

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

The EU Anti-Poverty Strategy and Material Deprivation: Policy, Evidence and Practice

Summary Report

Online event, 20 May 2026



Funded by
the European Union

1. Background information

The online event of the Community of Practice (CoP) on Material Support took place on 20 May 2026. The event was organised within the framework of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) Social Innovation+ initiative and brought together the European Commission, managing authorities, partner organisations and civil society representatives from across EU Member States.

The event took place at a particularly significant moment, two weeks after the European Commission adopted the first-ever EU Anti-Poverty Strategy (EU APS) on 6 May 2026. The discussions addressed the persistent challenges of poverty and material deprivation across the EU, explored the implications of the newly adopted EU APS for material support systems, and presented new evidence from a structured survey conducted among Managing Authorities on the implementation of material support under the ESF+.

1.1. Objectives

The event aimed to:

- Present the main priorities of the EU APS and explore their relevance for material support systems;
- Share new findings from the structured survey on ESF+ material support implementation across Member States;
- Facilitate exchange between CoP members on the implications of these developments for future material support policies and practice;
- Identify opportunities to strengthen the contribution of material support to poverty reduction and social inclusion within the broader EU policy framework.

1.2. Target group

The event was addressed to CoP members and other relevant stakeholders, including:

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

1.3. Number of participants

The event welcomed 60 participants.

1.4. Geographical and typology spread

Participants registered from 18 Member States: BE, BG, DE, EE, ES, FI, FR, GR, HR, HU, IE, IT, LV, LT, MT, RO, SI and PT. In terms of affiliation, participants included representatives of various organisations, including managing authorities, NGOs and civil society organisations, European Commission and other institutions.

2. Main findings

2.1. Key outcomes

The event was opened by **Gintarė Zizienė** (Coordinator, CoP on Material Support), who welcomed participants and framed the significance of the occasion. She highlighted that the EU APS, adopted just two weeks earlier, reflects many of the issues the CoP on Material Support has consistently raised in recent years. She also recalled that the CoP had formally contributed to the development of the Strategy through its Recommendation Paper submitted in October 2025.

The EU Anti-Poverty Strategy: key elements and implications for material support

Ragnar Horn (European Commission, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion) presented the main elements of the EU APS, providing both the analytical and political context for its development. He explained the key drivers behind the Strategy: the fundamental right to live with dignity, as set out in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights; the moral and economic arguments against poverty; the urgency created by the rising cost of living, housing pressures, and ongoing child and in-work poverty; and the need to rebuild social cohesion and trust in institutions.

He noted that around 93 million people in the EU remain at risk of poverty or social exclusion, and that this number has decreased by 3.5 million against a 2030 target of at least 15 million. Strong emphasis was placed on the need to break the cycle of child poverty, with the pace of progress for children remaining a particular concern. The EU APS also sets a longer-term ambition to eradicate poverty by 2050.

The Strategy package comprises: the Communication on the EU APS; a proposal for a Council Recommendation on fighting housing exclusion; a Communication on breaking the cycle of child poverty and strengthening the European Child Guarantee; and an analytical Staff Working Document. The active inclusion approach is central to the Strategy's framework, combining adequate income support, access to quality services and labour market activation.

Key data highlighted the disproportionate impact of poverty on specific groups: people excluded from the labour market, people with a migrant background, people with disabilities, and those with low educational attainment. The territorial dimension was emphasised equally, with significant variation observed both across and within Member States. Regarding the cost of living, food prices rose sharply between 2021 and 2025, placing the greatest burden on low-income households, which spend the largest share of their income on food.

EU Anti-Poverty Strategy: reactions from the ground

Peter Verhaeghe (Caritas Europa) welcomed the adoption of the Strategy as an important step in keeping poverty high on the political agenda. He particularly supported the call on Member States to appoint an Anti-Poverty Coordinator at the highest political level, the commitment to developing guidance for national, regional and local anti-poverty frameworks, and the planned structured dialogue with people experiencing poverty. He nevertheless expressed concern that the Strategy's central emphasis on labour market activation does not fully reflect the situation of people facing the most severe deprivation. He also noted the absence of any initiative to revise the Free Movement Directive (2004/38/EC), which may deny mobile EU citizens access to social protection when they lose employment, and the lack of reference to the revised European Social Charter, which already enshrines the right to protection against poverty.

Caterina Marchetti (European Food Banks Federation, FEBA) welcomed the Strategy's recognition of poverty as a multidimensional issue, its strong emphasis on dignity, the lifecycle approach and the planned development of new poverty indicators by 2028. She stressed the importance of ensuring that these indicators capture not only aggregate figures but also the specific characteristics of vulnerable groups through disaggregated data. Two key gaps were identified: the Strategy largely builds on existing funding instruments without introducing new dedicated resources, and food insecurity is not treated as an explicit core priority despite sharp increases in food prices. FEBA called for food access to be embedded in the monitoring and implementation framework, and for food banks to be recognised as partners in social inclusion policies rather than solely as emergency actors.

Kinga Albert (Red Cross EU Office) echoed concerns regarding funding, noting that while Member States have in practice spent more than the mandatory minimum on material deprivation under the current ESF+, the absence of a binding earmark in the proposed Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028–2034 remains a concern for the sector. She also highlighted the risk that the Coalition Against Poverty, which involves philanthropic and private sector actors, could blur accountability by framing poverty reduction as a charitable act rather than a rights-based obligation of Member States. She further called for recognition that poverty can affect individuals outside traditional family structures, a consideration relevant to food aid programmes that currently prioritise families with children.

Marie-Amah Koudio (European Anti-Poverty Network, EAPN) welcomed the Strategy's focus on prevention, its lifecycle approach, the appointment of national Anti-Poverty Coordinators and the structured dialogue mechanism with people experiencing poverty. She expressed concern about the absence of concrete targets beyond the 2050 eradication ambition, the uncertainty surrounding funding implementation, and an insufficiently strong anti-discrimination perspective. She also noted the limited reference to migrants and migrant children in the Strategy, which represents a significant gap given the data on their elevated risk of poverty.

Structured survey findings on material support under ESF+

Julia Amorim and Marina Navarro Montilla (European Commission, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, Unit G.5) presented updated findings from the structured survey on ESF+ end recipients, conducted in 2024 and submitted in 2025. They had previously presented preliminary evaluation insights from the survey during the CoP meeting in December 2025. The analysis covers 14 Member States for direct support (BE, BG, CY, CZ, HU, IE, IT, LU, LV, MT, PL, PT, SI and SK) and seven Member States for indirect (voucher) support (AT, BG, EE, ES, FI, LT and RO).

The survey provides a detailed profile of end recipients. The majority are women (66%) aged between 30 and 64 (66%); 21% have a disability; and 77% are nationals of the country in which they receive support, though with significant variation across Member States. The majority rely on benefits rather than income from work, with no other household member earning a salary, underscoring the critical role of ESF+ support in meeting basic needs. Most live in rented or owned housing (71% for direct support and 81% for voucher recipients), although those receiving direct support are more likely to face precarious conditions, including homelessness. Among direct support recipients, 43% live with children, as do 60% of voucher recipients. In 44% of direct support cases and 50% of indirect support cases, a significant share of the aid is intended for them.

A total of 56% of direct support recipients and 31% of voucher recipients were already unable to afford food or essential goods the previous year, with a drop in income and the rising cost of living cited as the main reasons for needing support. Most recipients found out about the available support through social services or non-profit organisations (64% of direct support recipients and 70% of voucher recipients). Overall, 27% receive support monthly, 14% weekly and 12% daily, while 39% indicated they would need the same assistance again the following day or week. Despite this, recipients valued the support: 89% of direct support recipients and 95% of voucher recipients rated it as useful. Food is the primary form of support (89% for direct support and 75% for vouchers), while hygiene products the most highly valued goods. Accompanying measures vary greatly across Member States, ranging from near-universal coverage in Bulgaria (98%) to barely 10% of recipients.

The survey also compared the two delivery modalities. Direct support offers immediate, secure distribution, as well as opportunities for social contact and accompanying measures, but it carries logistical and administrative burdens and depends heavily on volunteers. Voucher systems offer greater choice and dignity: only 4% of voucher recipients reported feeling ashamed when asking for help, compared to 14% of direct support recipients. However, they raise concerns about fraud, limited shop participation in rural areas and short validity periods. Both modalities can serve as an entry point to broader services and social inclusion pathways.

Next steps for the survey: the Commission is currently conducting follow-up interviews with Managing Authorities and beneficiaries to deepen the analysis. Interested Managing Authorities were invited to participate. The final report will be circulated upon publication.

Discussion: What do these developments mean for the future of material support?

Paula Cristina Carvalho Cruz (EAPN Portugal) described the EU APS as an important starting point. She welcomed its focus on prevention across the lifecycle as a shift away from purely reactive responses. She called for stronger participation of people experiencing poverty through structured, continuous involvement in programme design. On financing, she warned that the proposed 14% allocation for social measures in the MFF 2028–2034 is insufficient and that civil society organisations need dedicated and stable funding to play their role effectively.

Nele Bossuyt (Managing Authority, Belgium) welcomed the Strategy's attention to vulnerable groups and its recognition that fighting poverty requires long-term structural solutions involving all levels of government. She raised concerns about diverging policy directions: while the EU APS sets ambitious goals, the current MFF 2028–2034 proposal removes the minimum earmark for material support and increases national co-financing rates. In Belgium, budgetary pressures are already making it difficult to meet growing demand. She emphasised that material support can only break the cycle of poverty when combined with accompanying measures that guide people towards social services, healthcare, housing support and debt counselling.

Simona Pulbere (European Commission, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion) highlighted several implications of the Strategy that are directly relevant to CoP members: the shift in framing poverty from an income issue to a broader question of rights, dignity and access to services; the recognition of the role of local authorities, NGOs and food banks as part of integrated social inclusion systems; and the ambition to move from short-term crisis management to approaches that address root causes and reduce repeated dependency.

CoP on Material Support: 2026 outputs and next steps

Rimgailė Baltutė (Lead Thematic Expert, CoP on Material Support) presented two outputs currently under development within the CoP. The first is a Toolkit on Building Resilient Material Support Systems, which is currently in the drafting phase. The Toolkit aims to support stakeholders in strengthening preparedness for crisis situations within the existing ESF+ framework. It is structured around a preparedness cycle comprising four elements: anticipate, prepare, respond and recover. The Toolkit builds on discussions from two dedicated CoP workshops and is being developed with a working group of CoP members and thematic experts.

The second output is an updated Mapping Report to be developed on the basis of a questionnaire completed by Managing Authorities. The updated report will include a specific focus on accompanying measures. Managing Authorities were strongly encouraged to involve partner organisations when completing the section on accompanying measures.

2.2. Participant feedback during the event

The event generated active participation, with several questions and comments raised throughout the discussion. Feedback confirmed the strong relevance of the topic and pointed to a number of shared concerns, particularly regarding the future funding of material support. Participants raised questions about whether the redirection of

resources towards housing and employment would lead to reduced attention to material support in future funding allocations, whether a dedicated percentage for material assistance and food aid should be maintained within ESF+, and whether ESF+ should remain a clearly defined fund dedicated to social inclusion and the fight against poverty, given the greater flexibility that Member States will have under the new budget architecture. Participants further emphasised the importance of coordination, noting that national plans alone are not sufficient and that effective coordination at regional and local level is essential for implementing the Strategy.

2.3. Impact

The event provided a timely and substantive opportunity for CoP members to engage with two major developments in the EU policy and evidence landscape: the adoption of the first-ever EU APS and the presentation of updated structured survey data on ESF+ end recipients. By combining a policy overview from the European Commission, reactions from EU-level civil society organisations, comparative evidence and a structured member discussion, the event enabled participants to situate their national and local work within the broader EU framework and to consider the practical implications of the new policy developments.

3. Lessons learned

The event highlighted several key lessons relevant to the future of material support within the EU policy framework:

- The EU APS marks a shift in framing, approaching poverty as a multidimensional challenge of rights, dignity and access to services rather than solely as an issue of income. This strengthens the case for integrated, person-centred approaches that link material support with accompanying measures.
- Effective implementation depends on coordination and participation. The Strategy's success will rely on strong cooperation across national, regional and local levels, and on the meaningful and continuous participation of people experiencing poverty in the design and delivery of support.
- Material support reaches people in situations of deep and persistent vulnerability. The structured survey confirms high reliance on benefits and frequent need, while very high satisfaction rates and clear differences between delivery modalities provide a strong evidence base for programme design and advocacy.
- Future funding is a shared and pressing concern. Questions were raised about how material support will be funded under the MFF 2028–2034, particularly in relation to the dedicated earmark and co-financing arrangements. Participants underlined the importance of ensuring that funding keeps pace with the ambitions set out in the Strategy.
- Accompanying measures remain the key lever for long-term inclusion. Their coverage varies greatly across Member States and strengthening them is a shared priority across the CoP community.

4. Next steps

4.1. Follow-up actions

- The CoP will continue to develop the Toolkit on Building Resilient Material Support Systems. CoP members are encouraged to share relevant practices and examples by contacting the CoP team.
- The updated Mapping Report questionnaire will be sent to Managing Authorities imminently, with a deadline of 15 June 2026.
- The European Commission is continuing interviews with Managing Authorities and beneficiaries to supplement the structured survey analysis. Interested Managing Authorities may contact the European Commission directly.

4.2. Future events 2026

- October: Social Innovation Forum, Brussels (7–8 October 2026). Registration is open and participants are encouraged to register.
- November: on-site joint event with the CoP on Social Innovation.
- December: online wrap-up event, reflecting on 2026 achievements and planning activities for 2027.

Annexes

- Annex 1: [Agenda of the event](#)
- Annex 2: [Presentations of the event](#)

