



OPERATIONAL PROGRAMME UNDER THE FUND FOR EUROPEAN AID TO THE MOST DEPRIVED



SUMMARY OF EVALUATION REPORT

“Performing External Quality Evaluation of the Operational Programme under the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD)”

CONTRACTING AUTHORITY: Agency for Social Assistance

CONTRACTOR: Global Advisers Corp.

Sofia, March 2020



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The evaluation of the FEAD OP implementation was carried out in the period June 2019 – February 2020 by a team of experts of “Global Advisors” Corp. – Contractor under Contract No ФC01-0068/19.06.2019 for the implementation of public procurement entitled “Performing External Quality Evaluation of the Operational Programme under the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived”, with the Agency for Social Assistance as a Contracting Authority.

The evaluation was performed on the grounds of Regulation (EU) No 223/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 March 2014 and its aim was to evaluate the quality of the FEAD OP implementation.

The evaluation covered the FEAD OP implementation for the completed financial years, for which there was an approved by the European Commission Annual Implementation Report for the Operational Programme elaborated by the Managing Authority, namely: 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018 years.

The evaluation covered the operations financed under the FEAD OP, as follows:

- Operation type 1 “Purchasing of food products”;
- Operation type 2 “Distribution of individual packages with food products”;
- Operation type 3 “Providing of warm meal”;
- Operation type 4 “Technical assistance”.

The evaluation focused on assessing the degree to which the relevant quality criteria for the FEAD OP implementation - effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence and EU added value, have been met.

The evaluation gave answers to a set of key evaluation questions grouped according to the quality criteria for the implementation of the Programme mentioned above, as follows:

Key evaluation questions under evaluation criterion “Effectiveness”:

1. *To what extent does the FEAD OP contribute to the national and EU objectives of achieving social inclusion and poverty reduction?*
 - To what extent are the FEAD OP objectives (as stated in Article 3 of Regulation (EU) 223/2014) on track to be achieved?
 - To what extent has assistance reached the most vulnerable groups (homeless, children at risk of poverty, etc.) and does it help them move further towards their social inclusion?
 - Are adjustments possible/made in relation to the FEAD OP when needs change or new needs emerge?
 - Are horizontal principles such as reducing food waste complied with Article 5 of Regulation (EU) No 223/2014?
 - Are there any unintended results? Is there any evidence of impacts yet?
 - Which are the external factors identified having an impact (positive or negative) on the achieved results of the operations financed under the FEAD OP? What is the impact of such external factors on the achieved results?
 - Are changes/reallocations of programme resources in the process of implementation effective for achieving the planned results, indicators and objectives?
2. *How are the various types of assistance under the FEAD OP delivered?*
 - What are the types of assistance delivered and the awareness raising activities for each type?



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- What are the types of accompanying measures under the FEAD OP, their frequency of delivery and is there any evidence of impacts yet?

Key evaluation questions under evaluation criterion "Efficiency":

1. *Are the elements of Management and Control System requirements in the OP under FEAD set appropriately to minimise the administrative burden while allowing effective and efficient Programme implementation?*
 - Is there any evidence of gold plating at Management Authority level in implementing the FEAD OP?
 - To what extent are the costs involved justified, given the outputs/impacts that have been achieved?
 - What type of operations for which target group proves to be most effective and efficient and why?
 - What is the feasibility of alternative delivery mechanisms and support modes for the provision of support to the most deprived (e.g. shared governance, indirect management, budget support)?
 - Does the procedure for identifying the end recipients facilitate access to the FEAD OP assistance?
 - Does the use of flat rates under the FEAD OP simplify the implementation of operations by partner organisations?
 - Is there any scope for simplification of the FEAD OP implementation?
 - Are there any significant differences in the expenses incurred per participant at regional level or under different procedures for one and the same operation?

Key evaluation questions under evaluation criterion "Relevance":

- To what extent are the selected assistance formats relevant to the identified target groups?
- To what extent do the selected assistance formats correspond to the target groups' needs?
- Is there any need for introducing other measures and approaches?
- Is territorial concentration of target groups' members taken into account during implementation of operations, including allocation of financial resources?

Key evaluation questions under evaluation criterion "Coherence":

1. *To what extent are the interventions coherent with other EU, national and regional interventions which have similar or complementary objectives, including the Bulgaria 2020 National Development Programme and the national measures aimed at reducing poverty?*
 - What role does the FEAD OP play in the national system of poverty alleviation?
 - To what extent is the FEAD OP support complementary to support provided by other European Union instruments, in particular the European Social Fund and the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund?
 - Has the FEAD OP contributed to supplement national (public or private) interventions and financial resources used with similar or complementary objectives?
 - How coherent are the Operational programmes internally and among themselves in cases of multiple support forms or delivery methods?
 - Has the partnership principle been observed during the process of programming of the FEAD OP and in what manner?



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Key evaluation questions under evaluation criterion “EU-Added value”:

- To what extent does the support from the Fund for European Aid to the most deprived in Bulgaria add value to existing national measures and support deprived people who would not receive such support out of the FEAD financing?
- Do the measures implemented under the Programme create models for integrated support and successful partnerships for support of vulnerable groups?
- What would be the most likely consequences of stopping the FEAD OP support for the vulnerable groups?
- Are operations performance more effective than other programmes and measures which have already been evaluated in Bulgaria?

For achieving the objectives of the FEAD OP evaluation the following **main activities** were performed:

- Research and analysis of available documents related to the FEAD OP implementation and reporting;
- Collection of information from participants in the FEAD OP implementation and reporting;
- Collection and analysis of other relevant information and data for the purpose of achieving the public procurement objectives;
- Collection of information from representatives of the target groups under the FEAD OP while observing all principles for preserving the dignity of individuals;
- Elaboration and submission to the Contracting Authority of a report containing recommendations and conclusions on the quality criteria related to the FEAD OP, and, if necessary – the adoption of suitable measures to optimize the Programme quality.

The evaluation was based on a desk research of documents and data related to the FEAD OP implementation and reporting.

For the evaluation purposes, additional information was collected from participants in the Programme implementation and reporting process through workshops, interviews and focus groups.

By means of a survey conducted, the opinion of 28 representatives of the partner organization under Operation type 2 (the Bulgarian Red Cross) and of 120 partner organizations under Operation type 3 (municipalities and districts of municipalities) of the FEAD OP was taken into account.

Through a survey carried out, useful and important information was collected for the purposes of the evaluation by representatives of the target groups covered by the FEAD OP, observing all principles for protection of the individuals’ dignity. The opinion of 415 end recipients of the service “Distribution of individual packages with food products” and of 430 end recipients of the service “Providing of warm meal” was taken into consideration.

All of the information collected was analyzed by means of stakeholder analysis; process and implementation evaluation; effectiveness and efficiency analysis; analysis of the logic of intervention; analysis of statistical summarizing indicators; expert evaluation, etc.

The text below summarizes the main **conclusions and recommendations** of the evaluation performed on the quality criteria for the implementation of the FEAD OP.



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Concerning the evaluation criterion “Effectiveness”

General conclusions:

Given the established poverty level in Bulgaria, it is important that support of the most deprived through operations financed under the FEAD OP should continue. The provision of food products to individuals at high risk of poverty **expands the effective scope of the social assistance programmes** while support aimed at expanding and building on the activities of the social canteens further improves access to social services of the most deprived people.

The adoption of Ordinance No ПД-07-1 dated 04.04.2016 on the Terms and Procedure for Identification of the Target Groups under the FEAD OP, defining the main target groups for the respective FEAD support – provision of individual packages with food products and provision of warm meal, **creates and approves the relevant regulatory framework** which is strictly observed by the partner organisations under the project.

According to the results of the survey conducted among the partner organizations under Operation type 3 “Providing of warm meal”, the support provided under Operation type 3 **reaches to a great extent the most vulnerable groups** - individuals and families receiving monthly support, having an income lower than the differentiated minimum income; uninsured individuals; individuals living alone with their children and receiving support under the Law on Family Allowances for Children; individuals living alone and receiving minimum pensions; homeless children and individuals.

According to the results of the survey carried out among representatives of the Regional Councils of the partner organization (Bulgarian Red Cross) under Operation type 2 “Distribution of individual packages with food products”, the support provided under Operation type 2 also **reaches to a great extent the most vulnerable groups** - individuals and families having an income lower than the differentiated income for heating; mothers (adoptive parents) supported under the Law on Family Allowances for Children; individuals and families who have received an one-off assistance for students enrolled in first grade; people with more than 90 percent of disability and low personal retirement income; individuals and families receiving monthly childcare allowances for a permanently disabled child; individuals and families accidentally affected by disasters and accidents.

Programme adjustments introduced so far have been incredibly effective, especially in **covering a much larger number of warm meal recipients**. As a result of reallocation of financial resources, the warm meal operation has recorded a significant progress and has achieved a much larger scale in the course of its implementation. Thanks to these amendments, the values of performance indicators related to the number of individuals receiving assistance under the Operational Programme, have increased repeatedly.

At the time of evaluation **no need for further adjustments to the Programme** have been identified.

The Programme itself sets out the relevant prerequisites and contains the necessary mechanisms to ensure **compliance with the horizontal principles** of Article 5 of Regulation (EU) No 223/2014.

The active awareness-raising measures under the Programme implemented by the partner organizations at local level play an exceptionally important role for **increasing the awareness of the target groups** both regarding the opportunities offered by the Programme



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itself and regarding the social services they can use on the territory of the respective municipality.

The **accompanying measures provided under the Programme** have an undisputedly positive impact on the end recipients of the Programme by helping them make the first steps towards overcoming poverty and social exclusion. Despite this, especially among recipients of individual packages with food products, there is still insufficient appreciation for a more meaningful involvement in the social and economic life through their participation in activation measures such as prequalification and educational courses which could improve their chances of finding a job, with recipients mostly seeking opportunities for other types of social assistance.

Recommendations:

When reporting and presenting the Programme activities to the wider community it would be a good idea to consider the option of **describing specific examples of positive changes in the lives of recipients of both types of services provided under the Programme**. This could be carried out in the form of brochures, good practices manuals, publications in specialized media or other suitable methods. This will, on the one hand, strengthen the trust of recipients and the general public in the Programme, and, on the other hand will increase awareness regarding the services provided.

With regards to the accompanying measures, it would be a good idea if employable persons are familiarized with and directed towards suitable qualification-building measures and are encouraged to be actively involved in the labour market so that at a later stage they can take advantage of activation measures under the ESF or other sources of financing.

Concerning the evaluation criterion "Efficiency"

General conclusions:

The rules and procedures introduced in the various stages of the FEAD OP implementation **do not lead to excessive administrative burden**. A number of rules have been introduced for Programme implementation simplification, especially concerning Type 3 Operations. Such is the predominant opinion of the representatives of the partner organizations, surveyed as part of the evaluation. Despite this, there are some opinions to the contrary. The rules and MA guidance identified as burdensome mainly concern the project implementation and reporting stage.

There are no facts and circumstances which compromise the justification of costs under the FEAD OP against the outputs achieved.

The partner organizations and the end recipients **rate highly the quantity and quality of the services** related to the provision of food support. This allows us to conclude that the **costs allocated to these services are justified against the outputs achieved**. Analysis results show that, apart from the opinions expressed on whether the flat rate for administrative activities and accompanying measures is sufficient for high-quality service, costs for those activities are justified given the outputs achieved.

The design of both types of operations under the FEAD OP (type 2 and type 3) conforms to the specifics and needs of the different target groups. Increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of the measures is directly dependant on the adequate choice of the accompanying measures, in compliance with the individual specifics and needs of the end recipients. This is also one of the conditions for achieving Programme objectives and overcoming poverty and social exclusion.



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The evaluation has not identified any facts or circumstances which fail to support the opinion of the Commission, expressed in the interim evaluation of FEAD implementation, namely that there are strong arguments for **keeping the FEAD delivery mechanism of shared management**, mainly because of its simplicity, the accumulated experience and the national and regional knowledge of poverty and social exclusion, challenges and needs.

The mechanism used to identify the most deprived persons for the FEAD OP objectives is based on the conditions for access to social assistance and social services set out in the national legislation. The method selected by the FEAD OP ensures coverage of all individuals covered by the national social assistance system who meet the relevant criteria.

Individuals from other vulnerable groups are also covered by the FEAD OP measures - homeless people and members of minority groups who for various reasons are outside the social assistance system and outside the social services registers, with individual social surveys being conducted for each identified case. Whenever such individuals find themselves in crisis centres or shelters, their food and care is covered by local budgets.

The position of the MA within the structure of the Agency for social assistance and the appointment of partner organizations with capacity and know-how in the field are a further guarantee for wider and easier access to the FEAD OP support for the people in need.

The introduced **simplification of expenses** under the FEAD OP significantly facilitates the activities of the partner organizations in providing food support to the target groups. At the same time **a shortage of funds is reported for administrative expenses and accompanying measures**.

The MA has undertaken a number of **steps to simplify the procedures** concerning the management, implementation and reporting of measures under the FEAD OP. Those steps, however, are not deemed sufficient by some representatives of the partner organizations, especially with regards to the volume of reporting documentation. Proposals have been made for alternative models of food support provision with view of simplifying procedures, such as introduction of a voucher system.

Recommendations:

The MA of the FEAD OP should discuss with the partner organizations the **opportunities for further specification of the accompanying measures** to match the specific individual needs of the end recipients of the assistance.

The introduction of alternative models for food support provision should be considered carefully and assessed against the risk; such models should not limit access to assistance for the most deprived and must guarantee the quality of the service provided.

Concerning the evaluation criterion "Relevance"

General conclusions:

Identification of the most deprived individuals to be supported under the Programme is carried out on the basis of an assessment of needs, carried out in compliance with the objective criteria set out in national legislation, and following consultations with the stakeholders.

The adopted approach to identifying target groups under the Programme is **effective**, and the selected support formats are **relevant to the identified target groups** and contribute to complement the social policies at national level.



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The support formats selected under the Programme (food support) **correspond to the needs of the target groups**, as food is the most important type of support to relieve the most extreme forms of poverty.

The provision of support in the form of packages with food products or warm meals is of great significance and importance for the end recipients and their family members, as survey results reveal. A very high percentage of the surveyed end recipients **rate highly the support provided under the Programme** and appreciate its importance for their daily life; in their opinion the selected support formats meet their needs.

The accompanying measures, provided simultaneously with the food support, **further assist the end recipients** to overcome poverty and social exclusion by providing access to other types of social services or encouraging them to take advantage of activation measures.

The results of the evaluation reveal that it would be useful and expedient if, during the 2021-2027 programming period, **additional forms of material assistance** are provided simultaneously with the food support. This opinion is confirmed both by the partner organizations and the end recipients under the Programme.

The most suitable additional formats of material support to be provided during the next programming period, according to the opinion of the respondents, are **packages of basic sanitary and hygiene products for personal hygiene and cleaning materials for home cleaning** for poor individuals and families, **packages with essential products for infants** born to poor families and **provision of infant food from the so-called 'milk stations'** for children raised in families at risk which will contribute to their proper diet.

By implementing the Programme, including allocation of financial resources, **the FEAD support has reached a significant part of the population of the country** living in poverty and material deprivation. The provision of packages with food products under Operation type 2 in 2018 was performed by BRC employees and volunteers in 309 distribution points located in all municipalities and districts of the country; while the warm meals service was provided in accordance with 209 contracts concluded with municipalities and districts of municipalities in 276 public dining halls located on the territory of all 28 districts in the country. At national level, the total number of individuals covered by the FEAD assistance in 2018, is 567,445. The percentage of those supported under the FEAD OP against the total population living below the poverty line for 2018, is 36.59%.

Recommendations:

It is recommended that during programming of the Operational Programme for the next programming period (2021-2027), financing of additional forms of material assistance be discussed, to be provided simultaneously with the food support to the people in need, such as packages of basic sanitary and hygiene products for personal hygiene and cleaning materials for home cleaning for poor individuals and families, packages with essential products for infants born to poor families for growing them in a family environment and provision of infant food from the so-called 'milk stations' for children raised in families at risk.

Concerning the evaluation criterion "Coherence"

General conclusions:

The FEAD OP support plays an important role by **complementing the measures aimed at reducing poverty and encouraging social inclusion** at national or local level. There is a high degree of coherence and complementarity with the national financing provided through the



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Social Protection Fund and the overall social assistance policy applied in the country. The provision of food products to individuals at high risk of poverty or the delivery of warm meals expands the effective scope of social assistance programmes: savings created by reducing the basic food expenses of households can go towards meeting other basic needs of poor households.

Thanks to the assistance provided under the FEAD OP, both the number and the categories of end recipients covered by the support have increased. Nevertheless, the warm meal service **is still not provided in several municipalities** in which the existing facilities (social canteens) fail to meet the hygienic and sanitary norms and requirements set out by the national legislation.

The FEAD OP is one of the instruments applied in Bulgaria which is coherent to and **complements other EU funds** aiming to reduce poverty and enhance social inclusion by playing an important role in alleviating food and material deprivation and encouraging the social inclusion of vulnerable groups.

The FEAD OP support largely complements the support provided under the European Social Fund and the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund. The support under the FEAD helps vulnerable groups to make their first steps towards overcoming poverty and social exclusion by meeting their basic food needs and thereafter directs them to take advantage of the activation and social inclusion measures implemented with ESF and AMIF support.

The measures financed under FEAD, ESF and AMIF, are internally coherent and have a complementary effect, while their different nature ensures lack of duplication and double financing. Social inclusion and the accompanying measures under FEAD act as a stepping stone for access to the social services and social inclusion measures financed under ESF and AMIF.

FEAD OP **builds on and complements national measures** and national resources used for similar purposes. There is complementarity with national financing provided through the Social Protection Fund and with the overall social assistance policy applied in the country.

Implementation of the projects financed under Operation type 3 “Providing of warm meal” of the FEAD OP complements, builds on and expands the scope of the existing national programme supporting social canteens financed by the state budget through the Social Protection Fund. Thanks to this, each year the warm meal service covers a much larger number of end recipients; thus contributing to achieve the objective of reducing the number of individuals living in poverty by providing food support.

The FEAD OP and other programmes and measures aiming to reduce poverty and encourage social inclusion in the country are internally coherent; this coherence is achieved by **providing different support to target groups’ representatives**, which was ensured as early as the programming stage.

The **partnership principle** was strictly observed during the FEAD OP programming. The Operational Programme was elaborated and is implemented on the basis of broad consultations with stakeholders. Interaction with partners is constant and allows identification of existing problems and finding the most suitable resolution.

Recommendations:

It is recommended that support under the Programme, aimed at **expanding and building on the activity of social canteens**, continues throughout the next programming period. Financing of municipalities implementing warm meal projects for the people in need should



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also continue, while financing from the Social Protection Fund should be used mainly for financing reconstruction and modernisation projects for the existing facilities of social canteens, and for the purchase of kitchen equipment and furnishing of dining halls. In this way the support under the Programme for the provision of warm meals to target groups will reach even municipalities which currently do not provide this service because the facilities they have at their disposal do not meet hygienic norms and sanitary requirements set out in national legislation.

Concerning the evaluation criterion „EU-Added value“

General conclusions:

The support provided under the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived in Bulgaria complements the impact of the existing national programme on social canteens, financed by the state budget through the Social Protection Fund by providing the opportunity for round-the-year warm meal delivery to identified target group members, a service previously confined to the winter months. Food products distribution is carried out almost exclusively under the Operational Programme and covers an exceptionally large number of individuals living below the poverty line. The accompanying measures provided under the Programme – guidance and information on other available types of support and social services, significantly contribute to overcoming the social isolation of the target groups' representatives.

The Operational Programme supports people in need who, **were it not for the Fund assistance, would be deprived of food support and social integration measures.**

The support provided to the representatives of the vulnerable groups has created **long-lasting partnerships and has strengthened the cooperation** between various municipal and state institutions and NGOs. It has contributed to mobilisation of local resources and to improved cooperation and coordination between institutions and organizations with the purpose of supporting recipients of the Programme assistance. Implementation of Programme measures has helped to create models for support and to overcome the isolation of the vulnerable groups. An **innovative approach was applied to provide integrated support** to the end recipients in accordance with their needs, comprising combined delivery of food support and social inclusion measures.

The eventual suspension of the support under the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived would have a **serious impact on the target groups' representatives.** Under the national programme on social canteens, municipalities provide warm meals to the people in need only during the winter months. End recipients of the service would be deprived of this opportunity for the remaining part of the year. Distribution of food products outside the scope of the FEAD OP is carried out sporadically, mainly under donation programmes in the non-governmental sector. This type of food support can therefore not be relied on by those in need. In addition, the end recipients would lose access to information on other types of support and social services. Within the framework of the FEAD OP assistance this information is provided as part of the accompanying measures under the Programme.