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Analysis of ESF+ Support Addressing Material Deprivation

Insights into recipient demographics, implementation modes and key lessons learnt

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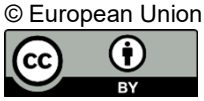
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Contents

Executive summary **6**

1. Introduction **7**

How does ESF+ material support work in practice? 8

2. Methodology **10**

3. Demographics: Who are the recipients of ESF+ material support? **12**

3.1. Socio-demographic characteristics 12

3.2. Living conditions and household composition 15

4. Nature and implementation of support provision **21**

4.1 Need for support and frequency of aid distributions 21

4.2 Content and usefulness of the support 23

4.3 Role of accompanying measures 23

4.4 Accessibility & availability of ESF+ support information 24

4.5 Difficulties in aid receipt 26

5. Comparing direct and indirect support **31**

5.1. Benefits and challenges of direct support 31

5.2. Benefits and challenges of the voucher system 33

6. Lessons learnt **37**

7. Conclusion **42**

Executive summary

The European Social Fund + provides material support to alleviate deprivation of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU. This report analyses the qualitative and quantitative findings from the 2024 structured survey of beneficiaries and end recipients of material support, complemented by additional interviews with Managing Authorities. It provides a detailed insight into who the end recipients are and discusses the key benefits and challenges of providing material support directly or via vouchers.

The data shows that the support is positively perceived across Member States, with 90% of end recipients finding it useful. The provision of food is more common than that of goods at EU level. In terms of demographics, two thirds of end recipients are women and aged between 30 and 54. Children in the household are also central recipients of the support. For many respondents, the ESF+ support is crucial in meeting their basic material needs, given their low incomes and inability to afford the items needed. In most cases, social services or non-profit organisations pointed end recipients to the ESF+ support available. To further assist the social integration of end recipients, accompanying measures are envisaged, with the most common being advice on food preparation and nutrition or redirection to competent services. As implementation of accompanying measures varies across Member States, there is room for improvement in some of them. Overall, the aid delivery runs smoothly, with most respondents not facing any difficulties, with remaining challenges being delays, needing to travel long distances, technical difficulties or access to information.

Compared to the direct delivery of aid, fewer end recipients of vouchers report feeling ashamed of accessing support. This demonstrates that reduced feelings of stigmatisation constitute a core benefit of voucher schemes, alongside personalisation of support and lower administrative costs. However, the need to introduce control and security systems limits shop participation in the voucher schemes, while opportunities for social contact at the distribution point are also reduced.

In addition to these main findings, the report provides further insights about how the ESF+ material support contributes to the EU’s broader commitment to reducing poverty and social exclusion, while also identifying key lessons learnt.

1. Introduction

The ESF+ is the European Union's main instrument for investing in people and supporting the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, with an initial EU budget of EUR 95 billion in 2021-27 (EUR 140 billion including national co-financing). Having integrated the 2014-2020 FEAD (Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived), the 2021-2027 ESF+ also provides food and material support, under the specific objective set out in point (m) of Article 4(1) of the ESF+ Regulation, "Addressing material deprivation". It thereby aims to contribute to the 2030 target of lifting at least 15 million people out of poverty or social exclusion in the European Union ([1]).

24 Member States ([2]) allocate resources to the respective specific objective (m). In that, they can choose to provide direct support via the distribution of food and goods and/or indirect support via the distribution of vouchers which enable end recipients to purchase certain food and goods.

In order to gain a better understanding of the ESF+ material support provided, the ESF+ Regulation envisages two structured surveys of end recipients and beneficiaries of food and/or basic material assistance throughout the 2021-27 programming period. The results are to be reported by Member States by 30 June 2025 and by 30 June 2028, based on surveys carried out in the preceding year. This report summarises the key findings of the first structured survey, based on the reported sample of 20 Member States, while also integrating additional insights from follow-up conversations with six Managing Authorities.

Chapter 2 of the report outlines the methodology underlying this report. Chapters 3 and 4 are based on the quantitative data from end recipients, discussing their socio-demographic characteristics and living conditions to gain an overview of the key target groups. Then, the nature of the support is analysed, covering, for example, the types of assistance received, how recipients knew about its availability and perceived its utility as well as potential difficulties in accessing support. Chapters 5 and 6 are based on the qualitative replies by the beneficiaries providing the support. These chapters compare the benefits and challenges of the two support modes, namely direct support versus the voucher system, and analyse the overall lessons learnt as shared by the beneficiaries.

This analysis of the structured survey thereby offers a detailed and valuable EU-level insight into the implementation of ESF+ operations providing material

([1]) European Commission (2021). *European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan*. Available at: European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan - Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

([2]) The remaining three Member States (Denmark, Germany and Sweden) provide support to the most deprived under a dedicated priority programmed for Specific Objective (l).

support. Collecting data on vulnerable groups, such as those facing material deprivation, can be particularly challenging, as they may be reluctant to provide personal details concerning their livelihoods. Hence, operations addressing material deprivation are subject to lighter reporting requirements under the ESF+, allowing for the use of estimates in transmitting yearly figures to the European Commission. The data and findings from the structured survey therefore allow for crucial additional insights, which facilitate national and EU level evaluations of measures addressing material deprivation.

How does ESF+ material support work in practice?

The Regulation establishes a minimum of 3% of Member States' ESF+ budget to be allocated to material deprivation. In practice, an average of 5% has been allocated by Member States These resources can be programmed under the specific objective (m) related to the provision of material assistance, as done by 24 Member States with a total budget of EUR 5.5 billion (incl. national co-financing), or under the specific objective focusing on social inclusion of the most deprived (SO(l)), as done in three Member States with specific dedicated priorities.

Food and/or basic material assistance may be provided directly. Direct support can entail, for example, the distribution of hot meals to recipients as well as the dispersal of food packages or material goods via pick-up stations or home deliveries. Indirect support, through vouchers or cards, can be in electronic, paper or other form, provided that they can be redeemed only against food and/or basic material assistance. Member States shall complement the delivery of food and/or basic material assistance by accompanying measures, such as referrals to competent services ([3]).

Recipients need to meet certain conditions to access the material support available. In most cases, this relates to living in poverty or with a low income, which may be determined by receipt of or eligibility for welfare benefits or social assistance. Assessments or referrals by social services are also common practice, as some form of attestation or documentation is typically required. Depending on Member State's programming, the focus can also lie on reaching certain vulnerable target groups, such as homeless people, parents, carers with disabled dependants or asylum seekers.

([3]) C.f. Art. 19(2) of Regulation (EU) 2021/1057 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021. Available at: Regulation - 2021/1057 - EN - EUR-Lex

Key terms of ESF+ implementation

Beneficiary

- Legal definition: A public or private law body, an entity with or without legal personality or a natural person, responsible for initiating or both initiating and implementing operations.
- Role in ESF+ material support: A beneficiary is an organisation providing the material support, with e.g. the Red Cross being a well-known example.

End/Final recipient

- Legal definition: A legal or natural person receiving support from the Funds through a beneficiary of a small project fund or from a financial instrument.
- Role in ESF+ material support: Person receiving material support.

Managing Authority

- Legal definition: The managing authority shall be responsible for managing the programme with a view to delivering the objectives of the programme. In particular, it shall select operations, carry out programme management tasks, support the work of the monitoring committee, supervise intermediate bodies, record and store data.
- Role in ESF+ material support: In many cases, the managing authority is a national or regional ministry, coordinating the implementation of the operations.

2. Methodology

The structured survey comprises two distinct questionnaires, one focussing on the provision of direct support and the other on indirect support. Both questionnaires target two respondent groups: the organisations or actors delivering the support (beneficiaries) and the end recipients of that support. The surveys include a combination of quantitative and qualitative questions ([4]). Member States applied different methods in conducting their surveys, such as stratified random sampling, proportional allocation, random selection or two-step sampling frameworks, mostly based on a 95% confidence interval. Data collection methods also varied and included e.g. computer-assisted personal interviews (CAPI) or other face-to-face modes, computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI), or online surveys. For direct support, interviews were often conducted at the distribution point.

The results presented are based overall on reporting from 20 Member States ([5]), covering 28,250 end recipients across the EU (21,258 end recipients for direct and 6,992 for indirect support ([6])).

Specifically, the results for direct support are based on the reporting from 14 Member States ([7]), while 7 Member States ([8]) provided and reported on indirect support, with only Bulgaria reporting on providing both types of support (see Table 1).

Quantitative responses were analysed statistically and are presented as percentages, with results contextualised against overall totals and EU averages. Qualitative responses were analysed using a clustering approach to identify recurring themes, common topics, and patterns in respondents' feedback, thereby complementing and enriching the quantitative findings. Additionally, the

([4]) Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2023/2071 of 27 September 2023. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32023R2071 and Corrigendum to Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2023/2071 of 27 September 2023. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:L_202490016

([5]) AT, BE, BG, CY, CZ, EE, FI, HU, IE, IT, LV, LT, LU, MT, PL, PT, RO, SK, SI, ES. Four additional Member States (HR, FR, EL, NL) have programmed resources under SO(m) and are therefore required to conduct a structured survey. However, they all submitted justifications for non-submission of the survey data in 2025, mostly based on delays in implementation of the operations under SO(m) not allowing for the collection of (meaningful) data.

([6]) The overall figure of beneficiaries participating in the survey is not reported due to different interpretations of the question "organisations involved in interviewing" yielding results which cannot be aggregated.

([7]) BE, BG, CY, CZ, HU, IE, IT, LU, LV, MT, PL, PT, SI, SK

([8]) AT, BG, EE, ES, FI, LT, RO

analysis was complemented by interviews with six Managing Authorities (BG, EE, ES, FR, IT, LT), conducted in May and June 2026, to gain additional insights and triangulate results.

Table 1 - Overview of support reported on by Member State

Member State	Type of support	Number of survey responses
Austria	Indirect	1138
Belgium	Direct	1196
Bulgaria	Direct & indirect	2815 (direct) & 373 (indirect)
Croatia	*No reporting*	
Cyprus	Direct	660
Czechia	Direct	4029
Denmark	*Support to the most deprived under SO(l)*	
Estonia	Indirect (complemented by food banks)	1130
France	*No reporting*	
Finland	Indirect	778
Germany	*Support to the most deprived under SO(l)*	
Greece	*No reporting*	
Hungary	Direct	2211
Ireland	Direct	1534
Italy	Direct	2801
Latvia	Direct	1263
Lithuania	Indirect (complemented by food banks)	1078
Luxembourg	Direct	521
Malta	Direct	904
Netherlands	*No reporting*	
Poland	Direct	947
Portugal	Direct	1149
Romania	Indirect	1181
Slovenia	Direct	1097
Slovakia	Direct	131
Spain	Indirect	1114
Sweden	*Support to the most deprived under SO(l)*	

Source: Data reported by MS on the ESF+ SO(m) Structured Survey. Data extracted in December 2025.

3. Demographics: Who are the recipients of ESF+ material support?

3.1. Socio-demographic characteristics

The survey provides insights into the socio-demographic characteristics of the end recipients.

Gender

At EU level, 66% of end recipients are women for both types of support. However, the gender balance varies between Member States, ranging from 85% women in Spain to 39% women in Slovakia (see Figure 1). These variations likely stem from different programming choices and target groups: In Spain, where the support from vouchers is intended for households with at least one child under 18, mothers appear to be the primary caretakers collecting the voucher support. Slovakia has the highest share of respondents experiencing homelessness (36%), a population among which men are overrepresented according to OECD data ([9]).

Age

At EU level, the majority of the surveyed end recipients (66%) are aged between 30 and 64 (see Figure 2).

Nationality

Across reporting Member States, 77% of end recipients are nationals of the respective Member State ([10]), 6% nationals of another EU country and 7% refugees or asylum seekers ([11]). Notable differences are observed across Member States: in several Eastern European or Baltic countries, nationals account for more than 90% of recipients (BG, HU, LT, RO), whereas significantly higher shares of asylum seekers are reported in Austria (40%) and Cyprus (31%). These variations reflect inter alia varying demographic

([9]) OECD (2026). *OECD Affordable Housing Database*. Indicator HC3.1. People experiencing homelessness and housing exclusion. Available at: https://oe.cd/ahd

([10]) 79% for direct, 70% for indirect support.

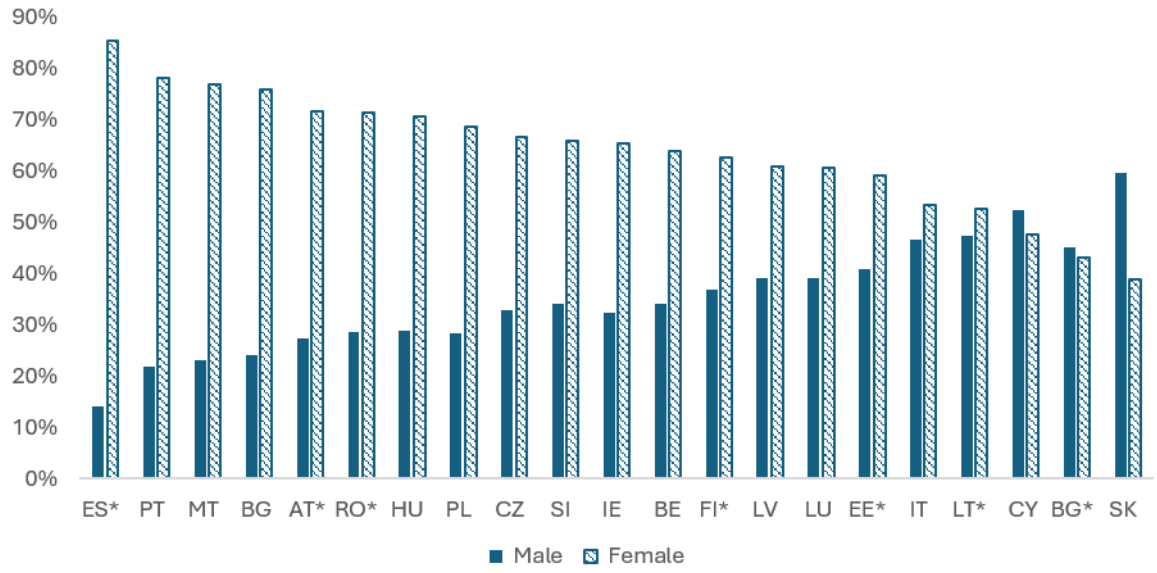
([11]) These figures do not add up to 100%, as not all respondents wished to answer this question.

compositions as well as specific targeting approaches of national support programmes.

Disability status

Overall, 21% of surveyed end recipients report having a disability. This proportion tends to be higher in Member States with a larger share of respondents aged 65 and over, which is in consistent with Eurostat data showing that disability rates rise with age ([12]).

Figure 1 - Respondent's gender by Member State

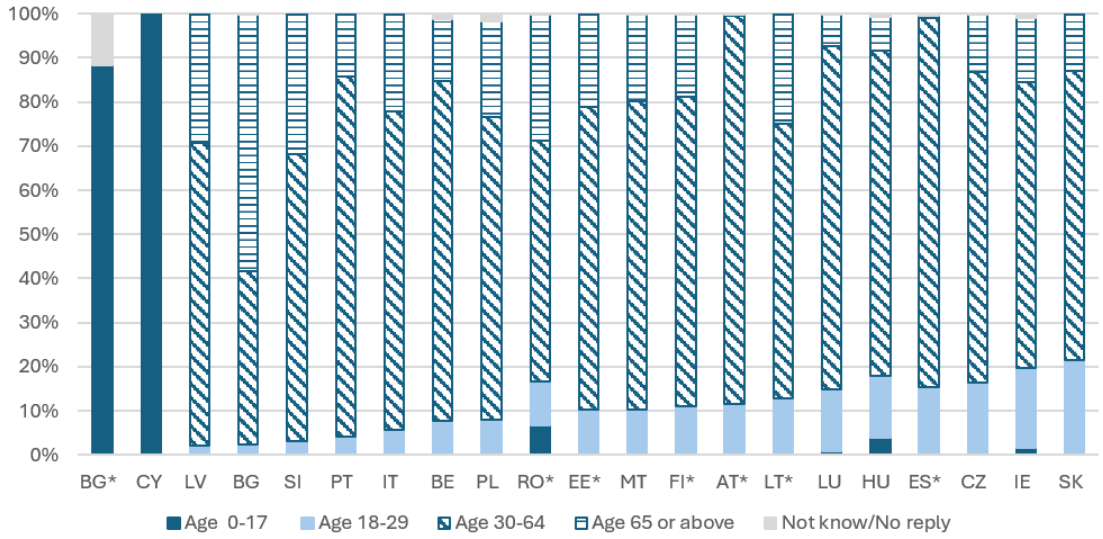


Source: Data reported by MS on the ESF+ SO(m) Structured Survey. Data extracted in December 2025.

Notes: Countries with asterisk (*) represent indirect support. ES support is intended at household level, hence the reply may only reflect the person collecting the voucher.

([12]) European Council/Council of the EU (2024). *Disability in the EU: Facts and Figures.* Available at: Disability in the EU: facts and figures - Consilium

Figure 2 - Respondent's age by Member State



Source: Data reported by MS on the ESF+ SO(m) Structured Survey. Data extracted in December 2025.

Notes: Countries with asterisk (*) represent indirect support. Countries ordered by increasing values of age group 18-29. Not know/No reply refers to the individual not knowing the reply, not willing to reply or not understanding the question. The figures from BG and CY are likely a result of misunderstanding the question. In most cases of children supported, the parents would have been the respondents and should have indicated their own age in filling in the questionnaire.*

Income & economic status

The data reveal that a significant majority of respondents do not earn an income from work, with figures standing at 74% for both types of support. Instead, they rely predominantly on benefits or other forms of income, accounting for around 60% for both (see Figure 3). Furthermore, in most cases, no other household member contributes a salary (72% for direct support and 68% for indirect support) or receives any additional income or benefits (67% and 58% respectively). This pattern underscores the importance of support provided through ESF+, showcasing its critical role in financial sustenance. Notably, this reliance varies among Member States.

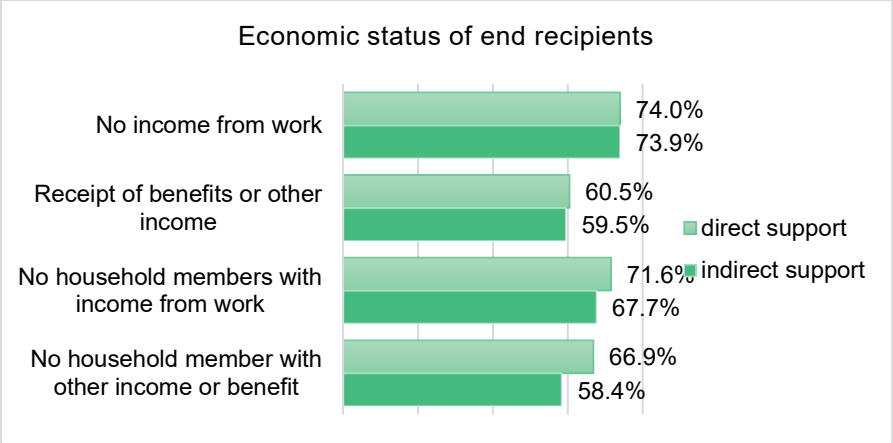
The highest shares of recipients of ESF+ material support who work are found in Hungary (46%), Luxembourg (34%) and Spain (32%). This is largely in line with Eurostat data on Member States with highest rates of risk of in-work poverty. (13)

In some Member States, the share of end recipients not receiving benefits or any other income vastly exceeds the EU average of 35% for direct and 38% for indirect support. For instance, 80% of respondents in Cyprus, 76% in Italy, 65% in Romania and 59% in Luxembourg do not get any other income or benefits.

(13) Eurostat (2025). *8.2% of EU workers are at risk of poverty.* Available at: 8.2% of EU workers are at risk of poverty - News articles - Eurostat

Furthermore, a substantial 83% of recipients of indirect support indicated that neither they nor other household members receive assistance (such as food, goods, or advice) from other organisations. Only a small fraction, 15%, benefit from additional aid. This trend is mirrored among recipients of direct support, with just 21% indicating that they, or members of their household, receive supplementary assistance. Combined with high unemployment, these patterns of recipients' lack of access to benefits or other income highlight the financial vulnerability of many recipients and underscore the relevance of ESF+ support in addressing their material needs.

Figure 3 - Economic status of end recipients



Source: Data reported by Member States on the ESF+ SO(m) Structured Survey. Data extracted in December 2025.

3.2. Living conditions and household composition

The structured survey allows for an insight into living conditions and household composition of the end recipients.

Residence

Respondents were asked about their place of residence (see Table 2). For both types of support, most respondents live in a home which they own or rent themselves (71% for direct support, 81% for indirect support). Within that, there are significant variations between Member States when it comes to the shares of respondents renting versus owning their home. These can be explained both by different target groups as well as general variations in shares of homeownership across Member States ([14]). As the share of respondents living

([14]) Eurostat (2025). European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC). *Indicator: Distribution of population by tenure status, type of household and income group.* Available at: [ilc_lvho02] Distribution of population by tenure status, type of household and income group

in a home is lower among recipients of direct support, precarious living conditions are more prevalent: Higher shares of surveyed recipients of direct support live on the street (4%), in accommodations for single parents (4%) or for asylum seekers (3%) compared to surveyed recipients of indirect support (all shares below 1%). In some Member States, the proportion of homeless recipients substantially exceeds the average e.g. in Slovakia (36%), Czechia (10%) and Italy (9%), with Czechia also standing out regarding the share of respondents living in a home for single parents (18% compared to 4% on average). These figures may suggest greater vulnerability of recipients of direct support.

Household composition

At aggregate level, 36% of surveyed recipients of direct support live alone, while 14% live in a couple without children. Households with children account for a substantial share of respondents, with 21% living alone with children and 23% living in a couple with children. Overall, 43% of end recipients of direct support have children in their household.

The proportion of households with children is even higher among recipients of indirect support, where 60% live with children. This includes 33% living in a couple with children and 28% living alone with children, whereas 24% of respondents live alone and 11% in a couple without children ([15]).

These household characteristics are reflected in the intended recipients of the support. For direct support, 44% of respondents report that the assistance is intended for the children they live with ([16]), while 88% indicate that it is intended for themselves ([17]). In the case of indirect support, children emerge as the primary recipients, with support intended for them in 50% of cases, compared with 44% where the support is intended for the respondent themselves. This strong difference to direct support can partly be explained by eligibility for voucher support in some countries (e.g. Austria, Bulgaria or Spain) depending on having children in the household.

Figure 4 illustrates variations across Member States and shows how the intended recipients of support vary in line with differences in household

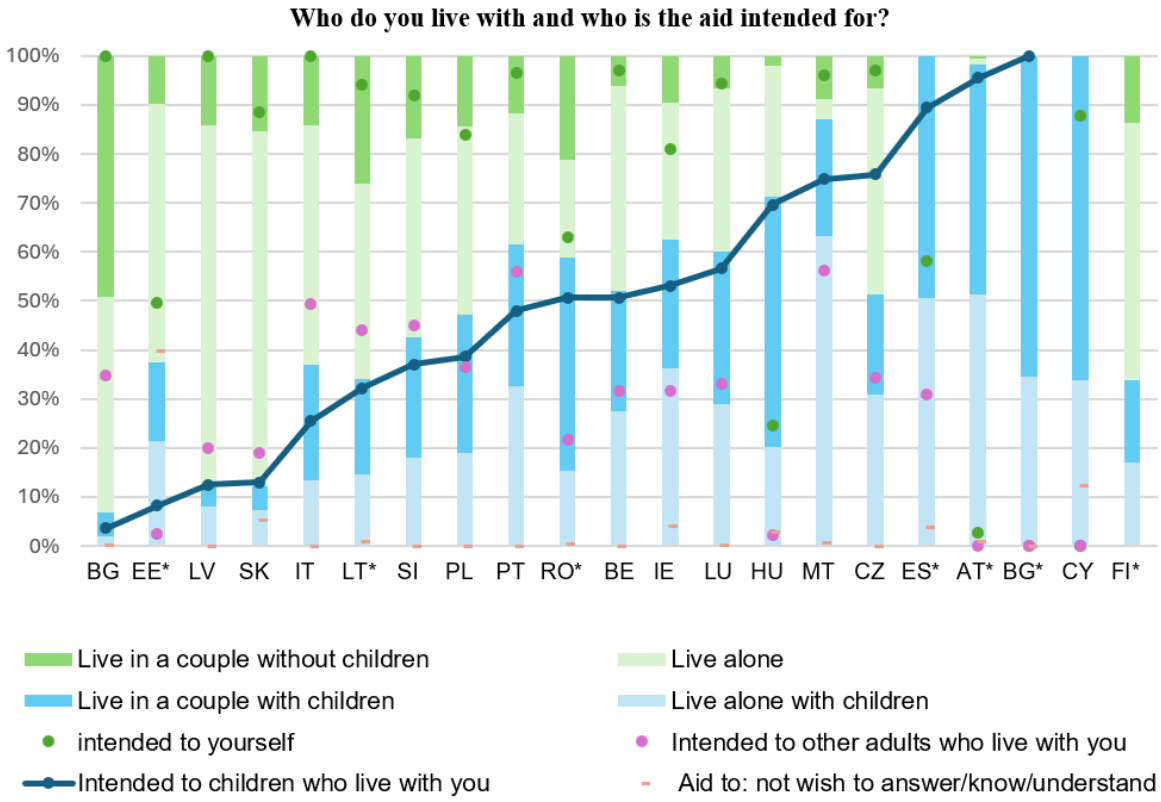
([15]) These figures do not add up to 100%, given the option to respond ”other” or not wishing to answer.

([16]) This figure is surprisingly 0.4 percentage points higher than the overall share of respondents who live with children. The most likely cause is inconsistent reporting from Czechia, where 46% of respondents report living with children but 76% indicate that the support received is intended for children who live with them. This could have been caused by a misunderstanding of the survey question.

([17]) Percentages do not sum up to 100%, as respondents were able to select more than one response.

composition. For instance, in countries where a high proportion of recipients live with children (CY, BG, HU, ES, AT, RO), high proportions of the aid received are intended for them.

Figure 4 - Recipients' household composition and intention of the aid



Notes: Countries with asterisk (*) represent indirect support. The data in the figure is sorted in increasing order of the value "aid intended to children who live with you". Several answers could be selected under the question "who is the aid intended for?", and therefore, lines may sum up to more than 100%. As Finland and Cyprus submitted no or incomplete data for the question on aid intentions, there is no line in the graph for these two Member States.

Table 2 – Recipients' place of residence

"Where do you live now?"

	In a home that I own	In a refugee camp	I rent an apartment or house	I am hosted by family, friends or other people	I live in a home for the elderly	I live in accommodation for single mothers or single fathers	I live in a university residence or a young worker's hostel	I live in accommodation for asylum seekers	I live in a caravan or mobile home	I live in the street (squat, slum, tent...)	Other	I do not wish to answer /know/ understand the question
AT*	1.7%	NA	**91.0%**	2.2%	NA	0.1%	0.1%	0.5%	NA	NA	3.0%	1.1%
BE	12.3%	0.6%	**78.3%**	3.7%	0.1%	0.3%	0.1%	0.6%	0.3%	0.9%	2.8%	0.0%
BG	**91.5%**	0.0%	2.2%	3.4%	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	2.2%
BG*	**65.1%**	0.0%	7.2%	26.5%	0.0%	0.0%	1.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
CY	33.0%	0.0%	**48.0%**	17.6%	0.3%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.6%
CZ	3.2%	0.0%	**41.2%**	4.9%	0.7%	18.0%	0.0%	12.6%	0.0%	10.3%	6.1%	1.7%
EE*	40.1%	0.0%	**42.4%**	3.8%	7.2%	0.0%	0.3%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	3.5%	0.0%
ES*	11.8%	0.0%	**62.8%**	13.1%	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%	0.4%	0.3%	3.4%	5.6%	2.2%
FI*	13.9%	0.0%	**79.4%**	1.8%	0.4%	0.0%	0.1%	1.2%	0.3%	0.3%	2.1%	0.6%
HU	**43.1%**	0.0%	11.4%	13.2%	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%	3.8%	0.1%	0.8%	20.5%	6.8%
IE	14.3%	0.1%	**47.4%**	4.5%	0.7%	2.0%	0.6%	2.7%	2.2%	3.5%	16.8%	5.2%
IT	15.6%	0.5%	**46.1%**	8.0%	2.2%	1.0%	0.0%	0.4%	1.7%	9.0%	7.6%	5.8%
LT*	**60.7%**	NA	8.9%	22.1%	NA	NA	NA	0.6%	NA	NA	7.0%	0.8%

	In a home that I own	In a refugee camp	I rent an apartment or house	I am hosted by family, friends or other people	I live in a home for the elderly	I live in accommodation for single mothers or single fathers	I live in a university residence or a young worker's hostel	I live in accommodation for asylum seekers	I live in a caravan or mobile home	I live in the street (squat, slum, tent...)	Other	I do not wish to answer /know/ understand the question
LU	7.3%	1.5%	**77.4%**	5.6%	0.4%	1.0%	0.6%	0.8%	0.8%	1.0%	3.5%	0.4%
LV	**53.0%**	0.0%	41.6%	1.6%	0.2%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	1.1%	1.9%	0.6%
MT	26.4%	0.0%	**58.4%**	12.6%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.1%	1.8%	0.2%
PL	**54.6%**	0.0%	23.1%	8.3%	0.2%	1.2%	0.3%	0.0%	0.2%	0.5%	7.7%	3.8%
PT	18.8%	0.0%	**66.8%**	11.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.8%	2.0%	0.2%
RO*	**75.4%**	0.0%	4.9%	14.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%	4.9%	0.3%
SI	40.0%	0.0%	**52.0%**	7.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
SK	4.6%	NA	3.1%	15.3%	NA	4.6%	2.3%	NA	NA	**35.9%**	22.1%	12.2%
EU	32%	0.1%	**38.9%**	7.1%	0.5%	3.8%	0.1%	3.1%	0.1%	3.9%	6.5%	2.8%
EU*	36.9%	0%	**44.3%**	10.6%	1.4%	0.1%	0.2%	0.4%	0.1%	0.6%	4.2%	0.8%

Notes: Countries with asterisk (*) represent indirect support. NA is indicated in the table when data was not reported. "EU" represents the average at EU level for direct support, and EU for indirect. Figures are reported as cumulative data at Member State level. Highest values per Member State are highlighted.*

Box 2: Children at the centre

The ESF+ Regulation establishes an appropriate amount of its resources to be allocated to the implementation of the European Child Guarantee for activities addressing child poverty. The objective of the European Child Guarantee is to prevent and combat social exclusion by guaranteeing effective access to free early childhood education and care, free education (including school-based activities and at least one healthy meal each school day), free healthcare, healthy nutrition and adequate housing for children in need ([18]).

This is crucial in the context of 1 in 4 children in the EU being at risk of poverty or exclusion, which is proven to impact their future ability to succeed in education or the labour market ([19]).

Hence, SO(m) operations focussing on children can contribute to fighting the worst forms of child poverty. The data from the structured survey reflects this targeting in certain Member States: Under direct support, the highest shares of aid going to children were reported in Hungary (70%), Malta (75%) and Czechia (76%). The targeted nature of voucher programmes in some countries resulted in even higher shares of children in the household supported such as in Spain (89%), Austria (96%) and Bulgaria (100%).

- In Austria, the voucher system allows low-income households to purchase school supplies ([20]).
- In Bulgaria, vouchers enable the purchase of baby/child food at a canteen, targeting most vulnerable families with children aged 10 months to 3 years, often from the Roma community.
- The Spanish programme focusses on families with at least one child under the age of 18, who earn below 45% of the average national income. The choice to support families with children is part of wider efforts to combat Spain's high child poverty rates.

([18]) Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 of 14 June 2021. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.L_.2021.223.01.0014.01.ENG

([19]) European Commission (2021). *The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee*. Available at: The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee - European Commission

([20]) Bundeskanzleramt (2025). *"Schulstartklar!": Europäischer Sozialfonds Plus unterstützt einkommensschwache Familien in Österreich zum Schulstart.* Available at: https://www.bundeskanzleramt.gv.at/themen/europa-aktuell/2025/08/schulstartklar--europaeischer-sozialfonds-plus-unterstuetzt-einkommensschwache-familien-in-oesterreich-zum-schulstart.html

4. Nature and implementation of support provision

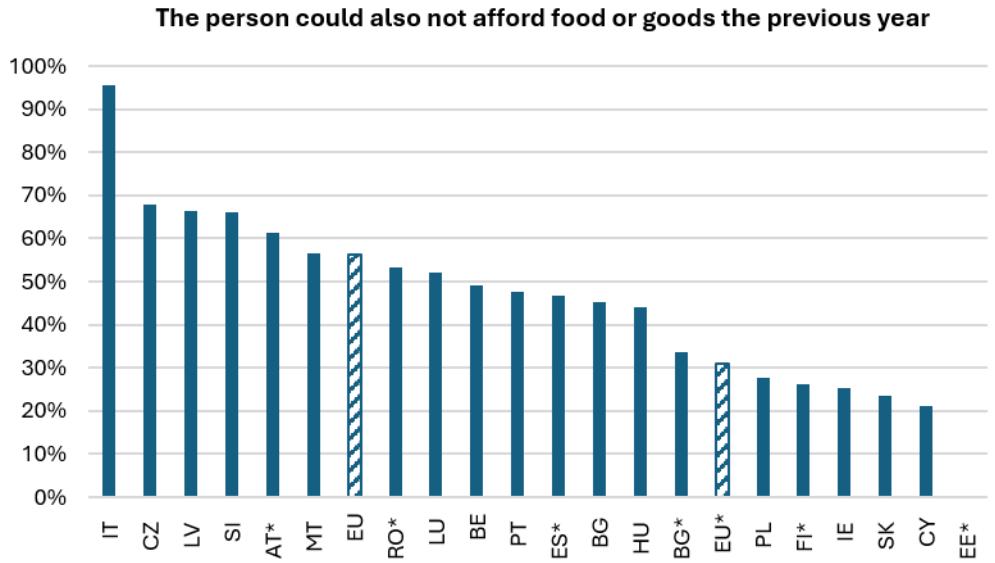
4.1 Need for support and frequency of aid distributions

To gain an understanding of the reasons behind the need for material support, recipients were asked why they could no longer afford the food or goods they just received, if they were still able to do so a year ago. Among recipients of direct support, 20% indicated a drop in income, 24% an increase in their costs. For recipients of indirect support, these shares were higher, at 32% and 28%, respectively.

However, many respondents have already been unable to meet their material needs for a longer period of time: 56% of recipients of direct support and 31% of recipients of indirect support reported that they were already unable to afford the same food or goods the previous year (see Figure 5). This highlights again both the greater financial vulnerability of recipients of direct support as well as their prolonged dependence on additional support.

At Member State level, Italy constitutes the most extreme case for direct support, as 96% of respondents were already unable to afford food or goods the previous year. For indirect support, Austrian respondents show the highest share (61 % compared to the EU average of 31%). In the case of Austria, this may be explained by their voucher scheme facilitating the purchase of school supplies at the start of the academic year, which tends to be a costly yearly expense.

Figure 3 - Replies to the affordability in the previous year



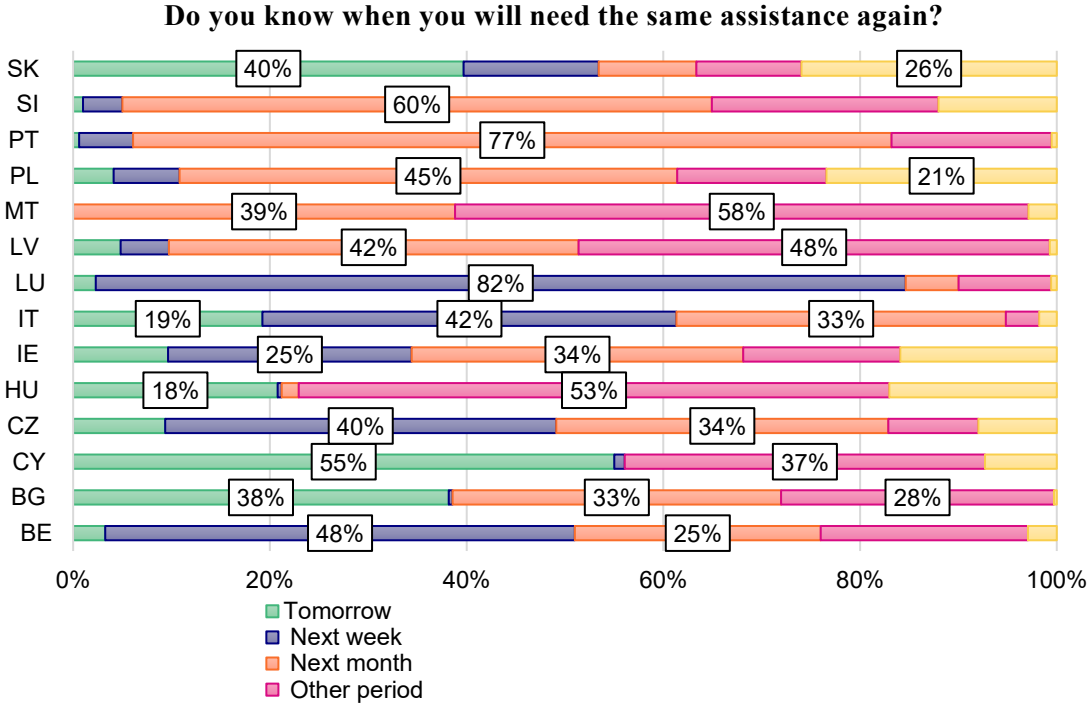
Source: Data reported by Member States on the ESF+ SO(m) Structured Survey. Data extracted in December 2025.

Notes: Countries with asterisk (*) represent indirect support. LT did not report any data on this question. EU shows the average for direct support, EU shows the average for indirect support.*

When looking into how often recipients get food and goods through direct support, 27% receive food once a month, 14% once a week and 12% every day, while goods are provided less frequently (12% once a month, 5% once a week and only 1% once a day). In some Member States, close to 40% of the respondents receive food every day (BG, SK), while in other countries most of the food aid is received once a month (PT, IT). Frequency of support can be linked to the nature of its provision: For instance, recipients in Bulgaria or Slovakia receive daily hot meals, whereas other Member States focus on the weekly or monthly distribution of canned or dry goods.

At the same time, 18% of the recipients of direct support at EU level report that they would need assistance again the same day, 21% the next week and 33% the next month. The variation across Member States is noteworthy and also reflects programming choices: While less than 5% report needing the aid again the following day in Belgium, Luxembourg, Latvia, Malta, Poland, Portugal and Slovenia, more than a third report so in Cyprus (55%), Slovakia (40%), or Bulgaria (38%) (see Figure 6). These are also the Member States with the highest shares of recipients receiving daily support, demonstrating a reliance on the aid available.

Figure 4 - Recipients' need for assistance



Source: Data reported by Member States on the ESF+ SO(m) Structured Survey. Data extracted in December 2025.

4.2 Content and usefulness of the support

The provision of food is at the centre of ESF+ material support. Individuals mostly receive food (89% directly and 75% through vouchers/cards). Goods are also distributed to a big proportion of respondents (45% through direct and 54% through indirect support).

In the case of food items and goods, 89% of individuals indicate that items received were useful, with similar views across all Member States. When individuals reported food or goods not or only partially being useful (10% of the total), the reasons included insufficient quantity (33% of replies), poor quality (25%) or insufficient frequency (22%). Assistance received through vouchers or cards was considered useful by an even higher share of recipients (95%).

Among the most useful food items, respondents highlighted:

- Basic products such as flour, oil, sugar, pasta, and rice as the most useful item for both types of support (69% for direct, 49% for indirect).
- Followed by: Canned food (63%), Milk (43%), other dairy products (39%) and dessert and breakfast cereals (38%) for direct support
- And: Meat (42%) and fresh vegetables/fruits (41%) for indirect support

The most useful goods reported by individuals were hygiene articles through both types of support, followed by household linen and cleaning products received directly, and clothes and equipment for adults and children. In the case of indirect support obtained through vouchers, clothes and equipment for children represent the second most useful item received.

4.3 Role of accompanying measures

As the provision of accompanying measures is envisaged in the ESF+ Regulation, beneficiaries should also provide additional advice or guidance. In practice, more recipients of direct support received this support than respondents in the voucher system: 43% of recipients of direct support reported receiving advice, compared to 24% of voucher recipients. Most of the guidance provided alongside direct support relates to advice on food preparation/ storage and nutrition (50% of cases), followed by health advice (44%) and redirecting the recipient to other competent services (41%). Individual coaching and workshops are the least frequent type of guidance received (only 15% of the cases). Among the 24% of recipients of vouchers and cards receiving guidance, 48% were redirected to competent services, while 27% received advice on food preparation and storage, 26% advice on job search, 23% health advice or individual coaching and workshops.

The accompanying measures are considered to be useful by the recipients. 78% of the individuals that received guidance through direct support see it as very useful, while only 3% qualified it as not very useful or not useful at all ([21]). Advice or guidance accompanying voucher support was also considered useful by 78% of the recipients, but not useful by 7%.

Member State approaches to the provision of guidance differ significantly: While in some countries less than 10% of respondents received guidance (CY, HU, LU, LV, LT, RO), it was provided to more than 75% of respondents in other countries (CZ, SK), reaching 98% in Bulgaria.

The ex-post evaluation of the 2014-2020 FEAD (Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived) found the provision of food and material support to be most effective in combination with accompanying measures, as they served as a key entry point for further social inclusion measures. Accompanying measures, when tailored to the target groups, had a more direct impact in addressing the initial obstacles to social inclusion than the distribution of food and basic goods alone ([22]). These measures are crucial in building trust between end recipients and social workers and thus highly relevant to the needs of most deprived individuals, who are often distant from social services. The ex-post evaluation already found uneven implementation of the measures across Member States, which these results from the structured survey confirm for the current programming period. Hence, most Member States have room for improvement in terms of provision of accompanying measures and guidance, which has been recognised by several Managing Authorities. According to the Lithuanian Managing Authority, low figures may also be related to non-take up of support offers, particularly concerning participation in training or other more complex accompanying measures, which remain voluntary for recipients.

4.4 Accessibility & availability of ESF+ support information

The structured survey also asked end recipients how they came across the ESF+ support available. Member States adopt diverse strategies in advertising ESF+ support. While social services remain dominant across all EU Member

([21]) These numbers may be subject to misreporting, since some countries present a mismatch between the number of recipients qualifying the usefulness of the guidance/advice and the total number of recipients of such aid. A reason for this mismatch can be found in qualitative replies from Member States reporting that: "*some survey terms (e.g., 'workshop', 'goods', 'advice/guidance') were not understood or interpreted inconsistently by beneficiaries.*"

([22]) European Commission (2025). *Ex Post Evaluation 2014-2020 Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD).* Available at: Ex Post Evaluation 2014-2020 Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) | European Social Fund Plus

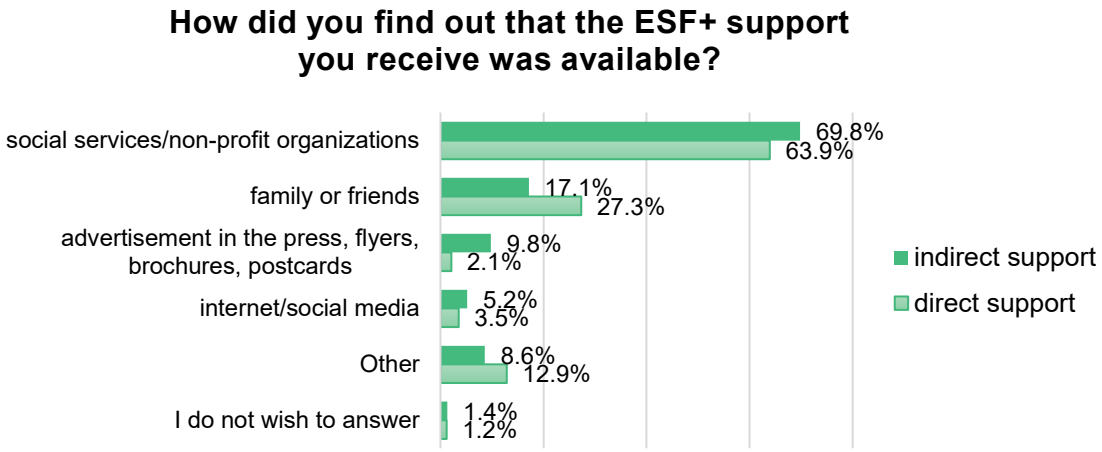
States, the varying significance of traditional advertising, digital platforms, and personal networks demonstrates dynamic and tailored approaches, reflective of cultural and infrastructural differences affecting information dissemination strategies throughout Europe.

Most of the recipients gained awareness of the availability of ESF+ support thanks to social services and non-profit organisations (above 60% for both types of support, see Figure 7). Figures are particularly high in Luxembourg (93%) and Latvia (93%) for direct support and Estonia (86%) and Spain (88%) for indirect support, highlighting the importance of these entities for information sharing irrespective of the support type. This shows their relevance as a primary source of information for vulnerable citizens, which turn to social services or non-profit organisations for general support.

The informal dissemination of information via “word of mouth” was also relevant: 27% of recipients of direct support and 17% of those in the voucher system found the ESF+ support via family and friends. Nevertheless, the shares vary significantly between Member States, ranging from less than 10% in Austria, Estonia, Malta or Hungary to around 45% in Slovenia, Slovakia or Italy. The importance of traditional advertising mediums, such as advertisements in the press, flyers, brochures, in promoting ESF+ support differs notably across support type and Member States: at EU level, almost 10% of recipients in the voucher system discovered the ESF+ availability that way, with Austria (28%) and Romania (19%) standing out with higher shares. In contrast, advertisements only reached 2% of direct support recipients at EU level. Only Slovakia (21%) engages heavily with press and print media, while no other country reaches 5% of its recipients through advertisements. This may also be due to few Member States running communication campaigns in the first place, as pointed out by the Italian Managing Authority, who also highlighted the need for careful design of future campaigns by a communication expert given the sensitive nature of the measures.

Lastly, internet and social media outreach show similar modest engagement at EU level, informing 4% of recipients of direct and 5% of recipients of indirect support. However, Member States like Hungary (9%) or Romania (10%) record higher shares.

Figure 5 - Accessibility of the support at EU level



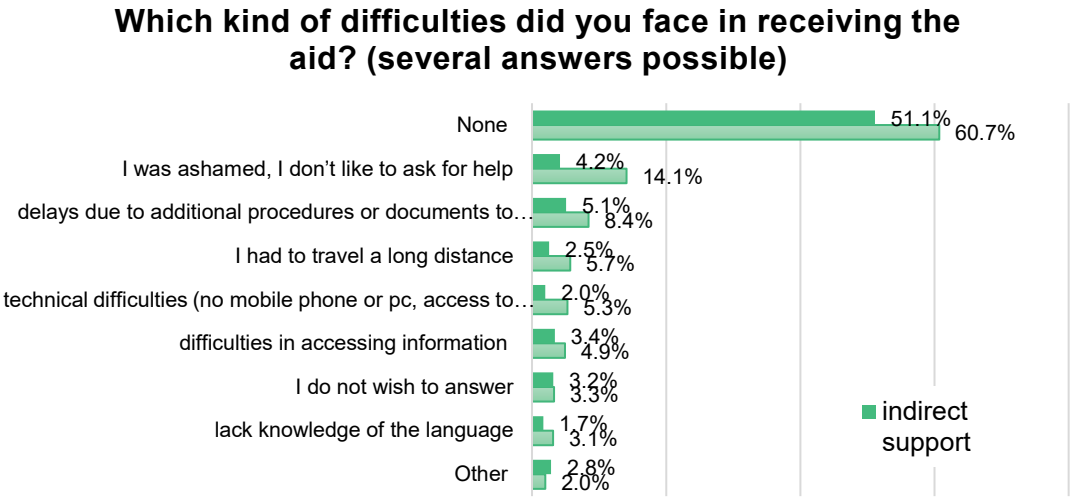
Source: Data reported by Member States on the ESF+ SO(m) Structured Survey. Data extracted in December 2025.

4.5 Difficulties in aid receipt

Overall, the majority of recipients of both direct (61%) and indirect support (51%) reported that they did not experience any difficulties when receiving food/goods. For recipients of direct support, the key challenge constitutes feeling ashamed and not wanting to ask for help (14% of respondents), followed by experiencing delays due to additional procedures or documents to be provided (8%). 6% had to travel a long distance and 5% experienced technical difficulties due to lacking access to a phone/PC (see Figure 8).

In comparison, fewer respondents in the voucher system (4%) reported feelings of shame, which will be further analysed in Section 5. Delays due to the provision of additional procedures or documents poses the most common difficulty (5%), followed by difficulties in accessing information (3%) and travelling long distances (3%).

Figure 8 - Difficulties in aid reception at EU level



Source: Data reported by Member States on the ESF+ SO(m) Structured Survey. Data extracted in December 2025.

However, the difficulties experienced differ between Member States, emphasising the need for tailored approaches to addressing these challenges at national level (see Table 3). For instance, delays were particularly common in Cyprus (35%) or Italy (26%) for direct support and in Spain (16%) for vouchers. According to the Italian Managing Authority, the delays reported can also be explained by the timing of the survey in November 2024, at which point their ESF+ programme had only been running for two months. This created a gap in 2024 following the end of the FEAD implementation in 2023. Similarly, delays in Spain occurred due to the transition from one programming period to another, which involved a change from direct support provision to setting up the requirements to provide indirect support.

Long distances to the distribution point (12%) and difficulties in accessing information (13%) were most common in Italy, and technical difficulties in Czechia (15%). These challenges may reflect both the vulnerabilities of the national programmes' target groups as well as potential areas of improvement. Long distances under indirect support are linked to the limited number of supermarkets accepting the vouchers in some countries.

Table 3 – Type of difficulties faced by end recipients

"Which kind of difficulties did you face in receiving the aid? (several answers possible)"

	None (did not face any difficulty)	I was ashamed, I don't like to ask for help	Delays due to additional procedures or documents to be provided	I had to travel a long distance	I had technical difficulties	I had difficulties in accessing information	I do not wish to answer	Lack knowledge of the language	Other
BE	77.1%	**8.0%**	4.4%	2.9%	1.1%	3.3%	1.1%	3.0%	4.7%
BG	77.8%	5.2%	3.9%	**7.4%**	4.3%	5.4%	2.3%	0.4%	0.1%
CY	61.7%	0.3%	**34.8%**	NA	0.9%	0.6%	1.8%	0.8%	0.5%
CZ	23.0%	**32.9%**	6.8%	8.4%	15.3%	8.1%	0.0%	6.3%	1.8%
HU	71.2%	5.4%	**6.6%**	1.9%	2.7%	0.9%	6.0%	0.1%	1.2%
IE	57.9%	**14.5%**	0.3%	3.3%	2.6%	2.3%	17.4%	2.7%	4.8%
IT	49.0%	**25.6%**	25.5%	12.3%	6.1%	13.1%	1.1%	9.5%	NA
LU	83.3%	1.9%	4.8%	5.0%	0.0%	1.0%	0.4%	1.5%	**5.2%**
LV	93.3%	0.3%	0.5%	0.8%	0.6%	**1.0%**	3.5%	0.1%	0.0%
MT	83.8%	1.2%	0.4%	**2.8%**	0.0%	0.6%	0.7%	0.0%	12.2%
PL	66.9%	**12.0%**	8.6%	3.7%	2.9%	1.0%	8.3%	0.4%	1.1%
PT	83.2%	**6.7%**	4.6%	3.1%	0.3%	1.5%	0.8%	0.4%	1.5%
SI	86.0%	**7.0%**	2.0%	1.0%	1.0%	2.0%	0.0%	4.0%	1.0%
AT*	90.1%	1.2%	0.4%	1.0%	0.1%	0.4%	3.2%	**1.6%**	1.2%
BG*	74.5%	4.6%	**11.0%**	3.5%	2.4%	6.7%	3.5%	0.5%	0.0%
EE*	0.0%	6.1%	0.0%	0.0%	1.7%	3.6%	4.9%	3.9%	**7.8%**
ES*	65.9%	4.4%	**16.0%**	7.4%	3.5%	4.1%	4.4%	2.0%	NA
FI*	74.8%	**12.2%**	0.3%	1.0%	0.8%	4.2%	3.5%	2.1%	5.0%
LT*	NA	1.3%	0.5%	**4.1%**	0.8%	1.0%	2.1%	NA	2.1%
RO*	80.9%	1.9%	**10.5%**	1.7%	4.4%	5.8%	0.7%	0.6%	1.6%

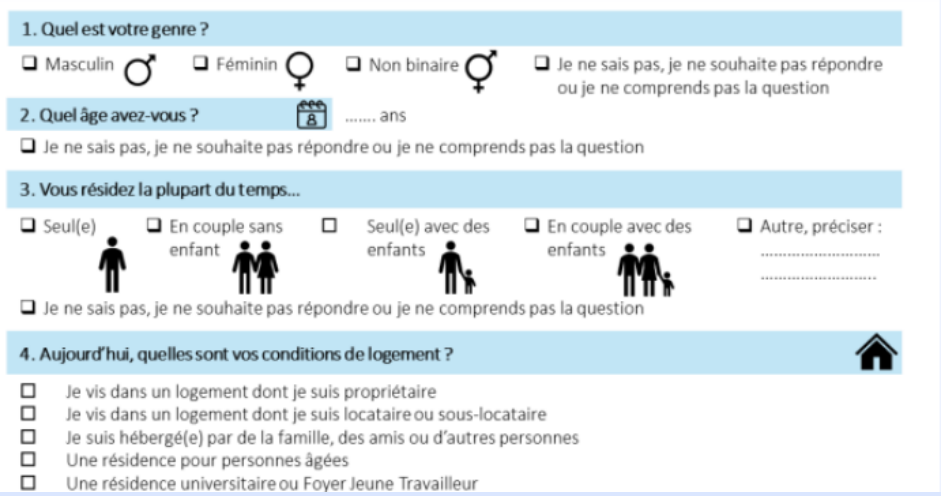
Notes: *Countries with asterisk (*) represent indirect support. NA is indicated in the table when data was not reported. Figures are reported as cumulative data at Member State level. Highest values per Member State among the first 7 categories (excl. "Other" and "Do not wish to answer" are highlighted.*

Country case study – Methodological practices in FRANCE

In France, the Managing Authority conducted in-depth analytical work on the basis of their survey, resulting in a dedicated national report. Their research showcases strong methodological and analytical considerations:

- **Designing and administering the survey:** In tailoring the questionnaire to their needs, the Managing Authority involved their partner associations as well as external sociologists in the process, and set up a dedicated committee to pilot the research. This ensured that the characteristics of both the key target groups and of the volunteers were taken into account. For instance, adding images to the questionnaire (see below) supported respondents who are not French native speakers, while administering the survey on paper did not require digital skills from the volunteers in charge and facilitated flexibility and usability.
- **Cross-sectional analysis based on micro-data:** As the Managing Authority received all questionnaires from the partner associations and not just the aggregated figures, a cross-sectional analysis based on characteristics of end recipients was possible. Hence, they were able to analyse age breakdowns, gender, household composition, administrative status etc. at regional level, which yielded insights into the different profiles of respondents in metropolitan areas, smaller towns, rural areas and over-seas territories. These results could be used to tailor programming to the characteristics of end recipients in a type of region.
- **Cross-validation:** The Managing Authority compares their data with the figures provided by the partner associations and general national statistics, ensuring their reliability.
- **Follow-up analytical work:** Planned activities include a qualitative survey of the end recipients, with a focus on accompanying measures, and an evaluation of the articulation between the European and national programme. At the same time, the national IT system is being further developed to improve the availability, quality and reliability of data on food assistance.

Image 1 - Questionnaire for ESF+ end recipients in France



Source: Intermediary report "Enquête structurée portant sur l'étude sociologique des bénéficiaires finaux du FSE +" (unpublished, provided by the Managing Authority)

5. Comparing direct and indirect support

The structured survey provides an opportunity to compare the direct provision of material support with aid delivery via a voucher system by exploring the answers provided by the beneficiaries implementing the support ([23]). This information can complement the findings on differences between support types that emerged from the survey of end recipients, such as reduced feelings of stigmatisation among those in the voucher system (4% versus 14%) and the greater precarity of living conditions: Fewer recipients of direct support reside in their own home (71% versus 81% for indirect support), thereby making them more likely to live on the street or in publicly provided accommodation. Further, 51% of them (compared to 31% for voucher recipients) state already being unable to afford relevant food or goods the previous year.

From the perspective of the beneficiaries providing the support, both the direct provision of food and goods and support via voucher systems present advantages and challenges. The following two sections of this report are based on an analysis of the free-text/qualitative responses from the beneficiaries, allowing for in-depth insights into how they perceive their work.

5.1. Benefits and challenges of direct support

The beneficiaries providing material support directly reported several benefits to this mode. The immediate delivery of food or goods without intermediaries ensures **transparent and secure delivery** and **direct and timely access to support**. Recipients can immediately meet their basic needs, which is crucial in crisis situations. The **quality, safety and appropriateness** of the food and goods provided can be directly controlled, also **minimising the risk of misuse, abuse or diversion of aid.**

The direct aid distribution also facilitates **personal contact** with and among the recipients. On the one hand, this allows for confidential relationships to be developed, improving understanding of recipients' problems, **reducing social isolation and building community**. In Bulgaria for instance, end recipients can also participate in the distribution of food as volunteers, allowing them to be actively involved. On the other hand, the distribution point serves as an opportunity to **provide additional assistance and advice**, including on social welfare matters or trainings, thereby aiding social integration and poverty

([23]) A limitation for comparing support types quantitively lies in Bulgaria being the only Member State for which data on both direct and indirect support is available. This could undermine comparability, since differences may not only stem from the nature of the support provided but also from general socio-economic, structural or policy divergences between Member States.

reduction. As discussed above, combining material and food support with accompanying measures increases their effectiveness in combatting deprivation.

Depending on the set-up of their direct support systems, Member States also highlight specific benefits, such as the home delivery of bulky items or the provision of a daily warm and healthy meal for those unable to prepare meals themselves.

Nevertheless, the direct distribution of aid also poses challenges. A key concern lies in the **need for storage facilities** and organisation of efficient distribution, which requires **logistical efforts** in terms of collecting, sorting and preparing food or parcels. Maintaining good hygiene and food safety standards and tracking expiration dates can constitute additional concerns. Overall, the provision of direct support is associated with **significant administrative and bureaucratic burden**.

Since these processes are **time-consuming and labour-intensive**, **sufficient human resources** are needed. In most cases, this creates a dependence on a sufficient number of regular and experienced volunteers, which cannot always be met. For volunteers, the engagement with vulnerable recipients may pose an **emotional challenge.**

Delivery delays and supply issues occur and negatively impact the timely, regular and sufficient provision of food to end recipients. Furthermore, **limited product variety** results in the personal needs of the recipients not always being met. Depending on their location, commuting to the distribution points can be an **accessibility issue** for e.g. elderly recipients or individuals with limited access to transport.

Table 4 - Benefits and challenges of providing direct support

Benefits	Challenges
• Direct and immediate distribution of food and goods • Quality, safety, and appropriateness of provided goods/food • Prevention of misuse, abuse, or diversion of aid • Facilitating personal/social contact as well as the provision of additional assistance and advice • Support for broader social integration, poverty reduction and well-being	• Logistical challenges concerning distribution and storage • Administrative and bureaucratic burden • Lack of sufficient human resources & volunteers • Delivery delays & supply issues • Limited product variety and customisation

5.2. Benefits and challenges of the voucher system

A central benefit to the voucher system lies in the **reduced stigmatisation of end recipients**, as the support is provided in a more discreet way via commonly used establishments. For instance, the Estonian and Lithuanian Managing Authorities explained that their voucher cards resemble the supermarket's membership cards and may also be used at self-service tills. This reduces the feeling of differentiation and preserves self-esteem and human dignity. The survey among end recipients confirms this, as fewer respondents in the voucher system report feeling ashamed of accessing support in comparison to end recipients of direct support (4% versus 14%).

Recipients are **empowered and actively involved in decision-making**, as they can choose and personalise the items. This facilitates adaptability to special diets, allergies, and individual preferences. Austria reports receiving positive feedback by families on the element of choice, since "children particularly affected by poverty often have little or no choice in everyday life". Furthermore, the voucher system requires **fewer logistical efforts**, since storage or transport do not have to be managed, which reduces administrative costs and human resources required.

Accessibility and convenience may also be improved, since recipients can purchase and access food or goods in regular shops at flexible times, which is subject to the regional coverage of participating shops however (see below). However, the provision of vouchers also poses risks and challenges. Member States mention concerns surrounding **theft or loss** of the cards, requiring additional insurance or protection for those instances. **Fraud, misuse or**

ineligible repeated applications are additional security concerns. Member States have set in place measures to avoid this risk. For example, in Bulgaria, meal vouchers can only be used in the specific canteens where food is provided. Spain prohibits the use of vouchers to buy certain products (such as alcohol), which would be signalled to the cashier upon the attempt to buy them.

While storage or transport logistics are not a concern, the distribution of vouchers requires a **comprehensive partner supply network and coordinatio**n between several partner organisations.

Further, acceptance of vouchers is often limited to a few, typically larger stores, given the requirement for a cash control system for monitoring and verification. This results in **restricted accessibility** for households in certain geographical locations. The limited availability of supermarkets is frequently linked to the need to set up IT systems that are compatible with the requirements of the vouchers support. **Short validity periods** given vouchers' expiration dates can then constitute an additional challenge for end recipients.

Table 5 - Benefits and challenges of providing support via vouchers

Benefits	Challenges
• Reduced stigmatisation of end recipients • Empowerment, choice and personalisation • Reduced administrative costs • Greater flexibility in accessing support for recipients	• Limited acceptance and access to voucher/card-accepting stores • Concerns regarding security or misuse and need for mitigating measures • Short validity periods and related limitations • Need for comprehensive partner supply network and coordination

Country case study – Combining direct and indirect support in BULGARIA

As the only Member State reporting on the provision of both direct and indirect support in addressing material deprivation, Bulgaria constitutes an interesting case.

Direct support is provided via three measures, all of which are accompanied by the provision of additional guidance.

1. Hot lunches are provided on a daily basis to those who are unable to afford or prepare food themselves, particularly targeting the elderly. In terms of resources allocated, this is a central focus of the programme.
2. Vulnerable groups receive packages with food and hygiene products, which take into account households' individual needs and are distributed at least once a year. These hygiene products are also considered to be the most useful items by the majority of respondents.
3. Packages containing essential items for newborns, such as diapers, wipes or other hygiene articles, are distributed to households with newborns.

The data and responses from end recipients reflect the design of these measures:

- **Nature of support and accompanying measures:** 100% of the respondents received food (versus 89% at EU level), 62% goods (42% in EU) and 98% guidance (significantly exceeding the EU average of 41%). The latter highlights the emphasis Bulgaria places on including accompanying measures in their approach to tackling social exclusion and eradicating poverty. Asked about the type of advice received, advice on food preparation/storage and nutrition (53%), health advice (49%) or redirection to competent services (23%) were most common.
- **Demographics:** The end recipients are older than on EU average, with 58% aged 65 or above (22% at EU level) and thereby also more likely to have a disability (37% compared to 22% at EU level) and less likely to live with children (7% compared to 43%).
- **Reliance on support:** End recipients are heavily reliant on the support provided, as 38% receive food daily and also indicate requiring the same assistance again the following day (compared to 12% and 15% at EU average). This dependence is also pointed out in the programme description as a justification for its implementation and linked to Bulgaria having the highest share of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU (29.0% compared to 20.9% EU average in 2025) ([24]). The Managing Authority highlighted that meeting the material needs of the most deprived is a crucial first step in tackling poverty, which should not be discontinued.

For indirect support, the measure centres around the provision of vouchers which enable the purchase of baby/child food at a canteen, targeting most vulnerable families with children aged 10 months to 3 years, often from the Roma community. The data shows that 34% of the recipient households are single parents. The Managing Authority shared that the voucher scheme is more limited in scope than the measures under direct support. Key implementation challenges include lack of awareness by

eligible families or non-participation by some local municipalities due to the need for initial registration and administrative efforts.

Good practices

Since Bulgaria recorded the highest share of end recipients receiving accompanying advice or guidance, the Managing Authority provided further insights into their approach:

- Some of their **accompanying measures are collective**, such as screenings of educational films or dissemination of leaflets at the distribution point. This allows for more people to be reached at the same time.
- A **robust system for tracking the provision of accompanying measures** is in place. Beneficiaries must report on them in every payment request, allowing for information to be gathered systematically.
- An **institutional agreement** exists between the ESF+ programme on food and basic material support and the programme on human resources development, through which data on participants and recipients can be shared. As the accompanying measures may also refer recipients to the human resource programme, the Managing Authorities are able to see whether vulnerable end recipients also entered another ESF+ funded operation.

([24]) Eurostat (2025). European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC). *Indicator: Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion by age and sex.* Available at: [ilc_peps01n] Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion by age and sex

6. Lessons learnt

Based on the replies provided in the reporting by beneficiaries about improvement areas as well as follow up conversations with some Managing Authorities, a number of lessons have emerged regarding the implementation of direct and indirect support under ESF+. These lessons highlight both operational challenges and areas for further improvement.

A. Quantity and frequency of support

Beneficiaries from several countries indicated in the survey responses that the volume of food or goods provided was insufficient or that distributions were not frequent enough to meet demand. In some cases, respondents expressed the need for increased quantities or more regular support, as well as improved availability of specific hygiene items.

This challenge was also highlighted under the vouchers/ cards system. In a few instances, it was reported that support received does not fully cover basic needs and should be offered more often and in a higher amount, with longer validity periods of the cards.

Managing Authorities recognised this challenge in the interviews and highlighted the impact of inflation on food prices as well as rising numbers of people requiring material support as a key constraint.

B. Adaptation of aid to recipients' needs

Survey responses consistently highlight the need for greater flexibility and improved alignment of aid with the diverse and evolving needs of recipients. In a number of Member States, beneficiaries reported that the food and basic goods provided under direct support were sometimes limited in variety or not fully adapted to specific target groups.

Several recurring issues emerged from the survey replies:

- **Limited variety and dietary suitability**: Feedback pointed to the need for greater diversification of food baskets, including improved quality and broader product choice. Consideration of cultural or religious dietary requirements, such as halal products or other specific dietary items, was also mentioned.
- **Mismatch with specific target groups**: Different population groups have distinct needs. For example, homeless persons may require ready-to-eat or hot meals, while families with children may need child-specific food products better aligned with children's needs. Some Member States

observed increasing diversity and evolving characteristics among recipients, reinforcing the importance of adaptable and needs-based support systems.

In response to this feedback, corrective measures have already been introduced in several cases, including expanding the range of available products and improving diversification.

Overall, the evidence from the survey suggests that a more flexible, needs-based approach – allowing for greater diversification, responsiveness, and adaptation to different target groups – is essential to maximise the effectiveness and relevance of support provided under ESF+.

C. Barriers to accessing support

In several Member States, beneficiaries reported the existence of psychological, social, and informational barriers that may discourage potential end recipients from requesting or accepting aid. In some cases, stigma or lack of awareness limited access to available support.

Some actions have already been taken. For example, Malta expressed in the survey that they addressed these barriers by integrating psychological and therapeutic support within community services. This approach improved internal referral systems and reduced delays previously associated with waiting lists, enabling timelier and coordinated assistance.

These experiences underline the importance of embedding material support within broader social service frameworks to ensure that vulnerable individuals can access aid without additional obstacles.

A remaining challenge in the case of indirect support is the varying involvement of different administrative levels, as explained by Managing Authorities in the interviews. For instance, in Bulgaria, some municipalities find that participating in the vouchers system involves logistical challenges and complicated registration requirements which prevent them from expanding the system. Similarly, in Spain, the delivery of the aid mainly depends on the autonomous communities, which creates heterogeneity in the provision of support to recipients. Some regions started implementing much faster, while others had delays in the process.

D. Administrative and documentary burdens

Administrative complexity remains a recurring challenge. Beneficiaries in several Member States reported difficulties linked to eligibility requirements, documentation, and procedural obligations in the survey. In Hungary, for instance, eligibility for the educational package requires a valid decision

confirming entitlement to the regular child-protection allowance. However, these decisions often expire at the beginning of the academic year and can only be renewed at a later stage, resulting in delays in access to support.

In Italy, beneficiaries reported challenges related to IT systems, warehouse and logistics management, as well as the frequent need for end recipients to repeatedly submit documentary proof of their eligibility. In the interview, the Italian Managing Authority suggested that the latter may also result from misunderstandings of requirements at volunteer level and highlighted that they have communicated to partner organisations that this is not needed.

In their survey replies, Portugal and Slovenia's beneficiaries also highlighted the administrative burden placed on beneficiary organisations in managing ESF+ support, including complex reporting and compliance requirements. In Portugal, corrective actions have already been introduced to streamline procedures.

This challenge is similarly highlighted under the indirect support system, including implementation delays, frequently caused by the requested additional documents. However, several interviewed Managing Authorities suggested that implementation delays can, in some instances, be explained by the timeline of the survey, which was performed early in the process and couldn't capture the full implementation.

These findings suggest that simplification of administrative processes and better alignment of eligibility documentation with implementation timelines are critical to improving the efficiency and accessibility of support. Some Member States have already taken action to facilitate accessibility.

E. Strengthening accompanying measures

The survey responses also highlight the importance of reinforcing accompanying or guiding measures. In some cases, the survey shows that a substantial number of operations did not provide accompanying measures alongside material assistance. Follow-up actions are being taken by Managing Authorities, as expressed in the interviews.

In Italy, ensuring that all partner organisations in the extensive network are able to deliver basic accompanying measures, such as providing information, orientation, counselling or accompaniment to social services, is a key priority. Dedicated territorial meetings with partner organisations at all levels will be held to discuss first results. In addition, the planned recruitment of 3,000 social workers shall strengthen the social services available.

While the survey shows that respondents receiving direct support are more likely to receive advice or guidance than those under the voucher system (41% versus 24%), possibly due to the advantage of the distribution site serving as a contact point, strategic policy choices can tackle this issue. In Estonia, local

governments decided that the voucher cards would not be sent via post, but should be picked up on-site to facilitate personal contact and the opportunity for further information or counselling.

Strengthening these measures – including counselling, social inclusion support, and referral services – can enhance the long-term impact of material aid and contribute to more sustainable pathways out of poverty and social exclusion.

F. Communication and coordination

Improved communication between managing authorities, intermediate bodies, beneficiary organisations, and end recipients emerged as another key lesson from the survey responses. In Italy, there were calls to enhance communication and visibility of helpdesks and to optimise online portals and networks. Portugal similarly highlighted the need to strengthen coordination and communication among all parties involved.

Under the voucher system, recipients from some Member States reported difficulties related to charging the cards or knowing the remaining balance available, as well as a general lack of information and awareness included by users and merchants about the scheme and products included. Hence, improved communication and verification systems as well as targeted information to the various actors involved are required. Clear communication channels and accessible information systems are essential to ensure smooth implementation and timely problem-solving.

Some actions have already been taken. Portugal reported in the survey that they had established telephone and email support lines, which has facilitated cooperation with intermediate bodies and improved responsiveness to beneficiary entities in this Member State, while Bulgaria reported that they plan to train the project partners on a compulsory basis.

G. Limited shop participation (indirect support)

A reiterated challenge under the system of indirect support was the restricted access due to limited shop participation. Since smaller shops often do not participate in the scheme, end-recipients need to go to larger supermarkets, which may be further away from their homes. However, smaller shops may not be aware of the scheme or lack the required information systems needed to ensure proper legal accounting and transparent reporting of programme funds. Interviews with Managing Authorities showed that a major challenge in including smaller supermarkets is related to their lack of capacity to implement the required IT systems that enable the use of vouchers. To better adapt to the recipients, some Member States allow the recipient to choose a voucher linked

to a concrete supermarket chain of their preference among the ones available (LT, ES).

Key areas for action

Based on the lessons reported, the following priority areas for improvement can be identified:

- **Greater diversification and flexibility in the provision of food and goods**, ensuring alignment with the specific and evolving needs of different target groups.
- **Simplification of procedures**, including streamlined eligibility requirements and reduced documentary burdens.
- **Enhanced communication and coordination** among all actors involved, supported by accessible helpdesks and digital tools.
- **Reinforcement of accompanying measures** to complement material support and promote social inclusion.
- **Enhanced participation of small shops in indirect support schemes** to increase accessibility to users, including possible technical assistance and information to the shops in need.

These lessons provide valuable guidance for the continued implementation and refinement of ESF+ support addressing material deprivation, supporting a more responsive, inclusive, and efficient delivery of assistance to those most in need.

7. Conclusion

ESF+ measures addressing material deprivation provide substantive support to the most deprived in Europe. The structured survey of end recipients and beneficiaries, conducted in 20 Member States, provides a detailed insight into who the end recipients are and what the key benefits and challenges of providing material support directly or via vouchers are.

The programmes have been positively received across all Member States, as almost 90% of end recipients at EU level found the aid provided to be useful.

The provision of food is at the centre of ESF+ material support: Most respondents receive food (89% through direct support, 75% through vouchers). The receipt of goods is slightly more common among voucher recipients (54% for vouchers versus 45% direct support). **In terms of demographics of end recipients, EU-level data indicates the largest share of recipients being women, EU nationals, and predominantly within the age bracket of 30-64**. One in five have a disability, which is in line with EU disability rates. Children are also central recipients of ESF+ support, as households where children are present (43% for direct support, 60% for indirect) direct high proportions of the aid to them. A significant majority of respondents (74% for both types of support) do not earn an income from employment and instead depend largely on benefits or alternative income sources.

For many respondents, the ESF+ support is of critical importance in meeting basic material needs. More than half of the respondents receiving direct support and a third of respondents in the voucher system already could not afford the necessary items the previous year. This recurring need for aid is also reflected in the large share of respondents indicating that they will require the same support again the next day (15%), week (21%) or month (33%).

Accompanying measures are foreseen in the form of further guidance or advice, as they are shown to enhance effectiveness of the support, but implementation varies significantly across countries, showing room for improvement. End recipients who do receive additional advice mostly find it useful, with the most frequent guidance being advice on food preparation/ storage and nutrition for direct support and redirection to competent services for indirect support.

Social services and non-profit organisations play a crucial role in reaching vulnerable groups. Most of the recipients gained awareness of the availability of ESF+ support thanks to social services and non-profit organisations. Information shared by family and friends also plays an important role, while traditional advertisements or digital media brought only a small shareof respondents to the ESF+ in most Member States.

The delivery of the support runs smoothly but has scope for improvement. At EU level, more than half of the recipients did not experience any difficulties when receiving the aid, with notable differences between Member States however. Delays due to additional procedures, needing to travel long distances, technical difficulties or challenges in accessing information impacted larger shares of recipients in some countries, where mitigating measures are largely already under way.

Comparing direct and indirect support, reduced feelings of stigmatisation among voucher recipients is a central benefit. Further benefits of the voucher system include the personalisation of support, convenience for recipients and reduced administrative costs in absence of logistical challenges concerning distribution, storage and delivery of items. However, support via vouchers carries risks around theft or misuse of aid as well as problems with limited acceptance of cards and short validity periods. Direct support allows for the immediate distribution of items, preventing the diversion of aid, while also facilitating social contacts during aid distribution, providing the opportunity for broader social integration. Nevertheless, the delivery is more time-consuming and labour intensive, requiring sufficient volunteers, while also lacking the option to customise products received.

The responses of both end recipients and beneficiaries point towards a few key lessons learnt: There is still scope to improve quantity and frequency of the support, as well as to target it to the evolving needs of the recipients. The shop participation in the voucher system should be expanded to improve accessibility. Furthermore, barriers to accessing and efficiently delivering support exist, including administrative difficulties and the need for improved communication and coordination.

Overall, the ESF+ support to material deprivation has demonstrated its importance in helping people meet some of the most urgent needs associated with poverty across the European Union. By directly meeting the basic material needs of the most deprived, it not only alleviates immediate hardship but also reinforces social inclusion objectives. Importantly, ESF+ interventions have proven effective in reaching the most vulnerable groups, those who are often beyond the scope of mainstream services, thereby ensuring that assistance is delivered where it is needed most and contributing meaningfully to the EU’s broader commitment to reducing poverty and social exclusion.

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