

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

Building Resilient Material Support Systems II

Summary Report

1. Background information

In recent years, we have faced an increasing number of crises, ranging from public health emergencies to geopolitical, economic, energy and climate-related shocks, contributing to growing uncertainty. These crises disproportionately affect vulnerable groups, making the preparedness of material support systems a critical concern. Building on the discussions held at the Social Innovation Forum (SIF) 2025, this second online event aimed to further develop the discussion by examining how preparedness can be supported and enabled at system level within the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) framework. The discussion drew specifically on the outcomes of the workshop organised by the Community of Practice (CoP) on Material Support during the Forum.

1.1. Objectives

The objectives of the online event were to:

- Explore existing ESF+ measures related to crisis preparedness and assess how they can be used to strengthen material support systems.
- Exchange experiences and lessons learned across countries and among different stakeholders.
- Identify priority actions and practical elements at system level that can support preparedness for material support.
- Foster a shared understanding among stakeholders of the conditions required to ensure the continuity and resilience of material support systems in times of crisis.
- Clarify what support, guidance or follow-up may be needed from the CoP to further advance this work.

1.2. Target group

CoP members and other relevant stakeholders, including:

- EU policymakers and experts from DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion;
- Representatives from Managing Authorities;
- NGOs and civil society organisations working in social inclusion and material support.

1.3. Number of participants

The event welcomed 58 participants.

1.4. Geographical and typology spread

Participants were registered from the following 16 Member States: BE, BG, DE, EE, FR, GR, HR, HU, IE, IT, LV, LT, MT, SI, PT and UA. In terms of affiliation, the participants included representatives from various organisations, such as: 12 National Managing Authorities, 3 Regional Managing Authorities, 3 Line Ministries, 6 Implementing Organisations, 5 Intermediate Bodies, 12 representatives from NGOs, 7 non-profit organisations, 4 EC representatives and 6 participants from other institutions.

2. Main findings

2.1. Key outcomes

Gintarė Zizienė (Coordinator of the Community of Practice on Material Support) opened the event by welcoming participants and underlining the relevance of the topic in the context of multiple and overlapping crises. She emphasised the need to move beyond reactive crisis responses towards stronger anticipation, learning and system resilience, including improved coordination and knowledge sharing across countries.

Aistė Adomavičienė (Thematic Expert of the Community of Practice on Material Support) presented an overview of the outcomes from the workshop organised by the CoP on Material Support during the SIF 2025 in Brussels. She summarised the key preparedness aspects identified during the workshop, including leadership and cooperation, operational preparedness, personnel and volunteers, supply chains and stock management, delivery systems and logistics, and approaches to reaching and supporting end beneficiaries. The summary of the workshop can be found [here](#).

Simona Pulbere (Policy Officer, ESF+ and Cohesion Policy, European Commission, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion) presented an overview of how cohesion policy instruments under the ESF and ESF+ have adapted to crises. She recalled that during the 2014–2020 programming period, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent crises

revealed the need for faster and more predictable responses, leading to exceptional and temporary measures such as the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiatives (CRII and CRII+) and Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe (REACT-EU). These instruments introduced regulatory flexibilities, simplified cost options, higher co-financing rates and retroactive eligibility. She explained that the 2021–2027 ESF+ framework incorporates more permanent flexibility mechanisms, including streamlined programme amendments, increased use of simplified cost options, and a stronger focus on institutional capacity and workforce resilience. She also highlighted targeted instruments such as Cohesion’s Action for Refugees in Europe (CARE) and Flexible Assistance to Territories (FAST-CARE) in response to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine; the role of the mid-term review of the ESF+ in enabling the reallocation of resources to emerging priorities; and ongoing reflections on future crisis-response instruments in the post-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework, noting the growing emphasis on preparedness and resilience within EU funding frameworks.

Olha Moloko (Humanitarian Aid and Recovery Cluster Lead, East Europe Foundation, Ukraine) presented practical experience from Ukraine on delivering material support in the context of the full-scale war. She described how the Ukrainian civil society organisation rapidly shifted from development-focused activities to humanitarian response. She highlighted the importance of partnerships with local authorities, businesses and international donors, as well as the role of local organisations in ensuring access to affected populations, particularly in frontline or occupied areas where logistics and infrastructure were severely disrupted. Her intervention emphasised the need to combine flexibility with accountability, including simplified but reliable reporting, and to adapt support modalities to context, such as tailoring food kits, providing storage solutions or shifting towards vouchers where markets remain functional. She also emphasised the importance of humanitarian standards, coordination mechanisms, localisation of aid, and the duty of care for staff and volunteers. The experience demonstrated that preparedness, coordination and adaptability are critical for ensuring continuity of material support, with lessons applicable beyond conflict situations.

Simonas Gurevičius (Director, Lithuanian Food Bank) presented the Lithuanian experience and reflections on preparing material support systems for different types of crises. Drawing on experience from the COVID-19 pandemic, migration pressures and the war in Ukraine, he emphasised that preparedness must be developed in times of peace and should cover multiple crisis scenarios. He highlighted the importance of clearly defined roles and cooperation between government, municipalities and NGOs, as well as the need for advance planning, realistic estimations of needs and sufficient operational resources. His intervention underlined that food assistance should be treated as a core priority in crisis preparedness, noting challenges related to food reserves, storage capacity, kitchens and distribution infrastructures at local level. He also stressed that crisis preparedness requires sustained financial investment and should not rely solely on the capacity of individual NGOs. He noted that ESF+ plays a crucial role in sustaining material support systems and contributes to creating the necessary infrastructure for preparedness. However, effective preparedness requires complementary funding, infrastructure planning and shared responsibility beyond individual organisations.

The event was followed by interactive workshops focusing on preparedness, barriers and enabling conditions for material support systems in crisis situations. The discussions were facilitated by: Rimgailė Baltutė (Group 1), Elena Koleva (Group 2) and Aistė Adomavičienė (Group 3). For the main findings, please see Annex 3.

2.2. Participant feedback during the event

Participant feedback during the discussions highlighted broad agreement on the relevance and urgency of strengthening crisis preparedness for material support. Participants confirmed that recent crises have exposed gaps in preparedness across different contexts, while also demonstrating that many challenges are shared across countries and stakeholders. Feedback also pointed to uncertainty regarding the use of ESF+ for preparedness purposes, particularly in relation to flexibility, audit requirements, procurement rules and timing. Through a word cloud exercise conducted during the online event, participants shared their views on how the CoP on Material Support could help strengthen crisis preparedness. The collected input confirmed participants’ strong interest in practical examples and good practices, as well as in the development of a preparedness toolkit, alongside continued peer exchange and clearer guidance.

Interactive questions provided additional insights. When asked whether their Member State has (or is developing) a crisis preparedness plan for material support, 83% of respondents indicated that they do not know, while only 8% confirmed the existence of such a plan. Among those aware of a preparedness plan, the majority noted that it is not aligned with or framed within the ESF+ framework. A large majority (79%) considered the role of the EU to be very important in supporting Member States’ crisis preparedness for material support.

2.3. Impact

The event further explored how crisis preparedness for material support can be addressed within the ESF+ framework. Through policy-level input and practice-based experiences, participants gained a clearer understanding of enabling conditions, remaining challenges and the need for coordination between different actors and instruments. The discussions provided concrete insights into planning, coordination, operational capacity and prioritisation, and will contribute directly to the preparation of a toolkit on crisis preparedness for material support within the CoP.

3. Lessons learned

The event confirmed that effective crisis preparedness for material support requires a system-level approach rather than relying only on ad hoc responses or individual organisations. While crises differ, many preparedness needs are shared and can be addressed through arrangements agreed in advance. A key lesson was the importance of preparation during periods of stability, including planning, needs assessment and capacity building. Participants also underlined the central role of coordination and partnerships, as well as the importance of ESF+ in supporting structural preparedness and everyday material support systems. In parallel, it was recognised that ESF+ needed to be complemented with other instruments in emergency situations.

4. Next steps

4.1. Follow-up actions

- Following the event, a toolkit with recommendations on crisis preparedness for material support will be developed.
- Participants were invited to share additional inputs or relevant materials by email with the CoP coordinator.
- A working group will be established to support the preparation of the toolkit. Volunteers interested in contributing to the drafting process were invited to contact the CoP coordinator by 13 February.

4.2. Future events 2026

- 24–25 March, on-site event 'Integrated Approaches to Material Support: Accompanying Measures and Partnerships in Practice', Rome, Italy.
- 20 May, online event 'Exploring the relationship between food waste reduction and tackling poverty, and the opportunities and challenges of linking both objectives'.
- October, on-site event, Social Innovation Forum 2026.
- November, on-site joint event with the CoP on Social Innovation on social impact measurement.
- December, online event reflecting on 2026 achievements, sharing lessons and planning priorities and activities for 2027.

Annexes

Annex 1: [Agenda of the event](#)

Annex 2: [Presentations of the event](#)

Annex 3: Key findings from the breakout rooms

Annex 3

Key Findings from the Breakout Rooms

Online event, 4th February 2026

Questions:

1. Crises can take different forms (e.g. pandemics, war, inflation, climate impacts). When developing a toolkit, are there common elements (e.g. institutional structures, processes, disruptions to supply chains, capacity constraints, etc.) which should be included to ensure effective crisis preparedness for material support within the ESF+ framework? If yes, what are these common elements?
2. Where do you encounter the greatest challenges, uncertainties or barriers when using ESF+ for crisis preparedness?
3. What should indicate that a material support system is 'prepared' for a crisis?
4. What is currently missing to translate preparedness discussions into concrete, actionable steps within the ESF+ framework?

GROUP 1

Facilitator: Rimgailė Baltutė

- Crises take different forms, but responses are often ad hoc, underlining the need for more structured preparedness. Advance planning and needs mapping are essential at all levels, with particular attention to beneficiaries of material support.
- Preparedness should reflect different types and phases of crises, with clearer guidance on how ESF+ can be used at different stages.
- Some contexts face constraints in using ESF+ for emergency response, linked to legislation, procurement rules and timing. ESF+ is often seen as more suitable for structural preparedness, while emergencies may require complementary EU or national funding.
- Training and capacity building are cross-cutting needs. Accompanying measures can support the preparedness of institutions, implementing organisations and end beneficiaries.
- Preparedness requires resilient systems and supplies in each country, supported by strong cooperation between institutions and across borders.
- A timely response is critical, especially when delays have immediate negative effects on vulnerable groups.
- Ensuring access to basic needs, such as food, water, shelter, medicine and fuel, remains a core priority.
- Minimum preparedness includes having operational arrangements in place: response scenarios, defined roles, communication channels and agreed first steps.

GROUP 2

Facilitator: Elena Koleva

- Preparedness should include measures to protect staff and volunteers, recognising their safety, availability and well-being as critical for an effective crisis response.
- Preparedness planning should explicitly identify and prioritise target groups most affected in crisis situations. Material support systems should be able to adapt quickly to changing needs while ensuring continuity of support for the most vulnerable.
- There are constraints in using ESF+ for crisis preparedness, particularly due to limited flexibility in urgent situations. Administrative requirements can slow down action and make it difficult to respond quickly. Audit-related concerns discourage proactive use of ESF+ for preparedness measures.
- Greater clarity is needed on how resources can be mobilised and transferred quickly to support preparedness actions in line with ESF+ requirements. Some participants noted the potential need for clearer or dedicated mechanisms in the next MFF.
- Clearer guidance and greater confidence in applying existing rules are needed to support timely action.
- There is a need for a clear ESF+ preparedness protocol, aligned with rules accepted at both EU and national level, defining steps across programming, management and implementation in the field, and providing specific guidance for Managing Authorities.

GROUP 3

Facilitator: Aistė Adomavičienė

- Effective use of ESF+ requires moving beyond isolated measures towards an integrated response that is linked to broader national and EU-level strategies (e.g. employment and social inclusion frameworks).
- Flexibility and promptness should be guiding principles in crisis situations. Rapid delivery of material support is essential, and procurement procedures should be simplified during crisis periods to enable timely responses.
- Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic show that responses remained highly bureaucratic. Crisis situations require more agile and simplified procedures, while maintaining accountability and safeguards.
- At present, there are no crisis preparedness plans, or there is uncertainty about how such plans should be structured and aligned with EU expectations, including ESF+ requirements.
- A prepared material support system operates with simplified procedures during crises, reducing unnecessary administrative burdens while maintaining safeguards. It is able to respond rapidly, particularly for people in urgent need.
- Preparedness includes ensuring available and pre-planned resources, with suggestions that a defined share of funding could be reserved for emergency response.
- Regular coordination mechanisms, such as stakeholder round tables and formal cooperation agreements, strengthen readiness.
- NGOs play a critical enabling role, as their operational flexibility can support faster responses, particularly when administrative procedures initially delay action.

