

Recommendation Paper

Strengthening End Beneficiary Participation in Material Support Interventions: Strategic Actions and Policy Recommendations for Enhanced Engagement in ESF+ Programmes



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This recommendation paper, developed by the Community of Practice (CoP) on Material Support, aims to enhance the participation of end beneficiaries in the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) programmes addressing material deprivation. Drawing on insights from the April 2024 CoP meeting in Athens and extensive survey data, the paper provides a comprehensive overview of current practices, challenges, and success stories in involving end beneficiaries in ESF+ programmes. Its ultimate goal is to present actionable recommendations for managing authorities, partner organisations, practitioners, and CoP members, fostering a more inclusive and effective approach to material support.

Key findings

- Importance of beneficiary participation:** Active involvement of end beneficiaries in decision-making and programme implementation is crucial for creating responsive and sustainable social support systems. Their participation not only enhances the relevance and effectiveness of ESF+ programmes but also empowers individuals, fostering a sense of ownership and dignity.
- Current practices and engagement mechanisms:** Survey results show significant commitment to beneficiary participation among non-profits, with 100% reporting clear goals for involvement. However, only 53% of public authorities have established similar objectives, highlighting the need for more systematic and structured approaches within the public sector. Regular meetings with partner organisations and feedback mechanisms are the most common methods of engagement. Non-profits, on the other hand, demonstrate a stronger focus on direct engagement through regular meetings and the use of advisory boards.
- End beneficiary involvement in shaping ESF+ material support:** Non-profits are more proactive than public authorities in involving end beneficiaries in shaping both material support and accompanying measures. This underscores the critical need for the public sector to adopt participatory approaches, ensuring that support is better aligned with the actual needs of end beneficiaries.
- Barriers to participation:** Key challenges to effective participation include limited human and financial resources, logistical constraints, and data privacy concerns. Broader social exclusion factors, such as digital illiteracy, language barriers, and socio-economic challenges, also hinder participation and underscore the need for accompanying measures to empower beneficiaries. Public authorities, in particular, often face challenges engaging end beneficiaries directly due to their more formal and less flexible processes compared to non-profits.
- Success practices:** Successful initiatives can serve as valuable examples of how direct beneficiary involvement in programme design and delivery can be effectively implemented. These examples showcase promising practices and offer insights into strategies that could further enhance programme effectiveness. These initiatives underscore the importance of real collaboration, transparency, and collective effort in addressing end beneficiaries' needs, paving the way for a more inclusive and impactful social support system.
- Role of partner organisations:** Partner organisations play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between public authorities and end beneficiaries. While 86.67% of public authorities report having clear objectives for involving partners, partner organisations perceive their role in shaping ESF+ support as only moderate. This indicates a need for stronger collaboration and better integration of partner input into decision-making processes to enhance programme effectiveness.

Key recommendations

- For the European Commission:** The European Commission is encouraged to require managing authorities to include detailed participation frameworks in their operational plans. Additionally, the Commission should monitor these efforts by requiring Member States to report on participation metrics as part of regular ESF+ programme evaluations.
- For managing authorities:** Together with partner organisations, managing authorities should define clear objectives for end beneficiary involvement, implement formal participation mechanisms, allocate adequate resources for engagement, and prioritise inclusivity. They should also ensure continuous engagement through both formal and informal channels, integrating digital tools to effectively reach diverse beneficiary groups.
- For non-profit organisations:** Non-profits are urged to embed participation into their organisational culture, build capacity for meaningful beneficiary involvement, and maintain flexibility in service delivery to adapt to beneficiaries' evolving needs. They should use a combination of formal tools, such as advisory boards and

structured consultations, alongside informal tools, like community dialogues and feedback sessions. Non-profits should collaborate with managing authorities and document successful participation models to inspire further innovation and inform best practices across the sector.

- 4. For CoP members and experts:** The CoP should continue to foster knowledge sharing and exchange, provide capacity-building opportunities, and advocate for participatory approaches in ESF+ policies at both national and European levels. It is also important for CoP members to actively involve partner organisations and end beneficiaries in workshops, discussions, and research activities to ensure that their perspectives shape future recommendations. Collaboration with other CoPs should be prioritised to leverage synergies and effectively tackle cross-cutting challenges.

By implementing these recommendations, the CoP and its stakeholders will contribute to a more inclusive and effective material support system under ESF+, ensuring that beneficiaries' voices are heard, respected, and integrated into the design of interventions that aim to address material deprivation across Europe.

INTRODUCTION

Involving end beneficiaries in the decision-making and implementation of European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) programmes is fundamental for effective and sustainable social support systems. The participation of those directly impacted by material deprivation ensures that interventions are more responsive to their needs and are more empowering, fostering a sense of ownership and dignity among beneficiaries. By actively engaging end beneficiaries, programmes can be better tailored to address the specific challenges faced by vulnerable populations, thereby enhancing the overall impact of material support initiatives.

This recommendation paper builds on the discussions and insights from the Community of Practice (CoP) on Material Support, mainly focusing on the event 'Involving the Target Group: From Decision-Making to the Provision of Support', held in Athens, Greece, on 10-11 April 2024, as well as a targeted questionnaire distributed to members.

The importance of participation has been echoed in various CoP meetings and discussions. Engaging beneficiaries and partner organisations at all stages of programme development—planning, implementation, evaluation, assessment, and reporting—can lead to more personalised and responsive support measures. At the same time, a quantitative and geographical assessments are also vital. Smaller-scale efforts are often easier to implement and can be more effective, while larger-scale initiatives tend to be more complex and challenging. Participation plays a key role in identifying the real needs and challenges faced by vulnerable populations, enabling the design and execution of interventions that are better tailored and aligned with their needs. However, achieving economies of scale is equally important to ensure programmes remain efficient and cost-effective. Striking a balance between tailoring interventions to individual needs and maintaining scalable solutions is crucial to preventing fragmentation while maximising results and impact.

Moreover, participation not only improves the design and delivery of support programmes but also significantly enhances their transparency and accountability. By actively involving end beneficiaries, partner organisations, and managing authorities, an inclusive approach fosters a sense of ownership and collaboration among all stakeholders. This, in turn, builds trust, which is a cornerstone for the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of social support systems. However, achieving meaningful and lasting participation is not without its challenges. It demands considerable financial investment to ensure that the adequate resources, tools, and infrastructure are available. Tailored training is also essential to equip stakeholders with the skills needed to engage effectively, facilitate dialogue, and address diverse needs. Furthermore, fostering genuine participation is a time-intensive process, requiring ongoing commitment to nurture relationships, gather feedback, and adapt strategies based on input.

By involving marginalised groups in the decision-making process, these individuals are recognised not merely as recipients of aid but as active contributors to the development of their communities. This approach empowers individuals, reduces stigma, and fosters a sense of ownership. It not only improves the inclusivity and relevance of the programmes, but also enhances their sustainability and long-term impact.

In the context of ESF+, the participation of end beneficiaries is a key component for achieving more impactful outcomes and fostering empowerment. By meaningfully involving individuals in the design, implementation, and evaluation of programmes, these initiatives become more responsive to their needs while providing opportunities for active engagement and building a sense of ownership in the process. The ultimate goal of these efforts is not merely to meet every request or address every expressed need by end beneficiaries but to create an inclusive environment

where participation serves as a catalyst for empowerment and social integration. By engaging beneficiaries in this way, programmes can help inspire confidence and self-efficacy, enabling individuals to become active contributors to their own development and that of their communities. This approach also aligns with broader European Union objectives, such as the European Pillar of Social Rights, which emphasises the right to active support and inclusion for all.

This paper aims to offer practical recommendations for managing authorities, partner organisations, and policymakers to design and implement more participatory and responsive material support interventions under the ESF+ framework. It is based on the experiences, insights, and actions of managing authorities, implementing organisations, and civil society partners across Europe, highlighting both successful practices and areas requiring improvement. The paper aims to contribute to an inclusive, effective, and sustainable material support system. Its ultimate goal is to ensure that material support reaches those most in need in a way that not only respects their dignity but also empowers them to overcome poverty and social exclusion.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this paper combines several data collection methods, including insights from meetings, workshops, and a targeted questionnaire distributed to CoP members. This multi-faceted approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the current state of participation, challenges, and potential solutions to enhance the involvement of partner organisations and end beneficiaries in ESF+ programmes addressing material deprivation.

Sources of information

1. **Meeting and workshop insights.** Discussions from the CoP meeting 'Involving the Target Group: From Decision-Making to the Provision of Support', held on 10-11 April 2024, in Athens, Greece, provided valuable qualitative data. The event welcomed 69 participants from 18 EU Member States and brought together managing authorities, implementing organisations, and other stakeholders, offering an opportunity to share experiences, showcase successful practices, and identify existing barriers. The discussions also laid the groundwork for the questionnaire.
2. **Questionnaire distribution.** A structured questionnaire was developed and disseminated to members of the CoP on Material Support. This questionnaire aimed to gather detailed information on the involvement of partner organisations and end beneficiaries in ESF+ programmes. It covered several key areas, including:
 - Current practices: Methods used for involving end beneficiaries in programme design, implementation, and evaluation.
 - Challenges and barriers: Obstacles to effective beneficiary engagement.
 - Success stories and best practices: Examples of successful strategies and initiatives that have led to meaningful engagement and positive outcomes.
 - Recommendations: Suggestions for improving participation based on respondents' experiences.

The questionnaire was distributed and responses collected from 20 June to 3 July, receiving a total of 29 responses from a diverse range of stakeholders across 16 EU Member States, including Belgium, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia, and Spain. These included 15 representatives from public authorities, 12 from non-profits, and 2 from other institutions, ensuring a broad representation of different national contexts and perspectives.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the questionnaire was analysed using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Responses were categorised to identify common themes, challenges, and best practices. This analysis was complemented by insights from CoP meetings, which allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the current landscape of participation in ESF+ programmes.

MAPPING OF PRACTICES

This section analyses the current practices employed by managing authorities and partner organisations across Europe to involve end beneficiaries in ESF+ programmes addressing material deprivation. By mapping these practices, we aim to identify variations in approaches and highlight successful examples where beneficiary input has improved support outcomes.

Setting clear goals for beneficiary involvement

The assessment of beneficiary participation starts with evaluating whether organisations and institutions have set clear objectives for involving end beneficiaries. Clear objectives demonstrate a commitment to consistently include beneficiary input in decision-making processes, leading to better alignment of programmes with the actual needs of the people they serve. The data indicates a significant level of dedication to beneficiary involvement, with approximately 76% of respondents reporting that they have clearly defined goals for such involvement (Figure 1). However, 24% of respondents lack these objectives.



Further analysis reveals significant differences in participation practices based on the type of organisation. Notably, all respondents from non-profits (100%) reported having clear goals for involving end beneficiaries. For instance, the Lahti Diaconia Foundation in Finland (**FI**) emphasised that one of their strategic objectives is to enhance the participation and engagement of individuals in vulnerable life situations.

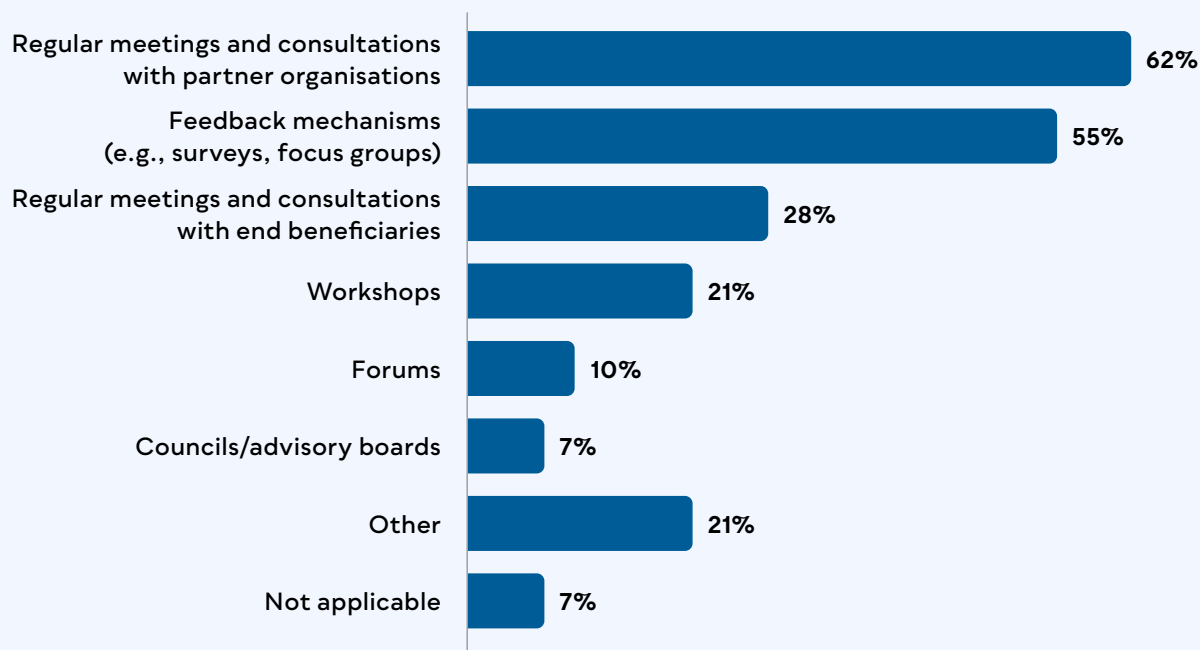
Public authorities, in contrast, show more varied results in their commitment to beneficiary participation. While 53% of respondents from public authorities reported having clear goals for involving end beneficiaries, a significant 47% have not yet established such objectives. This indicates a potential area for improvement within the public sector. For example, the National Managing Authority in Belgium, PPS for Social Integration (**BE**), noted that their organisation employs experts by experience in poverty and social inclusion.

These results indicate that while the majority of organisations recognise the importance of involving end beneficiaries and have established clear goals to support this, public authorities have room to develop and formulate their approaches further. This presents a valuable opportunity for public authorities to adopt more concrete strategies and collaboratively set clear objectives to strengthen beneficiary participation in their programmes.

Mechanisms for end beneficiary involvement

The effectiveness of beneficiary participation in decision-making processes largely depends on the mechanisms employed. The data collected from the survey illustrates the variety of methods used by different entities to engage end beneficiaries. The data (Figure 2) reveals a wide range of approaches, with some mechanisms being more commonly used than others.

Figure 2. In general, what mechanisms does your organisation/institution use to include (or involve) end beneficiaries in decision-making?



Regular meetings and consultations with partner organisations are the most commonly employed mechanism, used by 62% of all respondents. This practice is equally prevalent among public authorities and non-profits. This indicates a strong emphasis on collaboration and communication across both sectors, ensuring that decisions are well-informed and coordinated through the input of partner organisations.

Feedback mechanisms, such as surveys and focus groups, are employed by 55% of respondents overall, with significant variation between sectors. There is a noticeable difference in the usage of these mechanisms between public authorities and non-profits, with 67% of public authorities using them compared to only 33% of non-profits. It is worth noting that 100% of respondents in the 'Other' category reported using feedback mechanisms, indicating a strong reliance on structured feedback to gather and analyse beneficiary input in this group.

Regular meetings and consultations with end beneficiaries are reported by 28% of respondents. This method is more commonly used by non-profits (50%) compared to public authorities (13%). The higher engagement of non-profits in direct consultations with beneficiaries reflects their closer interaction with the communities they serve and their mission-driven focus on beneficiary involvement.

Workshops are utilised by 21% of respondents. This mechanism is used by 20% of public authorities and 17% of non-profits, while 50% of the 'Other' category organisations reported using workshops. This method, although less common, is important for facilitating in-depth discussions and interactive participation.

Forums are used by 10% of respondents, with 13% of public authorities and 8% of non-profits employing this mechanism. The lower overall usage suggests that forums might be more formal and potentially reserved for specific topics or larger-scale discussions, indicating a more limited role in regular engagement processes.

Councils or advisory boards are used by 7% of respondents, exclusively within the non-profit sector (17%). This underscores the non-profit sector's commitment to structured beneficiary involvement.

Other mechanisms are reported by 21% of respondents. This category is predominantly used by public authorities (33%). For example, an implementing organisation, Western Greece Region Public Authority (**GR**), mentions several of them, including bottom-up research, digital apps, telephone centres, and cooperation with social workers of community centres. Such other methods were reported by 7% of non-profits. The relatively high percentage of other mechanisms suggests a broader range of strategies for engagement outside traditional frameworks.

Finally, 7% of respondents selected 'Not applicable', with equal representation by public authorities and non-profits. This suggests that a small proportion of organisations either do not employ formal mechanisms for beneficiary involvement or use methods outside the scope of those covered by the survey.

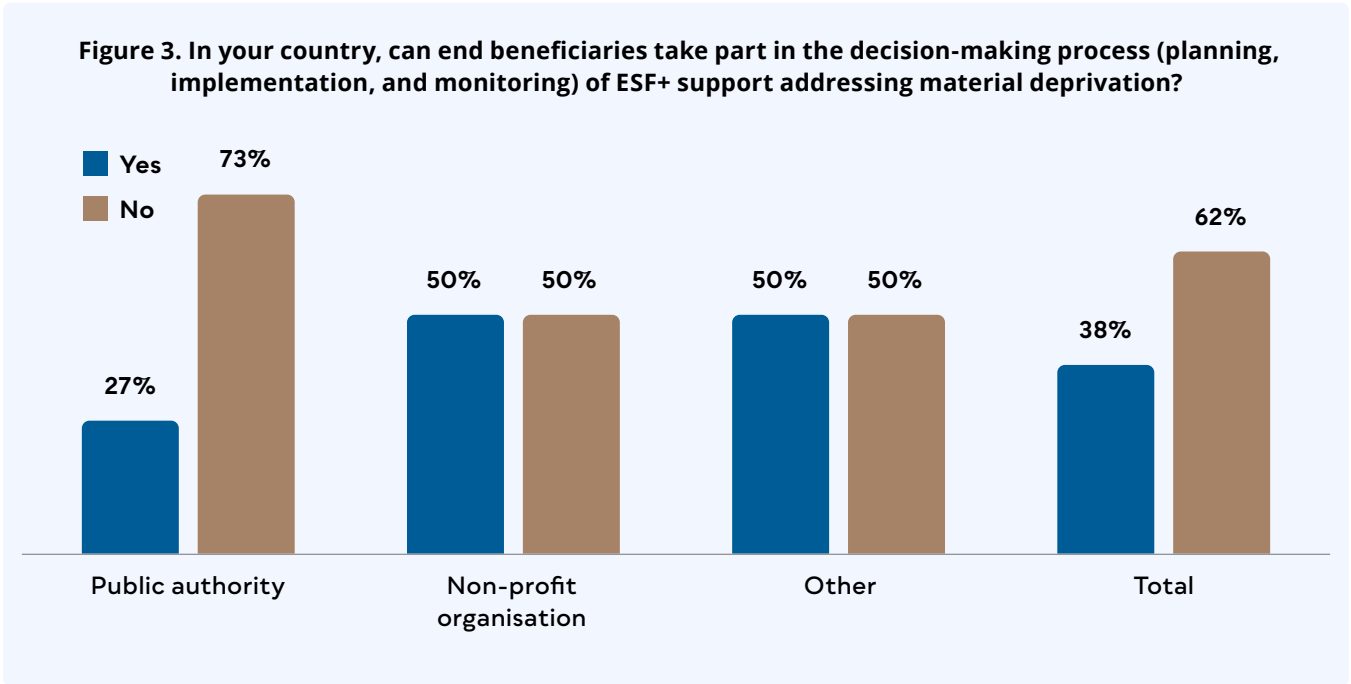
In summary, the data shows that public authorities are more inclined to use structured and formal mechanisms, such as regular meetings with partner organisations and feedback systems, to engage beneficiaries indirectly. Non-profits, on the other hand, place greater emphasis on direct engagement, leveraging regular and frequent meetings and advisory boards to maintain close contact with end beneficiaries. This distinction clearly reflects the more direct nature of non-profits' interactions with those they support, while public authorities often engage indirectly. The variations in involvement mechanisms across organisation types reflect the importance of adapting participation mechanisms to each organisation's unique nature, context, and strengths. However, organisations can benefit from each other by using various strategies and improving participation methods. This can create a more efficient and inclusive engagement process that takes advantage of the strengths of each approach.

End Beneficiary Involvement in Shaping ESF+ Material Support and Accompanying Measures

In the context of ESF+ programmes, the involvement of end beneficiaries in shaping both material support and accompanying measures is crucial for ensuring that the assistance provided is relevant and effective. By engaging beneficiaries directly in the process, programmes can better reflect their actual needs, preferences, and challenges, rather than relying on generic solutions. It also facilitates ongoing feedback, enabling programmes to adapt and evolve in response to changing needs, thereby enhancing their effectiveness over time. As a result, programmes are more likely to achieve meaningful, sustainable outcomes that go beyond short-term relief, ultimately contributing to long-term social inclusion and the reduction of poverty. The survey data offers valuable insights into the extent and nature of beneficiary involvement across different types of organisations and countries, highlighting both successes and areas for improvement.

Involvement in the Decision-Making Process of ESF+ Support

The survey data provides a broader perspective on the extent to which end beneficiaries are able to participate in decision-making processes across various stages of ESF+ support addressing material deprivation, including planning, implementation, and monitoring at the country level. While the ideal scenario is that end beneficiaries are fully engaged in all stages, the findings highlight the challenges in making this a widespread reality. The data reveals a considerable gap in participatory practices, with 62% of respondents indicating that beneficiaries are not involved in these crucial processes, while only 38% report that such participation occurs (Figure 3).

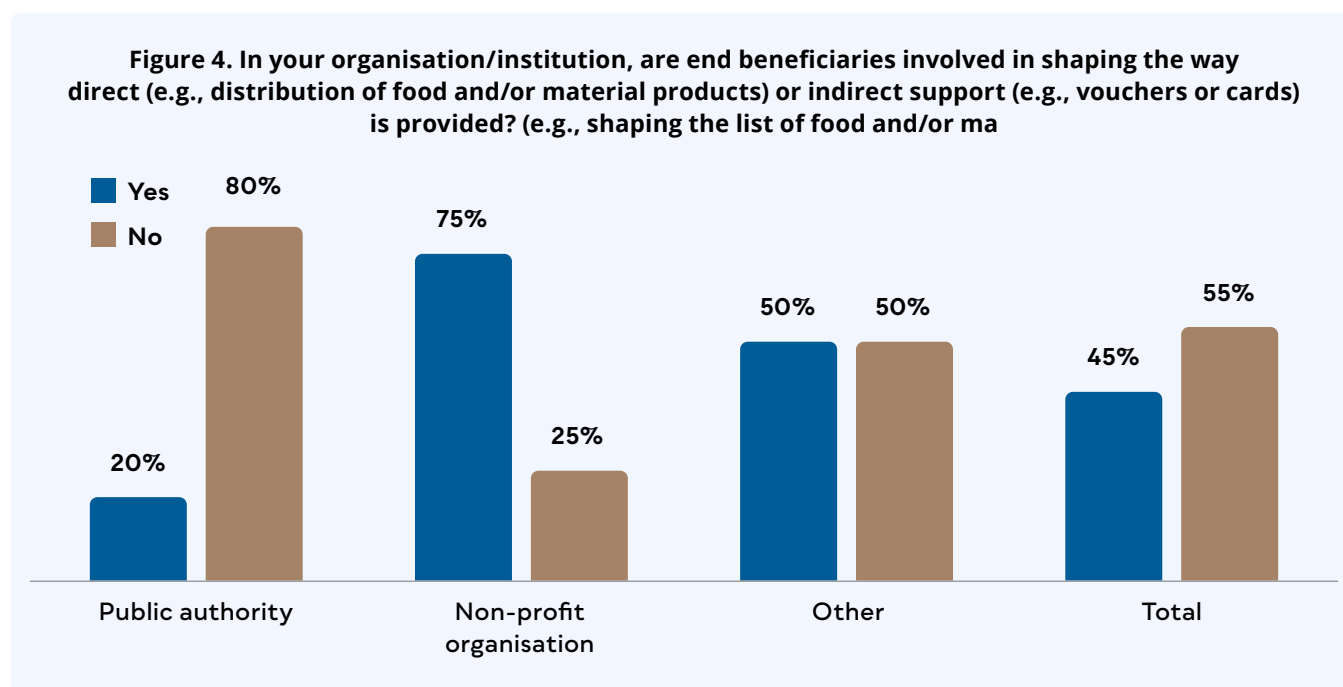


When comparing responses from different types of organisations, notable differences emerge in their views of the situation in their respective countries. Public authorities are more likely to report lower levels of beneficiary involvement, with only 27% indicating that beneficiaries participate in the decision-making process. In contrast, 50% of non-profits report that beneficiaries are involved in these processes.

This divergence in perspectives may reflect differences in the structures and processes of non-profits and public authorities. Non-profits, which often operate closer to the ground and maintain direct relationships with communities, may be more accustomed to involving beneficiaries in decision-making. As a result, they might be more optimistic or aware of participatory practices at a local or regional level, even if such practices are not widespread nationally. In contrast, public authorities operate within more structured and complex bureaucratic frameworks, which can make engagement processes more challenging to implement. These complexities often require navigating multiple layers of regulation and administration, which may limit the flexibility and scope of beneficiary involvement at the national or governmental level.

Involvement in Shaping Direct and Indirect Support

This section explores the extent to which end beneficiaries are engaged in shaping the provision of direct support, such as food and material assistance, and indirect support, including vouchers or cards. Overall, 45% of organisations reported involving beneficiaries in these decisions, while 55% do not (Figure 4).



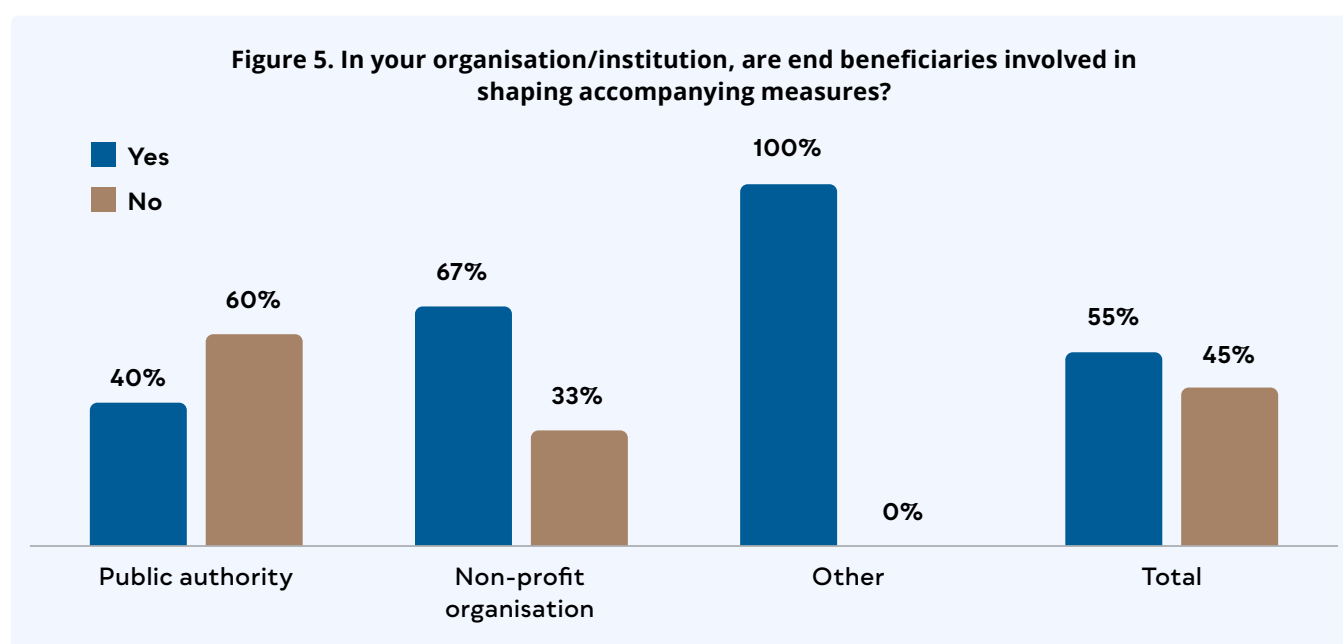
Public authorities show a lower level of beneficiary involvement, with only 20% engaging beneficiaries in shaping support mechanisms, compared to 80% that do not. However, there are notable examples of efforts to involve beneficiaries. For instance, the Ministry of Social Affairs, as the National Managing Authority in Estonia (**EE**), employed feedback mechanisms for a system transition to food cards. In this preparation phase, interviews were conducted with both social workers and individuals in need. Similarly, in Bulgaria (**BG**), the Agency for Social Assistance employs feedback forms to gather input from beneficiaries. In contrast, Ireland's Department of Social Protection (**IE**) engages beneficiaries through its network of 150 partner organisations.

On the other hand, non-profits involve beneficiaries significantly more, with 75% reporting active engagement in shaping the delivery of support. Beneficiaries are also invited to test and provide feedback on the food delivered through ESF+ programmes. Similarly, the Lahti Diaconia Foundation in Finland (**FI**) has developed an ongoing project called 'Work and Food', which supports the food aid chain and creates work practice opportunities for beneficiaries. Through this initiative, beneficiaries are directly involved in service design during the project. Several other non-profits also noted that end beneficiaries take part in the distribution of material support as volunteers, further emphasising the non-profit sector's participatory approach.

The data highlights a significant gap between public authorities and non-profits in terms of beneficiary involvement in shaping support delivery. Non-profits are not necessarily more inclined to engage beneficiaries. Rather, their nature, structure, and operational model naturally lead to closer, more frequent, and more direct relationships with end beneficiaries. These non-profits typically work on the ground, often in communities where they have established trust and ongoing communication with those they support. As a result, they are more accustomed to involving beneficiaries in decision-making processes, as their mission requires deep understanding of local needs and a more hands-on approach. In contrast, public authorities generally lack the same direct, ongoing relationship with end beneficiaries. Their mechanisms tend to be less accessible, with processes often being more top-down. This highlights a clear need for enhanced participatory mechanisms within the public sector.

Involvement in Shaping Accompanying Measures

Accompanying measures, which complement the direct support provided under ESF+ programmes, play a vital role in maximising the impact of material assistance. These measures often include additional services or interventions that enhance the impact of material support. According to the survey, 45% of organisations or institutions involve beneficiaries in shaping these accompanying measures, while 55% do not (Figure 5).



Public authorities demonstrate a relatively lower level of beneficiary involvement in shaping accompanying measures, with only 40% reporting such engagement. For example, an implementing organisation in Portugal (**PT**), the Câmara Municipal de Almodôvar, reported that their accompanying measures are defined in close consultation with beneficiaries, ensuring their voices are reflected in the decision-making process. The Western Greece Region Public Authority (**GR**) has demonstrated strong beneficiary engagement through social bottom-up research, feedback from past actions, and interviews. These tools allow beneficiaries to participate actively in the mapping process, identifying their personalised requirements and those of their families, ensuring that the accompanying measures directly address their needs. They also launched the 'myptdeteba' app, which provides end beneficiaries with updates and notifications about food/material support distributions and accompanying measures.

Non-profits again show a higher rate of involvement, with 67% including beneficiaries in shaping accompanying measures, compared to 33% that do not. This aligns with the sector's broader commitment to ensuring that all support aspects are responsive to the needs of the target groups. The Lahti Diaconia Foundation in Finland (**FI**) launched a 'Digi workshop', where young participants developed a free online shop that is now part of the institution's activities. It provides material aid and integrates digital skills training for beneficiaries.

In other organisations, 100% reported involving beneficiaries in shaping accompanying measures. For instance, in Malta (**MT**), the Foundation for Social Welfare Services tailors accompanying measures to meet the specific needs of people in the region. Often, the interventions or activities are directly informed by the needs expressed by the beneficiaries themselves.

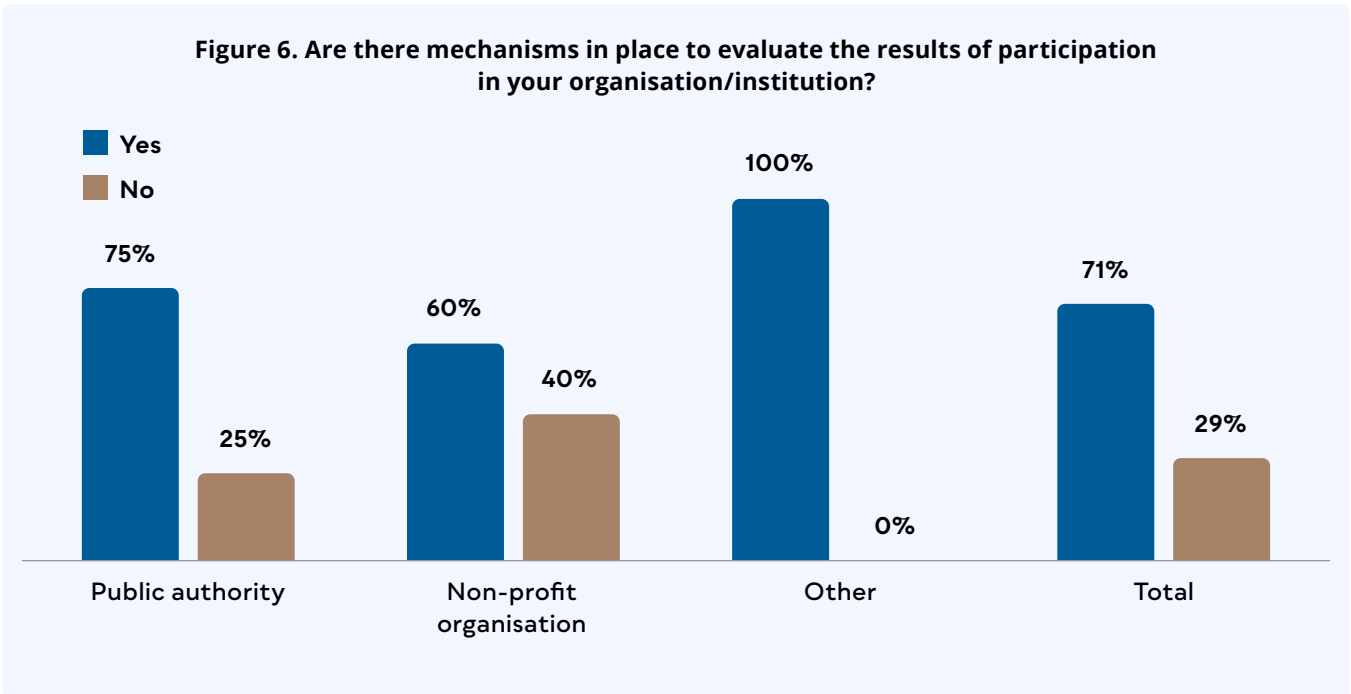
The data further highlights a clear distinction between public authorities and non-profits in terms of beneficiary involvement in shaping accompanying measures. Non-profits, with their closer community ties and flexible structures, tend to engage beneficiaries more actively in designing these measures. Public authorities, on the other hand, could benefit from strengthening the participation of end beneficiaries and collaborating with partner organisations to enhance the relevance and effectiveness of their accompanying measures.

Evaluating the Results and Impact of Participation Mechanisms

This chapter explores the tools and methods organisations use to assess the effectiveness of their participation practices. It first examines if and how organisations evaluate the involvement of beneficiaries and partners in decision-making. Then, it explores the tools used to measure the broader impact of these participatory efforts on ESF+ programme outcomes.

Mechanisms to evaluate results of participation

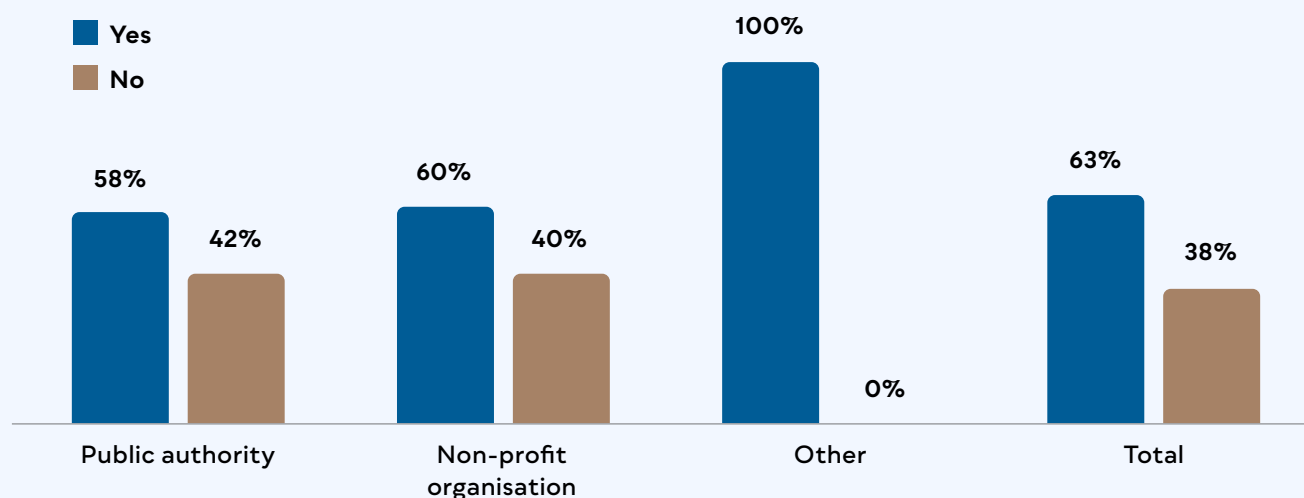
The survey results highlight the current mechanisms in place to ensure and evaluate participation results in decision-making processes. A clear majority of organisations (71% overall) reported having mechanisms in place, but there is a notable distinction between the types of organisations (Figure 6).



75% of public authorities reported having established mechanisms to assess participation results, suggesting they are generally well-prepared to track beneficiary engagement. This higher percentage may also be driven by regulatory requirements and the use of structured tools, such as surveys, which facilitate monitoring and evaluation of participation. However, the 25% of public authorities without such mechanisms highlight areas where further development is needed to ensure more comprehensive and effective monitoring and evaluation practices, ultimately strengthening the transparency and accountability of beneficiary involvement.

Non-profits show a slightly lower rate of having evaluation mechanisms, with 60% reporting the presence of such mechanisms and 40% indicating a lack thereof. This gap may be attributed not only to resource and organisational constraints but also to the nature of their engagement. Non-profits often rely on more direct and informal interactions with beneficiaries, which, while valuable, can be more challenging to evaluate systematically compared to more structured approaches.

Figure 7. Are there mechanisms in place to evaluate the impact of participation in your organisation/institution?



Mechanisms to evaluate the impact of participation

The second chart (Figure 7) shifts focus to the evaluation of the impact of participation mechanisms within organisations. Overall, 63% of organisations report having impact evaluation mechanisms in place. This is notably lower than the percentage of organisations that evaluate participation results, reflecting the greater complexity involved in impact assessment.

According to survey data, 58% of public authorities have established mechanisms to assess the impact of participation, while 42% do not. This suggests that, while public authorities may engage stakeholders and beneficiaries, many still lack the tools or processes to comprehensively measure the broader outcomes of these efforts.

Similarly, 60% of non-profits report having mechanisms to evaluate the impact of participation, with 40% lacking such frameworks. For non-profits, which often focus on direct community engagement, the challenge lies in translating these interactions into measurable impacts.

Qualitative data reveals that most organisations, both public authorities and non-profits, predominantly rely on surveys and structured forms to collect feedback and assess the results and impact of participation. Standard tools include satisfaction questionnaires, feedback surveys, and regulatory reports, typically gathered at regular intervals, such as quarterly or annually. While these methods are effective for capturing immediate responses and perceptions, they may not fully capture the broader, long-term impact of participatory practices.

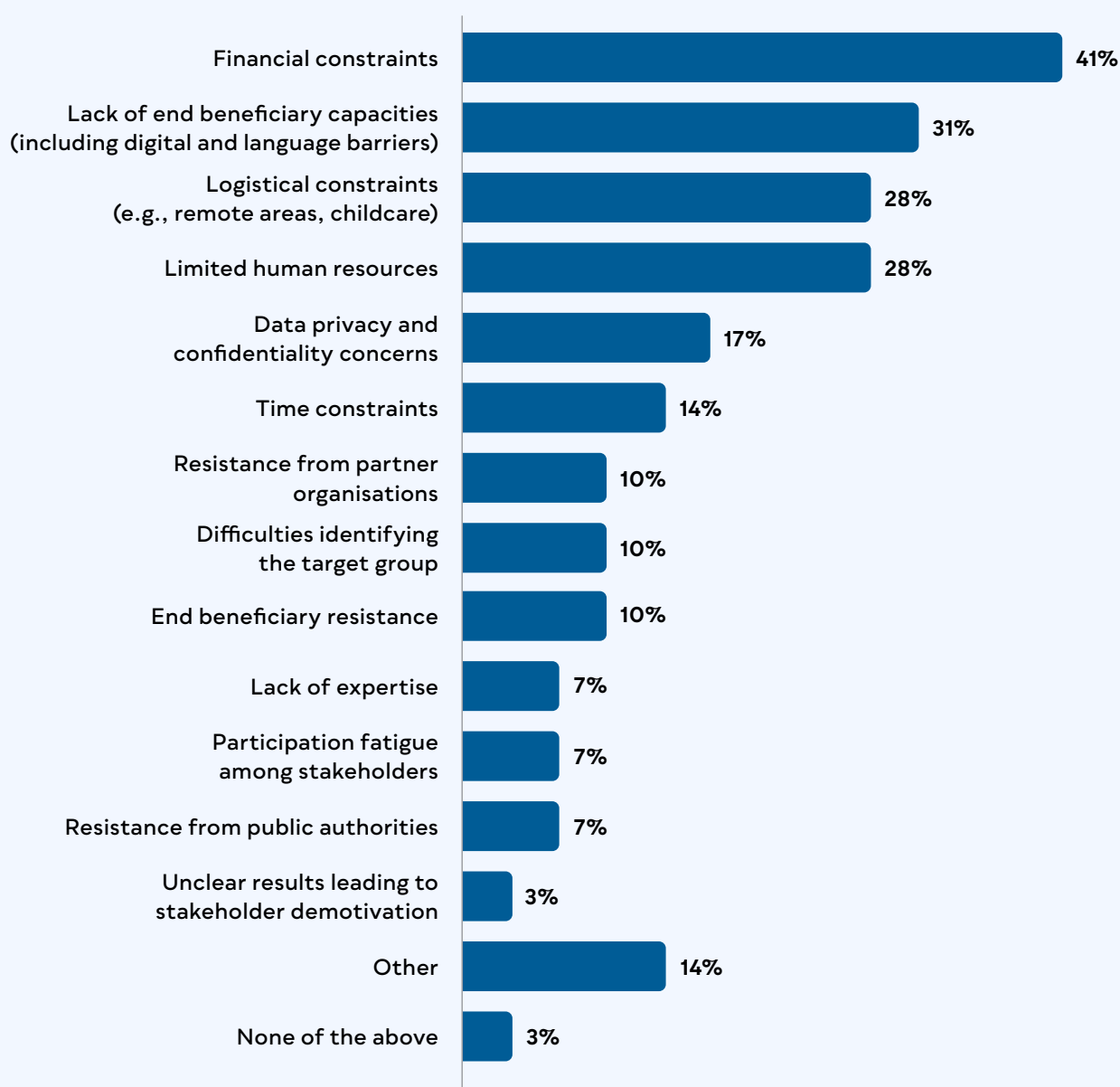
A few organisations employ more advanced evaluation frameworks and indicators to gain deeper insights into the impact of participation. For example, the Lahti Diaconia Foundation in Finland (FI) uses the ESIS scale (Experiences of Social Inclusion Scale), developed by the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare. The ESIS scale is scientifically validated and measures people's feelings of participation, providing a structured tool for evaluating social inclusion.

Despite the use of advanced practices by some, most organisations continue to rely on structured, survey-based data to track participation outcomes. This indicates that, while many have established mechanisms to evaluate the immediate results of participation, fewer are utilising more sophisticated tools to capture its long-term impact. This is understandable, as impact assessment can be a complex and resource-intensive process. However, developing more comprehensive frameworks could provide deeper insights into the value of participatory practices and enhance decision-making and support delivery. Strengthening these evaluation capabilities will be crucial for maximising the benefits of participation within the ESF+ programmes.

CHALLENGES TO INVOLVING END BENEFICIARIES

Both public authorities and non-governmental organisations recognise the importance of engaging beneficiaries in shaping the services and support they receive. During the meeting in Athens, CoP members brainstormed and identified several key challenges that organisations face in achieving meaningful beneficiary participation. These insights formed the basis for the survey, which has now confirmed the significance and prevalence of these obstacles, underscoring the complexity of the process.

Figure 8. In general, what are the main challenges your organisation/institution faces in involving end beneficiaries?



Financial constraints (41%): Financial limitations are the most commonly reported challenge, affecting 47% of public authorities, 33% of non-profits, and 50% of other entities. Insufficient funding can hinder the ability to organise participatory activities, invest in necessary tools, or hire dedicated staff to facilitate engagement processes.

Lack of end beneficiary capacities (31%): Obstacles such as digital literacy, language barriers and other factors were reported both by public authorities and non-profits. These are not only barriers to participation but also indicators of broader social exclusion. The focus should be on reducing these barriers through accompanying measures that help to build the capacities of the end beneficiaries and empower them to engage meaningfully.

Logistical constraints (28%): Issues such as reaching remote areas, providing childcare, and ensuring accessible venues are reported by 50% of 'Other' organisations, 42% of non-profits, and 13% of public authorities. The focus should, therefore, be on addressing these obstacles to promote greater inclusion while also ensuring that participation processes are more accessible, particularly for the most vulnerable groups.

Limited human resources (28%): A shortage of staff capacity to manage and facilitate participatory processes is a significant barrier, reported by 50% of other entities, 33% of non-profits, and 20% of public authorities. This challenge highlights the need for additional support and resources to ensure effective participation. It also underlines the importance of fostering better cooperation and collaboration across different organisations to maximise the use of available human resources.

Data privacy and confidentiality concerns (17%): Handling sensitive personal information responsibly is a challenge for 20% of public authorities and 17% of non-profits. Ensuring compliance with data protection regulations is essential to maintain trust, but it also complicates efforts to collect detailed feedback from beneficiaries, particularly in an environment where data privacy concerns are increasingly prominent.

Formalised involvement: The reliance on surveys and structured methods, while often seen as a way to justify programmes, may not always lead to meaningful change. This can create a disconnect between the data collected and the actual needs of beneficiaries. Furthermore, such an approach may also limit the richness of feedback, as it often fails to capture the diverse and complex realities of target groups.

Fragmented data and lack of representation: Despite the availability of data, it often lacks cohesion and fails to connect with people's varied needs. Additionally, public consultations sometimes lack representation from different target groups, which can result in policies and programmes that do not fully address the issues at hand.

Resistance from public authorities (7%): Resistance from public authorities can arise due to structural and operational challenges, as well as scepticism about the feasibility or value of participatory approaches. Authorities may feel constrained by rigid administrative frameworks, tight deadlines, or limited resources, which can make integrating beneficiary input seem impractical.

Lack of expertise (7%): This issue, exclusively reported by non-profits, points to a potential need for training and capacity-building in this area.

Participation fatigue (7%): Frequent requests for input without visible outcomes can lead to participation fatigue among beneficiaries, diminishing their willingness to engage over time. This challenge highlights the importance of demonstrating how participation is valued and results in tangible, concrete changes. It is crucial to ensure that beneficiaries feel heard and valued, and their contributions should lead to meaningful improvements, reinforcing their motivation to continue engaging in the process.

PARTNER INVOLVEMENT BY PUBLIC AUTHORITIES IN ESF+

Effective collaboration with non-governmental organisations and other partner entities is a critical component in the delivery of ESF+ support addressing material deprivation. During the CoP meeting in Athens, it was emphasised that partner organisations often serve as essential partners connecting public authorities with end beneficiaries and ensuring that support programmes are responsive to their needs.

Defining objectives for partner involvement

Public authorities must engage in discussions with partner organisations to jointly define clear objectives, as well as the specific roles and tasks each organisation will undertake in the implementation of support measures. This collaborative and structured approach not only clarifies roles and expectations but also leverages the strengths of each partner, such as their direct community ties and specialised knowledge. Such collaboration fosters a shared sense of ownership and enhances the responsiveness and impact of programmes addressing material deprivation.

The survey data reveals that 87% of public authorities have clearly defined objectives regarding the participation of partner organisations in ESF+ support addressing material deprivation, while 13% do not (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Does your institution have clearly defined objectives regarding the participation of partner organisations in ESF+ support addressing material deprivation?

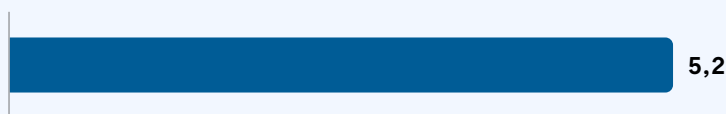


This high percentage of public authorities with defined objectives reflects a strong awareness of the importance of structured collaboration with partner organisations and aligns with regulatory requirements. Partner organisations, including NGOs and other intermediaries, are essential not only in facilitating the connection between public authorities and end beneficiaries but also in actively collaborating as equal partners in designing, implementing, and evaluating support measures. Rather than acting solely as intermediaries, these organisations bring valuable on-the-ground expertise, direct community engagement, and a deep understanding of the needs and challenges faced by beneficiaries. Their involvement as true partners ensures that the perspectives of end beneficiaries are meaningfully integrated into every stage of the process, fostering more effective, relevant, and sustainable solutions.

This reinforces a key point discussed in previous chapters and the Athens workshops: end beneficiary involvement is often achieved indirectly through partner organisations. By setting clear objectives, public authorities ensure that these partners are not only part of the delivery process but also contribute to the decision-making and the shaping of support programmes.

However, despite the commitment of public authorities to involve partner organisations in ESF+ decision-making processes, the perception from the partners themselves is more reserved. When asked to rate their level of involvement by the Managing Authority in shaping ESF+ support, partner organisations rated their involvement at an average of 5.2 out of 10 (Figure 10).

Figure 10. How do you evaluate the level of involvement of your organisation by the Managing Authority in shaping ESF+ support addressing material deprivation? (0 = not involved at all; 10 = extremely involved)



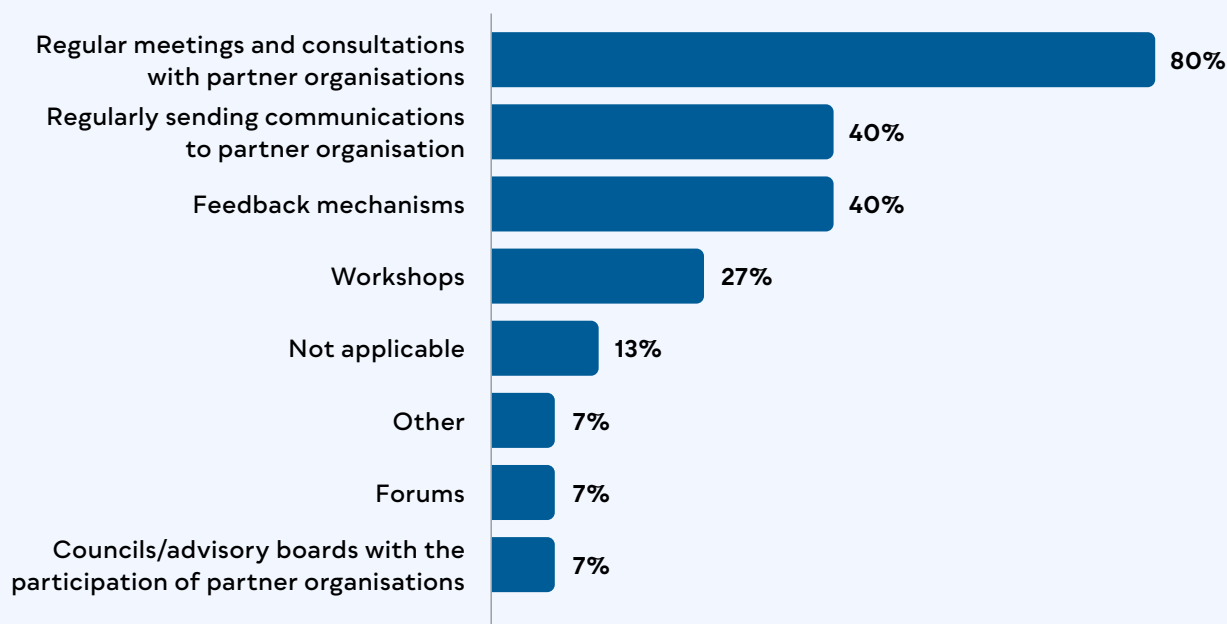
This moderate rating highlights a disconnect between the intentions of public authorities and the experiences of partner organisations. This suggests that engagement is often limited by the structure of the process. Once objectives are already defined, the scope for meaningful enhancement diminishes, as further involvement may be reduced to consultation or requests for opinions rather than collaborative discussions. Greater emphasis should be placed on involving partner organisations during the initial phases of defining objectives to ensure a more inclusive and impactful process.

To address this issue, it is necessary to go beyond formal consultation mechanisms and adopt a new approach that involves partner organisations from the very first step. This requires recognising non-profits as equal partners in the process. This could involve co-defining objectives, creating more inclusive and transparent decision-making processes, providing additional resources and support to partners, and fostering a culture of collaboration that recognises and integrates the unique insights of partner organisations. By doing so, public authorities can ensure that partner organisations are more integrally involved, thereby enhancing the effectiveness and impact of ESF+ support measures.

Mechanisms for involving partner organisations

To facilitate meaningful collaboration, public authorities employ various mechanisms to involve partner organisations in the decision-making and implementation processes. This section explores the range of methods used to engage partners. Public authorities use various mechanisms to involve partner organisations in the decision-making process related to ESF+ programmes addressing material deprivation. According to the survey, the most commonly used method is **regular meetings and consultations**, reported by 80% of public authorities (Figure 11).

Figure 11. What mechanisms does your institution currently have in place to involve partner organisations in the decision-making process in ESF+ support addressing material deprivation?



Qualitative responses provided further insight into how regular meetings and consultations are utilised: the Lithuanian intermediate body European Social Fund Agency (**LT**) actively participates in weekly meetings with partner organisations to ensure that various stakeholders are aligned and informed. Similarly, the National Managing Authority in Belgium's PPS for Social Integration (**BE**) schedules regular meetings every three months with partner organisations. In Italy, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (**IT**) organises a national round table with national partners to discuss all aspects of the programme, aiming to improve the implementation of food aid and related social activities.

Other frequently used mechanisms include **sending regular information** and **feedback mechanisms**, cited by 40% of respondents. These mechanisms ensure that partners are kept up to date with programme developments and provide channels for them to share their insights and concerns regarding the implementation of ESF+ support.

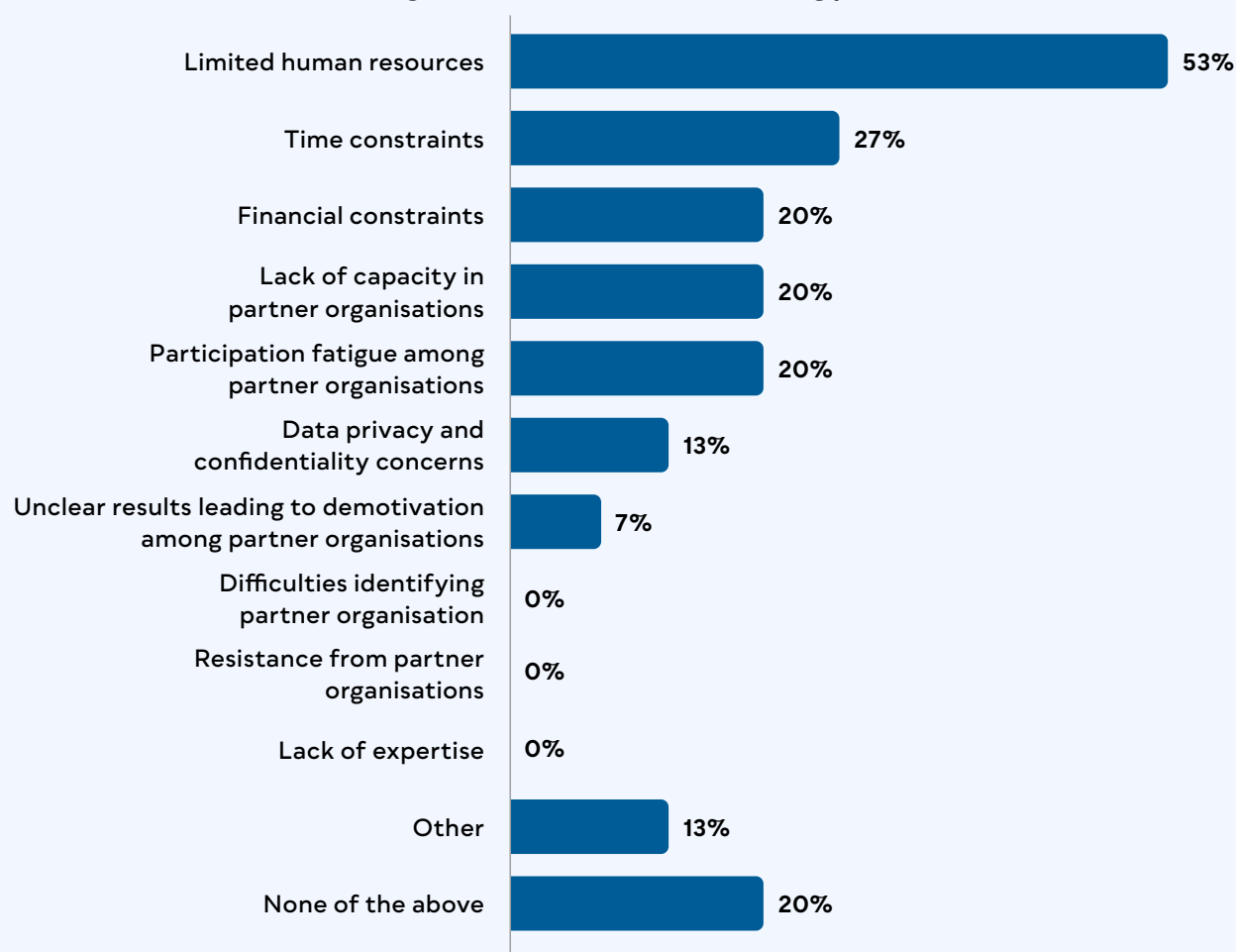
Workshops are used by 27% of institutions, providing a more interactive and collaborative approach, allowing partners to discuss specific programme elements, which likely fosters stronger engagement.

Less frequently used mechanisms include **forums**, **councils/advisory boards**, and other mechanisms, each cited by 7% of respondents. Notably, 13% of public authorities indicated that this question was '**Not applicable**' to their institution, which may suggest that in some cases, partner involvement is either minimal or not formalised within the current structure.

Challenges in involving partner organizations in ESF+ decision-making

Public authorities report facing various obstacles to achieving effective collaboration with partner organisations. Understanding these barriers is essential for improving the overall effectiveness and efficiency of partner involvement in ESF+ programmes. The following sections analyse key challenges public authorities face based on survey data and qualitative insights.

Figure 12. In general, what are the main challenges your institution faces involving partner organisations in the decision-making process?



The most significant challenge, reported by 53% of respondents, is limited human resources. Insufficient staffing and a lack of dedicated personnel make it difficult to manage ongoing coordination and communication with partners. A common misconception is that public authorities must handle every aspect of programme design and implementation before transferring responsibilities to partner organisations. However, this approach is not only resource-intensive but also overlooks the value of collaborative partnerships. If public authorities were to foster real, active collaboration with partner organisations from the outset, the shared responsibility would not only distribute the workload but also ensure that tasks are managed more effectively. By leveraging the strengths and local knowledge of partners, public authorities can make the process more manageable, enhance overall efficiency, and ensure that the programme is more responsive to beneficiaries' needs.

Time constraints, noted by 27% of respondents, further limit the ability to engage in sustained consultations, as many public authorities operate under tight timelines. Financial constraints, mentioned by 20%, also restrict the resources available for extensive partner engagement activities.

Other challenges include limited capacity within partner organisations and participation fatigue, both reported by 20% of respondents. Some organisations may lack the resources or expertise to engage fully, while those that participate regularly may feel discouraged if their input does not lead to clear outcomes. Data privacy concerns, cited by 13%, add another layer of complexity, particularly when handling sensitive information. Additionally, 7% of respondents reported unclear results from feedback processes, indicating difficulties in translating partner input into actionable outcomes.

Interestingly, 20% of respondents indicated that they do not encounter significant challenges in working with partners or have developed effective collaboration mechanisms. This suggests that, in some contexts, successful strategies are in place, providing potential models for overcoming common barriers in other settings.

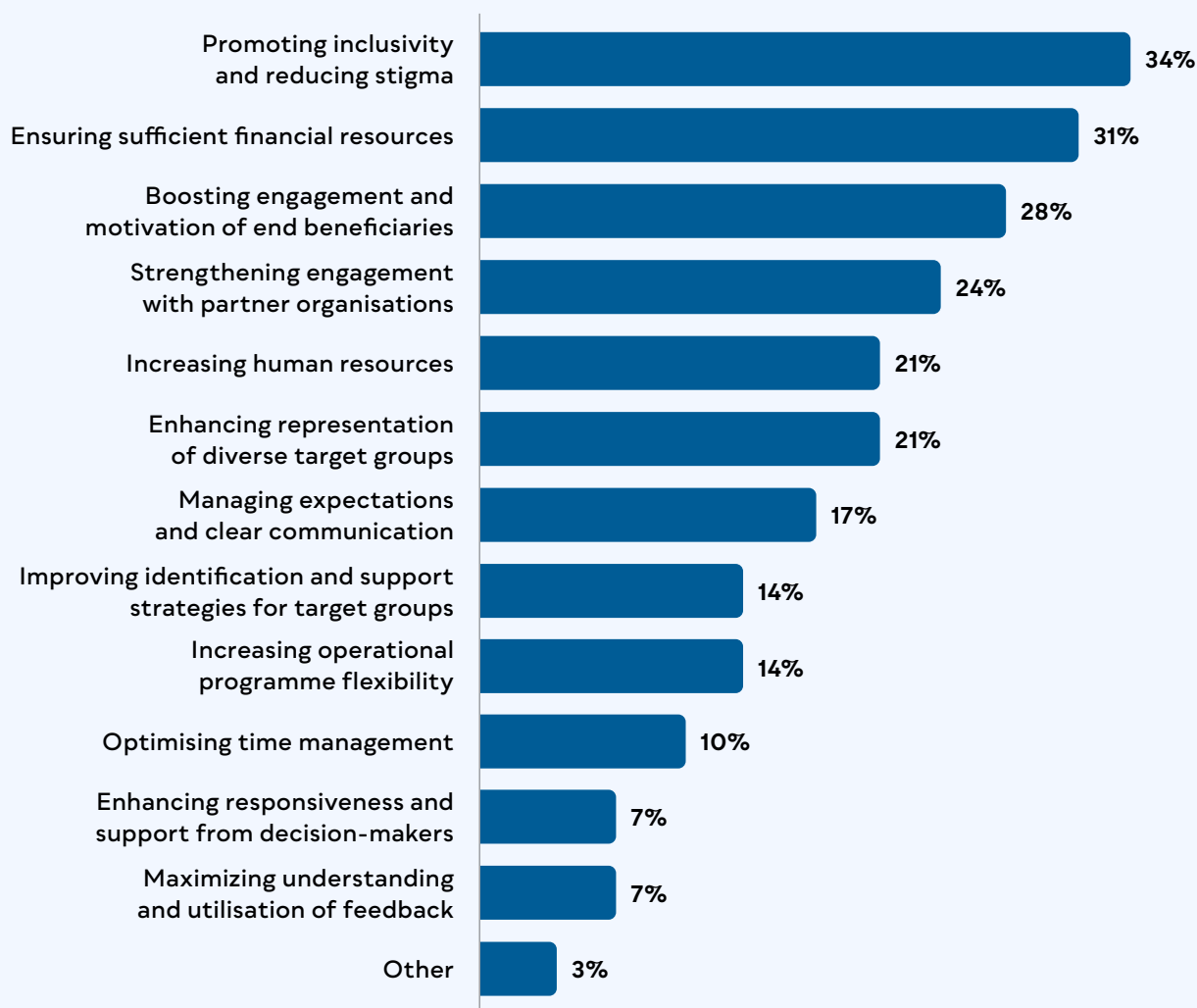
Overall, addressing these challenges requires a different methodological approach that includes building capacity, improving resource allocation, and enhancing communication and feedback mechanisms. Strengthening collaboration with partner organisations is crucial for the success of ESF+ programmes and for ensuring that support effectively reaches those who need it most.

ENHANCING PARTICIPATION: KEY FACTORS AND STRATEGIC IMPROVEMENTS

While challenges exist in involving end beneficiaries in decision-making, members recognise that certain factors could significantly improve the effectiveness and quality of beneficiary participation. By addressing these factors, institutions can create more inclusive, responsive, and effective material support programmes. Alongside these factors, respondents have highlighted actionable steps, policy changes, and institutional support needed to further enhance the involvement of partner organisations and end beneficiaries.

The factors and actionable steps outlined in this chapter are based on insights shared during the workshop, as well as responses to the survey question: 'What policy changes or institutional support would enhance the ability to involve partner organisations and end beneficiaries in your country?' These sources reflect overlapping themes, highlighting common priorities among stakeholders.

Figure 13. What factors could enhance the effectiveness and quality of end beneficiaries' participation?



34% of respondents identified promoting inclusivity as the most critical factor in improving the participation of end beneficiaries. Both public authorities and non-profits recognised the importance of ensuring that all segments of the target population—regardless of socio-economic, cultural, or geographic background—have equal opportunities to participate. Reducing stigma and actively reaching out to underrepresented groups can build a sense of belonging and trust, enabling beneficiaries to contribute meaningfully to decision-making processes. Policy changes that lower administrative barriers and foster more inclusive environments were also noted as necessary for making these improvements.

The need for adequate financial resources was emphasised by 31% of respondents, with notable differences between sectors. While 20% of public authorities pointed to the need for increased funding, 42% of non-profits highlighted this as a critical issue. Many respondents stressed the importance of policy changes that would increase funding for capacity building and operational costs, particularly for smaller partner organisations. Such financial support is essential for organising outreach activities, participatory workshops, and other engagement initiatives. Without these changes, many organisations feel that their ability to involve beneficiaries meaningfully remains limited.

Boosting the engagement and motivation of end beneficiaries was identified by 28% of respondents as a key area for improvement. This includes using innovative approaches such as digital platforms, community outreach, and participatory tools to make it easier for beneficiaries to get involved. Encouraging active participation requires creating multiple channels for engagement and showing how beneficiary input leads to tangible outcomes. Positive motivation strategies and more personalised engagement methods can help sustain involvement over time.

Strengthening engagement with partner organisations was highlighted by 24% of respondents. Partner organisations often act as intermediaries, facilitating engagement between public authorities and end beneficiaries. Respondents suggested policy changes that encourage stronger, more equal partnerships between managing authorities and partner organisations, ensuring that partners can contribute meaningfully to decision-making rather than being limited to an operational role.

Managing expectations and ensuring clear communication were identified by 17% of respondents. Clear and transparent communication helps align expectations between organisations and beneficiaries, ensuring that participants understand the scope of their involvement and the potential outcomes. This reduces frustration and increases satisfaction with the process.

Improving identification and support strategies for target groups was mentioned by 14% of respondents. Rigid administrative structures often hinder effective identification and support strategies. Respondents suggested that institutional support is needed to create more flexible, adaptable frameworks that better align with beneficiaries' evolving needs, such as offering personalised assistance to diverse population groups.

Increasing operational programme flexibility was noted by 14% of respondents as a way to improve participation. Respondents advocated for more flexible programme structures that allow adaptation to local needs and beneficiary circumstances. Similarly, simplifying reporting and operational procedures would allow more time and resources to be devoted to engaging with beneficiaries.

Optimising time management was highlighted by 10% of respondents. Providing sufficient time for consultations and feedback ensures that engagement is not rushed and that beneficiaries have adequate opportunities to contribute meaningfully.

Enhancing responsiveness and support from decision-makers was highlighted by 7% of respondents. They emphasised the need for decision-makers to be more responsive to the input provided by beneficiaries and partners. Greater responsiveness ensures that feedback leads to actionable changes and that beneficiaries' needs are reflected in programme decisions.

Maximising the understanding and utilisation of feedback was cited by 7% of respondents. They emphasised the importance of properly designed feedback mechanisms and that the effective use of the information gathered. This enhances the relevance of the programmes and improves their impact on the target population.

The factors and actionable steps identified offer a roadmap for fostering more inclusive, effective, and responsive material support programmes. By addressing key areas such as promoting inclusivity, securing adequate financial resources, and strengthening engagement mechanisms, institutions can create environments that empower all stakeholders to contribute meaningfully. Emphasising flexibility, clear communication, and equitable partnerships highlights the need for a paradigm shift in approaches to participation—one that prioritises collaboration and adaptability. Importantly, the findings also stress the value of feedback mechanisms that are not only well-designed but also actively utilised to inform decision-making and drive tangible improvements.

Ultimately, enhancing participation requires a commitment to shared responsibility and a focus on inclusion. By adopting these strategic improvements, managing authorities, non-profits, and other stakeholders can work together to ensure that ESF+ material support programmes genuinely reflect and meet the needs of their intended beneficiaries.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations aim to strengthen the participation of end beneficiaries in shaping material support interventions under the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) programmes. Enhanced participation is critical to ensuring that interventions are more responsive, inclusive, and effective in addressing the needs of vulnerable populations.

The recommendations are structured around key stakeholder groups, including the European Commission, public authorities, non-profits and the CoP members, experts and the Steering Group. Each section provides targeted, actionable strategies to facilitate collaboration, innovation, and practical improvements.

By integrating the insights from the Athens event and the feedback gathered through the questionnaire, these recommendations present a comprehensive approach to fostering more meaningful engagement at all stages of programme design, implementation, and evaluation. These strategies are designed to support the ESF+ programme's overarching goals of reducing poverty, promoting social inclusion, and supporting individuals experiencing material deprivation.

1. Recommendations for the European Commission

The European Commission (EC) plays a pivotal role in setting the strategic direction for the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) programmes across Member States.

1.1. Fully implement the participation principle, including end beneficiaries

Require managing authorities to include detailed participation frameworks in their operational plans as part of ESF+ funding conditions. These frameworks should outline how end beneficiaries and partner organisations will be involved in decision-making processes. In addition, the EC should create a set of mandatory guidelines for Member States to ensure that end beneficiaries and partner organisations are systematically involved in all phases of ESF+ programmes. By standardising participation, the EC ensures a consistent approach across all Member States, enhancing the quality of material support programmes and ensuring that they meet beneficiaries' needs.

1.2. Monitor and evaluate participation efforts

The EC should require Member States to include participation indicators as part of their regular reporting on ESF+ programme implementation. These metrics could track the involvement of end beneficiaries in decision-making, the quality of engagement, and the impact of participatory processes on programme outcomes. The EC should actively involve partner organisations in monitoring efforts alongside managing authorities to provide valuable insights and foster greater transparency.

2. Recommendations for public authorities

Managing authorities play a critical role in executing ESF+ programmes and ensuring they meet the needs of end beneficiaries. To achieve this, managing authorities must prioritise structured, ongoing participation from end beneficiaries and partner organisations in designing, implementing, and evaluating material support interventions.

2.1. Develop clear objectives for end beneficiary involvement

Managing authorities, together with partner organisations, should define explicit, actionable goals for involving end beneficiaries in all decision-making phases. These objectives should guide the development of appropriate engagement strategies and ensure that beneficiary input is systematically integrated into programme planning, implementation, and evaluation.

2.2. Establish structured participation mechanisms

Develop formal mechanisms to involve partner organisations and beneficiaries throughout all stages of the ESF+ programme, from design to evaluation. Create mechanisms, e.g., advisory boards or participatory councils, where beneficiaries can contribute to shaping the programme. Set clear benchmarks to ensure structured and continuous participation throughout the ESF+ programme lifecycle. Begin with small-scale pilot projects to test new participation mechanisms and refine them based on feedback and outcomes before scaling up.

2.3. Prioritise direct and regular engagement

In addition to formal mechanisms, utilise informal approaches and direct communication such as meetings, workshops, and interviews with end beneficiaries. Establish regular channels of communication with beneficiaries to gather their input and keep them informed about programme developments.

2.4. Promote social inclusion and empower end beneficiaries

Focus on strategies that reduce barriers such as digital illiteracy, language differences, and socio-economic challenges that impede meaningful participation. Empower end beneficiaries to become active participants in programmes by fostering their skills and confidence, recognising them as active contributors. Achieve this through targeted capacity-building efforts and leveraging accompanying measures to address their broader needs.

2.5. Ensure the operational plans are flexible

Review and adapt operational plans and administrative processes to support flexibility in service delivery by partner organisations. This includes simplifying bureaucratic requirements, allowing localised adjustments, and incorporating mechanisms for regular feedback from implementing organisations.

2.6. Allocate funding for participation

Allocate funding to support formal and informal participation initiatives. This also includes funding for the staff and training to engage effectively with beneficiaries. Ensure financial support and resources are available to partner organisations to enhance their capacity for end beneficiary engagement.

2.7. Promote inclusivity and accessibility

Develop strategies to include marginalised and hard-to-reach groups. Tailor participation methods to the specific needs and preferences of different beneficiary groups. Provide information in multiple languages and formats (e.g., digital, print, audio) to ensure that participation opportunities are accessible to all, regardless of literacy level, language, or disability.

2.8. Use interactive digital tools

Utilise digital platforms such as apps, online polls, and social media to engage beneficiaries interactively. These tools are particularly useful for reaching younger beneficiaries or those with limited mobility, allowing real-time input. However, it is important to consider potential barriers such as digital literacy and access to technology, which could exclude some beneficiaries. To mitigate this, non-digital alternatives should complement digital tools, and efforts should be made to provide training or support to beneficiaries with limited digital skills, ensuring inclusive participation.

2.9. Enhance monitoring and evaluation of participation impact

Regularly assess the effectiveness of participation initiatives through feedback from formal consultations and informal channels. Integrate this feedback into programme reviews and communicate to beneficiaries how their input has shaped programme decisions. Create indicators and tools to measure the impact of beneficiary involvement.

2.10. Foster stronger collaboration with local partners

Collaborate with local non-profits and community organisations to facilitate informal engagement. These organisations often have established relationships with beneficiaries and can ensure that participation is comprehensive and reflective of community needs.

2.11. Ensure flexibility and adaptability in participation mechanisms

Recognise the need for flexibility in participation methods and adapt based on real-time feedback. Participation strategies should evolve to address the changing needs of beneficiaries and partners, ensuring relevance and engagement.

2.12. Facilitate peer learning and community building

Encourage beneficiaries to help each other through peer-to-peer learning activities such as mentoring programmes, group discussions, and workshops. Provide training and assistance to beneficiaries so they can become peer advocates or community representatives, enabling them to bridge the gap between their communities and decision-makers.

3. Recommendations for non-profit organisations

Non-profits play a critical role in bridging the gap between public authorities and end beneficiaries. As partners in planning and delivering ESF+ programmes, they must be involved from the beginning in drafting operational programmes to ensure that these programmes are tailored to the real needs of beneficiaries while fostering meaningful participation.

3.1. Integrate participation into organisational culture

Embed beneficiary involvement as a core value within the organisation. This can be reflected in mission statements, operational strategies, and internal policies that prioritise participation.

3.2. Strengthen engagement with end beneficiaries

Foster continuous engagement with end beneficiaries to ensure their perspectives are integrated into programme design and implementation. Regular feedback sessions, informal gatherings, and direct communication should be prioritised.

3.3. Build capacity for beneficiary participation

Provide training to help beneficiaries engage more effectively in decision-making. This could include public speaking, leadership development, and understanding ESF+ structures to empower beneficiaries to participate actively. Leverage accompanying measures for social inclusion.

3.4. Collaborate closely with public authorities

Maintain continuous collaboration with public authorities to ensure that feedback from beneficiaries is communicated and integrated into programme improvements. Act as a bridge, facilitating the two-way flow of information and feedback.

3.5. Use both formal and informal engagement tools

Utilise a mix of formal mechanisms (e.g., structured surveys and interviews) and informal tools (e.g., workshops, interviews, and meetings) to gather insights from beneficiaries.

3.6. Ensure flexibility in service delivery

Remain flexible in programme delivery by adapting services based on real-time feedback from beneficiaries. Tailor solutions to address the specific needs of different beneficiary groups, including marginalised or remote populations.

3.7. Promote inclusivity and accessibility

Adapt engagement strategies to meet the specific needs of communities by using culturally sensitive methods and reaching out to marginalised groups. Ensure inclusivity by providing information in multiple languages and accessible formats and creating outreach initiatives for those who may be excluded.

3.8. Facilitate peer learning and community building

Encourage beneficiaries to help each other through peer-to-peer learning activities such as mentoring programmes, group discussions, and workshops. Provide training and assistance to beneficiaries so they can become peer advocates or community representatives, enabling them to bridge the gap between their communities and decision-makers.

3.9. Monitor and evaluate participation impact

Regularly assess the effectiveness of engagement efforts by gathering feedback from beneficiaries and using it to make programme adjustments. Ensure that evaluation findings are reported back to public authorities to influence future programme decisions.

3.10. Invest in staff training

Ensure that staff and volunteers are trained in participatory methods, facilitation skills, and cultural competency to effectively engage with beneficiaries and address potential barriers to participation. Establish networks or forums for practitioners and partner organisations to share experiences, challenges, and best practices in beneficiary participation, fostering the adoption of innovative approaches and solutions.

3.11. Document and share success stories

Collect and disseminate case studies and success stories where beneficiary participation has led to positive changes in programme design or implementation. These can motivate other beneficiaries and stakeholders to get involved.

3.12. Explore innovative participation models

Explore and test innovative models of beneficiary participation to enhance inclusivity and engagement. Documenting and sharing the outcomes of these models will inspire wider adoption and provide insights into best practices for more responsive and effective participation strategies.

4. Recommendations for the COP members, experts, and the Steering Group

4.1. Facilitate knowledge sharing and peer learning

Host workshops focused on specific aspects of beneficiary participation, such as innovative engagement methods, overcoming barriers, and evaluating impact. Collect challenges and hurdles while disseminating the outcomes of innovative participation models, showcasing examples where these approaches have successfully led to more inclusive and effective beneficiary engagement.

4.2. Provide capacity-building opportunities for members

Offer training on participatory methods. Organise training sessions for CoP members on advanced participatory techniques, including co-design methodologies, digital engagement tools, and facilitation skills. This training should help members apply these methods effectively within their ESF+ programmes.

4.3. Advocate for participatory approaches in ESF+ policies

Advocate for the inclusion of participatory approaches in ESF+ policies at both national and EU levels. This may include promoting the incorporation of participation metrics in programme evaluations and advocating for increased funding to enhance engagement efforts. Encourage CoP members to actively promote participation within their local contexts.

4.4. Facilitate the involvement of end beneficiaries in the CoP's work

Actively involve end beneficiaries in CoP discussions, workshops, and research activities. This may include inviting beneficiaries as speakers, panellists, or contributors to CoP publications and events. Create an advisory group consisting of end beneficiaries who can provide regular input and feedback on the CoP's work.

4.5. Foster Collaboration with other CoPs

Focus the collaboration on sharing insights, aligning strategies, and identifying cross-cutting issues to enhance the effectiveness and coherence of ESF+ programmes. Joint initiatives, such as co-hosted workshops or shared research projects, can facilitate mutual learning, reduce duplication of efforts, and amplify the impact of innovative practices across Member States.

ANNEX 1

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

I. CONTACT INFORMATION

1. First name
2. Last name
3. Email address
4. Country
5. Organisation/institution
6. Position
7. Role in the ESF+
 - a. National Managing Authority
 - b. Regional Managing Authority
 - c. Line Ministry
 - d. Intermediate Body
 - e. Implementing Organisation
 - f. National Partner Organisation
 - g. Regional Partner Organisation
 - h. Local Partner Organisation
 - i. Other (Please specify)
8. Type of organisation/institution
 - a. Public authority
 - b. Non-profit organisation
 - c. Other (Please specify)

II. CURRENT SITUATION

9. In general, does your organisation/institution have clear goals for involving end beneficiaries?
 - a. No
 - b. Yes (Please specify)
10. In general, what mechanisms does your organisation/institution use to include (or involve) end beneficiaries in decision-making?
 - a. Regular meetings and consultations with end beneficiaries
 - b. Regular meetings and consultations with partner organisations
 - c. Councils/advisory boards
 - d. Feedback mechanisms (e.g., surveys, focus groups)
 - e. Workshops
 - f. Forums
 - g. Other (Please specify)
 - h. Not applicable
11. In your organisation/institution, are end beneficiaries involved in shaping the way direct (e.g., distribution of food and/or material products) or indirect support (e.g., vouchers or cards) is provided? (e.g., shaping the list of food and/or material support)
 - a. No
 - b. Yes (Please specify)
12. In your organisation/institution, are end beneficiaries involved in shaping accompanying measures?
 - a. No
 - b. Yes (Please specify)

13. In your country, can end beneficiaries take part in the decision-making process (planning, implementation, and monitoring) of ESF+ support addressing material deprivation?
- No
 - Yes (Please specify)
14. Can you provide any examples within your organisation / institution / country where end beneficiary participation has improved material support? (Please add any relevant websites.)

III. A. PARTICIPATION OF PARTNER ORGANISATIONS

[if the answer to question number 8 is 'a')]

15. Does your institution have clearly defined objectives regarding the participation of **partner organisations** in **ESF+ support addressing material deprivation**?
- No
 - Yes (Please specify)
16. What mechanisms does your institution currently have in place to involve **partner organisations** in the decision-making process in **ESF+ support addressing material deprivation**?
- Regularly sending communications to partner organisations
 - Regular meetings and consultations with partner organisations
 - Councils/advisory boards with the participation of partner organisations
 - Feedback mechanisms (e.g., surveys, focus groups)
 - Workshops
 - Forums
 - Other (Please specify)
 - Not applicable
17. In general, what are the main challenges your institution faces involving **partner organisations** in the decision-making process?
- Financial constraints
 - Limited human resources
 - Time constraints
 - Difficulties identifying partner organisations
 - Resistance from partner organisations
 - Data privacy and confidentiality concerns
 - Participation fatigue among partner organisations
 - Lack of expertise
 - Unclear results leading to demotivation among partner organisations
 - Lack of capacity in partner organisations
 - Other (Please specify)
 - None of the above

III. B. END BENEFICIARIES IN THE ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

[if the answer to question number 8 is 'b')]

18. How do you evaluate the level of involvement of your organisation by the Managing Authority in shaping ESF+ support addressing material deprivation?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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0 = not involved at all

10 = extremely involved

19. Is **your organisation** committed to integrating end beneficiaries into its structure?
- Yes, as paid staff
 - Yes, as volunteers
 - Yes, as members of the Board of Directors (executive committee, etc.)
 - No, we are not committed to integrating end beneficiaries into any structure
 - Other (Please specify)

IV. CHALLENGES

20. In general, what are the main challenges your organisation/institution faces in involving end beneficiaries?
- Financial constraints
 - Limited human resources
 - Time constraints
 - Difficulties identifying the target group
 - End beneficiary resistance
 - Resistance from public authorities
 - Resistance from partner organisations
 - Data privacy and confidentiality concerns
 - Participation fatigue among stakeholders
 - Lack of expertise
 - Unclear results leading to stakeholder demotivation
 - Logistical constraints (e.g., remote areas, childcare)
 - Lack of end beneficiary capacities (including digital and language barriers)
 - Other (Please specify)
 - None of the above
21. What factors could enhance the effectiveness and quality of end beneficiaries' participation? *[multiple choice, 5 options max]*
- Ensuring sufficient financial resources
 - Increasing human resources
 - Optimising time management
 - Promoting inclusivity and reducing stigma
 - Increasing operational programme flexibility
 - Managing expectations and clear communication
 - Enhancing representation of diverse target groups
 - Improving identification and support strategies for target groups
 - Boosting engagement and motivation of end beneficiaries
 - Enhancing responsiveness and support from decision-makers
 - Strengthening engagement with partner organisations
 - Maximising understanding and utilisation of feedback
 - Other (Please specify) [text box]

V. MONITORING THE RESULTS

22. Are there mechanisms in place to evaluate the results of participation in your organisation/institution?
- No
 - Yes (Please specify)
23. Are there mechanisms in place to evaluate the impact of participation in your organisation/institution?
- No
 - Yes (Please specify)

VI. FUTURE

- 24. What steps do you think should be taken in your organisation/institution to further enhance the participation of partner organisations and end beneficiaries in shaping material support interventions?
- 25. What policy changes or institutional support would enhance the ability to involve partner organisations and end beneficiaries in your country?

VII. OTHER COMMENTS

- 26. Please provide any additional comments or insights regarding the practices, challenges, or strategies related to involving partner organisations and end beneficiaries.

