



FEAD Community Thematic Seminar on “New beneficiaries of FEAD-funded measures and new practices implemented during the Covid-19 crisis”

Online, 2-3 February 2021

Synthesis report



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

Unit: F1

Contact: Maria-Anna Paraskeva

E-mail: marie-anne.paraskevas@ec.europa.eu

Web site: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1089>

European Commission

B-1049 Brussels

FEAD Community
Thematic Seminar on “New beneficiaries of FEAD-funded measures and new practices implemented during the Covid-19 crisis”

Online, 2-3 February 2021

Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

FEAD Community: Thematic Seminar on "New beneficiaries of FEAD-funded measures and new practices implemented during the Covid-19 crisis"

Online, 2-3 February 2021

**Europe Direct is a service to help you find answers
to your questions about the European Union.**

Freephone number (*):

00 800 6 7 8 9 10 11

(*) The information given is free, as are most calls (though some operators, phone boxes or hotels may charge you).

LEGAL NOTICE

The information contained in this publication does not necessarily reflect the official position of the European Commission

This document has received financial support from the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD, 2014-2020). For further information please consult: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1089>

© European Union, **2021**

Reproduction is authorised provided the source is acknowledged.

Table of Contents

| | | |
|-----|--|----|
| 1 | Introduction | 1 |
| 2 | Background and purpose of the Seminar | 1 |
| 3 | FEAD in France – Adapting FEAD to support new beneficiaries and respond to the Covid-19 pandemic | 2 |
| 3.1 | Background | 2 |
| 3.2 | New beneficiaries in France | 2 |
| 3.3 | New practices implemented in France | 3 |
| 4 | Identifying and supporting new beneficiaries of FEAD-funded measures..... | 4 |
| 4.1 | Who are the new beneficiaries?..... | 4 |
| 4.2 | Addressing the needs of new beneficiaries..... | 5 |
| 5 | New practices in response to the Covid-19 pandemic..... | 7 |
| 5.1 | Main challenges faced | 8 |
| 5.2 | Eligible practices within the scope of FEAD that could be maintained after the Covid-19 crisis..... | 9 |
| 6 | Conclusions | 12 |

1 Introduction

The Thematic Seminar on 'New beneficiaries of FEAD-funded measures and new practices implemented during the Covid-19 crisis' was the second mutual learning event¹ of a cycle of capacity-building activities planned within the FEAD Community during the transition period (2020-2021) and aiming at improving the delivery of the [Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived \(FEAD\)](#) at national, regional and local level. The Seminar, hosted by the French Ministry for Solidarity and Health, brought together local, regional and national stakeholders involved in the implementation of the FEAD, including: managing authorities, intermediate bodies, beneficiaries and partner organisations providing support, members of advisory or monitoring committees, independent experts, civil society organisations and representatives from the European Commission.

The social and economic crisis linked to the Covid-19 pandemic has amplified and exacerbated pre-existing social inequalities. A rising number of people across Europe have begun to fall into food poverty, with a simultaneous increase in reliance on food banks and similar services provided by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for help; this has led to increasing pressure on an already overstretched network of largely voluntary organisations.

All Member States strengthened their efforts to address the socio-economic consequences of Covid-19 in a swift, coordinated and efficient manner. This commitment of Member States has also been reinforced by the Recovery plan based on cohesion policy launched by the European Commission. The Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe (REACT-EU)² will provide EUR 47.5 billion additional funding to current European funds, including the FEAD, in 2021 – 2022. The changes introduced by REACT-EU for the FEAD include the possibility to use an EU co-financing rate up to 100%, in order to swiftly implement measures to assist the most deprived. Moreover, in alignment with the REACT-EU, 11% of the additional resources for 2021 will be pre-financed.

This report reflects on the discussions held during the plenary sessions and the parallel break-out groups, focussing on identifying new types of beneficiaries, their needs, as well as new challenges faced by partner organisations in the context of the pandemic. It also outlines new practices implemented in response to the Covid-19 crisis that could be transposed or inspire actors in other countries.

2 Background and purpose of the Seminar

The FEAD Community is an open membership network for all those who are working to reduce poverty in European countries, and using directly or indirectly the FEAD. It is a space for members to share good practices and encourage new ideas and to discuss how to provide non-financial assistance to the most deprived in Europe.

The Thematic Seminar focused on how FEAD-funded measures were adapted to address the needs of new beneficiaries² and how new practices were implemented in response to the social and economic crisis linked with Covid-19 pandemic. It provided a space where participants could share their experiences in relation to the challenges

¹ For more information about the first of the mutual learning events planned within the FEAD Community during the transition period 2020-2021, please see the webpage related to the First Annual Conference of the FEAD Community:

<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=88&eventsId=1572&furtherEvents=yes>

² In the context of this report, the term 'beneficiary' is used synonymously with 'end recipient', meaning an individual receiving food aid and other support funded through the Fund for European Aid for the Most Deprived (FEAD). Organisations receiving funding from FEAD to deliver food aid and other supporting measures are termed as partner organisations.

faced in the delivery of aid and assistance during the Covid-19 crisis, identify and discuss innovative, promising or good practices to address the needs of existing and new types of beneficiaries, as well as the recruitment of new volunteers to support the increased number of beneficiaries.

As the Seminar was hosted by the French Ministry of Solidarity and Health, particular attention was paid to the use of the FEAD in France and on measures introduced as a response to the pandemic by the French managing authority and by the four partner organisations; namely the French Federation of Food Banks (*Fédération française des banques alimentaires - FFBA*), *Restos du Cœur*, *Secours Populaire Français* and the French Red Cross (*Croix-Rouge française*).

3 FEAD in France – Adapting FEAD to support new beneficiaries and respond to the Covid-19 pandemic

3.1 Background

In France, the Directorate General for Social Cohesion of the Ministry of Solidarity and Health has been designated as the Managing Authority of the FEAD for the programming period 2014-2020. with the objective of co-financing food purchases distributed to the most deprived. A unit dedicated to FEAD was set up in 2017.

The FEAD funds a centralised food supply of approximately EUR 90 million per year distributed across France through four partner organisations: the French Federation of Food Banks (*Fédération française des banques alimentaires -FFBA*), *Restos du Cœur*, *Secours Populaire Français* and the French Red Cross (*Croix-Rouge française*). Around 30 types of basic products are delivered to 350 delivery points and ultimately distributed to nearly 9,000 distribution points, with the support of nearly 200,000 volunteers working with the end beneficiaries.

These 80,000 tons of FEAD products represent on average 30% of the total quantity distributed to most deprived groups in France. Approximately 4.3 million people, of the 4.8 million that are beneficiaries of food aid in France, receive aid from FEAD.

The Covid-19 pandemic led to the introduction of an initial confinement in France from 17 March to 11 May 2020, leading to a threefold effect:

- As nearly 60% of volunteers are senior citizens, who represent one of the group most at risk of infection during the pandemic and therefore had to discontinue their activities, the delivery process of food aid by partner organisations experienced some limitations.
- A loss of income for already vulnerable groups, caused by the slowdown in some sectors and a standstill of some economic activities (e.g. tourism, cultural activities).
- An increase in financial burden for some groups, especially single mothers, due to the closure of schools and therefore school canteens.

3.2 New beneficiaries in France

During the Covid-19 crisis, FEAD partner organisations have seen an increase of almost 40% in the demand for food aid. By the end of 2020, around 7 million people were estimated to be in a situation of food deprivation in France.

The health crisis worsened the conditions of those who were FEAD beneficiaries and led 'new clients' to ask for food aid, in particular students, people with precarious jobs (e.g. short-term contracts, temporary or informal work), independent entrepreneurs, restaurant owners and craftsmen.

In France considerable attention is paid to the situation of young people, for instance through the initiative '*Rebond pour la jeunesse*' (Rebound for youth) of the French

Federation of Food Banks (FFBA) and in particular disadvantaged students, who were already in a situation of vulnerability before the crisis. In this context the FFBA in partnership with the Centre régional des œuvres universitaires et scolaires - CROUS (Regional Centre for University and School Activities) in the Nouvelle Aquitaine Region - is distributing food parcels to the most disadvantaged students.

Distribution of food parcels to disadvantaged students - Banques alimentaires, France

The *Banques alimentaires* have launched a distribution of food parcels to students in the Nouvelle-Aquitaine Region in France. The network of 79 food banks in France has been fully mobilised since the beginning of the health crisis to ensure continuity in food aid distribution. During the first confinement in March-May 2020, 400 new organisations have joined the network to address a 22% increase in demand for food aid. Furthermore, 1,500 new volunteers joined to replace elderly and at-risk volunteers. During the second confinement (October-December 2020), another 70 organisations joined the partnerships. 200 tons of food were distributed, of which more than 25% were regional products (fruit and vegetables, dairy products, etc).

The new 'Rebound for youth' scheme will run in parallel to the scheme targeting the most vulnerable students in the Nouvelle-Aquitaine Region during 2021. It is a new emergency food aid scheme for 15–30-year-olds launched after the various lockdowns in France.

3.3 New practices implemented in France

In response to the involved partner organisations' warning about supply difficulties linked to certain ways of obtaining food products, in particular through collection, and in order to avoid a disruption of supply, the Directorate-General for Social Cohesion of the Ministry of Solidarity and Health was able to conclude a series of public contracting amendments for the spring of 2020. These food purchases, although financed through national credits, were supported by the market and by FEAD partner organisations with almost EUR 3 million of purchases for six basic food items delivered as of summer 2020. In order to speed up the delivery of the products, the usual FEAD logistics process was simplified and the *Union des Groupements d'Achats Publics* (UGAP), the public institution specialised in purchasing, was called upon to centralise the initial deliveries of food products and ensure their distribution to the organisations throughout France.

In complement to the measures funded through FEAD, during the crisis some organisations also developed additional local food distribution channels.

As the European Parliament and the Council adopted a new Regulation on 23 April 2020 amending the Regulation n° 223/2014 on FEAD and introducing the possibility to implement food vouchers financed by the FEAD, France developed a food voucher schemes on the island of Mayotte.

Distribution of food vouchers financed by FEAD in Mayotte, France

The operation of this new EUR 2.6 million food voucher scheme began in April 2020. It is led by the territorial delegation of the French Red Cross, a major player on the territory of Mayotte, which acts as a focal point for associations and social actors in the region.

Approximately 400,000 food vouchers (each one worth 6.5 euros) have been made available free of charge and are distributed to almost 8,000 families in Mayotte. They are issued by three distribution groups in Mayotte and can be used by end beneficiaries in partner stores.

The voucher scheme was already in place in Mayotte by the French Red Cross before the crisis and the possibility to receive FEAD funding has contributed to scale it up.

In parallel to the voucher scheme, the Red Cross has also set up two social grocery stores for food aid distribution, in order to provide a more effective support to the end beneficiary.

In the context of the programming period 2021-2027 the idea is to keep financing the voucher scheme in Mayotte through the operational programme managed by the Directorate General of Social Cohesion of the Ministry for Solidarity and Health. Vouchers could be funded in ESF+ within the general operational programme for the other French territories overseas (e.g. Guyane, Martinique, Guadeloupe and Reunion).

The health crisis has led to a relaxation of the rules that usually structure the management of FEAD. The new measures introduced include

- the possibility to distribute FEAD products to organisations that do not usually receive them, such as social grocery stores and organisations working with disadvantaged students;
- greater flexibility for delivery arrangements;
- postponement of the controls of samplings by FranceAgrimer, the public institution monitoring agricultural products and seafood, and of the deadline for organisations to carry out mandatory taste testing of FEAD food products.

Beside FEAD funding, the Ministry of Solidarity and Health has also set up additional voucher schemes in disadvantaged regions in France. These are very similar to the '*chèques services*' regularly provided to employees, thus avoiding stigmatisation for the beneficiaries.

The REACT-EU initiative has enabled the French FEAD to receive EUR 132 million in additional funding, 100% financed by the EU. This funding is used to make further purchases of food products that are delivered to the four partner organisations of the FEAD in France. A EUR 60 million 'REACT 2020' contract launched in November 2020 foresees the delivery of ten types of food items to the FEAD partner organisations from the beginning of April 2021. Moreover, EUR 72 million will complete a final FEAD campaign organised for 2021, where food products will be delivered as of Summer 2021.

These REACT-EU food products will be delivered by the suppliers directly to the 350 delivery points of the organisations, which will then transport them to their 9,000 distribution points to make them available to the end beneficiaries.

4 Identifying and supporting new beneficiaries of FEAD-funded measures

The Covid-19 crisis hit the most vulnerable groups in society disproportionately and increased the number of people in or at risk of poverty. In addition to an increase in the number of beneficiaries, new profiles of people in need of FEAD-funded support have also emerged. This section presents an overview of the main types of new beneficiaries, as well as their needs for support.

4.1 Who are the new beneficiaries?

The economic and social impact of the Covid-19 pandemic affected many people who, for the first time, found themselves struggling to cover their basic needs and having to ask for FEAD support. The rise in unemployment, social isolation, domestic violence,

and ill health conditions related to Covid-19, including mental illness, led to a more diverse profile of FEAD beneficiaries.

The confinement and lockdown measures taken to counteract the circulation of the virus significantly reduced the economic activity and volume of work, leading to a considerable number of workers being furloughed or made redundant. As their income declined, the day-to-day living costs, such as electricity and heating, have increased due to the additional time being spent at home. Many people exhausted their savings and found themselves in vulnerable situations.

Disadvantaged students have also been heavily affected by the disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, especially those who lost their summer jobs, or their scholarships. In some cases, students having to move back and live with their parents also caused difficult circumstances and desperate financial straits for vulnerable families.

The closure of schools and nurseries led to home-schooling and increased burden for families to balance childcare and employment. This affected in particular single-parent families (often women). Moreover, the closure of schools and nurseries also impacted the most vulnerable families who relied on free school meals programmes, which have been interrupted as well.

Persons with disabilities have also been particularly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. The suspension of social services that they were using, as well as decreased accessibility to basic services caused by confinement and social distancing measures, put them at considerable risk.

Other types of FEAD beneficiaries that emerged because of the disrupted economic and social activities are freelancers, non-standard workers and undeclared workers without an employment contract, who are often not eligible to apply for government benefits. The situation of live-in carers and domestic workers, and those living in temporary or unconventional accommodation has also been particularly impacted the pandemic.

As cases of domestic violence have risen by one-third in some EU countries³, some of the new beneficiaries in need of FEAD support are also such victims. Moreover, social isolation, persistent states of emergency, the disruption of health services and social services have affected the overall mental health of most vulnerable people. Both, overall wellbeing and life satisfaction have dropped to their lowest levels in 40 years. In the first six months of 2020 the feeling of loneliness in Europe almost tripled, especially among young and older people, and mental health challenges increased.⁴

4.2 Addressing the needs of new beneficiaries

As the Covid-19 pandemic profoundly impacted the society and created uniquely challenging situations, additional needs of new and already existing beneficiaries of FEAD-funded measures have emerged.

In order to design appropriate services, it is important for partner organisations to understand the real complexities of these new needs. In this regard, qualitative research can help achieve a better understanding of the status quo. One example is the 'Study on the impact of Covid-19', carried out by Restos du Cœur in France.

³ Thematic Background Paper: *Understanding the opportunities and tackling the challenges ahead in the second year of the Covid-19 crisis*, Graciela Malgesini Rey, 2021

⁴ Ibid

Study on the impact of Covid-19 - Restos du Cœur, France

The study about the effects of the Covid-19 crisis was conducted in two stages. The first phase, undertaken between July and October, was based on qualitative interviews with 15 volunteers (responsible for Restos du Cœur centres), 40 beneficiaries, and four observations in four local points of Restos du Cœur. The second phase consisted of a quantitative survey conducted between November and January on a sample of over 700 end beneficiaries.

The confinement period (March - May) and the collapse of the economic activity caused:

- A fall in employment, especially for the low-skilled and short-contract workers; interim work stopped;
- Small independent workers were not compensated by the French social protection system; and
- Some activities fully stopped (tourism, hotels and restaurants, event, culture, etc.).

The study found that as a result of these effects, there was an increase in the number of beneficiaries welcomed by the Restos du Cœur (e.g. people with precarious jobs before the crisis (short-term contract, temporary work, informal work, etc.), people having breaks in their integration path (e.g. suspension of a paid training, business creation); and people who lost their already modest income due to the shutdown of the economy in certain sectors. Furthermore, the most vulnerable people lost their last safety nets leading to new profiles of beneficiaries.

The study concluded that because of its consequences, the Covid-19 crisis plunges people into a precarious situation, in particular due to the total cessation of certain economic activities, such as tourism, catering, hotel sector, restaurants and cultural activities. Moreover the suspension of some administrative services inhibits people in claiming their rights and access services.

Furthermore, as new beneficiaries might not be aware of the support available through the FEAD-funded measures, outreach activities and communication about available support measures are crucial. Local cooperation with municipalities and other local stakeholders can contribute to spread information about existing services. People experiencing homelessness, undocumented migrants and people who are not eligible for social protection are not only particularly vulnerable, but also difficult to reach and support in the context of the pandemic. As some of the foodbanks and collection centres have closed to minimise the spread of the virus, and services have moved to home deliveries, many of those in a situation of housing exclusion have been left at increased risks of poverty and social exclusion.

An inspiring example of a measure targeting these vulnerable groups is the outreach and counselling for homeless women and women at risk of homelessness in the cities of Aachen, Eschweiler and Stolberg, conducted by the WABe e.V. organisation in Germany.

Stand out - Outreach and counselling for homeless women and women at risk of homelessness in the cities of Aachen, Eschweiler and Stolberg, Germany

WABe e.V. is a welfare organisation with wide experience in counselling. The aim of the 'Stand out' programme⁵ is to support women affected by the issue of housing shortage in Germany. The programme focuses on counselling women and networking with different institutions and organisations to find accommodation solutions for the target group.

It aims at reaching out to as many women as possible who have not yet received help from other institutions and organisations to reduce hidden housing precariousness and exclusion. Due to the large network encompassing different institutions and organisations, the project can offer a variety of options for counselling solutions.

The impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the project is reflected in the increased difficulties to access housing due to the decreased amount of affordable accommodation. The waiting time has soared in every agency and organisation involved in the search for accommodation due to the restrictions concerning visits and face-to-face meetings.

For more information on the Stand out project: <https://www.wabe-aachen.de/de/>

Social isolation, the rise of cases of domestic violence and the disruption of counselling and social services also led to increased need for psychological support. In response to these new needs, partner organisations quickly adapted their work methodology to deliver these measures virtually.

The use of digital tools can also help to reach out to new volunteers and to train them. An example of this can be found amongst the diverse tools put in place by the Red Cross in France (see section 5 for more details).

However, while new media and communication channels have been most useful for some beneficiaries, others, such as people experiencing homelessness, lack access to the internet and electronic devices and often do not have the necessary digital skills. The digital divide remains a challenge for both partner organisations and beneficiaries. Furthermore, it also affects disadvantaged students and pupils, as it reduces their access to education while classes take place online.

To help address the needs of beneficiaries, volunteer support is crucial. As most partner organisations have been working at reduced capacity and with a significantly lower number of volunteers, effective vaccine rollout schemes can help improve the situation. In Germany for example, during the recent months more and more staff have been recruited to help with the crisis, as the vaccination strategy was amended to prioritise those most at risk.

5 New practices in response to the Covid-19 pandemic

This section presents the challenges faced by partner organisations in relation to FEAD-funded measures during the Covid-19-related crisis and respective that participants identified and discussed during the Thematic Seminar.

⁵ <https://www.wabe-aachen.de/de/>

5.1 Main challenges faced

The increase in the number of beneficiaries has posed an enormous challenge for managing authorities and partner organisations as they had to face a higher demand for support with less (financial and human) resources, while adjusting their distribution processes to mobility restrictions, to the new needs of beneficiaries and seeking new ways to deliver accompanying measures (e.g. via telephone and online). As the increased demand of support resulted in more diversified profiles of beneficiaries, organisations also had to look for new ways to reach out to them.

Managing authorities and partner organisations consider reaching out to new beneficiaries one of the biggest challenges during the Covid-19 crisis, in particular when it comes to beneficiaries that have never received support and are not aware of the support available. People who became new beneficiaries of FEAD during the Covid-19 crisis tend to be people who have never been in such a situation before or have been forced to return to FEAD support schemes. It is important to understand the needs of the new beneficiaries and to bear in mind that stigmatisation can represent a barrier when trying to reach out to those still processing their (unexpected) new situation.

As food-delivery organisations usually tend to rely on elderly volunteers, who are also more vulnerable to Covid-19, the reduction in the human resources available to provide support caused a slow-down of their activities. Organisations had to identify also new ways of contributing for the volunteers belonging to at-risk groups, such as activities carried out remotely. In order to respond to the high demand for aid and assistance, organisations had to reach out to new potential volunteers, train them and identify ways to work in this unprecedented context (both in person and online).

The rapid adjustments made by the European Commission and the injection of additional resources into the FEAD as a response to the outbreak of the pandemic were a great support to ensure the continuity of certain activities and to adjust others to the new circumstances. However, the experiences from the ground showed that balancing the need to rapidly develop new measures with the need to fulfil the FEAD requirements is still deemed cumbersome. Procurement procedures are perceived as a burden that can limit the flexibility of FEAD-funded programmes (e.g. beneficiaries having to be identified in advance, food aid volume agreed at the beginning of the year).

Many partner organisations still encounter challenges in terms of cooperation at municipal and local level. Despite some progress achieved since the outbreak of the pandemic, there is a general consent on the need to look for sustainable networking solutions and further collaboration across the board and time. Local collaboration can play an important role as local authorities have the influence and resources to support FEAD actions (e.g. transportation, storage, networks). As it has been observed that projects and initiatives work much better if organisations cooperate with municipalities, which have an overview of the resources available and of the local situation, cooperation between organisations and municipalities has become mandatory in some countries (e.g. Germany). Other example of local authorities' involvement can be found in Finland, where support differs across municipalities depending on the resources available (e.g. providing vehicles or storage and distribution facilities).

Participants expressed their ongoing concerns about the lack of disaggregated data in FEAD and raised the point that such data would allow for better targeting and bring a more holistic approach to the programme.

5.2 Eligible practices within the scope of FEAD that could be maintained after the Covid-19 crisis

New ways of providing food aid support

Experiences shared at the Thematic Seminar showed that a reorganisation of the distribution processes was needed to keep providing food aid during the pandemic. In many cases, by introducing home deliveries (e.g. France, Portugal or Estonia) or by scheduling appointments to pick up the food packages without queueing (e.g. Finland). One example are the home food deliveries organised by the French Red Cross initiative 'Red Cross at home' to keep on supporting the most vulnerable groups. In some cases, these deliveries included also medication for people with severe illness.

'Red Cross at home', France

The Red Cross in France launched the 'Red Cross at home' toll free call line available to everyone calling from France, where citizens could request to get their food delivered. For people in need of regular medication, delivery of medicines was also available. For this initiative, the Red Cross runs a partnership with pharmacies to facilitate these deliveries.

People who want to volunteer can also call this line to offer their help and the Red Cross will allocate them to the areas where they are most needed, for instance, helping with the deliveries and raising awareness on protection measures. These volunteers joined specifically for the duration of the crisis.

The new approaches followed by Member States have demonstrated that it is possible to use alternative ways to provide food aid and support to reduce beneficiaries' exposure and limit the risk of contagion in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. These the new ways of providing food aid and support can also be useful to avoid the risk of beneficiaries, and in particular new recipients, feeling stigmatised.

In some countries, the use of mobile phones to keep providing support helped mitigate the effect of the closure of main contact points (e.g. Germany). Other countries, such as Portugal and Estonia, opted for keeping schools open as food delivery points for young people in a deprived situation (e.g. children reliant on school meals to have access to food).

Electronic vouchers

The use of electronic vouchers schemes and supermarket cards are perceived as less stigmatising for end recipients in comparison to food parcels, especially for new beneficiaries. This element needs to be taken into account as it may encourage new beneficiaries to ask for food support and help them in accepting their new situation. Moreover, the electronic format guarantees a free choice in the type of food by beneficiaries, in accordance to their taste and cultural specificities, and discourages fraud as the name of the beneficiary is indicated on the electronic card.

However, these tools have been criticised because of the lack of contact with beneficiaries, which prevents organisations from carrying out advice and counselling activities complementing material aid delivery.

Alternative ways to reach out to the target groups

Participants highlighted the importance of seeking new ways of addressing beneficiaries' needs and making actions sustainable beyond the crisis related to the pandemic. An example of this, the so-called 'Solidarity Markets', is provided by the *Secours Populaire* in France as an alternative to food parcel deliveries.

Solidarity markets, France

The 'Solidarity Markets' are aimed to enable the most vulnerable people to step away from food packages and to obtain a dignified food aid support by offering them local and seasonal products in exchange of a symbolic contribution while also supporting local farmers.

The added value of the food aid markets is that support is provided at different levels, helping local farmers and families in vulnerable situation while engaging volunteers in a longer term and increasing local level collaboration; the project is a great example of this as it works closely with the Chamber of Agriculture, local producers and the volunteers of the federation. The Solidarity Markets received financial support from the Director General for Social Cohesion, the Puy-de-Dome Departmental Directorate of Social Cohesion, Departmental Council and the National association of the secours Populaire.

Since June 2020, nine markets have been organised in the Puy-de-Dôme area (and steadily spreading to other communities) helping out 1,800 households. The objective of the project is to organise 50 Solidarity Markets in 2021 and 2022.

The Solidarity Markets are not only conceived as a response to the increased demand during the Covid-19 crisis but also in a longer term. In this regard, they aim to increase and strengthen logistical and human capacities, to develop financial support to cover operational costs and create a working team for the markets, as well as strengthening existing partnerships and seeking new ones to scale up the project to other territories and partner organisations.

The use of digital tools and platforms

Adjustment to the new circumstances linked with the Covid-19 crisis were manifold. For instance, some organisations introduced digital tools to facilitate the communication during the pandemic through instant messaging or posting explanatory videos on YouTube channels (e.g. in Germany).

The use of other digital tools such as messaging services, videos and apps were key to reach out to beneficiaries and keeping them engaged (e.g. people with mobility issues or living in rural areas) during the pandemic. These tools also enabled volunteers to keep working in a safe environment by using messaging services, such as WhatsApp, and telephone communication for individual follow-up. An example of this is the 'Hello, how are you?' campaign by the French Red Cross enabling volunteers to reach out to people which the social services have identified as vulnerable from their home with the aim to meet their new needs.

The increasing demand of psychological and social support during the pandemic can also be addressed by using specific online platforms. In Greece, the online platform [Menoumedytikiellada.gr](https://menoumedytikiellada.gr) (Western Greece) provides a help line to beneficiaries of the FEAD which directs them to local public services and NGOs that provide the support they need. The use of these digital tools can play an important role also after the Covid-19 pandemic (see section 5 for more details about these measures).

Support line "We Strengthen Together" and open online platform in Greece

The online open platform⁶ of the Western Greece Region offers an innovative integrated approach to inform, train and empower all citizens, however it is especially targeted to vulnerable groups (e.g. elderly, depressed people, children with autism, patients with chronic diseases, as well as FEAD beneficiaries). The platform includes distance learning, skills enhancement, physical and mental empowerment.

The use of the platform is disseminated through the psychological and social support line "We Strengthen Together". The support line was created to assist beneficiaries in building up mental resilience during the Covid-19 crisis with the aim of strengthening the sense of self-care and care for the weakest members, avoiding and preventing social exclusion, as well as promoting social cohesion. It offers special individualised actions for FEAD beneficiaries in the framework of accompanying measures implemented by Patras Holy Diocese for a total amount of 45,000 euros.

The project was a partnership between the Western Greece Region & Patras Holy Diocese as part of the FEAD Social Partnership of the Regional Unit of Achaia, Western Greece Region.

The use of digital tools such as platforms play also an important role in advertising available food aid support measures, often unknown to new beneficiaries. For instance the [Ruoka-Apu.fi](#) website (Finland), which collects information from all partner organisations and other stakeholders, is a useful 'one-stop shop' for people to find up-to-date information about food aid operations, and available free meals.

The Ruoka-apu.fi website in Finland

The [Ruoka-apu.fi](#)⁷ is a website that aims to connect food aid seekers and distributors by providing a space where distributors can advertise their food aid events and free meals in selected areas.

The website also aims at supporting national and local cooperation between different food aid distributors, registered associations, parishes and municipalities so that they can operate in a more effective way, as well as collecting and providing up-to-date information on food aid. Before setting up the Ruoka-apu.fi website, accessible information on food aid was rather scarce and scattered in different places. It was also difficult for food aid distributors to have an overview of the activities carried out by other organisations, making coordination challenging.

Food aid beneficiaries, organisers and distributors were closely involved in the design of the website, through meetings and surveys. The development of the website is still on-going, in terms of language settings (e.g. English and Swedish versions) as well as tools for more detailed reporting for food aid providers, such as statistical tools for distributors.

Another example of the use of digital platforms is the Red Cross Platform, 'Benevolt'⁸ launched in France during the Covid-19 pandemic for publishing white label advertisements where anybody can publicise offers or requests for help.

⁶ www.menoumedytikiellada.gr

⁷ <https://ruoka-apu.fi/>

⁸ <http://croix-rouge.benevolt.fr>

The French Red Cross is using online tools also for facilitating and streamlining the activities of volunteers through the creation a mobilisation and recruitment kit, which includes all the communication tools, communication templates and documents which volunteers can use.

As regards the loss of experienced volunteers (e.g. volunteers from risk groups having to step aside), the use of online tools can be a solution to reach out to new volunteers and to train them. An example of this can be found in the diverse tools put in place by the Red Cross in France.

New tools to recruit and retain volunteers - Red Cross, France

The Red Cross in France launched a centralised job application form accessible to anybody who wanted to volunteer, via a free toll line or online. 12,000 applications were received during the pandemic and the tool is still running.

In addition, a set of tools was created to onboard new volunteers and enhance their level of commitment, including:

- An online platform with remote onboarding tools⁹: welcome videos, digitalised training (including modules for volunteers active in delivery and listening support);
- A Customer-Relationship-Management (CRM) system aiming at keeping in touch with occasional and mobilised volunteers;
- An external outreach campaign of the French Red Cross, showcasing the Red Cross work via five dedicated e-learning modules;

The rapid digitalisation of these tools allowed the French Red Cross to become more accessible to the general public.

6 Conclusions

The social and economic crisis linked with the Covid-19 pandemic brought a steep increase in the number of beneficiaries of FEAD-funded measures across Europe. This entailed the appearance of new profiles of people in need of the FEAD support (e.g. workers who have been furloughed, students who lost summer jobs or scholarships, monoparental families, freelancers, workers without an employment contract, etc.) and of new needs to be addressed (e.g. psychological support, need for information). The FEAD regulation was revised to allow for an effective response to the crisis, for example, through early eligibility of actions, flexibility to amend existing operational programmes and broadening the scope of eligibility.

Moreover, managing authorities and partner organisations delivering FEAD-funded support had to adapt their measures and operations in order to be able to provide food aid and assistance to the beneficiaries in the unprecedented circumstances linked to the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g. lockdowns, social distancing measures, mobility restrictions), while ensuring the safety of both beneficiaries and staff/volunteers. New ways of delivering food aid included the introduction of electronic voucher schemes to deliver food aid and basic assistance without human contact, home deliveries or the set up of smaller collection points.

New ways of providing accompanying measures were also developed, by combining different ways of communication (via telephone or online). Digital platforms are being

⁹ <http://formation-benevoles.croix-rouge.fr/>

widely used as a tool to facilitate the distribution of food aid and the provision of support, as well as to provide updated information on the services available. In the context of the Covid-19 crisis, communication and outreach activities are extremely important to inform new beneficiaries of the support available through FEAD-funded measures. However it is to be kept in mind that certain target groups (e.g. people experiencing homelessness), who have limited or no access to the internet and electronic devices and/or lack digital skills, may be excluded from these outreach strategies.

Online tools are also extensively used for onboarding and training new volunteers, as well as keeping them engaged despite the lack of face-to-face meetings. In many organisations, new volunteers were needed to provide support to the increased number of beneficiaries and replace the volunteers belonging to at-risk groups that are not able to carry out activities requiring face-to-face interactions.

Some of the innovative solutions designed as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic could be effectively used and maintained thereafter, for instance to deliver food and to support beneficiaries with mobility issues (e.g. home delivery) or living in remote areas (e.g. online support), and to ensure a flexibility of choice for the beneficiaries (e.g. solidarity market, voucher schemes).

