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The Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived and Social Citizenship: Case study research in Belgium, Lithuania and Portugal

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1 Introduction

Poverty has been a central object of social policy interventions since the emergence of European welfare states. Not least because it is assumed that poverty endangers the status as citizens. Marshall (1950) noted that the role of citizens can only be realised through the interplay of liberal freedom rights, democratic rights of participation together with social rights, which guarantee certain standards of living. The link between citizenship and poverty reduction is also prominent in the Beveridge Report (1942). Beveridge saw poverty as one of the "five giant evils" and described "freedom of want", which essentially meant freedom of poverty, as a political goal. In the same vein, the Capabilities Approach as a "moral theory of social arrangements" (Sen, 1985) emphasises the freedom of individuals to live a life they regard as fulfilling. Consequently, poverty and social exclusion can be understood as a deprivation of capabilities.

However, persisting high poverty and social exclusion rates remain a key challenge of European welfare states. In 2021, over one in five European citizens was at risk of poverty or social exclusion.¹ Consequently, the question arises more than ever, which role the EU should and could play in combating poverty and strengthening social citizenship. Despite limited social competences the EU already acts as '*supporter*' of national social policies (Vandenbroucke et al., 2021). The EU Structural Funds – and in particular the European Social Fund (ESF) – are traditional examples of such supportive role. Moreover, the EU also help to strengthen *power resources* of individuals that are constitutive of social rights. For example, the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) provides citizens with *normative power resources*, i.e. resources providing general justifications that legitimise claims. In order to actually implement social rights, however, there also need to be *instrumental power resources* enabling actual access

¹ Eurostat (2022). Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion by age and sex.

to services and *enforcement power resources* addressing a third party in the event of a dispute (ibid).

In this regard, the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) is a particularly interesting EU social policy instrument. By subsidising food aid and, to a lesser extent, basic material assistance, FEAD intends to address basic needs of citizens experiencing poverty. In addition, by promoting *accompanying measures*, FEAD seeks to foster social inclusion of the beneficiaries and to support them in accessing social rights. FEAD will also be part of the funding merger European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), which is supposed to be the EU's main financial instrument to help to implement the EPSR (European Commission, 2021b). Consequently, the question arises if FEAD could strengthen *power resources* of citizens experiencing poverty and social exclusion.

However, studies emphasise that, although food aid may be able to alleviate some form of need, it does not enable the individuals to overcome poverty and to participate in society (Caraher and Cavicchi, 2014; Lambie-Mumford and Silvasti, 2020). Moreover, researchers point to the fact that food aid is not based on rights, and they express concern that food aid could shift responsibility for people experiencing poverty and social exclusion from the state to civil society (Greiss et al., 2021; Lambie-Mumford and Silvasti, 2020; Riches and Silvasti, 2014; Poppendieck, 1998). Consequently, the question arises as to how FEAD can be understood in relation to social rights and social citizenship.

The scarce literature on FEAD has to date paid little attention to this question. Therefore, we seek to examine whether the legal frameworks of FEAD introduce elements into the food aid system that could strengthen social citizenship of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion. We will pay special attention to the element of *accompanying measures* and whether these could empower food aid users in their status as rights-holding citizens. We look in particular at the FEAD operational programmes of Belgium, Lithuania and Portugal. We also draw on primary survey data to shed light on the local field of action.

We proceed as follows: First, we outline key characteristics of food aid in Europe today and the role of FEAD (section 2). We then discuss our theoretical approach to operationalising social citizenship (section 3). Subsequently, we describe the method of analysis and present our findings (section 4). Finally, we discuss these and reflect on the way FEAD contributes to the institutionalisation of food aid.

2 Food aid in Europe and the role of FEAD

Food aid in European welfare states has evolved into a complex and multi-level system of assistance involving a wide range of resources and actors with many different providers such as religious and non-religious organisations and multitudes of volunteers (Caraher and Cavicchi, 2014). While in most countries food aid organisations started as individual local initiatives, many organisations have become professionalised over the 20-30 years (Lambie-Mumford and Silvasti, 2020). In addition, there are nowadays supra-regional networks, national food aid umbrella organisations and the European Food Banks Federation (FEBA). Fuelled by the recent years of socioeconomic crises, food aid seems to have become increasingly established as regular support service for people in need.

However, food aid remains an informal type of support mainly facilitated by volunteers, their commitment, time, work, and through private donations. Therefore, several authors express concern that food aid could become institutionalised and provide the incentive to governments to shift responsibility for people experiencing poverty and social exclusion from the state to civil society (Greiss et al., 2021; Lambie-Mumford and Silvasti, 2020; Riches and Silvasti, 2014; Poppendieck, 1998).

Furthermore, for food aid recipients, there is a fundamental difference between charity food aid and a formal social benefit. The latter is based on social rights, and can therefore be claimed by recipients. In contrast to food aid, a social benefit is based on a quasi 'open-ended' budget, because even if there are more eligible requests for a particular social benefit than the total budget foresees, the corresponding agency will issue the benefit. This means that, *in principle*, all eligible persons can be reached by the benefit. Food aid, on the other hand, is usually not given on the basis of a guaranteed right, but 'while stocks last' and 'as fair as possible' depending on the discretion of the individual food aid organisation. In more general terms, criticism of food aid is most often based on a welfare state theoretical argument, that understands food aid as a contradiction to the logic of social rights within the welfare state arrangements (Schoneville, 2018; Kessl et al., 2020). Food aid as a charity is neither aiming nor capable to guarantee forms of support to overcome poverty (Bazerghi et al., 2016).

Moreover, research indicates that food aid recipients may experience stigma and shame (Garthwaite, 2016; Schoneville, 2013; van der Horst et al., 2014). In general, charity food aid limits people's freedom to choose groceries according to individual needs and preferences and respectively their diets and eating habits. However, according to the Capabilities Approach, freedom of choice is crucial to actually supporting individuals in terms of their capabilities – the opportunities or freedom a person has to ultimately achieve what is important to them in life (Sen, 1988).

Research points out that there are also methods of distributing food aid seeking to reduce stigma, such as social restaurants that are open to everyone, or universal free school meals (e.g. Levin and Hewins, 2013; Hebinck et al., 2018). Studies also report efforts by local actors to allow as much freedom as possible in the – albeit usually quite limited – choice of products. Furthermore, there are social shops, which offer a wide range of products and where people can shop for little money or free of charge on the basis of a credit amount (Ghys, 2017; Oosterlynck et al., 2019; Galli et al., 2016). Due to the dependence of local organisations on mostly unstable and unpredictable donations, however, such forms appear to be the exception. Studies also suggest that in several countries, food aid organisations sometimes provide additional non-material services with the aim of helping their users beyond basic needs (Arcuri et al., 2020; Greiss et al., 2022). These services may include opportunities for social interaction and various counselling services, e.g. debt counselling.

Against this backdrop, FEAD is an interesting case as the first public food aid programme across Europe with the general aim of helping people take their first steps out of poverty and social exclusion. It originated from the EU programme to distribute food surpluses via local organisations from intervention stocks to people in need in Europe (MDP) within the framework of the Common Agricultural Policy. Since 2014, FEAD has been subsidising only newly purchased products and has added *accompanying measures* as a compulsory element in the issuance of food aid and material assistance. These aim to socially include food aid and material assistance recipients and to support them in getting out of poverty. Consequently, the programme has been integrated into the framework of European social policy.

Although FEAD also supports other material assistance as well as non-material forms of support, food aid remains at the centre with more than 80% of the total allocations (European Court of Auditors, 2019). Most Member States opted for FEAD-funded programmes to subsidise food aid and/or other material assistance complemented by *accompanying measures*.² Four Member States³ chose programmes for non-material social inclusion measures, representing only 2,4% of the total FEAD funding. The total budget of the Fund in the 2014-2020 period is EUR 4.5 billion⁴. In response to the COVID 19 crisis, there was further funding until 2022.⁵ Compared to ESF with around EUR 121 billion for the 2014-2020 period,

² Ten Member States decided to use their entire FEAD budget for food aid (Belgium, Bulgaria, Estonia, Spain, Finland, France, Poland, Slovenia, Malta and the United Kingdom). One Member State decided to subsidise non-food material assistance only (Austria).

³ Denmark, Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands. Germany accounts for the larger share by far of funding, with Denmark and the Netherlands having chosen the minimum allocation set out in the FEAD regulation.

⁴ Including EUR 674 million national co-financing and excluding EUR 154 million of technical assistance.

⁵ The operational programmes may run even longer. The last accounting year of FEAD is 2023-2024.

FEAD funding is relatively small. In terms of its share in food aid, however, FEAD has become a relevant factor in many European countries (European Commission, 2019b).

So far, research on FEAD has examined the fund's historical emergence and political enforcement (Caraher, 2015; Madama, 2016), its budgetary scope in relation to national welfare efforts and the risk of substituting rights-based anti-poverty measures with charity-based food aid (Greiss et al., 2021) and the level of FEAD and ESF allocation in relation to indicators of Member States' social needs (Hermans et al., 2022). The literature to date, however, has paid little attention to the extent to which FEAD could have an impact on social citizenship. Seeleib-Kaiser (2019) mentions FEAD in the context of supporting EU social citizenship, especially for migrants. However, he refers exclusively to a FEAD programme for non-material social inclusion measures. Instead, we will look at FEAD's core programmes, i.e. those supporting food aid.

3 Social Rights and Social Citizenship

Theoretical Considerations

Our main interest with this article is the question whether the legal framework of FEAD introduces elements into the food aid system that could strengthen social citizenship. We consider it key that the concept of social citizenship puts the individual level of well-being in the focus. Social rights as essential part of social citizenship should be reflected according to their capacity to support the individuals to realise their own ideas of a good life (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum and Sen, 1993). Freedom from the restraints that poverty causes can therefore be understood as crucial. Within this context poverty is to be understood as more than material deprivation and the lack of basic goods (Osinski, 2020). We therefore consider social rights as more than a form to address basic needs, but rather a key element for individuals to realise a fulfilling life. Furthermore, social rights should be evaluated according to their actual accessibility and actual realisation – instead of their mere formal existence. Additionally, we consider the accessibility and realisation of social rights as a process that can be supported by several actors on different social and political levels.

In order to operationalise our understanding of social citizenship in the context of FEAD, we refer to the concept of social rights as *individual power resources* (Vandenbroucke et al., 2021). By incorporating central aspects of the Capabilities Approach, this concept distinguishes between (a) *Normative power resources*, whereby a legally binding act defines *who* owns the benefit, *what* it entails, and *how* the benefit is (administratively) provided. For the purpose of our article, we focus on the legal aspect of normative power resources only. (b) *Instrumental*

power resources, which support access to benefits, e.g. through information and awareness raising, counselling and the provision of procedural channels for claiming and enforcing benefits; (c) *Enforcement power resources*, which provide guaranteed powers to turn to a third party (usually a court) for enforcement in the event of a dispute. Through the lens of the Capabilities Approach (e.g. Sen, 1999) these power resources can be understood in relation to the individuals' capabilities, or real opportunities, to lead a fulfilling life. The approach emphasises the importance of empowering individuals with the resources and freedoms necessary to pursue their chosen goals and their version of a fulfilling life.

Furthermore, the concept tries to understand the realisation of rights as a multi-level and multi-actor process: Social rights may be embedded at different levels of governance, from the local to the EU level. Similarly, multiple actors, including informal ones, may be involved in the creation and transfer of power resources, e.g. civil society through facilitating access to social rights.

4 FEAD and food aid in Belgium, Lithuania and Portugal

4.1 Methods

We chose an embedded mixed-method approach. The documents we analysed relate to the funding period 2014-2020⁶ and encompass the 'FEAD Regulation'⁷, to the national FEAD Operational Programmes (OP), and non-legal texts (e.g. 'FEAD case studies')⁸. For the purpose of our article, we only focus on those OP types that (exclusively or mainly) use FEAD funds for food aid ('OP I').⁹

In the first part of our analysis, we examine FEAD's legal framework. In the second part, we take a closer look at three different OPs using a multiple case study design (Yin, 2009) to shed light on FEAD in its actual contexts. We selected the OPs of Belgium, Lithuania and Portugal because of their major role in these countries (European Commission, 2019b), while exhibiting different social policy contexts. More specifically, the importance of FEAD budgets differs when put in relation to the respective national 'social-safety net' expenditure (*see figure 1*). While for

⁶ The FEAD programme continues until the end of 2023. The new programme ESF+, in which FEAD has also been integrated, has started with a delay. Not all new national programs for the use of funds for the ESF+ strand of the previous FEAD are available to date.

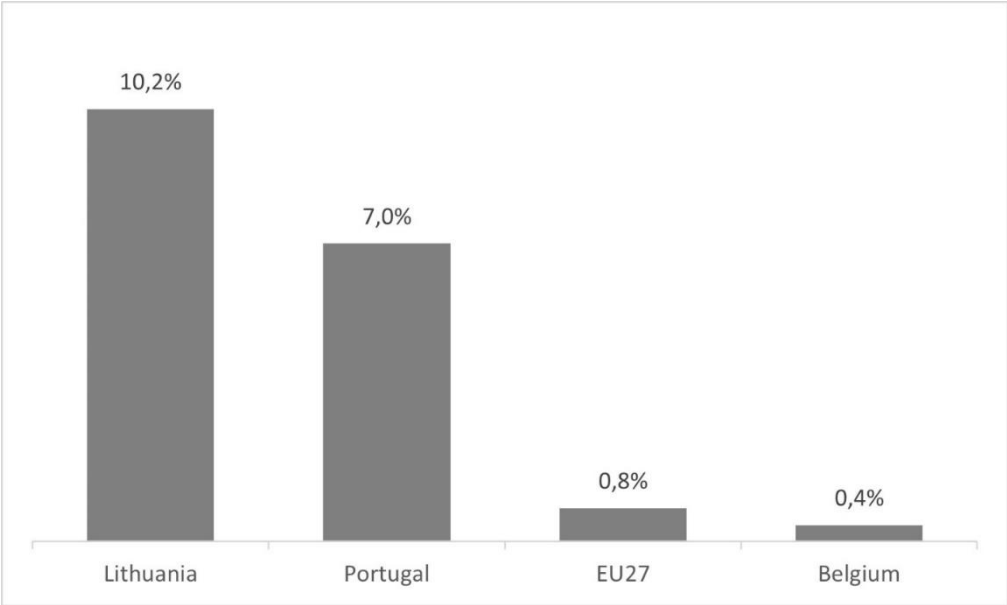
⁷ Consolidated FEAD Regulation (Regulation No 223/2014) and 2020/ 2021 amendments.

⁸ European Commission, 2016a, 2016b, 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2020, 2021c.

⁹ We thus excluded two countries that only distributed basic material support (no food) (Austria and Cyprus) and another four that did not use their FEAD funds for any form of food/material aid, but followed the second FEAD OP type (OP II) and offered non-material social inclusion measures (Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden).

Lithuania FEAD funds represent more than 10% of national social-safety expenditure, as this country is overall a 'low spender' on social protection, for Belgium it is only about 0.4%, as Belgium is a 'high spender' on social protection in general and on expenditure for the most deprived in particular. Portugal, as a 'medium spender', is in the upper middle range with 7%.¹⁰ Furthermore, there are interesting differences in terms of the food aid systems and the role of state actors. Unlike in Lithuania, prior to FEAD, Belgian and Portuguese public actors were already involved in food aid to a small extent.

Figure 1: Percentage of FEAD budget in national social safety-net expenditures 2014-2020¹¹



Furthermore, we draw on primary data of an international survey project on food aid in Europe (Greiss et al., 2022). The cross-sectional survey was conducted between March and August 2021 with local organisations/ distribution points¹² providing food – mostly in the form of food products – for free or at a low price to people in need in Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal and Spain.

As we noticed a lack of accessible data to determine a country's entire scope of food aid providers, in terms of both definability and comparability between countries, we set the target

¹⁰ This heuristic classification refers to social spending in these countries in relation to the EU28 average of 28% of GDP in 2016 (Eurostat).

¹¹ To express the national safety-net expenditure we used the Eurostat function 'social exclusion not elsewhere classified' which collects benefits in cash or in kind (except health care), including non-taxable income support paid to people with insufficient resources or other safety-net payments to alleviate destitution (including shelter for the homeless) as well as benefits in kind such as food, clothing and fuel. We took this expenditure for the years 2014-2020 and the planned FEAD budgets for this period (including EU means and national co-financing).

¹² In the following, we will only refer to 'food aid organisation' as the comprehensive term that also encompasses 'food distribution points'.

population as the total number of local food aid organisations affiliated with the largest national food aid umbrella organisation(s) in each country.

Survey participants were recruited by means of a self-administered questionnaire and the technique of computer-assisted web-interviewing. The response rate in Belgium was 42%, in Lithuania 19% and in Portugal also 19%.¹³

In the following section, we first examine whether dimensions of *individual power resources* can be identified within the FEAD framework documents by considering both the Regulation and national OPs. We start by investigating whether the legislative act of FEAD itself can be understood as a *normative resource* and therefore focus on the questions 'what' are the benefits, 'who' the recipients of the benefits are, and 'how' they receive them. In a further section, we deepen our analysis at the level of the three FEAD OPs and survey results under study.

4.2 FEAD's general framework

The FEAD Regulation concretely names two forms of material benefits, food aid and basic materials, that can be purchased on national or local level and has to be distributed at local level free of charge. However, the form of food aid is not further specified – whether it is the form of products/ food baskets or meals.

The Regulation names also two forms of non-material benefits, which are only broadly defined. One of them (social inclusion measures) is only related to OP II.¹⁴ The other one is called *accompanying measures* and is defined as

“activities provided in addition to the distribution of food and/or basic material assistance with the aim of alleviating social exclusion and/or tackling social emergencies in a more empowering and sustainable way, for example guidance on a balanced diet and budget management advice” (art 2 (11)).

The detailed determination of the individual measures is left to the respective OPs. These only provide short descriptions and *indicative* lists lacking further explanation on the measures' implementation. The indicative lists encompass, for example, debt counselling, budget management advice, psychosocial support, housing services and advice on nutritious food.

¹³ The response rates in the other countries were: Germany: 9%, Hungary: 41%, The Netherlands: 51%, Poland: 5%, Spain: 5%.

¹⁴ As explained in 2.1, we will not take into account OP II in our article.

Regarding the question ‘who’ is described as the recipient of the benefits, the Regulation mentions a group that is characterised as ‘the most deprived’. The definition of the group within the Regulation however is relatively open. Accordingly, the determination of the recipients of the benefits requires the definition of the specific target groups by the Member States (art 7(2)).

Our analysis of the OPs shows that eligibility criteria are based on a) the more general principles of households living at risk of poverty and social exclusion and/ or food insecurity, b) the specific principles for providing social assistance as defined by national legislation, c) expert decisions involving national (and local) authorities and, in some countries, civil society actors, d) the assessment by an individual professional from state-approved social services and e) local public or private organisations approved by a public authority.

Regarding the question of ‘how’ the benefits are (administratively) provided, there are, on the one hand, clear specifications in the Regulation how to set up the specific *governance* of their OPs. This includes the designation of a managing authority, a certifying authority and a functionally independent auditing authority and setting-up a financing plan (art 7(4)). The food and/or basic material assistance may be purchased through public procurement by the managing authority or by partner organisations themselves (art 23(4)). Furthermore, the Regulation sets out the mechanisms for regular audits and control (art 13(1)). In order to implement FEAD on the ground, the managing national authority should work together with partner organisations, meaning “*public bodies and/or non-profit organisations that deliver food and/or basic material assistance*” (art 2(3)).

On the other hand, it is less clear how exactly people are supposed to *actually receive* the food aid. The regulation only states that all benefits shall be distributed free of charge to the most deprived persons (art 23(5)).

With respect to *instrumental power resources*, we identified the so-called *accompanying measures* as potential resource: With flat-rate costs of 5%, partner organisations that deliver food and/or basic material assistance shall themselves or in cooperation with other organisations undertake measures

“consisting of a re-orientation towards competent services, that complement the provision of material assistance, aiming at the social inclusion of the most deprived persons, whether or not these activities are supported by the Fund” (art 7(4)).¹⁵

Hence FEAD includes the idea to combine food aid/ basic material assistance with measures that are intended to provide people with broader and more sustainable support for social

¹⁵ However, *accompanying measures* shall not be compulsory in cases where the food and/or basic material assistance is provided solely to most deprived children.

inclusion. In particular, a re-orientation towards competent services could function as a channel to access social rights.

Lastly, we analysed whether or not the Regulation can be regarded as an *enforceable resource*. However, FEAD recipients are not defined as 'right-holders' of FEAD benefits. Although the OPs mention certain eligibility criteria, the recipients fulfilling these criteria can neither claim the receipt of the benefits nor the receipt of compensation. Moreover, there is no agency or procedure that could deal with any dispute at the recipient level.

4.3 Case studies

4.3.1 Belgium

The Belgian Food Bank Federation ('Belgische Federatie van Voedselbanken'/'Federation Belge des Banques Alimentaires') unites nine regional food banks, which act as storage and distribution centres for more than 670 affiliated food aid organisations (Greiss et al., 2022). These are mainly non-governmental, but Public Social Welfare Centres also offer food aid. Our survey results show that almost all organisations work with volunteers. Mainly, they offer food products/groceries (for free or at a low price) and sometimes prepared meals. During the COVID-19 crisis, most organisations had to cope with increased demand. The average number of households supported in 2020 was 11.7% higher compared to 2019 (ibid).

FEAD resources play an important role in the Belgium food aid system (European Commission, 2019b). According to the National Food Bank Federation, FEAD food products represent 40% of the food banks' total sources of supply. Belgium is one of the ten OP I-countries using FEAD funds to subsidise food aid only (European Commission, 2019b).¹⁶ When we put FEAD's budget in relation to the national social safety-net expenditure, however, it is a negligible factor (*see figure 1*). This can be explained by the fact that Belgium is a 'high spender' on social protection (Pacolet, 2019). However, this does not ultimately mean that Belgium is able to tackle rising poverty figures. On the contrary, the protective effect of social transfers is declining, especially among the working-age population (Cantillon et al., 2021). Assessing the distributive capacity of social transfers by comparing poverty rates before and after transfers, social transfers (excluding pensions) contributed to a reduction in poverty rates in Belgium of around 33% in 2018. In 2008, the corresponding figure was still 46%.

The Belgian OP aims to help provide *temporary solutions* and understands the objective of satisfying basic needs not as an end in itself, but rather as a means to reach the most deprived

¹⁶ The other countries using FEAD funds for food aid only are Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, France, Malta, Poland, Slovenia, Spain and the United Kingdom.

and enable them, e.g., to attend training or to benefit from ESF-funded activities to (re-)enter into working life.

FEAD benefits consists mainly of free food (distributed in the form of food parcels or meals) and to a lesser extent of basic materials for children such as nappies as well as *accompanying measures*.¹⁷ The 'who' of the benefits encompass any person at risk of poverty.¹⁸ Furthermore Public Centres for Social Welfare and approved private partner organisations are required to set up a mechanism to check that the food aid beneficiaries actually meet the conditions. Regarding the 'how', the main local bodies involved are local civil society organisations as well as public institutions, primarily Public Centres for Social Welfare distributing benefits free of charge to eligible households.

As far as *accompanying measures* are concerned, the Belgian OP provides the organisations with an indicative list of possible measures and compels them to refer FEAD beneficiaries to further social integration services, e.g. to Public Social Welfare Centres. It is unclear, however, how exactly these referrals are to be implemented and whether they are providing information and support to access social rights.

Regarding the EU annual case studies on good practice, we identified one initiative as potentially strengthening instrumental power resources in particular, by offering personalised counselling and administrative support in addition to the distribution of FEAD food aid (European Commission, 2016). However, our survey results show only a slight difference between FEAD-funded (61%) and not FEAD-funded organisations (53%) with regard to the offer of non-food/social inclusion support for food aid users.¹⁹ In terms of 'referring to competent services which provided advice on social rights', 47% of FEAD-funded organisations offered this service, in comparison to 40% of non-FEAD-funded organisations.²⁰ With regard to the offer of the organisation to give 'advice on social rights' itself, the picture is similar: 30% of FEAD-funded and 21% of non-FEAD-funded organisations offered this kind of non-material support.²¹ Consequently, our findings do not suggest that FEAD-funded food aid organisations in Belgium promote the implementation of *accompanying measures* substantially more than non-FEAD-funded organisations.

¹⁷ The Belgian accompanying measures are financed through national funds.

¹⁸ The at-risk-of-poverty rate is the share of people with an equivalised disposable income (after social transfer) below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold, which is set at 60 % of the national median equivalised disposable income after social transfers.

¹⁹ We asked the organisations about the types of food and non-food support they offered to their food aid users (before the COVID-19 crisis).

²⁰ Other frequently mentioned forms of non-food support were e.g. clothing, furniture, social meeting place/ coffee corner, advice on managing a household budget/ debt counselling.

²¹ If we look only at the non-governmental organisations in our sample, the picture is similar. The percentages for non-governmental organisations are 2-3% higher for 'referral to competent services' and 2-3% lower for 'advice on social rights'.

4.3.2 Lithuania

In Lithuania, there are around 600 food aid organisations affiliated to the National Food Bank Federation ('Maisto Bankas') (Greiss et al., 2022). The affiliated organisations are mainly non-governmental. According to our survey, more than 80% of them work with volunteers. Mainly, they offer food/ groceries (for free or at a low price) and less prepared meals. During the Covid-19 crisis, most organisations were confronted with an increased demand. The average number of households supported in 2020 was 9.5% higher compared to 2019 (ibid).

FEAD was the first public source of food aid subsidies in Lithuania (European Commission, 2019b). Meanwhile, FEAD products account for around 45% of the total food distributed by partner organisations. Hence, public subsidies via FEAD nowadays play a major role in the Lithuanian food aid system. In terms of budget size, FEAD is a relevant factor, too, when put in relation to the national social safety-net expenditure (*see figure 1*). This can be explained mainly by the fact that Lithuania has a social model characterised by overall low public spending.²² Particularly, spending on housing, means-tested social benefits and social assistance is below the EU average in absolute terms and as a percentage of GDP (Lazutka et al., 2019). Furthermore, according to the FEAD Mid-term evaluation (2019), Lithuania seems to invest relatively more FEAD funds than most other countries in relation to their population at risk of poverty and social exclusion and their poverty reduction goal, which underlines the relatively important role of FEAD in their anti-poverty strategy.

The Lithuanian FEAD OP emphasises, however, that the Fund's material support can only indirectly alleviate people suffering from severe material deprivation by reducing their expenditure on products and/or commodities or by improving the nutritional value of the products consumed. The OP thus aims at improving the basic needs of the beneficiaries without claiming to directly address the problems of poverty.

The OP describes free food products (no meals), basic hygiene goods and *accompanying measures* as the key forms of support. The 'who' of the benefits is determined by the average monthly income of the person as well as the assets held. Furthermore, persons applying for support from the fund are subject to the requirements of the social assistance system. In terms of the 'how', the OP emphasises that all FEAD benefits have to be provided to beneficiaries free of charge. They are provided by local civil society organisations as well as public

institutions like municipalities. To access the benefits, interested persons must submit an application to the municipality.

Generally, the importance of *accompanying measures* for realising the Lithuanian OP is emphasised. However, a more precise definition is lacking. A short indicative list of possible measures is given. These are primarily aimed at social integration, by offering consulting, training and courses.

Regarding the EU annual case studies on good practice, assistance with the completion of documents is a possible example of instrumental power resources (European Commission, 2021). However, it is not clear what exactly this service encompasses. The OP emphasises that local actors know the needs and concerns of the people best and should therefore decide on the concrete measures they ultimately implement.

Finally, our survey findings do not point to any particular promotion of accompanying non-material measures among FEAD-funded organisations. Only 38% of FEAD-funded organisations compared to 53% of non-FEAD-funded organisations provided non-material assistance to food aid users. It is interesting to note, however, that most of FEAD-funded organisations with additional non-material assistance offered advice on social rights. Although not explicitly mentioned in the OP as a possible *accompanying measure*, it seems that this measure is nevertheless implemented by the organisations.

4.3.3 Portugal

Portugal operates two parallel food aid systems. The National Food Bank Federation ('Federação Portuguesa Dos Bancos Alimentares Contra A Fome') associates 21 regional food banks with some 2400 connected local food aid organisations (Greiss et al., 2022). In addition, with the implementation of FEAD, the country has been divided into 146 zones to which more than 630 public and private food aid organisations were assigned.

According to our survey including organisations from both systems, about 60% of the organisations work with volunteers. Most organisations offered food products/ groceries (for free or at a low price). Three out of ten organisations also offer prepared meals. During the Covid-19 crisis, most organisations were confronted with increased demand. The average number of households supported in 2020 had been 28.4% higher compared to 2019 (Greiss et al., 2022).

FEAD is not only relevant as a source of support for food aid, but has also created another sub-system of food aid of its own, which is managed by an administrative unit ('PO.APMC') of the Ministry of Social Security. That means that the distribution of food aid is linked directly to

the statutory sector. Furthermore, the OP presents FEAD as an important complement to existing national mechanisms, the Social Canteens Programme, food support through vouchers or cards (in Medeira) and cash benefits as part of the social security system. If we put the FEAD budget relative to national social safety-net expenditure, it confirms that FEAD constitutes a non-negligible element of the Portuguese welfare state. This can be explained against the background that Portugal as 'Southern' welfare regime (Ferrera, 1996) is characterized by a 'rudimentary' development of its social protection (Gough, 1996).

The FEAD benefits consist mainly of free food products, in the form of baskets and meals and, since the COVID-19 crisis, also by means of electronic cards. Furthermore, the OP also stipulates the distribution of essential goods such as hygiene products and *accompanying measures*. The 'who' of the benefits is determined by the concept of economic deprivation. The eligibility criteria correspond to the criteria within the national system of social protection. The identification of eligible persons/families is done by a social worker. Also undocumented people are eligible for FEAD benefits. In terms of the 'how', the OP states that FEAD benefits have to be provided to beneficiaries free of charge. They are provided by local civil society organisations as well as public institutions. Since 2021, beneficiaries can get personalised electronic cards with a certain amount of money available, which they can use to buy food products and basic materials in normal shops that accept the cards. Products such as alcohol and tobacco cannot be purchased with the card, and the products must be "FEAD eligible". What the latter means exactly is not explained.

With regard to the *accompanying measures*, the OP gives a detailed list of measures that already exist in the regular system of social services. These include a first point of contact to advise each person/family of their rights and of the services and resources appropriate to their situation.²³

Finally, our survey results show that there is no substantial difference in the provision of additional non-food support between FEAD-funded organisations and non-FEAD-funded organisations. While 54% of FEAD-funded organisations indicate to offer non-food support for food aid users, 53% of non-FEAD-funded organisations do so.²⁴ However, the results also show that FEAD-funded organisations offering non-food support are more likely to provide

²³ The EU case studies mention Portuguese practices only in the 2016 edition. These are about supportive measures for healthier nutrition of beneficiaries and therefore cannot be directly identified as potential instrumental power resources.

²⁴ The majority of FEAD-funded organisation providing non-food support in our sample are non-governmental organisations (63%).

social rights advice (86%) and referral to competent social services (82%) than non-FEAD-funded organisations (51% and 63% respectively).²⁵

4.4 Summary of country-specific FEAD implementation

The main findings of the case-study research regarding country-specific implementations of FEAD are shown in Table 1.

²⁵ Of the FEAD-funded organisations offering social rights advice, 64% reported being a non-governmental organisation and 10% reported being a governmental body. Of the FEAD-funded organisations providing referral to competent social services, 60% reported being a non-governmental organisation and 10% reported being a governmental body.

Table 1: Main findings for Belgium, Lithuania and Portugal

	Belgium	Lithuania	Portugal
FEAD food aid implementation	Integration into existing food aid system including non-governmental and governmental providers	Integration into existing food aid system including mainly non-governmental providers; FEAD was the first public source in the system	Alongside the existing food aid system, the creation of a new sub-system including non-governmental and governmental providers
Types of food aid	Food packages (mainly), meals	Food packages	Food packages (mainly), meals, electronic cards
Eligibility criteria	Any person at risk of poverty	Income and asset test, submitting an application to municipality	Eligibility criteria correspond to the criteria of the national social protection system
Accompanying measures			
- Specification in the OP	Indicative list of possible measures, but referral to competent services mandatory	Indicative list of possible measures	List of measures that already exist in the regular system of social services
- Examples of potential instrumental power resources	Personalised counselling and administrative support	Assisting with the completion of documents	First point of contact giving advice on social rights
- Implementation (survey results)	FEAD-funded organisations were only slightly more likely to offer non-food/social inclusion support than non-FEAD-funded organisations	FEAD-funded organisations were less likely to offer non-food/social inclusion support than non-FEAD-funded organisations	FEAD-funded organisations were only slightly more likely to offer non-food/social inclusion support than non-FEAD-funded organisations

5 Discussion and Conclusion

Our main interest was to examine whether the legal framework of FEAD introduces elements into the food aid system that could strengthen social citizenship. We operationalised this question using the concept of *individual power resources*. In particular, we looked at the food aid systems in Belgium, Lithuania and Portugal and FEAD's influence at national and local levels. In the following we address our key findings.

First of all, FEAD is a highly targeted social policy instrument whose resources are strictly earmarked to address basic needs and social exclusion. Member States are obliged to draw up an OP in which they map their poverty situation and countermeasures, and how they intend

to effectively orient FEAD funds to it. This could contribute to making social grievances more visible and to changing political strategies in the end. In addition, FEAD introduces several compulsory elements into the administrative system of food aid. The Regulation thus provides for more governmental impact and control mechanisms within the informal relief system, and possibly also for more stability in the food aid offer through purchased products.

At the level of the citizen, however, essential elements of the charity food aid model remain. While the operational programmes set access criteria for receiving the benefit, this gives no final guarantees to eligible persons to actually receive the benefit. Recipients of FEAD benefits are not addressed as rights-holding citizens. Neither do eligible persons have the *enforcement power resources* to claim them. The legal framework does not stipulate a specific type of food aid (food products/packages or meals). In all three countries it are mainly food products/packages and only to a lesser extent meals, and the OPs also tend to support the existing practice. However, FEAD benefits in the form of a selected but limited range of products may help but do not guarantee to ultimately meet *individual's* basic needs. Through the lens of the Capabilities Approach (e.g. Sen, 1999), the individuals' ability to choose is crucial in combating poverty while respecting individual self-determination and dignity (e.g. Leßmann, 2011; Alkire, 2013). Furthermore, FEAD introduces a system of supply with food outside of the primary market, it therefore becomes a secondary system of integration in itself (Schoneville, 2018).

Our findings show that *accompanying measures* indeed could have the potential to support social citizenship. These measures are aimed to socially include the beneficiaries, providing them with further and more sustainable assistance, as well as supporting them in gaining access to social rights. We therefore understand these *accompanying measures* as a possible form of *instrumental power resources*.

We also identified crucial shortcomings in the legal frameworks concerning *accompanying measures*. Particularly, only 5% of the national FEAD funding is earmarked for these measures, which does not reflect the importance attributed to these measures for the entire programme. Furthermore, also the OP's lack more detailed descriptions of the measures. The Lithuanian OP, for example, emphasises that local actors know the needs and concerns of the beneficiaries best and should therefore decide for themselves which concrete measures they ultimately implement. While this position is understandable, it lacks the definition of concrete objectives as well as evaluation possibilities to assess the accessibility and effectiveness of the measures.

These observations are also confirmed by the European Court of Auditors emphasising that no indicators are set to measure the effectiveness of the *accompanying measures*, nor are

official audits stipulated (European Court of Auditors, 2019). Furthermore, the FEAD Mid-term Evaluation points out that local organisations may not have the necessary knowledge and resources to implement the measures effectively (European Commission, 2019b). To tackle this shortcoming, the ‘FEAD Community’, an open network with actors from different levels, is supposed to exchange experiences on good practices. However, further research at the local level would be needed to examine the implementation of the *accompanying measures* in more detail.

In addition, our survey results do not indicate that non-food services are implemented to a greater extent in FEAD-funded organisations than in non-FEAD-funded organisations. In particular, for the *accompanying measures* of ‘social rights advice’ and ‘referral to competent social services’, only in the Portuguese sample were FEAD-funded organisations more likely to provide these services than non-FEAD-funded organisations. In the case of Lithuania, the majority of FEAD-funded organisations with additional non-material assistance offer advice on social rights. Further research could explore these interesting findings in more detail and extend the study to more countries.

Our findings also suggest that FEAD benefits are used to top-up social assistance (in the case of Belgium) and are integrated into the existing statutory system of social protection complementing existing resources (in the case of Portugal). Furthermore, our findings indicate that (welfare) state authorities are explicitly promoted as crucial part of local food aid systems. Hence FEAD plays a significant role regarding the public-private interplay within the food aid systems in all three countries. Furthermore, in Lithuania, a country with little state support for the most deprived, FEAD funds seem to fill a gap in the social safety net. These findings suggest that FEAD strengthens ties between the statutory and the voluntary sector and consequently supports a certain degree of institutionalisation of food aid within the national welfare arrangements. Through FEAD, welfare states become (further) involved in a benefit system that is not based on individual rights, but functions mainly like a charity system.

In this context, vouchers or cards to purchase food and basic materials in conventional shops (as in the case of Portugal) are particularly interesting. This form of in-kind support is mainly associated with the reduction of costs and administration as well as with the potential to provide beneficiaries with a greater sense of dignity and autonomy (European Commission, 2021a). The distribution of food vouchers is also allowed under ESF+, which basically takes over the frameworks for FEAD 2014-2020.²⁶ However, ESF+ does not prioritise food aid in the form of

²⁶ Member States shall allocate at least 3% of their resources of the ESF+ strand under shared management to support the most deprived persons. They may either address material deprivation through food and/or basic material assistance provided directly to the most deprived persons or indirectly, for example, through vouchers or cards, and providing *accompanying measures* supporting their social inclusion (like FEAD OP I), or promote

vouchers or cards, and therefore, 'traditional' forms of food aid such as food packages are still promoted.

Research should therefore follow up on which food aid practice individual countries ultimately opt for. It could appear attractive for some Member States to integrate FEAD aid in the form of vouchers into national social protection mechanisms. Hence FEAD could contribute to food voucher programmes becoming part of European last-resort social assistance schemes, as is the case with the federal 'SNAP' food voucher programme in the US (Greiss et al., 2021; Brady and Parolin, 2020). This would be a remarkable development with respect to the different welfare traditions between the US and the EU.

To conclude, despite its relatively small budget, FEAD has an impact on social safety-nets in European countries. Moreover, the fund seems to be becoming an integral part of national welfare systems. However, the new funding programme ESF+ would be an opportunity to review the framework conditions and, in particular, to benchmark the nature of the benefits, their accessibility and effectiveness against the need to reinforce social rights and social citizenship of the most deprived.

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