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Viktor Vesterberg & Magnus Dahlstedt

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Framing the right to work: negotiating social inclusion in welfare projects targeting poor EU citizens in Sweden

Viktor Vesterberg ^a and Magnus Dahlstedt ^b

^aDepartment of Behavioural Sciences and Learning, Division of Education and Sociology, Linköping University, Linköping, Sweden; ^bDepartment of Culture and Society, Division of Social Work, Linköping University, Linköping, Sweden

ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine how the situation for contemporary poor EU migrants is framed by social work professionals involved in initiatives funded by the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived in Sweden. Through 16 semi-structured interviews with these professionals, the research questions guiding the analysis concern how they describe and frame the needs of poor EU citizens living in precarious conditions, emphasizing work as a social right as well as how they navigate the EU policy guiding their work. The analysis is informed by frame analysis as analytical approach, with a focus on identifying diagnostic and prognostic framing. The findings presented highlight the professionals' strategies in stretching EU policy frameworks to support the category of poor EU citizens in Sweden. The results point to how professionals make use of their discretion to meet the livelihood needs of poor people by claiming their right to work.

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The hour has come to break out
Shackled and chained, almost goin' insane
It's better to live on the run
Set me free, set me free
Halloween, *Ride the sky*, 1985

Introduction

The mobility of poor people has long been understood as a socio-political problem of great concern, which has propelled a range of policy measures. Sometimes these measures have aimed to assimilate these people into the welfare state. At other times, the measures have either aimed to exclude them from rights or deport them from the territory of the nation state (Yıldız and De Genova 2017). In history, the problematic of poor people's mobility has taken many shapes. In the late nineteenth century, it was not least intimately linked to what was referred to as the *social question* (Ulmestig 2007). A recurring category of poor people that has attracted particular attention in public discourse has been people with a Roma background (van Baar 2018).

In the following article, we examine one contemporary shape of this category, i.e. of poor people moving across nation-state borders. More specifically, we focus on poor EU citizens, a category that over the past decade has attracted considerable attention in public discourse as well as in research

CONTACT Viktor Vesterberg  viktor.vesterberg@liu.se

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(Enroth 2022). Once again, poor people with a Roma background have been portrayed as a target group in need of certain social policy measures (Hansson 2019). In policy debate, these poor EU citizens have sometimes been portrayed as a burden to the welfare state in the better-off member states of the union (Woolfson 2007).

Research has drawn attention to various conditions in the countries of origin pushing poor EU citizens in search of livelihood in other parts of the union. Two of the main push factors highlighted are poverty and anti-ziganism (Mesic 2017; Panican and Swärd 2019; Swärd 2015). Further, attention has been turned to the highly precarious living conditions in the countries in which poor EU citizens seek livelihood, characterized by poverty, poor health, and housing (van Baar 2021; Ekendahl, Karlsson, and Minas 2020, Herz; 2018; Teodorescu and Molina 2020).

Throughout the European Union, a range of social initiatives has been identified, in support of poor EU citizens crossing the national borders within the union. Such initiatives have been guided by explicit objectives of social inclusion and the rights of migrants, as stated in the European Pillar of Social Rights (Carrera & Colombi 2025). In these initiatives, a recurring target group for professionals are homeless migrants, who are supported in overcoming their social problems, in terms of livelihood, health care and childcare (Ahmad & Busch-Geertsema 2024).

However, as illustrated in previous research, these initiatives have been organized differently throughout the member states in the Union. For instance, EU-funded projects in countries such as Belgium, Lithuania and Portugal are organized more as *charity* in the form of providing material aid, rather than strengthening *social rights* (Greiss & Schoneville 2023). Sweden, on the other hand, has organized EU-funded projects based on social rights. However, as shown in previous studies on such projects in Sweden, professionals risk strengthening established stereotypes which may further stigmatize and position targeted migrants as victims in need of empowerment (Lundstedt 2005; Wright Nielsen 2009).

In relation to this research, the focus of this article is directed at professionals conducting social work in social initiatives financed by *the Fund for European aid for the most deprived* (FEAD), and more specifically how they understand and respond to the needs and wishes of poor EU citizens, living in highly precarious situations in Sweden. The aim of the article is to provide knowledge about how professionals engaged in these initiatives describe and frame their work with the target groups. Based on interviews with professionals working in such initiatives, we pose the following research questions:

- How do the project staff describe their work with supporting poor EU citizens in Sweden, with a specific focus on *work as a social right*?
- How do the project staff diagnose the problems and needs of their target group, and what solutions are proposed as a response to this diagnosis?
- How do the project staff navigate and negotiate the EU policy frames guiding the FEAD activities?

In relation to previous research, the following article contributes with knowledge about how the life situation of poor EU citizens is framed and addressed by professionals in a European policy context. More specifically, we contribute with in-depth insight into how professionals both navigate within and stretch established policy frameworks set by the European Union. The results of the study point to how professionals not only risk stigmatizing and further excluding their target groups, but also how they make use of their discretion to meet the needs of poor people, by claiming their right to work. Overall, the study highlights how some of the classical issues in social work research are framed in a contemporary era of migration, concerning access to as well as possibilities of utilizing social rights for various sections of the population.

Welfare and work in times of migration

Welfare states historically emerged together with the nation-state and its principles for citizenship, in terms of distribution of rights and obligations, belonging, inclusion and exclusion (Schierup, Hansen, and Castles 2006). This applies to Sweden as well as other welfare states. Traditionally, Nordic welfare states have been characterized as *universal* primarily proposing similar social rights for all citizens (Larsen and Ilsoe 2022). The work line, a strong work ethic and an active labour market policy have been central political themes for the rise of the Swedish welfare state and the development of social policy during the twentieth century (Junestav 2004). Although the Swedish welfare state is often described as generous and de-commodifying, which means that citizenship rights are linked to the individual's performance on the labour market (Esping-Andersen 1990).

Since the 1990s, when Sweden became a member of the European Union, the limits and content of national citizenship have become increasingly complex regarding the provision of rights and obligations (Delanty 2000). When poor people move across national borders, a series of challenges for the national welfare state appears, not least in terms of who are deemed entitled to the rights provided by the welfare state (Hansen 2021; Yuval-Davis 2011). The mobility of poor people and their right to welfare is not least brought to the surface in an EU political context. Within the EU, free movement is a central right providing all citizens of the union the possibility to seek livelihood in all member states (Hansen and Hager 2010). However, those exercising this right are not guaranteed access to all benefits of the welfare state rights of the country in which they reside (Ratzmann and Heindlmaier 2022).

Since the collection of empirical data for the current study was conducted in 2018–2019, the political landscape in Europe has changed significantly. With these developments, social rights and ambitions of including vulnerable groups, not least poor EU citizens, are rapidly changing. In several member states, a significant social policy transformation has taken place, with an increasing focus on repressive policy measures that gradually erode, and challenge established citizenship rights, particularly for vulnerable groups, among these migrants (cf. Joppke 2025; Thomas and Jones 2025). Leading politicians throughout Europe are repeatedly framing migration, both within Europe and from other parts of the world, as causing severe social problem, not least regarding poor migrants (Baldini 2024). As recently concluded by Nyhlén, Skott and Giritli Nygren (2024, 493), these developments risk further stigmatizing and significantly worsening the living conditions for 'vulnerable EU citizens': 'In light of rising punitive populism, we predict that evictions and camp closures, the violent criminalisation of begging and the closure of shelters are all enabled and legitimised by the spectre of "vulnerable EU citizens"'. In the light of these developments, the following study presents results on how professionals conducting social work used their discretion to support the social rights of poor EU citizens in Sweden in a time where such efforts were still not as challenged as they have increasingly become.

Empirical context

The European Union finances a range of social initiatives in the member states, through funds from which various actors can apply for means to carry out different activities, for instance with a focus on social cohesion, inclusion, and support for vulnerable groups within the union. In this article, we draw attention to one of these funds, FEAD. This fund was active during the programme period of 2014–2020 and has since 2021 been integrated into the larger social fund framework ESF+ (for the period 2021–27), organized in six programme areas (A–F). Among these, programme area C (Reduce the risk of economic vulnerability, initiatives aiming social inclusion of people in risk of poverty), most similar to FEAD, has with its 3% of the total means been allocated the least funding (ESF 2025).

The target group for the welfare projects financed by FEAD in Sweden, were vulnerable EU citizens, more specifically non-economically active persons residing in Sweden based on EU law,

who were not entitled to financial support from the welfare state according to the Swedish Social Services Act. The overarching goal of the fund was to reduce poverty among the target group, in line with the ambitions formulated in the European Commission's Europe 2020 strategy, in terms of reducing poverty and social exclusion within the union (EU-commission 2021).

When implementing the FEAD programme, member states had the option to choose between two operational programmes: (1) provision of food and material assistance, or (2), activities outside active labour market measures, aimed at the social inclusion of the most deprived. While most of the member states chose the first option, Sweden, together with The Netherlands, Germany and Denmark chose the second (FEAD 2017).

The projects financed by FEAD in Sweden had a particular focus on facilitating *social inclusion* through community orientation and health promotion. FEAD was not supposed to fund activities centred on *labor market inclusion*. The FEAD projects were based on voluntary participation among the target group, meaning that they had to appear relevant to attract participants. The means of the fund was administrated by the governmental authority The Swedish ESF Council, operating on behalf of the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Social Affairs. At the council, two government officials and an economist were employed to work with FEAD. In addition to these, several professionals were employed within the projects financed. Further, numerous volunteers were involved in carrying out the activities. The projects were driven by public as well as civil society organizations, such as municipalities, the Church of Sweden, and other religious communities.

Method and empirical data

The data material consists of 16 semi-structured interviews carried out in 2018–2019, with professionals engaged in all five projects that were active at the time, as well as the Swedish policy document guiding the initiatives financed by FEAD (FEAD 2018). All projects carried out work with providing support to the target group. The projects were located throughout Sweden. These are the five projects presented by their location and project owner:

- (1) the northern part of Sweden, run by an association of municipalities
- (2) the southern part of Sweden, run by the Church of Sweden
- (3) the western part of Sweden, run by a municipality
- (4) the western part of Sweden, run by a civil society organization on Christian ground
- (5) the eastern part of Sweden, run by an international aid organization

The interviewees were selected accordingly: two officials employed at the Swedish ESF council, working with the administration of FEAD, were interviewed due to professional expertise concerning FEAD. From the five projects, eight project leaders and three project co-workers and were interviewed, due to their insights into the work carried out in the respective projects (some projects had several leaders, in different locations). Further, we interviewed three steering group representatives involved in strategic concerns regarding the projects, due to their specific insights into the overarching planning of the projects. All interviewees provided important insights into the FEAD project activities, from their different perspectives.

During the interviews, the professionals were asked to reflect upon the projects they were involved in, in relation to the policy ambitions guiding FEAD and their work with social inclusion for their target group. The interviews lasted one to two hours were recorded and verbatim transcribed. The total amount of transcribed text consists of 276 Word pages.

The data collection in this study was conducted according to scholarly-accepted ethical guidelines in social research. In line with such guidelines, the interviewees were informed about the purpose of the research and that they could interrupt their participation in the research at any time.

All interviewees have been anonymized. The research has been ethically vetted by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.

Analytical approach

In the article, we approach citizenship and social rights as a constant, ongoing negotiation where rights are claimed, attained, limited, and challenged (Gamson 1990). In these negotiations, different sections of the population mobilize to formulate their interests and claim various rights. Rights can also be claimed on behalf of others, where certain actors appear as representatives for specific groups.

Claims to rights are made on different grounds. For instance, the labour movement illustrates a struggle primarily propelled by unequal distribution of material resources, in a quest for labour rights and social justice. Among more recent movements (such as Black Lives Matter, cf. Shuster and Campos-Castillo 2017) we find several expressions of struggles for recognition, with a focus on inequalities based on discrimination and misrecognition of certain group identities (cf. the distinction between redistribution and recognition by Fraser 1995).

The struggle to describe reality is an important dimension in all negotiations and claims concerning social rights. In this article, we approach these struggles over how reality should be described through the theoretical lens of a *frame analysis*. Based on Goffman (1974), an extensive literature has been dedicated to examining how social movements describe, that is, frame reality, in their struggle of rights for various sections of the population (Smith 2021; Snow and Benford 1988; Snow, Vliegenthart, and Ketelaars 2019).

In the article, we direct attention to two diverse ways of framing reality in struggles for social rights: the *diagnostic* and the *prognostic* framing.

Through *diagnostic* framing, various phenomena, conditions, and processes in society are identified and described as problematic and thus in need of change. Through such framing, certain groups can claim access to already existing rights or claim the development of new rights. Diagnostic framing also involves describing the causes of the problems identified and the ones responsible for causing and providing solutions to them. In these descriptions, roles such as allies and opponents, victims and perpetrators appear. Further, diagnostic framing concerns characterizing the specific group claiming rights, attributed with specific interests, needs and living conditions (Snow and Benford 1988), illustrating the processes of constructing target groups widely discussed in social work research (Schneider and Ingram 1993). Diagnostic framing can be made by marginalized groups and by representatives on their behalf.

Prognostic framing refers to a variety of ways of meeting the problems identified, based on the diagnostic framing, the specific causes and responsibilities formulated. Here, concrete strategies for claiming rights are developed, directing certain lines of action and mapping out the actors responsible for carrying out specific tasks in the struggle for rights (Snow and Benford 1988). In short, diagnostic framing is directed backwards in time, to map the present and identify reasons why things have become the way they are, while prognostic framing is directed into the future, to bring about change.

When struggling to frame reality to bring about change, social movements need to relate to existing societal frames, i.e. to descriptions of reality that are already established in society. As illustrated in research, success in terms of claiming rights may relate to the ability to align the claims made with well-established frames, making them understandable and reasonable for wider sections of the population (Shuster and Campos-Castillo 2017). Not least, social movements operating in a variety of settings have related their specific claims to rights to a well-known existing conception of the rights of the individual, a so-called *meta protest frame* (Snow, Vliegenthart, and Ketelaars 2019), such as the civil rights movement of the sixties, which gained wide political resonance, which later served as a source of inspiration for a variety of movements claiming rights for various groups (Reed 2019).

Much research using such an approach to frame analysis has directed attention to social movements operating outside the mainstream political system in their struggle for social rights (Mesic

2017; Smith 2021). However, in this article, the focus is on negotiations of social rights *within* the political system and an EU political context. Specifically, we turn attention to how project staff in EU financed social initiatives in Sweden frame their work to meet the needs of poor EU citizens in the country, with a specific focus on work as a social right.

Data analysis

In the analysis presented, we direct attention to how project staff frame the problems and needs of poor EU citizens as a target group and how they relate to and negotiate the current policy frames guiding the activities carried out.

The analytical process was conducted accordingly. Initially, departing from Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, we carefully went through the collected data. While doing so, we searched for recurring frames whereby the project staff describe their work in relation to the target group, and more specifically instances where problems were described (i.e. diagnostic framing) and solutions were proposed to meet these problems (i.e. prognostic framing). Using the computer software program NVivo, we then systematically created codes that capture elements of both diagnostic (poverty, vulnerability, health, values, distrust) and prognostic framing (entrepreneurship, collaboration, work, information). In the next step, we related these codes into broader themes. For instance, diagnostic framing codes were clustered into the themes of problems located to the home country and the target group, while prognostic framing codes were clustered into the main themes of political frames and trustful relationships. Finally, we selected compelling examples from the data, in line with the research questions and previous research.

Results: negotiating the rights of poor EU citizens in Sweden

In the following, our analysis is presented in two sections. First, we address the question of the problems the FEAD projects are addressing, i.e. the *diagnostic framing*. Thereafter, we turn to the question of how project staff seek to address these problems, developing specific strategies for meeting the needs of their target group, i.e. the *prognostic framing*.

Diagnosing the problems

Regarding the problems that FEAD projects address, a contradictory picture emerges. According to the policy programme guiding the initiatives financed by FEAD, the problem addressed is related to the free movement of citizens within the EU. On the one hand, free movement is described in positive terms, with 'positive effects for employment, growth, and competitiveness' (FEAD 2018, 2). On the other hand, the mobility of poor EU citizens is described as a problem rather than a possibility. As formulated in the policy programme, poor EU citizens have 'difficulties getting a job and often lack livelihood', which in turn puts them in 'an acute need as they lack both the possibility of overnight accommodation and livelihood' (FEAD 2018, 2).

The FEAD projects operate in these tensions between free movement as a positive right and as causing social problems when used by poor EU citizens. In a way, the projects can be understood as responses to the problems related to the internal mobility in the union, as citizens from member states in the eastern part of the union seek livelihood in other EU countries. To assist citizens facing severe poverty in the new countries of residence, the European Parliament and the European Council have jointly introduced FEAD, the Fund for European Aid to the most Deprived (FEAD 2018, 3).

According to the guidelines of the policy programme, the projects financed by FEAD should address the problems of the target group by offering activities 'of a health-promoting and community-oriented nature' (FEAD 2018, 9).

In the interviews, project personnel identify two main causes of the problem they are set to face: on the one hand conditions in the target group's home country, in the form of poverty and

vulnerability, on the other hand, conditions linked to the target group themselves, in the form of poor health and certain values. Overall, these circumstances make it difficult for the target group to establish themselves in the labour market.

When it comes to causes that are attributed to the target group's home country, project personnel describe the target group's living conditions as very precarious, through contrasts between circumstances in Sweden and in countries such as Bulgaria and Romania. Not least the homes are highlighted as particularly significant, which we see clear examples of in Marianne's and Lotta's descriptions of the living conditions in Bulgaria and Romania in particular. As Marianne puts it: 'when you're down in Bulgaria or in Romania, you're in Sofia and you drive past the huge slum where they live'. Lotta describes the meeting of her colleagues in similar terms: 'My colleagues who have been to Romania and seen ... those who live in dumps, in sheds'.

A striking contrast in terms of social rights appears in Lisa's description of the situation in Sweden and countries in the eastern part of Europe. 'A slightly harsher way of looking at things, which is not based on human rights or even civil rights'. The living conditions of a specific part of the target group, namely the Roma, are described as particularly precarious. Roma is a category which repeatedly is described as particularly vulnerable to poverty, discrimination, and racism. This vulnerability, in turn, is said to be a reason they move to other countries in the Union. The problem description can be illustrated with the following conversation with Lotta.

Researcher: What is their main problem as you see it? As you have been told? [...]

Lotta: Discrimination.

Researcher: Okay. In Sweden or in another country or all of them?

Lotta: In their home countries, that is why they leave. Because they do not have the opportunity, this is about historical discrimination. Then it is about Roma [...] because I think that the Roma in Romania and Bulgaria, there it is, it is a structural racism [...] that affects them in ways that you might not always be able to imagine. You do not like to talk about being Roma, because then you do not get certain jobs, you get lower wages and so on.

We can see how the target group's vulnerability is framed as caused by a historically rooted discrimination, which Lotta names in terms of structural racism. This discrimination is said to have a long history, but still affects Roma in countries such as Romania and Bulgaria. Lotta believes that structural racism creates great difficulties for Roma to establish themselves in the labour market. This framing of the problem provides a background for why the target group moves abroad, away from hardship and vulnerability, in search of livelihood and better living conditions.

In addition to these causes for migration attributed to the target group's home countries, the project staff also highlights causes attributed to the target group themselves. Not least, it concerns poor health and certain values, which are said to make it difficult for the target group to establish themselves in the labour market. When it comes to poor health, it is framed as part of the broader vulnerability that affects the target group. Poor health is, among other things, repeatedly framed as a problem in terms of dental hygiene, as illustrated in the following quote by Karin:

A woman told us that when we had dental health information, she opened her mouth, had three or four teeth. 'There's no point in brushing my teeth', she said. Then we said, 'No, but if your children see you brushing your teeth, your children will brush their teeth and then hopefully they will have more teeth left'.

The problem of poor health is further framed in terms of stress, not least caused by precarious living conditions, and uncertainty about future livelihood and the family's housing situation. 'If you have such stress for your family, or you have the stress of how we will live this winter. How my children should feel [...] Then there can be problems in the body, which settle in', as Marianne says.

Despite these difficult conditions, the target group is said to have a strong will to work. For example, Lotta metaphorically describes the target group's conditions for finding work as a long road, with many steps that need to be passed: 'Many people want a job when you ask them, but the road to our labor market is very, very long. [...] there are so many steps you have to pass'. Distance here is not about geographical distance, but rather about distance in the form of values, which are said to be far apart. 'They have a completely different value structure than us', says Johan, for example, 'which is often based on collectives, which makes it very difficult'. In this framework, a distinction is made between different value structures, regarding the view of the individual and the collective, which Johan believes makes it difficult for the target group to establish themselves in the labour market. A similar reasoning is also illustrated in the following quote, where Johan reflects on the difficulty of meeting the target group as individuals in project work.

It is difficult to get a person to talk about 'what problems do *you* have?' at all. 'What education do *you* have?' It can be a tricky question, to get this person to try to delineate. 'Our *group* has this competence and these resources. We have every opportunity to make use of that if necessary'.

Here, we can see how the target group is framed as deviant with respect to values where the target group is framed as primarily seeing themselves as part of a collective community rather than as individuals. These values are described as a contrast to the values that are common in majority society, which are based on principles of individual freedom and rights. Thus, the target group is framed as in need of certain interventions due to their perceived lack of individualized identity, which is taken for granted in Western societies (Rose 1999). In a Western understanding of citizenship, the autonomous individual provides the starting point for civil rights and regulates the citizens' relations to society. Therefore, a target group that is primarily understood as a collective – rather than a set of individuals – becomes difficult for the professionals to handle.

Another part of the values attributed to the target group is a distrust of public authorities. The framing of distrust is illustrated in the following quote by Johan: 'All forms of authority figures are, often with good reason, distrusted by this group'. According to Johan, such values of the target group create difficulties in the work of establishing trustful relationships with the target group. Another way of framing the problem of distrust is provided by Lars, who describes the challenge caused by the bureaucratic requirements by the EU in terms of accounting and registration, which may make the building of trustful relationships with the target group hard.

It is an obligation we have, that they must know that they [the target group] are part of an EU project. We must keep activity lists. [...] They also must answer indicator questions posed by the EU. [...] The Commission doesn't understand the challenges with this target group. It must be done anyway, daily. It worsens the trust within the target group, that we must bring up issues that seem irrelevant to them.

So far, we have highlighted some illustrative examples of how project personnel frame the problem they are set to work with, based on the target group's current and past conditions. Based on this diagnostic framing of the problem, the question is what kinds of strategies project staff develop to meet the problems identified, which we will address in the following section.

Prognosing the solutions

Since the activities which the FEAD projects carry out are voluntary to participate in, project personnel emphasize the importance that their activities are perceived as meaningful and meet the needs of the target group. Therefore, knowledge about the target group's needs and wishes are required, something that the professionals spent a lot of effort and time creating.

Elena describes the project's overall strategy to create meaning for the target group in terms of 'total flexibility'. 'We must be where they are and we must adapt completely to what they do', she notes. 'That was the method, total flexibility'. The ambition was that the target group should choose their own activities. The strategy to create meaning was thus to give the target group the opportunity to choose between different activities: 'We had like a smorgasbord'.

Within the projects, knowledge about the needs and wishes of the target group has been obtained in several ways, for example in the form of systematic interviews with special reference groups and surveys. Marcus summarizes the results of the surveys done by saying: 'Most people want a job here, if only temporarily'. The target group's willingness to work is something that frequently comes up when project personnel describe the target group's wishes.

The projects have an overarching ambition to meet the target group's wishes, and according to the surveys that have been conducted, these are mainly about finding work. When project staff seek to meet this request, however, a tension arises, because the EU fund's guidelines do not allow work-life-oriented efforts. Lotta describes the tension as follows.

This is about the target group; after all, we should not run the projects for our own sake, but for the sake of the target group. Then you must be a bit smart and think about how we can coordinate so that it will be as good as possible, because we have quite strict restrictions within FEAD as well. After all, we are not allowed to work with anything that leans towards working life at all. Nothing to do with work.

Project staff address this tension by developing different strategies to accommodate the target group's will to work. These strategies consist of relating to and at the same time stretching established political frameworks, so that working life-oriented efforts becomes possible. For example, project staff adopt the common political vocabulary in the fund's guidelines and in a broader EU political context.

One of the main activities that FEAD's guidelines prescribe is *community orientation*. Such activities can, for example, involve providing information about the conditions, civil rights, and obligations in Sweden. A recurring strategy is to adopt the vocabulary of community orientation so that it is extended to also include information related to working life and the labour market. Concretely, community orientation efforts can be applied to provide information about what can increase the target group's opportunities to find work in Sweden. Such strategies are also sanctioned by staff at the Swedish ESF council. 'Many people want to work', notes Kim from the council, and adds: 'Of course, in your community orientation, you must inform about what it looks like', for example in terms of legal opportunities to find work for the target group. Speaking of legal alternatives and community-oriented interventions, Marcus also points out: 'When you say labor market interventions and such, then it is the case that in our project we provide community orientation, where we inform that these are the legal alternatives'. By adopting prevailing vocabulary around community orientation, it may become possible to meet the target group's wishes to find work, even if work-life-oriented efforts as such are not officially sanctioned by FEAD.

Another example of how project personnel build on established political frameworks and stretch them to enable working life-oriented efforts can be seen when project personnel adopt the common, well-established, political vocabulary around entrepreneurship. Promoting entrepreneurship is part of a contemporary political meta-framework that spans over a range of policy areas (Berglund and Johansson 2007; Pircher 2018). It is found in individual member states and is also included as a priority objective in the EU's overall future vision, as formulated in the EU 2020 strategy. In the following quote, we see how Marcus uses the vocabulary around entrepreneurship as a way of broadening the target group's options for livelihood.

Our project includes micro-entrepreneurship, which is my way of dodging labor market efforts. So, we have investigated what conditions and opportunities you have as a vulnerable EU citizen to support yourself through micro-entrepreneurship, a more worthy alternative than begging.

As a strategy to circumvent the fund's guideline not to carry out work-oriented efforts, Marcus describes how he chooses to frame the activities that are carried out as micro-entrepreneurship. In this way, the target group is informed about legal and, as Marcus calls them, more dignified livelihood opportunities as alternatives to begging, for example street selling and berry picking.

The examples presented above illustrate how established political frameworks are adopted as a recurrent strategy to claim social rights on behalf of the target group, in a way that makes the claims plausible and legitimate.

Another strategy that the professionals use to safeguard the target group's social rights, by extending the fund's guidelines, involves establishing collaborations with other actors and mobilizing different networks. We can see an example of how this strategy can be expressed in the following quote, where Elena describes how she refers the target group to a job coach who works with the Salvation Army.

If you want to integrate, if you want to find a job, there is someone at the Salvation Army who is a job coach, whom you can meet. Yes, we can go there because we are going there anyway to talk to your group, then we can show you [the job coach]. So, we refer to them.

Establishing collaborations becomes an important strategy that once again makes it possible to carry out work-life-oriented efforts, even if the project as such does not represent the service to which the target group is referred.

Establishing collaborations also fulfils other purposes for the projects. Not least, collaborations with different actors are described as a successful way to meet the target group's needs and wishes, by promoting trustful relationships. This particularly applies to projects run by public actors. Lotta, who works in a municipal project, describes their collaboration with voluntary organizations as a resource in the following way.

We have very good cooperation in our municipality. It is the real estate office that evicts. Then there are voluntary organizations and such. We collaborate and make the best of our resources, for the target group. [...] We, as a municipality can never build that trust [with the target group] in that way and that is not really our role, I feel. But, on the other hand, collaborate with voluntary organizations that have more of a role to help people in need in some way.

In this reasoning, we want to focus on two things. To begin with, the reasoning is based on the idea that voluntary organizations are particularly suitable for building trustful relationships with the target group, in a way that is not considered possible for municipalities. Not least because the municipality is responsible for evicting the people who are not considered to have the right to stay in certain places. The reasoning that Lotta makes relates to the kind of diagnostic framing of the target group as different and deviant that we have previously pointed out, which focuses on the target group's lack of trust in public authorities. Gunilla makes a similar reasoning when she describes the challenges, for her as a representative of the municipality, of meeting the target group. By the target group, she often is seen as a representative of the authorities. For this challenge to be managed, the actual place where they meet their target group is of great importance. Again, networks with voluntary organizations are highlighted as a valuable resource for the municipality.

We try to be where they [the target group] are, where they themselves choose to be. That is also a way of approaching the target group. We are not forcing them anywhere. [...] It is also difficult to meet the target group because they have a strong aversion to anything that could be called the authorities and the public. That you are like an official. So, it is important to meet where it is convenient for them to be.

Instead of arranging meetings in the municipality premises, Gunilla talks about how they prefer to use premises where the target group is already located and is comfortable, not least premises of voluntary organizations and churches.

In this section, we have highlighted two recurring strategies that project staff developed to meet the problems identified, which make it possible to meet the needs and wishes of the target group and claim work as a social right, on behalf of the target group: firstly, to embrace and extend

established political frameworks to enable working life-oriented efforts. Secondly, to establish collaborations that can build trustful relationships between the projects and their target groups. In this way, the target group can be reached and involved in the activities, something that is deemed difficult to achieve.

Conclusion

In the article, we have focused on how welfare professionals in Sweden work to meet the needs of poor EU citizens, especially in terms of *work as a social right*. We have drawn particular attention to challenges to the national welfare state created when poor EU citizens exercise the right to move freely within the Union's borders, and how project staff in social initiatives financed by FEAD describe their efforts with meeting the needs and wishes of their target groups, not least their will to work. In the analysis, we have identified a discrepancy between, on the one hand, the fund's guidelines and, on the other hand, the project staff's ambitions to meet poor EU citizens' needs for livelihood and willingness to work. The discrepancy revolves around the fund's guidelines, which do not prescribe work-life-oriented interventions, and the target group's willingness to earn their living through work.

As for the project staff's way of describing their work, we can see that they do so through a diagnostic framework where the problem they are set to deal with is described in terms of (1) poverty and vulnerability in the target group's home countries and (2) conditions linked to the target group's poor health and deviant values, in terms of strong collective identity and lack of trust in authorities. Further, our analysis shows that even if FEAD does not formally target Roma populations in particular, the project staff repeatedly describe the project's target groups as mainly consisting of poor Roma from the EU's eastern member states. In line with results of previous research, these Roma are described as particularly hard hit by poverty and racism (Teodorescu and Molina 2020; van Baar 2018; Panican & Swärd 2019) At the same time, we have shown how Roma is a category framed as bearers of certain values that, in several ways, make it more difficult for them to establish themselves in the labour market.

In relation to this way of describing the problem, we have also identified how project personnel make use of a prognostic framework that makes it possible to meet the target group's needs and willingness to work. Here, we have shown how project staff develop strategies that involve adopting and at the same time extending the guidelines that set the framework for the activity so that they can also provide working-life oriented activities – even though, FEAD do not prescribe such efforts. An important part of this strategy is to establish cooperation between public and voluntary actors, to build trusting relationships and create trust among the target group. These collaborations also make it possible for partners without a direct connection to FEAD to provide several types of work-life-oriented efforts.

In the last decade, research has shown that in several areas of social work, interventions are increasingly directed at symptoms of inequality, rather than their causes (cf. Kamali and Jönsson 2018; Lorenz 2025). As political attention is directed towards managing symptoms, processes that create inequality risk becoming invisible and thus difficult for welfare professionals to grasp and deal with. FEAD project personnel operate within a specific political framework. Therefore, they need to relate to the guidelines that apply to their profession. Thus, they are not supposed to engage in activities that are at odds with these guidelines. However, as shown, the project staff stretch existing EU policy frameworks to meet the target group's needs and wishes to find work in Sweden. In this way, they deal with structurally conditioned inequalities, such as unemployment and poverty, even though such inequalities tend to be neglected and silenced in mainstream political climate (Kamali and Jönsson 2018). Thus, the project staff support vulnerable EU citizens in *claiming their right to work* as members of the union.

Discussion

Since the current study was conducted (in 2018–2019), the political landscape in Europe has undergone a repressive turn concerning social policy and social rights, not least propelled by electoral success for right-wing populist parties throughout the EU (Joppke 2025; Thomas and Jones 2025). With these developments, political ambitions of social inclusion targeting certain vulnerable groups have gradually decreased across the political landscape, which in turn may have particularly negative impact on the social rights of poor migrants (Baldini 2024; Nyhlén, et al. 2024). The rapid political changes in relation to the relatively old material analysed in this study are an obvious limitation. However, the conclusions drawn from the study presented in this article may also provide insights of great importance, as the possibilities of conducting the kind of social work we have described are becoming increasingly more challenged and thus difficult to carry out.

This study was conducted during an era of political transition. The projects examined are now finished, and the policy framework studied is now included into the ESF+ programme, in the current period 2021–27, where the main focus is similar to that in the previous period. However, in light of recent policy transformations in Europe, important research questions need further investigation, concerning what will happen to the kinds of interventions and forms of social work that we have highlighted in this article, as an important contribution to knowledge on how the mobility of the poor is understood and dealt with in both Sweden and other parts of the EU in the future. In the present era, when the will to promote inclusion of migrants seems hard to even imagine, the social work documented in this article reminds us that such will, with all its shortcomings and complications, is still a possibility – future is, as always, open for negotiation.

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ORCID

Viktor Vesterberg  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5624-2576>

Magnus Dahlstedt  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0694-5753>

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