU support for the most deprived, sharing best practices while avoiding stigmatisation. Secondly, in doing so, information about available support could be provided in a way that considers the specific difficulties of target groups. This may involve using non-digital formats such as paper or oral information for those with limited digital access or providing oral information through social workers or community actors for those with low literacy. Additionally, multilingual information can help cater to those with language difficulties, ensuring that support reaches those who need it most.

Overall, ensuring sustainability of results for this type of support is challenging considering its focus on short-term relief, which is ultimately inadequate on its own to address the underlying causes of poverty and social exclusion.