



FEBA ANNUAL FORUM  
**ON FOOD AID AND  
SOCIAL INCLUSION**



How material support  
can pave the way for  
social inclusion

**2024 REPORT**



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# 1. Introduction

The FEBA Annual Forum on Food Aid and Social Inclusion is the annual opportunity to promote the dialogue on important topics related to food aid and social inclusion. Over the years, the European Food Banks Federation (FEBA) has addressed a variety of subjects from different perspectives and angles.

In 2024, the FEBA Annual Forum on Food Aid and Social Inclusion was organised by FEBA in the form of an online webinar. On the dedicated website of the event, recordings as well as the programme and speakers' short biographies are available.

While the 2022 edition focused on convening FEBA Members and other stakeholders and experts **to take stock of the most important policies at the EU level on social inclusion and food aid measures** such as the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived, REACT-EU, CARE, and the European Social Fund Plus, it also allowed for the presentation of recent legislative developments to prevent food waste in Moldova and Romania.

The 2024 FEBA Annual Forum on Food Aid and Social Inclusion aimed to focus on different measures and activities of food aid and how that fosters social inclusion with



I heard a lot about the need to be collective in our approaches, we therefore need consultation across the different levels that participate in the process. To come together, both at the European level as well as at the national and the regional but also the local level in the different communities.



**Esteban Arriaga,**  
CEO, FEBA

the theme: “How material support can pave the way for social Inclusion”. The event was attended by **88 participants** who followed it online.

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## 2. Keynote speech



**Simona Pulbere**, Policy Assistant, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, European Commission

I'm happy to be here online with you today and for giving me the opportunity to talk about the support of ESF+ and former FEAD because it is not fully closed yet. **The topic that we have here today, how material support can pave the path towards social inclusion, is important in these very changing times after a series of crises. And, as you have mentioned, a very politically challenging year.**

This year, with a new Commission hopefully in place by the end of the year but also with the start of the ESF+ programme a bit delayed, we can overcome the difficult moments that that we had in the previous years. So, it is true that the very difficult current social and economic situation, which was affected by the war in Ukraine, and by the cost-of-living crisis but also previously by COVID-19 is imminent. The different operations under these programmes were all affected by these crises because we have seen an amplification and exacerbation of pre-existing social inequalities.



A rising number of people in Europe are falling into the category of food and material poverty. And they are increasingly reliant on Food Banks or other similar services in order to be able to meet their basic needs.

So, in this context, I think it is important to highlight again the importance of the work of your organisations and your partner organisations because the work you do in this field is really important.

Without you, we cannot implement these programmes. You are key in supporting the most deprived and you were also very ready since the beginning to adapt to these changing times and able to come in support of the people that need it the most.

I would also like to give you a bit of political context from the Commission's side. I will recall the Social Pillar Action Plan and within this framework we work with all the programmes in order to tackle poverty and to reach the targets that this action plan has put in place.

It is about reducing the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million by 2030, including the reduction of at least 5 million children in poverty, which indeed is very ambitious.

But we hope that it is still realistic and with support from all key organisations and good partnerships, we can return to a good path of economic and social convergence.

So, this action plan in fact put forward an integrated approach that maybe we should highlight in this context of material deprivation, because to address all those in need, in all the stages of life, an integrated area of intervention is needed.

We have seen that we have measures within the European Child Guarantee, the European Platform on Combating Homelessness, and the EU Framework on Minimum Income. So, all these are initiatives that are very closely linked to the concerns also addressed by FEAD and ESF+ Material Deprivation. I would also like to remind you that the integration of FEAD in the ESF+ comes in the same line as the intervention with basic material support.

It is the first step, which can be complemented with other measures for subsequential inclusion, access to education, and jobs to come out of poverty and fully benefit from social inclusion: The real inclusion in society. We have seen that in these times solidarity was very important.

That is why we have been able to adapt FEAD during the pandemic and when the war started in Ukraine, to be able to provide financial resources, to be able to adapt to these changing needs in the society. So, FEAD was the only main instrument to target the most disadvantaged persons in the EU and now ESF+ has a component in the same line.

We as the Commission can provide the political environment, we can provide the framework, but then the implementation will be done by organisation like yours.



We cannot stress enough that material support is the first step towards social inclusion, and it cannot be achieved without support from your organisation and other organisations, which have the expertise on the ground.



I will only remind you that **FEAD was able to support almost 50 million people every year. Most of them were families, 30% children, 11% elderly people as well as migrants and homeless people.**

I will just simply say that in the future, ESF+ will remain more or less within the same financial resources. As for the Member States, they have managed to put an important part of ESF+ towards material

support amounting to around 4% of the overall ESF+ in different Member States.

And we will continue to work together in order to be sure that we adapt the support either under direct support through material or food support or indirectly through vouchers to be used for purchasing food or other goods.

### 3. Key findings from the FEBA report on the 2022 implementation of FEAD and REACT-EU and transition to ESF+

Since 2019, FEBA has continuously monitored the implementation of the FEAD across EU Member States and will continue to do so with ESF+ to paint a coherent picture as regards challenges and opportunities the Fund entails for the Food Banks in their role as Partner Organisations.



To analyse both the support received through FEAD and the REACT-EU initiative, and disclose findings regarding their implementation and impact, the new report is based on two sets of qualitative and quantitative data stemming from responses from 10 FEBA Members, who received either FEAD or REACT-EU or both, to two online surveys.

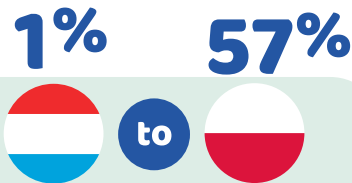
The questionnaires were tailored to further shed light on challenges and opportunities related to administration and the collaboration with the national Managing Authority.

- 10 FEBA Members** received food financed through FEAD and/or REACT-EU resources in 2022: Belgium, Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Italy, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Poland, and Spain. As regards the number of quantities of food redistributed, the report includes Portugal and is derived from data about the impact of FEBA membership in 2022.
- 9 FEBA Members** located in Czech Republic, France, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal, and Spain received and redistributed 143,888.54 tonnes of food products financed through the FEAD.
- 3 FEBA Members** based in Belgium, Estonia, and France managed the provision of 9,276.06 tonnes of food through REACT-EU to people in need including the reimbursement of administrative costs.
- 9 FEBA Members** received an economic reimbursement for operating and administrative costs (Czech Republic, France, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, and Spain through the FEAD as well as Belgium and Estonia through REACT-EU)
- Almost 90% of FEBA Members** responding to the surveys consider FEAD and REACT-EU assistance (food and non-food) as important parts of their composition of products for redistribution.

## Key numbers

**143,888.54  
tonnes**

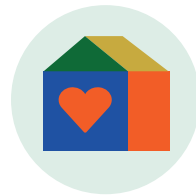
Total amount of FEAD food redistributed for 9 FEBA Members



FEBA Members received quantities of FEAD and/or REACT-EU food ranging from 1% (Luxembourg) to 57% (Poland) of the amount of food redistributed at national level.

**+15,000**

local charitable organisations benefited from food and/or material assistance financed through FEAD and/or REACT-EU and redistributed by FEBA Members.



**+3.5M**

end-beneficiaries received FEAD and/or REACT-EU assistance through FEBA Members in Belgium, Estonia, Italy, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Poland, and Spain.

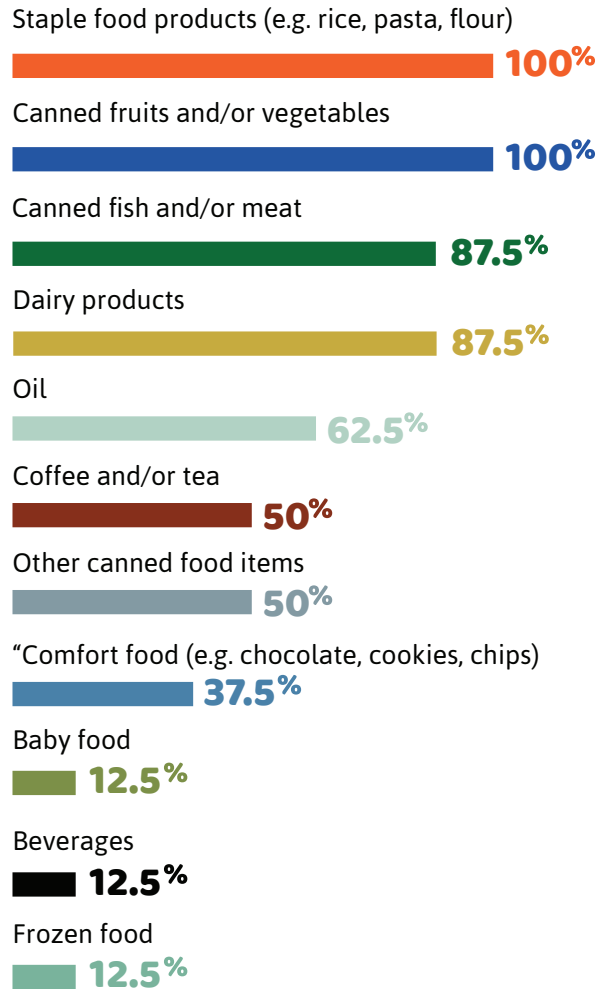
## Transitioning from FEAD to ESF+: implications for FEBA Members

Member States have chosen different forms of support for addressing material deprivation:

- Specific objective (m) integrated into a comprehensive ESF+ programme (CZ, CY, EL, FI, FR, HU, HR, IT, LU, MT, NL, PT, SK).
- Specific programme addressing material deprivation (BG, BE, EE, ES, LT, LV, PL, SI).
- Direct support: distribution of food, other material support (BG, EL, LV, PL, FR, HU, IT, SI, LU, IE, BE, NL, SK).
- Indirect support: distribution of vouchers (ES, LT, FI, EE, RO).
- Complement the delivery of food and/or basic material assistance by accompanying measures.
- On the other hand, some Member States (DE, DK, and SE) are planning to implement social inclusion assistance, while Austria is considering other measures.



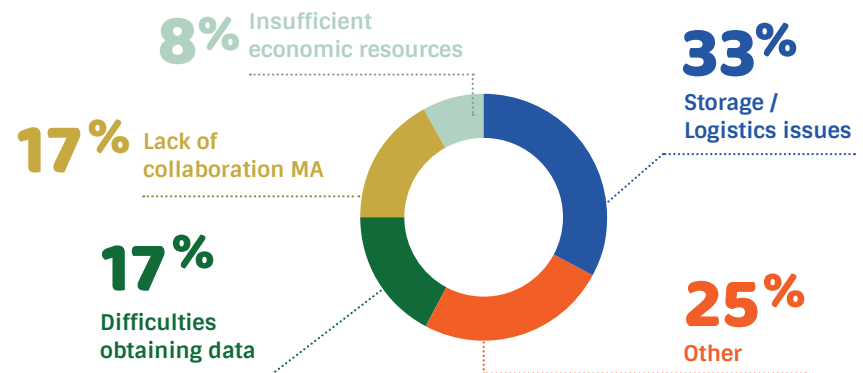
## Typologies of FEAD products received and redistributed by FEBA Members in 2022



DISCOVER  
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REPORT



## What were the main challenges related to FEAD in 2022?



## 4. Good practices from FEBA Members

### The complementarity of food aid and surplus recovery



**Barbara Mauvilain**, Director of Institutional Relations, Fédération Française des Banques Alimentaires



**Banques Alimentaires**



We are the 1st and the leading French food banking network in the country. We are present in all territories of France, including overseas, which is very important for us. We support 2.5 million people affected by food insecurity thanks to our 7,000 volunteers and through our 6,000 partner associations. The number of people we support is rising a lot due to the cost-of-living crisis and the effects of the pandemic.

The French Food Banks charter paved the way for social support. This charter was concluded after the pandemic, and enshrined two main goals:

- To simultaneously **fight food insecurity and food waste**.
- To use food aid to **create social links**.
- To constantly **help improving the food we provide**.
- To constantly **adapt to the changing needs of our partners, society and people** in precarious situations, in line with the major **sustainable development goals (SDGs)**.

But since the pandemic, we now provide direct food assistance, another important change is that we purchase food. This means that we are not only relying on donations. **Our model of circular economy has been focused on three main missions: collecting, redistributing, and supporting.** If we focus on the first main mission that is **collecting** our main sources of recovered food are retailers and wholesalers amounting to 44%. This part is mainly saved from becoming food waste. But you can also see that we have diversified

supplies from the FEAD of course, but also from the agri-based enterprise cooperative, the farmers. And as I said before, now we purchase some food for 3% of our main sources.

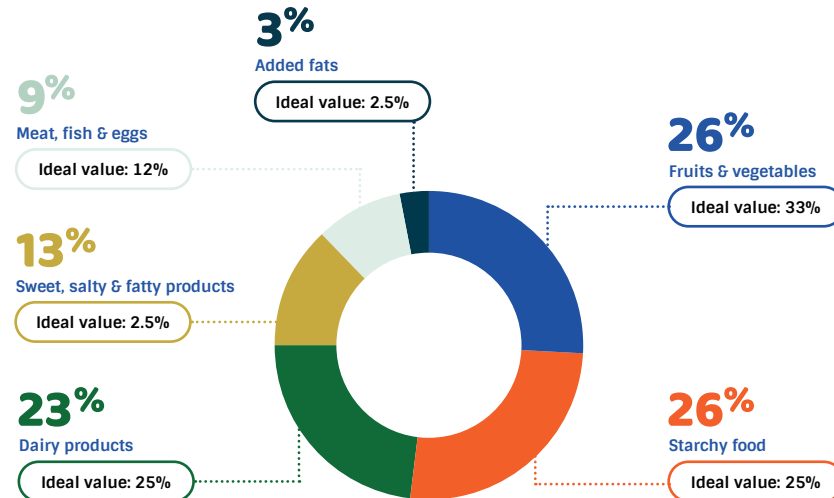
Looking at the second element, what type of food is being **redistributed** by the French Food Bank? It can take different forms through our social partners. It can be through social groceries, it can be through food trucks, it can be food baskets. So, it is very different, and it is linked to territory in France.

**As you see in our charter, we seek to improve the quality of food that we provide, and we seek to achieve the objective of the French national nutrition programme during every day of our work.** We have never been so close to the official recommendation, which is a success. If I take an example, you can see that for fruits and vegetables, we went up by eight points for our redistribution, which is a very good achievement. And it's a result of our work with the farmers, for example.

Moving on I would like to share with you an overview of the laws on food waste in France, which offers a very comprehensive framework.

In 2016, the so-called **Garrot law**, named after the minister at the time, was passed which was a milestone for us in fighting food waste. However, it was more focused on retailers at the time.

## French Nutritional Standards



And since then, two additional laws were passed, the **Egalim law in 2018** and the **law against waste and circular economy law in 2020**. These laws extend the obligation of the Garrot law to the agri-food sector and the HORECA sector. **This means that nowadays in France almost all the actors of the food chain must meet the obligation to reduce food waste.** If we focus on the famous Garrot law, this law includes a hierarchy of four pillars to fight food waste.

And the most important one for the Food Banks is the second layer of the hierarchy: donation. Meaning that when a stock management system is not enough, it is mandatory to sign a donation agreement

with at least one food aid organisation. So, it is a very strong donation lever for us and for all the food aid associations in France. However, this is not the only element, France has strong public policies in place for social support, like the national legal framework to implement social support which also influences the activities of the Food Banks. In the Egalim law of 2018 the **proposal of social support was included**. It then also became a part of the charter of the French Food Banks in 2021.

Another point is a new programme which is implemented by the French government, and which was organised with us called "Mieux Manger Pour Tous" in French or

“Eating Better for All” in English which encompassed a sustainable food aid fund to improve the food quality and fight food insecurity. Essentially, this programme supports the purchases and promotion of local and quality products, especially from farmers, including the participation of people in situations of food insecurity.

This helped us in diversifying our actions and that is why 3 years ago, we developed the health awareness programme called “Bons gestes, bonne assiette” in French meaning a “Good gesture, and a good plate” in English.

Why?

Because 71% of the people who are receiving food aid declare that they are suffering from at least one health issue, 16% declared for example, diabetes. **We want to counter that, and the aim of this programme is to improve the food that is being redistributed and we want to accompany the beneficiaries towards a more diversified and healthy diet.**

That is why we are training our associations in the field on this specific support for people facing food insecurity. **And on the ground, it means that we built and developed these workshops.** This can be a workshop to meet other people, as many struggle with loneliness. It can be a food waste workshop, to learn how to cook. It can be a physical activity workshop, which is very important.



For French Food Banks, material support in combination with accompanying measures is essential to foster social inclusion.

It can be a health and nutrition workshop, as I said before, for example, focusing on diabetes.

It can be a workshop with farmers from the field to the plate workshop, as we call them, and to promote the products of the local farmers and to teach beneficiaries how to cook and use fresh produce. In our programme we also developed some tools like a cooking recipe website where you can see on a calendar different seasonal menus for instance.

In addition to that, we also published different leaflets, for example, how to read the labels on products in the store. It is not easy for everyone, which is why we are offering our partner organisations support

to create a social link. We do it through food, through innovation, and local projects with a strong social impact. And for example, since the pandemic, we have developed more than 30 food transformation processing workshops.

And it is very useful because it allows us to turn donated surplus food into soups, as well as ready meals. So, it can diversify our redistribution and it improves the shelf life of the donated food. **It is very important to accompany our beneficiaries effectively through inclusion work and guided inclusion programmes, such as budget management and language classes, to share good moments or leisure activities and activities outside.**

So, you can see that we are working day-to-day to achieve six sustainable development goals. And thanks to solidarity-based innovation and close collaboration with our partners, food aid can be really a bridge to social inclusion for us. It is at the core of our mission.

And that’s why as a conclusion, I, will share with you that in the context of the debate on the vouchers in France, we are very strongly convinced that much higher support in combination with accompanying measures is essential to foster social inclusion.

## Costs of redistribution of surplus food



**Kerttu Olõkaine**, Project Manager  
Toidupank



Estonia has 3 million inhabitants and 16 Food Banks. Let's start with the situation of poverty in Estonia. The minimum gross salary is €820 per month, while the average gross salary income stands at €2,065 per month.

When we delve deeper into the statistics, we find that 5% of our population, approximately 48,000 people, live in absolute poverty, defined as having an income of less than €300 per month. Even more concerning is the fact that 22.5% or about 309,000 people live in relative poverty with incomes below €756 per month. But for those relying on social benefits, the maximum they can receive is €200 per month, with a slightly higher amount of €240 per month for children.

**These figures highlight the significant disparity in income and the challenges faced by this substantial portion of our population.** These are important figures to keep in mind.

Let's talk about the important Regulation (EU) No 223/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 March 2014 on the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived that helped us to get funded for distributing surplus food.

This regulation highlights the European Union's commitment to tackling severe food insecurity while also addressing the problem of significant food waste.

When you look at Paragraph 14, then you see that the article underscores the importance of a comprehensive approach to supporting adjusted donations of food, but also the entire logistical chain required to ensure that surplus food reaches those who need it.

**One of the key insights we gained is that it is more effective to use money for the distribution of donated food.**

This is because with €1.00, more food can be distributed compared to using the same amount of money to purchase food. This approach maximises the impact of available funds.

In the spring of 2014, the Estonian Ministry of Social Affairs recognised the efficiency and decided in principle that a portion of the project should be allocated to the cost associated with the collection, transport and distribution of donated food. This decision aimed to leverage the potential of surplus food to address food insecurity more effectively. However, despite the theoretical advances, implementing this funding strategy proved to be quite complicated in practice.

The complexity of the funding mechanisms and the administrative challenges involved made it more difficult to execute this plan

as initially intended. Recognising these challenges, the Ministry of Social Affairs in Estonia and the Estonian Food Bank engaged in significant lobbying efforts in Brussels.

Following the legislative change in July 2019, the Ministry of Social Affairs in Estonia organised the tender for distribution of donated food. This marked a significant step forward in our operation, as our support framework contract was signed in 2019 and later, we received two more tenders that were organised. The first target group was limited because it was based on the subsidies and some local governments did not pay those subsidies at all. But since 2022, we are on a new target towards more inclusion and now involving all of Estonia.

We work closely with local governments to transport food from big cities to smaller

regions and cities, because there is not as much food compared to the larger cities. The package should be at least 3 kg and consist of three different food groups. Although our packages are bigger and if people are in need, they have mobility issues, we bring those packages to their homes. We also use a food bus service in remote regions and islands.

**Last year we distributed 2,000,000 kg of food for approximately 9,019 people weekly.** And of that, 40% was through lists that were made by local governments and 60% was distributed by charities.



This paid off on the 18th of July 2018. The European Parliament voted in favor of the simplified cost option on the regulation. This regulation simplified the funding process, making it easier for organisations to access the necessary support for food distribution.



## Collaboration of Food Banks and Vouchers



**Simona Gurevicius**, CEO  
Maisto Bankas



Providing people with food is very important in Lithuania. So, the big question is how we make it possible that these people can be assisted in the best way possible at this moment. And that is what I want to focus on during my presentation here today.

One option is providing food baskets, which is amazing because you buy the food cheaper than people can buy it in the shop. However, the selection of those food types is not done by the people in need, which means they only receive what was chosen for them.

Another idea is to provide them with the vouchers. So, in some countries, there is one voucher applicable to all supermarkets. There are countries where there is only one

network chosen to provide the service. The main challenge with this option is that it only contains €25 per quarter of the year, per person. The beneficiary can choose the food and has a lot of dignity because they go to a supermarket like a regular customer, the challenge is that the funds are quite restricted. So, €25 per person for 3 months is not sufficient. Especially if a person has a family of four, that amounts to €100 per quarter, which is not enough.



So, we came up with our own option if you will and we are very happy with our local partners at the governmental level. And I see some of them joined the discussion today. They were happy to agree on a mixed model where we provide cards, as well as surplus food redistribution.

So, we combined the option of giving food and giving vouchers. What are the key factors for the success in achieving this goal? In Lithuania, according to the official data, 400,000 tonnes of food is being wasted, 60% in the homes of people. So, we cannot recover from there, of course we can educate, but we cannot save that food. However, the remaining food along the supply chain can be recovered, amounting to around 140,000 tonnes.

Let's have a look at the activities of our Food Bank, as you know our mission is to fight food waste and help people in need. Out of the just mentioned 140,000 tonnes we are "just" saving 6,700 tonnes, and which is an enormous effort but there is potential for more food that can be rescued. However, the Food Bank still faces obstacles such as missing legislation that incentivises food donation compared to for instance France, this is not the case for Lithuania. But if we speak about the ESF+ programme, around 100,000 people will receive this support.

We provide 5 kg per person, 5 kg per person per quarter. So, there are four quarters in a year resulting in approximately 2,000 tonnes per year. We rescue 6,702 tonnes of food which also serves approximately 100,000 people. **In total, through ESF+ and food redistribution, we help around 230,000 people.**

One of the main challenges that we are facing is the increasing difficulty to recover food from the supermarkets, which is why we diversified and looked at the primary production stage. As we observe an increasing demand for food, we need to diversify the sources. **There is not a lot of motivation from the supermarkets to give the food to charities. This should be changed, and more attention should be given to the environmental and social dimensions.**

It is an amazing system in the Czech Republic, where the government is investing in the infrastructure of charities. You need to have vans; you need to have storage space and so on and so forth. This is not always the case, for instance in Lithuania. As Simona mentioned in the beginning, NGOs are important partners and helped tremendously during the past years of crisis. However, it would be great if in practice this help would come from the state, from a legal perspective and the financial perspective. And not only in the framework of one single European programme, as the government is helping us right now with providing these funds.

What I want to present to you today is also how we redistribute surplus. We opened 41 so-called shops or social supermarkets in Lithuania. **When a person goes to such**



**a social supermarket the beneficiary can choose the products, instead of receiving a prepared basket as well as having the dignity to go to a story like any other person.** However, again, it is a challenge to maintain those shops because of rental and other operational costs.

There are 1,020 volunteers every day, but at least one must be an employee, one employee, per facility. It creates financial tension for an NGO to maintain such a network. However, you see that people are happy and the result of the work is bearing fruit.



You would not recognize that it is a free shop if you would not know it. However, there are always costs associated with such operations, like logistics for instance. We have 5 warehouses in the bigger cities, and you need to have logistics every day because the products that we recover and put on the shelves are many fruits and vegetables recovered from primary production that cannot wait for the second day.

As you know, we have the food processing kitchen and in different cities and we try to extend their shelf life, but please remember, it is only 2,000 tonnes. There are another 4,700 tonnes that go to the charities.

Another additional cost to manage a network of volunteers and to redistribute free food is the management of these operations through software and computers. One important element to mention under ESF+ is the fair compensation of expenses because we are redistributing the vouchers. But unfortunately, it does not cover the real cost that we need to pay.

And the key here, which I want to share with everyone, is that if you like this idea you have to have this vision that the combination is possible to do.

And so, without the vision and the strong belief, it is not possible to do it. You need to have people who believe in this mission, and you see them in the picture.



Believing in the programme and motivating the volunteers is the key to our success. Here are different shops in different small towns in Lithuania. The best model is therefore to combine the vouchers with actual food. I hope this will be a long a successful project that we will continue for many years to come. However, we should not forget about the legal and economic implications of our activities and take that into consideration.

## Food Aid through Vouchers



**Pedro Castaños Ruiz,**  
International Relationship Manager,  
Federación Española de Bancos de Alimentos



Spain has been one of the big countries which has decided to use vouchers instead of delivering food. So, what I will show you today is what that change means for us as Food Banks and for poverty in Spain. I will also elaborate on the current implementing process of the vouchers and the related concerns to that.

But first, some figures about the situation in Spain, just to clarify the context. Spain has a population of 48 million people, 5th largest population in the European Union. If you compare that to the rate of people at risk of poverty, it's 26.5%. It has gone down since the beginning of the century.

However, the pandemic resulted in an increase from which the country has not yet recovered. The percentage of people in severe material deprivation is 7.7% of the population, which means that 3.7 million people cannot afford protein-based food every second day or cannot heat their homes enough or cannot make ends meet. So, that's a short summary of the situation in Spain.



FESBAL represents 54 Food Banks which covers all of Spain including the islands. Last year we distributed 138,000 tonnes of food to approximately 1,187,000 beneficiaries. This means that the Food Banks have given around 117 kg per person.

So how did the FEAD programme help us?

Well, the numbers I presented are partly the result of the FEAD programme. I will focus on the last 3 years of FEAD during the next part of the presentation. The Managing Authority, so the ministry, organised different tenders in the form of ‘Food Baskets’ of which they then created a tender for each part.

So, for example, milk was an essential part of the basket so then a tender was organised specifically for milk, which they then bought at a comparatively low price as this was not exposed to market fluctuations. Since 2015, only two organisations have distributed products from these tenders: the Red Cross and FESBAL. This was split roughly on a half basis. Overall, the figures show that we distributed 79,000,000 kg of food in 2022 which cost around €79 million. That means that we are roughly buying food at €1.00 per kg.

In 2023, first problems arose and with the rise in food prices and inflation close to 10%, we distributed much less product. Just to compare to the previous year the cost of food was closer to €1.60 per kg. Therefore in 2023, FESBAL distributed around 16% of the food through this programme.

## FEAD Programme in Spain

PROGRAMME YEAR	QUANTITY (kg-l)	IMPORT WITHOUT VAT (€)	VAT (€)	IMPORT TOTAL PURCHASE (€)
2014	48.778.934,00	37.402.962,72	2.428.750,98	39.831.713,70
2015	113.152.883,74	110.101.995,88	7.906.025,21	118.008.021,09
2016	98.777.220,00	92.632.732,59	6.925.654,34	99.558.386,93
2017	87.305.105,04	82.297.127,24	6.493.872,66	88.790.999,90
2018	91.662.759,70	78.420.770,50	6.090.887,76	84.511.665,26
2019	96.432.124,68	92.175.281,42	7.436.768,03	99.612.049,45
2020	88.440.331,52	79.996.288,80	6.426.253,59	86.422.542,39
2021	63.885.246,32	53.080.548,85	3.955.308,37	57.035.857,22
2022	79.053.271,70	79.999.726,44	6.162.419,40	86.162.145,84
2023	50.890.027,66	88.571.372,37	7.470.193,81	96.041.566,18
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>818.377.904,36</b>	<b>794.678.813,81</b>	<b>61.296.134,15</b>	<b>855.974.947,96</b>

**The new programme was announced and the incorporation of FEAD into ESF+, with the Spanish Government choosing to opt for indirect material support through vouchers.** That means that people will receive a card with money. One of the reasons for this approach is that there is no shame

associated with going to the supermarkets like everyone else and preserving the dignity of the end beneficiary as opposed to them having to receive food aid. However, one of the main problems with this approach is that the amount of money on the card is a set amount, however as we observed in

the past years, food prices are unstable and subject to high inflation which the vouchers do not account for.

Another problem that the Food Banks observed is the switch from the managing authority at the national level, meaning from the former national ministry, now to the regional administrations. So that means that in Spain there are 16 different regions, we call them autonomous regions which means that the rules and regulations governing the vouchers will differ from region to region.

Another obstacle that FESBAL observed is the decision of the government to only hand out these vouchers to families, with the dependent minors. This excludes unemployed people, young people, families without children and elderly. From previous statistics we can see that under the new rules only a fraction of people in need will be eligible to receive help: 70,000 families, which make up only 16% of the people that are in need.

In a hypothetical scenario the help will look as follows: Two people with one child will have €130 per month to buy food in the supermarket.

### **Worrying is especially the increasing politicisation of the EU funded programme.**

For many years the changes under ESF+ were clear, but the lack of preparation led to many open questions with regards to the implementation. The Red Cross was chosen as the organisation to distribute the vouchers; however, they are not receiving instructions from the regions as to who qualifies for the vouchers which makes it more difficult. It ultimately led to a delay in the handout of these vouchers because the list of recipients was not defined by the authorities.

Another issue the Red Cross is facing, is getting retailers to accept these cards, so far only certain chains accept the vouchers, which can have as a consequence that some people might have to travel far to a supermarket that accepts their voucher. The regional governments estimate between 50% to 80% of towns have a lack of retailers that accept the vouchers. **This leaves people without food and without money in a very worrying situation.**

To make matters worse, as indicated, this has been politicised by many parties. The party of the central government often



differs from the governing parties in the regions, which means they blame each other for the delays or problems regarding the new funding programme.

It would have been nice to give you a more positive presentation today, but unfortunately recent developments in Spain are very worrying.

## 5. Panel Discussion – Perspectives of Stakeholders



**Luis Vilacha Fernandez,**  
Policy and Programme  
Officer, Red Cross EU Office



**Annika Sparrer,**  
Policy and Membership  
Development, Eurodiaconia



**Rimgailé Baltuté,**  
Lead Thematic Expert of the  
CoP on Material Support,  
European Social Fund Agency

### Introduction of organisation and experiences with the transition from FEAD to ESF+

#### Luis Vilacha Fernandez

The Red Cross EU Office represents the interests of 27 national societies across the EU as well as the Icelandic and Norwegian Red Cross regarding the topics of food aid and material assistance across the EU 27.

They deliver food aid and material support regardless of the use of new funds or without new funds. And they delivered food aid in different forms from food packages, food parcels in soup kitchens, through social grocery shops like in Luxembourg, for example, and in the case of vouchers and electronic vouchers. And we do so regardless of people's status, regardless of people's

religious beliefs, origins, personal income, sexual orientation, self-determination, race or ethnicity.

There is two points that I would like to bring to your attention. **The first point is the topic of working together. and then secondly, the topic of stability regarding the use of FEAD into the transition of ESF+.**

The topic of working together is something that we hear and I have heard several times over the last years from colleagues working also from in local branches at the national level is the importance of the architecture of FEAD of being a fund that was basically built into organisations, civil society with expertise, with knowledge, with commitment, with the trust of delivering like in this case, material support and for aid.

The importance of working together in the coordination and implementation as well as the delivery and the logistics of the delivery of the food and material support. Of course, with hiccups and with the bureaucracy, with the administrative burden. But still, it is something that from the Red Cross perspective, it has always been very positive to work together with colleagues from the Food Banks, you therefore probably know my colleagues at the national level very well.

And then the second point that I wanted to add quickly is the stability. What I mean by stability is that FEAD offered a very good set of products, of course canned products but shelf-stable products. But, nevertheless, a set of products that was planned in the delivery once, twice, three or four times a year, depending obviously on the Member State, which allowed colleagues, especially those working at the local level to really plan the agendas ahead to really know when those set of products will be delivered.

And then going the extra mile for fresh products, products that people would like to eat, products adapted to the different dietary restrictions or diabetes and so forth. So, it is also something quite positive in the sense that colleagues from the Red Cross always highlighted it in this regard. And then finally regarding the transition into ESF+.

One of the main things that we hear constantly, besides what Pedro shared and what reminds me about the worries of my colleagues from the Spanish Red Cross, I think for us, one of the things that we notice a lot in the transition that happened under COVID-19, which obviously is a crisis that is unpredictable in a sense. But one of the things that we hear, and we always give feedback, especially to the Commission, is the sense that the transition was done without hearing 100% what civil society was bringing to the table.

It does not mean that we were not helped, but it means that some of the problems that we see are problems that could have been maybe prevented or avoided in a way. And I remember some years ago with the issue, for example, of vouchers that they can be positive examples in the use of vouchers. But they were at the beginning kind of like trying to be imposed a bit obligatory.

Then it was optional at the end, which allowed some flexibility in some Member States. But nevertheless, in some countries,



like for example, the case of Spain, the fact that they have been obligatory has made people fall through the system, which obviously is a problem. So just to wrap up and to leave the floor to my colleagues in the panel, very important is the stability provided through the funding and very important is working together with other organisations, but also very important is listening to actors working on the ground with experience with the trust of the beneficiaries, with knowledge and also with a lot of commitment to work towards eradicating poverty.

And from our perspectives, like on the ground, my colleagues and I, we always

tried wherever we worked to have a very good connection to the local Food Banks, soup kitchens, etc. **Whatever target group it was, whatever beneficiaries we worked with, whether it was children in poverty, refugees, or the homeless, it was always very important to have a good relationship with the Food Banks.**

And even before the pandemic, before the Ukrainian war, we realised, or we saw that some of the local Food Banks were really struggling to keep up the help for more and more people coming in and more and more people who were in need and needed the support of the Food Banks.

**Annika Sparrer**

Eurodiaconia is a European network of protestant and Christian NGOs providing social and healthcare services across Europe, but also outside the European Union and advocating for social justice. It is very involved in supporting people and families in vulnerable situations that are at risk of poverty and social exclusion, and therefore also providing food and material aid to those in need.

And before I add on that what Luis just said, I wanted to share a very small personal experience because before I started working

for Eurodiaconia, I used to work as a social worker myself. And now looking at this very personal experience from a very local ground, looking at it from a European policy perspective and angle, I think this personal assessment seems to have become a reality all over Europe.

**Many members of ours report the rising numbers of people in need of food aid.** So, for example, one of our Swedish members saw an increase from 65 to more than 600 clients in just one year in their Stockholm social grocery store. We saw that the Swedish City Mission for example saw a doubling in the number of visitors in 2022. Even though they are involved in other projects, in that year, due to the high rise of beneficiaries in their food aid programmes, they had to spend 2/3 of their entire budget just on services of food aid just in that year because the numbers were so high.

And we still see that ongoing through 2023 and also 2024. **So, something that I want to stress is that NGO social service providers and Food Banks, from what we hear, have really used their creativity, their passion, and their resilience to keep up the aid, even though they have a rising number of people visiting or in need of the food aid. And then at the same time coping with financial or logistical issues.**

This is particularly the case from what we hear for smaller organisations who have

fewer resources, both financial resources, but also when it comes to staff, resources are quite an important issue as well. And that is especially important when keeping in mind that those small organisations are often those who locally work with the people at the very emergence of societies.

So, when it comes to FEAD, I think we have heard before that it is still in the transition phase somehow. So, it is hard to already give a real assessment of how it is going. **But here again, we hear that especially for small organisations, they are struggling a lot more than bigger organisations who have the resources to do advocacy, to really cope with the ongoing changes.**

And especially when it comes to the rising costs, we have heard that in Spain, which I thought was interesting they had more money but could serve fewer people and less food just because of the cost of the food, right? So that is something that our members are struggling quite a lot with. And then one last thing that I really want to highlight as well is that despite all these funding mechanisms, whether it is FEAD, whether it is ESF+, we still see very high levels of poverty. Throughout all the presentations that we have heard today from different countries, we really heard that in all the countries, the risk of poverty and social exclusion, the share of people is quite high, even the share of people at material deprivation. That affects the most

vulnerable and marginalised across Europe, but also more and more middle-income families who just cannot make their ends meet at the end of the month.

**So that is why for us, food aid is immensely important, but we also want to underline that food aid is a bridge towards empowerment and social inclusion, a very important one, but in fact it should not be a long-term solution.** We really need long-term solutions to tackle poverty, to tackle the root causes of poverty.

And just to sum up, one of our Spanish members said recently that food insecurity is a symptom of inequality. And I think that there's quite a lot of truth in that and that we have to address the structural problem as well.

### Rimgailė Baltutė

I work in the Lithuanian Anti-Poverty Network, but I am here mainly today as one of the experts in the Community of Practice on Material Support, in which, we bring together different stakeholders and we have more than 100 registered members. I am glad to see some familiar faces and some active members of our CoP here today. **We aim to enhance the provision of material support across the Member States by**

**consolidating knowledge, building capacity, and promoting collaboration.** So, in our CoP, we discuss different topics related to the implementation of material support programmes, for example, vouchers, digital tools, and accompanying measures. For example, during our last meeting in Athens, we talked about participation and involving the target groups. And now we are in the very early stages of preparing a recommendation paper on that. One of the topics was also the transition from FEAD to ESF+. And as Simona mentioned, FEAD achieved really significant results in providing food and basic material assistance to approximately 15,000,000 people every year, which I think demonstrates the critical role of FEAD in addressing basic needs. FEAD was integrated into ESF+.

I think that one of the reasons why it was done is not only to ensure continuation of support through food and basic assistance but also to incorporate other social integration measures and to find synergies with other programmes to address the root cause of poverty and social exclusion. As Simona also mentioned, material support and food support are usually the first step towards social inclusion. So, it's probably a bit too early to evaluate the transition and the results of the ESF+ because this programme just started this year in many of the countries. But just to give you the main tendencies, first of all, the ESF+ regulation mandates that Member States allocate at least 3% of their ESF+ resources to material

support or in some cases social inclusion measures, but as far as I know most Member States exceed this threshold.

Also, Member States adopt very different approaches to address material deprivation, and we saw from our questionnaire to the managing authorities that we did last year that it includes material support, direct support like distribution of food and material support, with the food packages remaining the most popular form of support. **But most of the Member States employ a combination of different support methods and from those who responded to the questionnaire, 83% use two or more types of material support in the programmes.**

And there is indirect support like vouchers, which are getting more popular, we saw from the question that it will be implemented in at least 8 countries together with the accompanying measures that were introduced in the previous programming period. But in the ESF+ it is now mandatory to implement them.

We also saw from the questionnaire and the report that we did afterwards that social counselling and the guidance services are the most prominent measures, but also financial literacy, childcare support and family support. This topic is also relevant to our CoP members, and we share some good practices during our meetings and there is definitely a huge variety of them, I would say.



With the ongoing crisis fully crisis effect of the aftermath of COVID and the war in Ukraine and inflation, what are some strengths and weaknesses that you observed when it comes to material support?

Rimgailé Baltuté

Indeed, in the past few years we had a very difficult socio-economic situation and of course, it hit the most vulnerable the hardest. And we see that also from the increase of people in need of support.

But I think that once again, **EU funds have been a crucial tool in providing the much-needed support and the ability to mobilise and allocate resources effectively.** That has been vital in ensuring that support reaches the most affected individuals and families. And during the COVID pandemic, we saw that **EU-funded programmes could really shift to meet the immediate needs and emergency food packages and hygiene kits were distributed, I would say effectively despite the lockdowns.** Similarly, last year, for example, we had our CoP meeting in Warsaw, which faced a huge influx of refugees from Ukraine. So, they also acted



very fast to reallocate resources and to adapt support programmes to provide that essential aid to the refugees. But that also happened in other countries as well.

And as I mentioned before, I, think that the variety of measures and a combination of them can also allow us to adapt to different situations in different kinds of crisis scenarios as well. And I think that in many cases, it has strengthened collaboration between different stakeholders because cooperation is crucial in addressing these challenges. But I also believe that the ESF+ framework facilitates sharing best practices and mutual learning among Member States and different stakeholders in response to this crisis.

But of course, there are some challenges and the first thing that comes to mind is probably

bureaucratic and administrative challenges because of the complex procedures which can delay the delivery of support in times of crisis, especially because also the implementation of schemes in Member States vary a lot, which is good, but it might also lead to different levels of effectiveness to respond to this crisis.

And another, quite obvious one, would be the budget limitation because these ongoing crises have stretched the financial resources and inflation and rising costs have made it really challenging for material support to meet the growing needs of vulnerable people. So, we had a very interesting discussion about that. And the question was raised of whether we should use these funds as a tool to cope with this crisis at all.

**Even though it has played a very important role in this still ongoing crisis, maybe there should be another separate tool which would be more flexible, adaptable and may be more suitable to cope with these immediate needs.** And lastly, even though it was mentioned before, I really also want to stress that it is important to say that this crisis only revealed our long-term issues and significant gaps in our social security systems.

So, there is a clear need for more substantial investment in our social security systems to build resilience because I guess that there are no signs that we should relax any time soon.

### Annika Sparrer

I would add that from a social service provider perspective, one strength of material support is the social inclusion approach. So many of our members, combine food aid with social counselling centres, for example. Or we have one member in Finland, for example, who started a new project just recently that tries to tackle the relatively high unemployment situation with their food help, the food aid programmes.

So, the food aid chain and its coordination are now developed in such a way that the chain enables new specific employment opportunities for people from that region who are outside the working or educational life.

This is just to show you that there are lots of possibilities, lots of opportunities to really combine food aid as a bridge to social inclusion.

But then also we saw that it was helpful to address the emergency social needs combined with social inclusion, but especially for those who are most vulnerable, most marginalised, and most include excluded individuals or communities in our society.

And that especially **FEAD was quite special because it went beyond the mere labour market integration and really focused on social and basic needs.**

In that way, our members were able to reach children in poverty, refugees, and other people in vulnerable situations that often fall through the social safety net that is usually provided. Next to that, there is the low threshold approach that was appreciated, so, allowing access to basic goods and services without a lot of conditionality.

And lots of our members have said that this approach was pivotal and reaching out to the most marginalised and excluded just because, as I said, they often fall through the net and do not benefit from traditional support programmes.

Next to that, there are some weaknesses as well. **We already talked about the administrative burden. So even though FEAD was appreciated, its relatively high administrative requirements compared to other EU programmes, were still a burden for many organisations.** Here again, it depended on the size of the organisation.

We have worked quite a lot and for many years with these programmes so now it is doable for us because we got used to it. We know what we must do, but just getting started and getting into it was really difficult

for many. Also, the fact that many had to use their own funds as well was quite difficult.

We have big organisations who can now contribute their own funds to the ESF+ projects. But for small organisations, that is quite a problem as well. And then especially with FEAD, we saw that we often needed an intermediary or municipality in between that was sometimes critical for our especially smaller organisations to then get the funding. So, it would also be helpful to have direct funding, especially for smaller organisations.

### Luis Vilacha Fernandez

I think everything is said and I could not agree more with everything that was said. But just to add a few points. **Obviously, a crisis is a crisis. It cannot be predicted. What we can do as a whole is, is to be better prepared to navigate them.** And I mean for that I could not agree more with what Rimgaile said before. What we need is to have well-funded social and health services.

This is something that is important to emphasize, that the underlying structural problem of the lack of well-invested social and health services which are not something that started with the COVID-19 pandemic or with the war in Ukraine.

It is something that we can trace back to the 2008 economic crisis and how it was handled across different Member States. From the Red Cross perspective, **the flexibility provided by the Commission regarding all the programmes that were launched during the COVID-19 pandemic and during the war in Ukraine were very welcomed.**

Plus, we always had the feeling that support was being received at the local level and there was never the feeling of funds not arriving. But I think one of the most important points, maybe I am repeating myself, through those months of crisis many of my colleagues at the local level were stretched very thin. And because people were locked down, there were a lot of volunteers that could not turn up because they were from the risk groups or the people that just went to the train stations to receive and to support people fleeing Ukraine.

The incredible amount of solidarity that was shown by civil society and volunteers working together and supporting people in need.

And of course, I mean, this must be financed through funds and, and as Rimgaile said as well, it is interesting to hear **that the 3% mandatory ESF+ allocation is already exceeded in some Member States, which is a sign for all of us when the Commission starts discussing the next MFF and the next ESF+, especially the earmark for material support.**

I think there is a lot of work to do for all of us to ensure that this is guaranteed and that there is some specific amount of money addressing the needs of Europe's more vulnerable citizens. Finally, I would like to add to what Rimgaile mentioned that we observed in Warsaw, is the fact that funds we allocate for emergencies. I think one of the elements that we have seen a lot in the Red Cross is that it has been very positive to use remnants from previous funding programmes, in this case, to support vulnerable households and people in need during COVID-19 or the war in Ukraine. But those are actual structural funds. **Structural funds are there to address societal changes and are there to be linked to the European Pillar of Social Rights, which is a wonderful compass provided by the European Commission to achieve a fairer and more social Europe. And they are supposed to be linked with principles.**

And what I mean with this is as Rimgaile said as well, perhaps we need to think about something else, something specific to address the emergency crisis, emergency situations that cannot rule out money from funds that are supposed to address long-term unemployment or the young population or gender equality or accessible housing or Roma inclusion and so on and so forth. I would say that with a lot of strengths we have all addressed together this poly crisis, but at the same time, many elements can be improved and worked on to address challenges that are lying ahead.



## 6. Conclusion

**The FEBA Annual Forum on Food Aid and Social Inclusion 2024 offered Food Bankers and stakeholders a platform to discuss their experiences and challenges with regard to EU-funded food aid programmes as well as highlight their activities to foster social inclusion.**

Food Banks and other civil society organisations adapted to crises as well as to the new systems of material support, however across the board they have reached their limits during the past years. The call for a more structural approach combined with emergency crisis response becomes apparent, as well as closer cooperation across all levels is needed.



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