

European Competence Centre for Social Innovation
Community of Practice on Material Support

Recommendation Paper on the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy

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Community of Practice on Material Support: Recommendation Paper on the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy

The European Union is preparing its first-ever comprehensive EU Anti-Poverty Strategy (APS), scheduled for adoption in early 2026. The strategy aims at 'helping people to access the essential protections and services they need and addressing the root causes of poverty.'¹

The Community of Practice (CoP) on Material Support brings together stakeholders, including representatives from EU institutions, national and regional authorities, intermediary bodies and NGOs. It aims to enhance the capacity of Member States to design, manage and implement ESF+ programmes to efficiently address material deprivation. In the framework of its activities, it has also initiated discussions on the EU APS and the role of material support² within it.

Through a series of workshops, written contributions and other exchanges, the CoP has identified priorities and recommendations to ensure that food and basic material support measures are recognised as necessary, supplementary and immediate assistance to the protections and services offered by public administrations. For this reason, these measures must be adequately funded and integrated into the broader framework of the EU APS.

This paper outlines these contributions, organised around five strategic pillars. Together, they provide a roadmap for integrating material support into a coherent, person-centred and forward-looking strategy to reduce poverty and promote social inclusion across the EU.

Background and context

Poverty is a multidimensional and persistent challenge affecting over 93.3 million people across the European Union.³ Although the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion has decreased since 2021, it remains a serious concern in several Member States. In fact, the situation has not only worsened in many Member States since 2020 due to successive crises such as Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and inflation, but has also evolved, with new target groups emerging and different dynamics shaping vulnerability across Europe. According to Eurostat, around 6.4% of the EU population reported experiencing severe material and social deprivation in 2024.⁴ Furthermore, 8.5% of people were unable to afford a meal containing meat, chicken, fish or a vegetarian equivalent every second day.⁵ Food deprivation remains a significant issue, particularly for vulnerable groups such as families with children, persons with disabilities and older adults. In this context, the EU APS is an important tool for building and ensuring resilience.

Despite the availability of social safety nets, these groups often struggle to meet their basic daily needs. Furthermore, members of the CoP have observed that new groups, including individuals in formal employment, students and those who were not previously considered at risk, are increasingly seeking assistance with material support.

In addition, in-work poverty has emerged as a structural issue. Many employed individuals are unable to afford food, housing or utilities due to low wages, unstable contracts and insufficient labour protection. Access to affordable housing is a significant concern, as rising rental and utility costs hinder the ability of households to meet other essential needs.

Moreover, systemic barriers persist in undermining the effectiveness of support systems across the EU. Administrative complexity, social stigma and fragmented service delivery make it difficult for people to access the assistance they are entitled to. The lack of coordination between social services, employment assistance, housing support, education and healthcare impedes users' ability to navigate the system and achieve sustainable inclusion. It is important to highlight what happens when access to food and basic material assistance is limited or overly complicated: it creates a barrier to the uptake of broader social services and protections. Individuals facing severe material deprivation often prioritise immediate survival needs, such as securing food or clothing, over longer-term support systems like healthcare, education, or legal aid. Without first addressing these fundamental needs, people in vulnerable situations may not even perceive the relevance or accessibility of additional support. In this sense, food and basic material assistance acts as a crucial entry point: it provides the fertile ground upon which trust can be built and more

1 European Commission, *President von der Leyen's mission letter to Roxana Minzatu*, 1 December 2024.

2 In this recommendation paper, material support refers to food and/or basic material assistance (i.e. goods which fulfil a person's basic needs for a dignified life, such as clothing, hygiene products (including feminine hygiene products) and school supplies, in accordance with [Regulation \(EU\) 2021/1057](#). The food and/or basic material assistance may be provided directly to the most deprived persons, or indirectly, for example, in electronic or other form of vouchers or cards. Delivery of food and/or basic material assistance is complemented by accompanying measures, such as referrals to competent services.

3 Eurostat, *People at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2024*, 30 April 2025.

4 Ibid.

5 Eurostat, *Inability to afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish (or vegetarian equivalent) every second day*, 16 June 2025.

comprehensive services can take root. Over time, by stabilising the most deprived individuals through immediate aid, public authorities can gradually guide them towards more sustainable pathways of empowerment and inclusion, ultimately eliminating their dependence on emergency support.

The ESF+ finances programmes at national, regional and local levels, many of which are implemented by the civil societies across Member States, leveraging the added value of volunteering. As a result, it has proven to be a highly effective instrument for delivering a crucial European public policy in both rural and urban areas. Yet this effectiveness also comes with growing pressure: CoP members, in particular NGOs implementing measures on the ground, are increasingly reporting rising demand for assistance while facing limited public funding and declining private donations. Administrative burdens and complex reporting requirements place additional pressure on actors involved in implementation, including public authorities and civil society organisations. For NGOs, whose capacities are already stretched, this significantly limits their operational flexibility. The challenge is particularly acute for volunteers, whose daily realities are often not taken into account when performance indicators and funding rules are designed. As the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034 is being prepared, it is essential that these requirements are adapted to the actual capacities of actors. In addition, governance structures often remain unclear or overlapping at national, regional and local levels, which weakens coordination, dilutes accountability and ultimately affects the effectiveness and quality of the support provided.

Material deprivation is one of the most visible manifestations of poverty, and a broader response is required to address it. Adopting this approach will enable a more comprehensive and structural response that tackles the root causes of poverty, prevents exclusion and promotes long-term social cohesion. The forthcoming EU APS presents a distinctive opportunity to enhance the role of material and food support within a comprehensive and coordinated EU strategy to combat poverty. Realising this potential will necessitate strategic alignment, appropriate resourcing and a firm commitment to reaching those most in need through concrete, inclusive and sustainable measures.

Priorities and recommendations for the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy

Drawing on the collective experience of its members, the CoP on Material Support proposes the following priorities and recommendations for the EU APS. This section outlines strategic directions and corresponding recommendations aimed at embedding material support within a coherent, multidimensional and rights-based framework to reduce poverty and social exclusion across the EU, as informed by members' insights.

1. Adopt a multidimensional and inclusive approach to poverty

Poverty and material deprivation are driven by a number of intersecting factors, including income insecurity, housing and food deprivation, limited access to public services, digital exclusion, low skills and limited opportunities for reskilling or upskilling, and labour market instability. These factors often overlap and compound one another, leading to entrenched disadvantage and social exclusion. Addressing poverty requires recognising development needs across multiple areas, such as social welfare, healthcare, education, the pension system, housing, regional development and civil society development. Ensuring that people in vulnerable situations can not only access but also afford basic necessities, such as food, is essential. Without this, their ability to engage with healthcare, education and other vital services necessary for long-term inclusion is severely limited.

The EU APS should therefore adopt a comprehensive, person-centred approach that acknowledges the complexity of poverty and addresses it step by step according to priorities. People facing poverty need to be supported gradually as they rebuild their trust in others and institutions. This is why food and basic material support must come first. Food and basic material assistance should be inclusive and also promote active inclusion, ensuring access to adequate income, meaningful employment and quality services in a second step. This three-pillar model is crucial in addressing the symptoms and structural causes of poverty simultaneously. These pillars are like the supports of a bridge, i.e. they are meant to follow one another rather than forming simultaneous foundations of a building. Such an approach should consider the diverse realities experienced by various population groups and territorial disparities across Member States and regions. It should also anticipate and mitigate emerging risks relating to digital and green transitions, demographic changes and evolving labour market conditions.

Recommendations:

- 1.1. Recognise poverty as a multidimensional phenomenon which must be addressed step by step and incorporate material and income support within an integrated policy framework that encompasses access to housing, education, healthcare, digital infrastructure, employment opportunities, culture and leisure.

- 1.2. Ensure the strategy responds to both persistent and emerging forms of poverty, such as energy poverty, digital exclusion, structural shifts in the labour market and shocks, including climate or health crises and geopolitical instability.
- 1.3. Promote coordination across different sectors, giving priority to shared planning and the delivery of services. Ensure that material and financial support are systematically connected with services such as employment, education, housing and health. Strategic and operational planning should reflect this integration, with shared objectives and aligned resources across all sectors.
- 1.4. Promote preventative approaches that extend beyond alleviating hardship to diminish the risk of poverty over time. For instance, invest in early intervention for children and young students, and in programmes developed in cooperation with schools, health centres and social services, to identify individuals at risk and provide timely support before severe deprivation sets in. Address housing insecurity and support individuals facing sudden income shocks or health crises.
- 1.5. Reinforce the role of adequate, accessible and empowering minimum income schemes as a central pillar of inclusive social protection systems. Lay the groundwork for a future EU directive to ensure legal guarantees for a minimum income across all Member States.
- 1.6. Align the EU APS with the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan to ensure strategic coherence across EU policies, supporting consistent implementation through national action plans and the European Semester.
- 1.7. Ensure that national APS implementation plans include targeted measures to address territorial inequalities, particularly in remote, rural and structurally disadvantaged areas with limited access to infrastructure and essential services.

2. Recognise food and material assistance as core to inclusion

Food and basic material assistance are crucial in ensuring basic dignity and facilitating social inclusion. As well as providing immediate relief, they offer the first point of contact with wider support systems, including healthcare, education, social services and access to employment. Addressing these interlinked needs is essential to preventing poverty from deepening and spreading. Therefore, food and basic material assistance must be recognised as a foundational component of social inclusion. These measures offer vital stability and reduce vulnerability, particularly during times of crisis or transition.

To maximise their impact, these measures must be adequately funded, better integrated with other services and embedded in long-term social policies. They must also be designed in a way that respects the rights and agency of beneficiaries.

Recommendations:

- 2.1. Recognise food and basic material support explicitly as integral components of the EU APS, establishing clear links to other areas of social protection and inclusion.
- 2.2. Promote an approach to food security that prioritises access to available, affordable, safe and nutritious food as a fundamental social need closely linked to adequate housing, a minimum income and fair working conditions.
- 2.3. Ensure the sustainability and adequacy of funding for material support measures by earmarking 5–10% of ESF+ resources for this purpose and promoting the use of other EU and national funding streams to enhance delivery.
- 2.4. Complement the integration of material support with other services, including employment assistance, healthcare, counselling, digital inclusion programmes and housing support, and ensure these are supported by accompanying measures that promote stability and long-term empowerment.
- 2.5. Systematically link food and basic material assistance initiatives, along with their accompanying measures, to mainstream social protection systems, ensuring they are structurally incorporated and clearly aligned with the EU's broader objectives of reducing poverty, promoting social inclusion and supporting employment, as well as with relevant EU policies and legislation.
- 2.6. Encourage the inclusion of child-specific material support measures within the APS, ensuring alignment with the European Child Guarantee. This should include targeted access to food and hygiene products, digital equipment and other essential goods, recognising that early investment in children and families has the strongest long-term impact on reducing poverty and breaking its intergenerational cycle.

- 2.7. Strengthen the capacity of local and community-based actors by reducing administrative burdens, facilitating flexible and multi-annual funding, and offering technical support for implementation and monitoring.
- 2.8. Address barriers to accessing food and basic materials by reducing stigma, simplifying eligibility and administrative procedures, and ensuring that delivery is accessible, user-centred and culturally appropriate. Outreach efforts should prioritise hard-to-reach groups.
- 2.9. Ensure that national schemes address the needs of non-traditional vulnerable groups facing poverty, including low-income workers and students. This should be achieved by adapting eligibility criteria, providing tailored outreach measures and designing programmes that guarantee effective access.
- 2.10. Enhance the evaluation of food and basic material assistance measures by considering not only delivery volumes, but also accessibility, user experience and their contribution to long-term stability and inclusion.
- 2.11. Strengthen the resilience of material support schemes to ensure they remain reliable and accessible in times of crisis, thereby safeguarding the continuity of assistance for vulnerable groups.

3. Embed partnership and participation across the strategy

The implementation of the EU APS must reflect the principles of partnership, subsidiarity and participation. This involves actively engaging all relevant stakeholders, such as public authorities, NGOs and people experiencing poverty, including those who remain invisible to social protection systems.

Local and community-based organisations are essential in providing food and basic material assistance, and in reaching marginalised groups. Their close ties to communities, trust among end beneficiaries, flexibility and practical knowledge make them invaluable partners in designing and implementing effective solutions. Additionally, people experiencing poverty should not merely be passive recipients of aid. They must be active participants in shaping the policies that impact their lives. Ensuring meaningful participation leads to better policy outcomes, strengthens legitimacy and enhances accountability.

Recommendations:

- 3.1. Operationalise the partnership principle by establishing structured coordination mechanisms at both the EU and national levels to ensure regular, inclusive engagement with all relevant stakeholders, including NGOs and local authorities. These structures should clarify roles and responsibilities, promote coherence across governance levels and ensure that stakeholder input informs all stages of APS development and implementation.
- 3.2. Ensure that EU and national funding instruments (e.g. ESF+, ERDF) include clear requirements and incentives for participatory planning and partnership governance, along with appropriate monitoring indicators.
- 3.3. Foster thematic coordination across key sectors (e.g., food, housing, employment, mental health and sleep) and align stakeholder platforms with national and EU planning cycles to improve coherence. This should include continuous investment in cooperation among policymakers at national, regional and local levels, as well as those implementing the measures (usually NGOs) and experts.
- 3.4. Ensure meaningful stakeholder involvement by requiring a minimum of 5% NGO representation in national coordination bodies, and by providing them with real influence over planning and agenda setting.
- 3.5. Provide dedicated and accessible funding to support the participation of smaller NGOs and community-based organisations, including coverage of administrative costs and technical assistance for engagement in EU and national processes.
- 3.6. Establish, or strengthen where already present, permanent and structured mechanisms at the EU, national, regional and local levels to ensure the participation of people experiencing poverty. These mechanisms should be systematically integrated into the design, delivery and evaluation of APS programmes, with outcomes that clearly inform decision-making and are linked to national processes and civil society platforms.
- 3.7. Ensure that people experiencing poverty are supported in participating through targeted training, access to information, and funding for engagement activities, including peer-led initiatives.
- 3.8. Promote co-design and co-production approaches, particularly at a local level, to improve the responsiveness and relevance of interventions, thereby strengthening public trust.
- 3.9. Launch an EU-wide communication and awareness strategy to promote understanding of the EU APS, reduce stigma and encourage broad societal engagement, including volunteering as a means of empowerment.

4. Secure adequate and sustainable financing⁶

The effective implementation of the EU APS depends heavily on the availability of sufficient, stable and well-targeted financial resources. Food and basic material assistance require stable funding to be accessible, effective and responsive to evolving needs.

Although EU funding instruments such as the ESF+ provide essential support, stakeholders in Member States consistently report persistent funding gaps, administrative challenges, and obstacles for smaller organisations in accessing these funds. Evidence shows that meeting basic needs such as food and basic material support not only delivers immediate relief, but also improves dietary quality, mental health and engagement with education and labour market services. This helps to break the cycle of poverty and reduce long-term public expenditure. Financial commitments must therefore recognise the crucial role of food and basic material support in promoting social inclusion. The upcoming negotiations on the EU Multiannual Financial Framework post-2027 offer a critical opportunity to secure ambitious and predictable financial commitments for poverty eradication. Funding must be adequate, aligned with key priorities and accessible to a diverse range of stakeholders.

Recommendations:

- 4.1. Demonstrate that ensuring food and basic materials are recognised as core priorities within ESF+ and other relevant EU instruments and constitutes an investment, not a cost. This should be reflected consistently in national programming and operational plans.
- 4.2. Ensure the EU APS is underpinned by binding targets and clear implementation guidelines with defined objectives, actions and financing frameworks. These should be closely aligned with national anti-poverty strategies to ensure coherence and coordination across governance levels.
- 4.3. Safeguard the independence of the ESF+ by preventing its merger with other EU funds or any structural changes to the MFF governance that could weaken its core mission. This is essential in order to preserve its unique role in promoting social inclusion, access to quality employment, education, healthcare, and in contributing to the eradication of poverty.
- 4.4. Earmark at least 5%, and ideally 10%, of the ESF+ budget for programmes addressing material deprivation. Consider supplementing these allocations with additional dedicated EU funding lines, or even a specific EU fund for poverty eradication. These allocations should be indexed to inflation to preserve their real value while maintaining robust funding for accompanying measures. Member States should retain the flexibility to adjust these allocations according to national contexts and evolving challenges.
- 4.5. Promote flexible, multi-annual funding models that enable sustainable service delivery, long-term planning and innovative partnerships, particularly among smaller and community-based actors.
- 4.6. Strengthen cross-fund synergies and encourage the integrated use of ESF+, ERDF, the Just Transition Fund and other EU resources to support infrastructure, logistics and social economy initiatives linked to anti-poverty goals.
- 4.7. Streamline access to EU funding by simplifying the application and reporting processes, offering technical assistance and providing capacity-building support. This should include exploring the possibility of waiving the application of state aid rules for activities aimed directly at combating poverty, thereby reducing administrative burdens and accelerating implementation.
- 4.8. Embed participatory approaches in the planning, implementation and evaluation of EU-funded programmes, ensuring the involvement of end beneficiaries and frontline organisations in shaping relevant, responsive funding strategies.

5. Strengthen monitoring, evaluation, and accountability

A robust EU APS must be underpinned by strong monitoring, evaluation, and accountability mechanisms. Without reliable data and clear benchmarks, it is difficult to track progress, assess effectiveness or hold institutions accountable. However, current systems across Member States often suffer from data gaps and inconsistent indicators.

Comprehensive monitoring must evaluate the real impact of poverty reduction measures, including material support. Such monitoring should be inclusive, evidence-based and designed to inform continuous learning and policy improvement.

⁶ As regards funding, the CoP on Material Support drafted a specific [Recommendation Paper on the post-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework](#). Specific recommendations on funding are already covered in this paper.

Recommendations:

- 5.1. Invest in the development of high-quality, disaggregated data on poverty and material deprivation, including data on access, take-up and user experience across different population groups.
- 5.2. Strengthen national monitoring and reporting systems for the implementation of APS, ensuring that the data informs policy cycles and supports evidence-based decision-making.
- 5.3. Align EU APS monitoring with existing EU instruments, such as the European Semester, Social Scoreboard, and Minimum Income Recommendation, to ensure consistency and strategic integration.
- 5.4. Include indicators that assess the quality, accessibility and user experience of material and social support.
- 5.5. Embed stakeholder participation in monitoring and evaluation, ensuring that the perspectives of frontline providers and people experiencing poverty shape implementation reviews and future planning.
- 5.6. Support Member States by providing them with technical assistance and capacity building to improve their monitoring systems, including through the use of participatory and community-based evaluation tools.

