

European Competence Centre for Social Innovation
ESF+ Social Innovation+ Initiative

Community of Practice on Material Support

Work Programme



This initiative is implemented under the EaSI strand of the ESF+

COP	Material Support
Programme year	2023-2024
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Social Innovation and transnational cooperation is an imperative.

ESF Social Innovation+ 2022–2027 aims at facilitating transnational cooperation to boost the transfer and scaling up of innovative solutions aimed at reducing inequalities across the EU, especially in the policy areas of employment, skills and social inclusion.

Transnational cooperation activities, including mutual learning and capacity building, will be organised in the framework of the following Communities of Practice (CoPs): (1) Employment, Education and Skills, (2) Social Inclusion, (3) Social Innovation, and, at a later stage, (4) Migrant integration and (5) Material support (Ex FEAD Community). Mutual learning activities will also be organised and supported within the EU-Roma network and the network supporting the implementation of the ALMA initiative in the Member States.

The ambitious objectives of the ESF+ Social Innovation+ action must be placed in the very challenging societal context of 2022. The European economy was slowly recovering from the Corona pandemic resulting in an overheated labour market and new work patterns. The social and interpersonal consequences of the lockdowns and stress caused by the pandemic are not yet completely understood. The recovery process stopped abruptly in February 2022, due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Millions left the country looking for a safe haven, budgets for military equipment boomed, and policy agendas shifted dramatically across the globe. An unprecedented energy crisis, high inflation, rising poverty and interruptions in the industrial supply chains challenge the EU societies and our way of living.

An additional layer of complexity was added on top of the numerous challenges pre-dating this crisis, such as the lack of personal assistance schemes and supported decision-making, or affordable and supported housing; also lack of effective family support, availability of long-term care services, limited access to the labour market for people excluded from society, and shortage of staff in social services. Social budgets are under pressure, and inclusion is rarely on top of the political agenda. While there is evidence that social protection schemes and social services play an important role in mitigating the effects of the crisis, many societal actors and institutions, despite being on the frontline, are geared down to a survival mode.

The pre-crisis policies of the EU provide a solid framework to address the social innovation and social inclusion challenges ahead. The work of the CoPs will connect the ESF+ regulation and funding to the wider policy context and assist in refocusing when needed.

These policy frameworks especially relevant for the Social Inclusion CoP are:

- European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) Action Plan
- ESF+ regulation and Common Provisions Regulation
- EU Semester
- Child Guarantee
- EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
- UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
- The Care Strategy
- European Platform on Combatting Homelessness

Although the post-corona era, the war, and the rising poverty risks bring extraordinary challenges, they also create the needed sense of urgency regarding social renewal and innovation. 'Business as usual' will no longer work. Rethinking local development, having everybody on board and at work, equipped with the skills of tomorrow, is a necessity. Participatory approach should be the instrument for achieving that.

Social Innovation, transnational cooperation, and EU funding are part of the answer in such difficult times, and they will help ESF+ Managing Authorities (MAs) in collaboration with beneficiaries to better address societal challenges in their national and regional programmes.

By bringing together experts, practitioners, researchers, decision- and policy-makers, innovators and entrepreneurs, who share common concerns or interests, the CoP activities will allow actors to identify proven solutions that can be upscaled and transferred across Europe. The best initiatives in the fields of employment, education, skills, and social inclusion could thus be spread across more regions, so that more people could benefit from them. The work done by the CoPs should contribute to the best possible use of the ESF+ budget.

Community of practice on material support – rationale

Poverty and social exclusion remain significant challenges in the EU. The recent data shows that in 2021 the At Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion (AROPE) rate in the European Union was 21.7%., which represented a slight increase from the 2019 AROPE rate of 21.1% and 21.6% in 2020. This means that around 95 million people in the EU were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2021.

Reducing poverty and social exclusion is one of the EU's main objectives. Member States had to allocate at least 25% of ESF+ resources to promoting social inclusion. In addition, the ESF+ includes the former Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD), with a specific objective dedicated to material support. All Member States are required to allocate at least 3% of their ESF+ resources to this objective, with the overall aim that, at Union level, a minimum of 4% of the resources of the ESF+ strand under shared management support the most deprived persons.

The EU's long-standing work to tackle poverty and social exclusion has been exacerbated by recent challenges. The sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, soaring inflation and energy prices, and the war in Ukraine have had the greatest impact on people experiencing poverty and social exclusion. For some people, these challenges have made it even more difficult to afford basic goods, leaving them to choose between paying their bills and meeting their basic needs. At the same time, it has increased the number of people in need of material support.

According to Eurostat, in 2021 around 6.3% of the EU population reported experiencing severe material and social deprivation. 7.3% of the EU population, or 32 million people, were unable to afford a meal with meat, chicken, or fish or a vegetarian equivalent every second day in 2021. Food deprivation remains a significant issue, particularly for vulnerable groups, especially families with children, people with disabilities and elderly, and can have severe consequences for individuals and their health, as well as for society.

While material assistance plays a significant role in ensuring the right to food, it can also be one of the tools for reducing poverty and social exclusion. In combination with other programmes, including social, employment and other services, material assistance is a first step towards lifting people out of poverty.

However, over the years, FEAD's experience has shown that the provision of material support comes with its own set of challenges that range from the organisation of logistics and storage to the provision of services and creation of partnerships. Crisis situations and changes in the economic and geopolitical landscape have often deepened the problems or created new ones: changing forms of delivery, disruptions in logistics chains, changes in the nature of volunteering, rising contingency costs, and reduced donations in a number of areas.

The current socio-economic context calls for innovative and sustainable solutions to make efficient use of available resources, meet people's basic needs and contribute to poverty reduction policies. Cooperation between Member States and different stakeholders is particularly important. Experts' knowledge and practical experience from different countries must be utilised to address the key challenges and establish the best practices using ESF+.

To tackle food deprivation in the EU, policymakers and civil society organisations must collaborate to develop comprehensive strategies that address the root causes of food poverty, including poverty and social exclusion, as well as access to healthy and affordable food. It is crucial to work together to find sustainable solutions that can help reduce food poverty in the long run. Such solutions should involve multi-stakeholder partnerships, innovation, and capacity building to create a more resilient food system that meets the needs of all.

Previous work of the FEAD Community has laid important foundations for tackling challenges collectively. However, it is equally important to explore emerging issues and find new approaches that are relevant to most Member States. Further strengthening of mutual learning is essential to ensure the effective provision of material support.

It is also crucial to recognise that the most effective and sustainable solutions are those that proactively involve the target group. Beneficiaries should be involved in programme design and implementation, as their insights can lead to more effective interventions and empower them, which produces more impactful outcomes. Empowering beneficiaries should be at the forefront of efforts to reduce poverty and social exclusion through material support.

Objectives

The overall objective of Material Support Community of Practice is to improve the provision of material support to individuals and families in need. By bringing together different stakeholders, the CoP can help to build a more coordinated, effective, and sustainable approach to material support provision.

Other objectives:

1. **Consolidating knowledge in the field of material support and sharing know-how.** Members of the CoP can share their experiences, challenges and best practices in providing material support to individuals and families in need. This can help to identify effective approaches, tools, and resources that can be replicated in other contexts.
2. **Building capacity.** The CoP can provide training and other learning opportunities for material support stakeholders. The goal is to equip actors in material support with the necessary knowledge, skills, and tools to ensure the needs of the target populations.
3. **Facilitating networking and encouraging collaboration.** By working together, different countries and stakeholders can leverage each other's strengths and expertise, leading to more effective and efficient provision of material support.
4. **Promoting innovation in the provision of material support.** The CoP can be a platform for generating new ideas and innovative solutions for providing material support. By bringing together different perspectives and experiences, the CoP can foster creativity and innovation, leading to the development of new tools and methods for providing material support.
5. **Supporting policy change.** The CoP can be a platform for promoting policy changes that improve material support provision and address the root causes of material deprivation.

The Material Support CoP aims to maintain the continuity of the FEAD community's activities and to use the knowledge generated for collaboratively addressing both old and emerging challenges. The CoP will continue to share its expertise and work towards identifying opportunities for improvement that can be implemented collectively.

The Material Support CoP focuses on three overarching topics that are relevant to most countries:

Reducing poverty and social exclusion through material support combined with accompanying measures. Which groups are the most in need of material support? How can we meet their varying needs? How do we determine who should receive the support? How can we reach those most vulnerable groups and how to address the non-take-up issue? How can we ensure that material assistance also addresses other basic needs and helps to lift people out of poverty? What synergies can be built between other ESF+ programmes to make an impact in social and environmental fields? Do we ensure that people experiencing poverty are sufficiently involved in decision-making? Do we ensure that beneficiaries are involved in the planning and implementation of the programme? Are the needs of the target group taken into account, when it comes to the design and implementation of the material support?

Providing material support in times of crisis. What is our response to the necessity of providing material assistance to the poorest in times of crisis? What lessons have been learned and what opportunities have been opened up by the recent crises? What are the roles of different actors? How crucial is their cooperation to tackling the new challenges? Have the mentioned crises already been overcome in the context of material assistance? What are the short-term socio-economic and geopolitical forecasts for European countries? How will this impact material deprivation indicators? Are the governmental institutions and other relevant stakeholders being prepared for future shocks?

Promoting innovations to address old and new challenges. What are the best practices that we can share? What are the different ways of support? What kind of improvements are needed to make material support delivery more effective? What factors foster innovations and which ones hold them back? Do we need legislative changes to move towards them? What is the role of different actors and programmes in helping to promote innovation?

The following topics will be discussed in 2023:

1. FEAD becoming part of ESF+: new developments, opportunities and challenges that arise during transition periods.
2. Accompanying measures: addressing the root causes of poverty and social exclusion. Providing social services, job training, education, or other support to enable individuals and families become more self-sufficient.
3. Advantages and drawbacks of the voucher system: best practices for designing and implementing voucher programmes, ensuring accessible and effective support for the target group.
4. Providing support during a cost-of-living crisis: What are the major challenges and necessary responses? What lessons can be learned from previous crises?

The following topics will be discussed in 2024:

1. Involving the target group: from decision making to the provision of support. Promoting participatory approaches, empowering the target group, and giving them a sense of ownership over the programmes.
2. Meeting varying needs: how material support can be tailored to meet the diverse needs of different target groups. Personalised approach to material support and interventions to meet the unique needs of each individual.
3. Material support and Just Transition: how material support programmes can contribute to more sustainable and green economic models.
4. Efficient and effective delivery of material assistance: logistics, storage, and distribution.

The topics can also be modified or changed according to the CoP members' preferences or due to other factors.

Participants: key target groups

The CoP will consist of a wide range of key stakeholders working in the areas of material deprivation, material assistance, or other related areas. This includes:

- European Commission
- National and regional Managing Authorities
- Line ministries
- Intermediate bodies
- Implementing organisations (NGOs)
- Other partner organisations

The CoP will also involve academics and practitioners with relevant knowledge in the field.

Ensuring members' involvement

The success of the CoP is inseparable from the active engagement of its members. However, the group is composed of a very large number of participants who come from diverse backgrounds and different institutions. It is therefore necessary to follow basic principles to ensure the participation of its members.

- **Relevant topics and activities.** The work programme will be presented and discussed with the participants of the CoP. The CoP will actively seek feedback from its members and make necessary adjustments to improve the effectiveness of its activities. The work programme can be revised and refined in response to the evolving needs and situation of the CoP participants.
- **Engaging and participative approach to events and meetings.** All stakeholders and interested participants can contribute through open discussions, breakout rooms and other events. The CoP will also provide opportunities for members to lead or contribute to specific projects or initiatives, based on their skills and interests. Technical tools will be used to engage and involve participants in different ways.
- **Inclusive environment that values all perspectives and input.** The CoP will make sure that all relevant stakeholders are invited to join the CoP and are given an equal opportunity to participate in discussions and decision-making processes. Ensuring respectful communication, active listening, and valuing all perspectives.
- **Regular communication.** The CoP will establish a system of communication to keep its members informed and engaged. The members will be regularly informed about upcoming events, activities, and opportunities to contribute, as well as provided with a space for ongoing discussions and exchange of ideas.

- **Effective management of the group.** A Steering Group will meet at least twice a year a year to discuss the progress and outputs of CoP activities, and to propose adjustments as necessary. External experts, representatives of the Commission, and of the European social fund agency (ESFA) will also participate in the meetings.

Proposed activities and outputs (results)

Material Support CoP will use various formats and tools to facilitate discussions and learning on different topics. These may include plenary meetings, webinars, peer reviews, study visits, trainings, networking events, etc. The selection of formats and tools will depend on the specific topic and the needs of the CoP members.

In 2023, 4 online and 2 on-site events are planned.

In 2024, 5 online and 1 on-site events are planned.

The outputs also may vary depending on the issue. They may include toolkits, guides, recommendation papers, mapping reports, etc. Additionally, one-page summaries that highlight the most important aspects of the outputs will be prepared to ensure accessibility and ease of use.

Dissemination of results

The recordings of the virtual meetings as well as the results of the meetings will be disseminated at the MS Teams group of the Community of Practice on Material Support. The outcomes of the meetings will also be shared within the community through newsflashes.

To reach a wider audience, the CoP will make use of other communication channels such as social media, the SI+ website, MS Teams and other platforms. ESFA will develop a communication strategy to determine the most effective dissemination channels for the CoP's results.

In addition, CoP members are encouraged to utilise their own communication channels, such as social media, websites, and newsletters, to share the outcomes of the meetings, and to ensure that policy makers and practitioners in Member States can stay informed about the CoP activities and their main results.

Teamwork organisation and logistics

The CoP coordinator and ESFA will act as the secretariat, responsible for organising work and administrative collaboration. They will provide assistance with logistics, technical support for online apps and tools, and technical experts.

The Steering Group, together with the Lead Thematic Expert and CoP coordinators, will coordinate, implement, and monitor the activities of all CoPs. Thematic experts will work closely with the CoP Chair and co-Chairs to develop and revise work programmes, organise activities, and set priorities. They will also contribute to the development of all outputs, prepare documents, and implement a wider dissemination strategy.

Work schedule

Time	Activities/meetings	Output
April 2023	Plenary meeting and breakout session	Presentation of the draft work programme, feedback collection, summary report
May 2023	First meeting of the Steering group	Setting up the Steering group, election of Chair/Co-chair
June 2023	Online meeting	Report
June 2023	Managing Authorities online meeting	Mapping report
September 2023	On-site meeting of the 5 CoPs	Report

October 2023	Online meeting	Mapping report
November 2023	On-site meeting and study visit	Report
December 2023	Plenary session	Revised work programme 2023-2024
February 2024	Online meeting	Report
March 2024	Online meeting	Report
April 2024	Online meeting	Report
June 2024	Online meeting	Report
September 2024	Online meeting	Report
November 2024	On-site meeting and study visit	Report

