

Support measures for businesses and individuals in the context of the COVID-19 crisis – Support measures taken by the French-speaking Community

Performance audit

Published: 17.11.2021



FULL REPORT (FR) 

What we assessed and why

In March 2020, the Belgian National Security Council implemented a health strategy to curb the spread of COVID-19. This strategy included socio-economic measures to provide support for affected businesses and individuals. We carried out a cross-cutting audit of all of the socio-economic support measures adopted by federal and regional authorities. Our audit covered the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of these measures, as well as the organisation of both the regulatory framework and checks on the proper granting of aid.

The French-speaking Community adopted 16 measures to support individuals and businesses. The amount disbursed, an estimated €121 million, was focused particularly on the areas of culture, youth, early childhood, and sport.

What we found

The health measures, which applied restrictions to the whole country, had consequences that required a coordinated and appropriate response from the authorities at various levels, in line with their respective powers. While a consultation and coordination system was set up between the various public authorities to manage the public health crisis, no such system was created to manage the socio-economic aspects. This led to a lack of consistency between support measures at the different levels of government. It also increased the risk of excessive or insufficient support.

Government decision-making remained collegial despite the health crisis. However, the French-speaking Community was unable to prioritise its measures, either between the areas of expenditure or between beneficiaries under the same measure.

The criteria for granting aid were not defined across different regulations with equal clarity. The regulations did not make aid conditional on financial hardship, to be demonstrated based on verifiable criteria such as reduced savings, borrowing capacity, or the ability to make payments.

Preventing the risk of aid duplication was based solely on beneficiaries' declarations, rather than on sharing information between public authorities. In particular, the French-speaking Community did not have information on the aid granted by municipalities, including social security offices, even though many of the operators it supported were locally established, and certain types of aid were of a social security nature.





Finally, the lack of coordination between measures adopted at the various levels of government meant that the French-speaking Community was able to decide to grant aid to an operator before the same operator's similar aid applications to other levels of government had been accepted or rejected.

The pandemic prevented authorities from carrying out documentary and on-the-spot checks. Teleworking and the introduction of electronic applications for aid also meant that original supporting documents could not be checked.

As a result of monitoring measures and as early as 2020, certain regulations were adapted. A specific budget and a new administrative department with its own accounting were set up, which in theory made financial monitoring possible. If better equipped with the necessary data, this new department could contribute to assessing the effectiveness of the main socio-economic support measures for businesses and individuals.

What we concluded

The French-speaking Community responded rapidly to the COVID-19 pandemic by taking a number of socio-economic support measures, following the federal Government's adoption of health measures.

In order to properly address our findings, we made a number of recommendations on the accounting, coordination, development, regulatory framework, control, monitoring, and evaluation of the socio-economic support measures.