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Investing in Children:

Breaking the cycle of disadvantage

[A Study of National Policies](#)

Belgium

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Investing in Children:

Breaking the cycle of disadvantage

A Study of National Policies

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COUNTRY REPORT - BELGIUM

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Executive summary¹

The fight against child poverty has increasingly become a priority for Belgian policy in recent years. In previous National Reform Programmes, an entire section has been regularly devoted to this topic. In addition to the initiatives of federal policymakers, extensive focus has also been devoted to the developments and planned activities of Belgium's federated entities. The importance of the issue of child poverty is further underscored by the recent publication of the first National Plan to Combat Child Poverty on 10 June 2013. For the first time in Belgium, a plan that transcends the boundaries of the country's Communities and Regions was created to specifically address child poverty and promote child well-being.

The National Plan to Combat Child Poverty is clearly founded on the notion that a multi-dimensional approach towards the fight against child poverty can only be waged if multi-level governance is established. This has resulted in a high degree of synergy between the different relevant policy levels and policy areas. This is further evidenced by the plan's fourth strategic goal, which states that it is necessary to negotiate both horizontal and vertical partnerships in order to fight child poverty. The remaining strategic goals were formulated to address the three policy areas which are fundamentally important to combating child poverty, and were designed along the same lines as the European recommendation entitled "Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage": (1) access to adequate resources; (2) access to quality services and (3) increasing opportunities for, and the participation of, children.

The major contribution that is reserved for Belgium's federated entities in the plan makes sense given that the implementation of the country's sixth state reform will put more tools at the disposal of Belgium's Regions and Communities. The transfer of large components of labour market policy, healthcare, housing and the child benefit allowance is expected to be a crucial means by which the federated entities will be able to create policies that are tailored to their own needs. At this point, however, the Regions and Communities of Belgium have barely begun drawing up concrete plans outlining how they are going to go about this process. In this respect, the transfer of the child benefit allowance is especially relevant in light of the fact that Belgium's current system for distributing this benefit has proved to be rather ineffective in fighting child poverty. When reforming the system, it is important that changes be founded on the principle of progressive universalism. This implies that, in addition to overall measures which are intended to benefit all children, supplementary initiatives also be undertaken in order to provide extra support for certain (vulnerable) sub-groups. This principle can also be applied within several other policy areas.

The core concept underpinning the policy initiatives in different policy areas holds that access to a job (on the part of the parents) is extremely important in the fight against poverty and child poverty. Although having a job is certainly important, one must take care that this emphasis on access to a job is not made at the expense of children. Indeed, in certain cases this could jeopardise the formation of a bond between mothers and small children. In this respect, the importance of having a reliable system in place for parental leave is indisputable. Less is being invested in a system of this type in Flanders than in Wallonia and the Brussels-Capital Region. Nonetheless, the Flemish Region pays more attention to the fight against child poverty than the other two Regions, as illustrated among other things by the existence of the Flemish Action Programme on Child Poverty and the Flemish Action Plan on Children's Rights.

¹ Readers should note that the drafting of this report was completed in September 2013 thus it does not include an analysis of data or policy developments that became available after this date.

All in all, the focus on child poverty in particular is still a relative phenomenon in Belgium. This is reflected in the limited mobilisation of financial resources from the EU for projects specifically aimed at reducing the poverty risk of children. Despite the undeniable increase in awareness and commitment for this objective, several problems deserve to be addressed as top priorities:

- Access to – and quality of early childhood education;
- Reform of the child benefit system;
- Better social protection of unemployed school leavers;
- Measures to improve the quantity and quality of housing for tenants (young families in particular);
- Further investment in family support so as to prevent family breakdown and stop the systematic in-care placement of poor children.

1. Assessment of the overall approach and governance²

The fight against child poverty is currently on the policy agenda at all policy levels. For example the federal coalition agreement states that the Belgian government, in consultation with the federated states, will formulate a realistic plan to eradicate child poverty. Children living in poverty moreover constitute one of the key priorities of Belgium's overall social inclusion policy. In addition to the attention devoted to the issue at the federal level, child poverty is given extensive consideration in the policy of the federated entities: Flanders has developed its Flemish Action Programme on Child Poverty and actively encourages provincial and municipal initiatives, the Walloon Region and the Wallonia-Brussels Federation have formulated a plan on children's rights, and the Brussels-Capital Region is focusing on future parents. Child poverty is also a transversal policy priority of Belgium's German-speaking Community.

Yet if one wishes to efficiently and effectively reduce child poverty, the sheer existence of these plans will not be enough. A **multi-dimensional approach** towards the fight against child poverty can only be waged if multi-level governance is established. A key development in this respect is Belgium's recently published National Plan to Combat Child Poverty. This plan was drawn up by the Poverty Working Group, which brings together representatives of Belgium's eight Federal, Regional and Community Ministers responsible for poverty reduction and social policy, as well as representatives from the intergovernmental Service for the Fight against Poverty, Economic Insecurity and Social Exclusion (Interministerial Conference on Social Inclusion, 2013).

It is constructive that the National Plan to Combat Child Poverty makes explicit mention of the need for a high degree of synergy between the different relevant policy levels and policy areas. The fourth strategic goal of the plan entails the negotiation of horizontal and vertical partnerships between different policy areas and different levels of government. This is why the plan provides a comprehensive overview of the initiatives that have been undertaken at different levels. The scope of the document is moreover not restricted to Belgium's federal government and its federated entities; it also recognises the importance of offering an integrated range of services via the full coordination of the various service providers, and as such the plan focuses on organisations that operate at the lower policy levels. Specifically, Belgium's Public Centres for Social Welfare (PCSWs) are encouraged to establish local community forums where PCSWs, schools, childcare centres and anti-poverty groups can come together to discuss child poverty issues and explore possibilities for specialised solutions.

With the implementation of Belgium's sixth state reform, the degree of coordination that exists between the different policy levels is becoming even more important. The transfer of large components of labour market policy, healthcare, housing and the child benefit allowance is expected to be a crucial means by which the federated entities will be able to develop policies that are tailored to their own needs. Up to the present, however, Belgium's Regions and Communities have barely begun the process of translating this planned transfer into a (possibly new) policy of their own.

As regards the focus on **children's rights**, the National Plan states that consideration must be given to the viewpoints of children. In this sense, the plan seeks not only to combat child poverty outright, but also to prevent child poverty in the first place and to promote the well-being of children. This children's rights approach hereby recognises the primary responsibility of the parents for the raising of their children.

² Readers should note that the drafting of this report was completed in September 2013 thus it does not include an analysis of data or policy developments that became available after this date.

The necessary support must therefore be made available to parents so that they are able to bear this responsibility, and this is why the plan bases its support for family life on a participative approach.

In their plans, the federated entities also assign priority to children's rights. An example of this is seen in Wallonia, where the training given to municipal workers who come into direct contact with children is supplemented with a "children's rights" component. The Wallonia-Brussels Federation plans to incorporate children's rights into the permanent training module for personnel who are involved in child well-being, and will ensure that public services give more consideration to children's rights. In addition, an inter-cabinet working group will be entrusted with analysing the conclusions of the child poverty studies within the context of the Belgian presidency of the European Union. In the Flemish Action Plan on Children's Rights, which was approved by the Government of Flanders on 15 July 2011, the Government of Flanders guarantees the fulfilment of its obligations in the area of children's rights. With this action plan, the Government of Flanders aims to strengthen the coordinated approach toward children's rights, with a priority focus on combating (child) poverty (Government of Flanders, 2011).

Though it is certainly encouraging that the different policy levels are making explicit mention of children's rights, the reference to these rights is primarily an end in itself. In the course of undertaking measures which have a direct or indirect impact on children, however, the extent to which these actions are compatible with the rights of children is not always explicitly examined.

With respect to the **balance between universal and targeted initiatives** in the fight against child poverty, it can be said that the approach taken by Belgian policymakers is founded on the principle of progressive universalism. This implies that, in addition to overall measures that are designed to benefit all children, supplementary initiatives are also undertaken in order to provide extra support for certain (vulnerable) sub-groups. This is also something which becomes immediately clear in the National Plan to Combat Child Poverty. The plan's stated target group consists of children between the ages of 0 and 18, but it also pays special attention to children living in extreme poverty, to the early childhood years (0 to 3 years) and to adolescents. In its topic-based report on poverty entitled *Jongeren in transitie. Volwassenen in wording/Jeunes en transition, adultes en devenir* (report not currently available in English, but title translates (freely) as "Young people in transition: adults in the making"), the Brussels-Capital Region devoted particular attention to young adults. Because the young adults of today are the parents of tomorrow, it is critical to invest in their development adequately so that they will be able to fulfil their role as parents properly. An essential element of the fight against child poverty is namely to ensure that the parents of young children are not living in poverty (Brussels Observatory for Health and Well-being, 2012). For its part, the social cohesion plan of the Government of Wallonia paid special attention to people living in caravans (Interdepartmental Office for Social Cohesion, 2006).

The transfer of various authorities within the scope of Belgium's sixth state reform presents the country with an opportunity to apply the principle of progressive universalism to the child benefit allowance and the education allowance by providing everyone a base amount, and adding supplement for low-income households. These initiatives will be discussed more extensively later in this report.

In spite of the aforementioned focus on a number of vulnerable sub-groups, there is still not enough attention being paid to low-income and immigrant families in Belgium. It is particularly noteworthy that these sub-groups take relatively little advantage of childcare facilities. The challenge for the government is thus to improve access to childcare for these families. No concrete measures have so far been taken, at either

the federal or regional level, to tackle the specific problem of child poverty among immigrant families.

In the fight against poverty - and against child poverty in particular - the **stakeholders** are always involved in the process of formulating the various plans. This was also the case with the National Plan to Combat Child Poverty, in which the officials responsible for policy engaged in a dialogue with the relevant stakeholders: representatives from UNICEF, the National Commission on the Rights of the Child, the Belgian Anti-Poverty Network, the Alliance for Families (both Dutch and French-language organisations), the Flemish Child & Family, the Walloon Birth and Childhood Office, the PCSWs, the chair of the Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU2020 and the chair of the Social OMC Indicators working group – Europe 2020 were all invited to attend a meeting of the working group to discuss the plan. A broader consultation with stakeholders took place during the Open Platform Day held on 28 March 2013, which was organised by the Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU2020. It is helpful that, in the plan, a direct appeal is made to children and young people in an attempt to draw them into a dialogue with policymakers. They are asked, for example, to send in any suggestions or comments they may have via email. But the question remains as to what extent this message is reaching its target group.

In Flanders, cooperative efforts between Child & Family and the Department of Education and Training will be further formalised into an official structured cooperative relationship. In addition, the call for projects relating to “preventive support of families with bridges to education/work” will continue. These projects are aimed at increasing opportunities for underprivileged children, getting parents more involved in what goes on at their child’s school, offering parenting support for those with children aged 0-3 years, and providing support to parents as they begin the process of entering the labour market. To fund these projects, 900,000 euros have been set aside for 2013, and for 2014, options for providing permanent funding within the framework of the new regulations on the preventive support of families are being studied. And as part of the Flemish Action Programme on Child Poverty, a round table conference was held on 24 March 2011 to bring people who are actually living in poverty into a dialogue with representatives from civil society at large as well as policymakers at the Flemish and local level. Efforts are currently underway in the German-speaking Community to implement an integrated family policy. This includes surveying parents on a regular basis in order to determine their real support needs. In the Brussels-Capital Region, the Brussels Anti-Poverty Platform and the Brussels Forum for the Fight against Poverty are each playing a key role in representing the needs of those living in poverty. In Wallonia, the Walloon Network for the Fight against Poverty serves as the primary point of contact on this issue.

It can therefore be concluded that, at both the federal and regional level, there are several channels through which interest groups can voice their concerns. The existence of these channels, however, does not yet guarantee that the voices of stakeholders always get the hearing they should, as proved to be the case during the drafting of the National Reform Programme (Schepers & Nicaise, 2013).

The **evaluation of the impact of the crisis measures** is a task that is mainly carried out by institutions that advocate for the poverty-stricken. One example is the recommendations formulated by the Belgian Anti-Poverty Network for the National Reform Programme and for policy steering (though it should be noted that these dealt with the impact that anti-crisis policies had on the overall poverty level). In addition, the OECD believes that continuing investments in education are absolutely essential for combating the negative consequences of the crisis. This is illustrated by the fact that Belgium’s increase in unemployment was less than the average increase in other

countries in Europe from 2008-2011.³ No reports have been published which specifically detail the impact of the crisis on children (living in poverty).

In sum, the Belgian plans for the fight against child poverty are a concrete echo of the EC's Recommendation. These plans are fairly comprehensive, well co-ordinated, and based on children's rights. The state reform will provide opportunities to amend existing provision (mainly the child benefit system) so as to make it more effective from a child poverty perspective. In future measures, children with immigrant backgrounds deserve more attention as they make up a particularly vulnerable group.

2. Access to adequate resources

2.1. Participation in the labour market

In Belgium in 2010, the percentage of people living in households with a very low work intensity was 2.6 percentage points higher than the European Union average. This discrepancy rose even further in 2011, to 3.5 percentage points. (13.7% as compared to 10.2%).

With respect to jobless households⁴, the Belgian government had set a goal of reducing the number of children living in these households to 7% by 2010 (from 13.5% in 2007). The table below shows, however, that the proportion of jobless households increased slightly in both Belgium and the EU overall from 2008-2012. In this case as well, the percentage of jobless households in Belgium is higher than the EU average.

Table 1: Percentage of unemployed households between 2008-2012 (in %)

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Belgium	12	12.8	12.5	12.9	12.7
EU (27)	9.2	10.1	10.4	10.5	10.8

Source: EU-SILC, Eurostat.

Because underemployed households are at greater risk of falling into poverty, providing these vulnerable families with job opportunities is a critical component of the fight against child poverty. Consequently, policymakers at different levels of government have undertaken numerous initiatives to address this, with one example being the improvement that has been made over the years to the conditions and benefit levels for parental leave (cf. below). The implementation of Belgium's sixth state reform could also play a key role in this process, given that the majority of responsibilities for helping the unemployed find work are being transferred to the country's Regions.

In Flanders, specific initiatives have been established under the Employment and Investment Plan to help persons living in poverty. The Government of Flanders has for example approved the roll-out of a new policy framework that is designed to allow the development of integrated work and well-being programmes. These efforts are always founded on the principle that employment is the best insurance against falling into

³ Education is a major factor in this, given that the increase in unemployment among higher-educated persons is less than that among those who did not pursue further education (OECD, 2013). Unemployment among higher-educated persons in Belgium rose by 0.2 percentage points, while the corresponding figure was 1.5 for OECD countries overall and 2.0 for the EU. Among non-higher-educated persons, unemployment rose by 1.2 percentage points in Belgium, 3.8 p.p. for OECD countries overall and 5.1 p.p. for the EU.

⁴ Jobless households are households where no member is in employment, i.e. all members are either unemployed or inactive.

poverty. Another important sub-group on which the Government of Flanders is focusing is young people. Because they are the parents of tomorrow, it is crucial to provide them with adequate support. Efforts to keep young people from dropping out of school early are especially critical in this regard. And in the Brussels-Capital Region, a great deal of attention is also being paid to the specific issues that this group faces in the labour market by means of the thematic report on young adults. A major problem in this regard is that subsidised organisations are often indirectly obligated to work with the segment of young people that maintains the greatest chances of success. This would imply that young people who are further removed from the labour market are frequently left to fend for themselves. An additional problem is that these young people are often not familiar with the range of services that are available to them, nor do they have a sufficient understanding of the government structures and the specific role that they play.

The introduction of a youth guarantee plan could help keep young people from falling through the safety net during times when they are transitioning between school, work and vocational training. A place should be reserved for every young person within each of these domains as well as options for flexible pathways between these various domains. Key ingredients of such a plan would be (a) a guaranteed range of services; (b) the freedom to choose between alternatives; (c) individual counselling; (d) adequate social protection and (e) linkage between the different services. In this respect, the anticipated introduction by the Government of Brussels of this type of youth guarantee, which would go into force as per September 2013, is promising. A total of 1,650 traineeships, which are to be filled by young people living in Brussels, have already been created for this plan. In order to provide additional support for these measures which are targeted at young people, a special youth services department will be formed within Actiris, the employment organisation for the Brussels Region (Fremault, 2013).

The Regions of Belgium are moreover continuing to focus on the integration of disabled persons in the workplace. In the Walloon Region, the integration subsidy is an important tool for boosting the participation of this group in the labour market. Employers receive a subsidy whenever they hire a person with a disability (under certain conditions).

Given their low rate of participation in the labour market, Roma families are another key group that deserves attention. However, it is often difficult to reach this group via conventional channels. In addition to the linguistic and cultural barriers that exist, the mistrust by the Roma of government services and institutions also presents a problem. To find work, they depend mainly on the social networks within their community, and as a result they rarely come into contact with traditional employment services. The fact that such a large proportion of Roma are employed in the informal sector makes it even more difficult to reach this group.

2.1.1. Work must “pay”

After introducing the so-called “work bonus”, the Belgian government, in order to keep work attractive to people, introduced an additional measure in the 2012 National Reform Programme that was designed to reduce the tax burden on the low and middle-income categories. It did this by increasing the annual limit on tax-free income by 200 euros.

In addition to this, the so-called Socio-Professional Integration Exemption (SPI) is specifically aimed at fostering the transition of persons living on income support to a (possibly part-time) job. The SPI can be seen as a component of income support, which means that it is also exempt from taxation. Though the federal government is planning to make adjustments to the SPI exemption, no concrete measures have yet been taken. Considering the measure’s complexity, its conditional nature and its

limited impact, it comes as no surprise that barely 1.5% of people earning a minimum income are making use of it.

It is furthermore particularly challenging for young people to find a permanent, high-quality job. When they do find work, this does not always guarantee a ticket out of poverty. They generally have less work experience, and as such are less likely to occupy positions that involve responsibility. The law moreover allows employers to pay the youngest workers less (apart from an employee's length of service). Indeed, all employees aged 21 and above are guaranteed the same minimum level of income, but this minimum level is less for younger workers (Brussels Observatory for Health and Well-Being, 2012). Another measure related to the employment opportunities of young people is the change in unemployment benefits for school leavers, or so-called "waiting allowances". In an attempt to "stimulate their integration into the labour market", the waiting period was transformed into a "mobilisation period". The time that a young person must wait after dropping out of school to qualify for unemployment benefits was extended from nine to twelve months. The conditions governing the job seeker's ongoing efforts to find work were also tightened (Peña-Casas & Nicaise, 2012).

The measures which have been proposed to stimulate employment, on the one hand, and the more stringent conditions for social benefits, on the other, stand as clear proof that the federal government is focusing on employment and trying to keep people from falling into the unemployment trap. A potential consequence of this, however, is that the income level of those persons who are unable to find work could be further eroded (Van Lanckeer & Pintelon, 2012). In addition, the "stimulating effect" of these types of measures must not be overestimated. An important point in this regard is for example the level of childcare expenses: if these expenses are high, the financial gains which are derived by underprivileged families from being employed will remain limited regardless (cf. below).

2.1.2. The participation of single parents and second earners in paid work

It is assumed that the overall measures that are designed to raise employment levels and encourage job creation will contribute to an increase in the employment level of single parents and second earners within a family. But a rising employment rate does not automatically result in a decline in unemployment among these specific groups. It must again be noted that obstacles such as low job quality and the lack of affordable childcare can have a significant impact on a person's access to work. We will revisit the importance of affordable childcare later in this report.

In the case of single parents, the federal government should strive to reduce the number of people who fall into the so-called "separation trap". This occurs when the higher benefits that are distributed to single parents discourage them from moving in with a (new) partner. The same applies to "joint living arrangements" (living with other single parents, etc.). Because single parents constitute a major risk group in terms of child poverty, the risks of falling into this type of separation trap must be mitigated as much as possible.

2.1.3. Access to affordable and high-quality education and care in the early childhood years

As mentioned earlier, accessible and high-quality childcare is a vital instrument for boosting the employment level among vulnerable households. It is fair to say that access to childcare is improving; government agencies such as Child & Family in Flanders and the Birth and Childhood Office in Wallonia have a strong reputation when it comes to reaching the poorest families. Yet access to childcare remains easier for middle-class families and for families in which both parents work.

The Flemish Action Programme for Children's Rights also makes mention of further investments in local, neighbourhood-oriented childcare services. These are designed to provide occasional and flexible childcare services. This measure is critical for families with young children because it allows parents to bring their children to a childcare centre if they need to go to a job interview or have to attend class. A neighbourhood-oriented childcare facility as described can also function as a social meeting place where these same parents can be conversed with and can ask their own questions.

2.1.4. Encouraging a work environment that promotes the combination of work and parenting

In the National Plan to Combat Child Poverty, an idea is put forward to promote the practice of parental leave among male employees by means of an awareness campaign. This proposal surfaced after it became clear that female employees were the ones who were mainly using the measures put in place by the government in recent years to improve the balance between work and family life. Yet fathers are gradually more inclined to invest time into child rearing and daily household tasks. It is legitimate to ask, however, whether raising awareness about male parental leave will be much of a factor in the fight against child poverty.

As mentioned earlier, the emphasis on employment activation should not come at the expense of (small) children. The provision of adequate (paid) parental leave (or for unemployed workers, an exemption from the requirement to apply for jobs) is key to the formation of the parent-child bond. This is why the proposal to increase the duration of parental leave from ten to fifteen days both for statutory employees and for contractual employees in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation is a step in the right direction.

Generally speaking, it would be advisable to extend the duration of parental leave (divided between both parents), though it is not the case that all parents are in a position to allow themselves this luxury. Yet the importance of a strong parent-child bond cannot be underestimated, and everything must be done to facilitate as much as possible the formation of this bond. In the event that the duration of parental leave were to be extended, the benefits which are paid to these families would then need to be high enough to keep them out of poverty. The principle of progressive universalism could once again be applied in this context (Eeman & Nicaise, 2012).

Two key priorities emerge from the preceding analysis for future policies:

- the access of jobless households to vacancies, should be (further) improved e.g. through positive action in favour of single parents or jobless couples in employment mediation and active labour market policies;
- All in all, Belgium has a fairly developed supply of child care, but the accessibility as well as the quality of available places for poor households needs to be improved. Here too, positive action in favour of families at risk of poverty is in its infancy stage. And in addition to the employment objective, the child development perspective needs to be (further) strengthened. Quantitative targets should always go in pair with quality norms.

2.2. Providing an adequate standard of living

2.2.1. Adequate benefits

The child benefit scheme can play a significant role in the fight against child poverty. Given the importance of this benefit, it is encouraging that the National Plan to Combat Child Poverty expresses support for incorporating the right to a child benefit into the Belgian Constitution (this has been achieved in the meantime). Additionally, the necessary steps will be taken to eliminate the discrepancy in the child benefit

allowance that exists between employees and self-employed persons before this benefit is transferred to the Communities and the Common Community Commission for the Brussels-Capital Region. The harmonisation of the different schemes is planned on July 1st 2014.

Belgium's current child benefit scheme is nevertheless inefficient in combating child poverty. This is demonstrated by research conducted by Bea Cantillon (2013), which indicates that the systems of almost all other Western European countries are more efficient. This comparative research explored the extent to which child poverty decreased in proportion to the effort that was put in (the child benefit allowance as a percentage of GDP). The Scandinavian countries proved to be the most efficient, while countries such as Italy and Spain lagged behind, with Belgium winding up just ahead of them. It is for this reason that Cantillon believes that the transfer of the child benefit system to the Communities, scheduled for 2014, will be an opportunity to make corrections to the system.

In addition to this, the federal government plans to cut the child benefit allowance for 100,000 students above the age of 22. As of 1 September, parents will see a slight decrease in the monthly child benefit they receive for all oldest (or only) children who were born in 1991 or earlier and who are still in school. The benefit will drop from 123.99 to 117.88 euros per month. The federal government is hoping that this cut will save 3 million euros by the end of this year. Though this measure was stipulated in the budget agreement, it has not received that much publicity from the government. This cut comes on the heels of an announced cut to the school bonus⁵, which is paid out to parents in one lump sum each year in August. The budget for the school bonus will be reduced by 15% in 2013 and another 15% in 2014. Families that qualify for a higher child benefit allowance (in most cases underprivileged families) will be spared from this cut.

Up until now, the child benefit has been seen mainly as a general-purpose measure. The use of this measure to provide extra support to specific target groups is therefore an exception to the rule. This is why it would be a good idea to apply the principle of progressive universalism when reforming this system: on the one hand, every child would receive a base amount, and on the other, an additional allowance would be provided to families living in poverty and to children with a disability or a developmental disorder. A similar proposal was also made recently by Flemish Minister for Poverty Reduction Ingrid Lieten (Flemish socialists, SP.A). She is specifically pleading for a universal base amount that would be supplemented with an additional allowance based on the needs of the individual child. Beyond this, an automatic allowance is designed to ensure that the benefit actually reaches the most socially vulnerable persons. In Flanders, Minister Lieten can already count on the support of the majority parties. The Flemish nationalists (N-VA) made it clear that the child benefit should be more dependent on family income, and the Christian Democrats (CD&V) reacted favourably to the proposal from the SP.A-minister⁶.

Progress on the *child subsidy*⁷, at one time a priority issue for the N-VA, has been repeatedly delayed. In light of the imminent transfer of the full responsibility for the child benefit allowance, it makes little sense to create yet another mechanism that

⁵ The purchase of school supplies at the beginning of each school year implies an additional burden on the family budget, so parents receive a supplemental allowance once a year that is included with their child benefit for July. This supplemental allowance is known as the school bonus.

⁶ Belga (29.06.2013), SP.A wil hogere kinderbijslag voor arme gezinnen (SP.A seeking higher child benefit for poor families). De Knack.

⁷ A one-off subsidy amounting to between 150 and 200 euros per year that is paid out upon the birth of a child – not to be confounded with child benefit.

would impose additional administrative burdens. Research conducted by the Centre for Social Policy at the University of Antwerp moreover indicates that, with 30 million euros allocated to its budget, the Flemish child subsidy would only have an extremely limited impact on the poverty level.

2.2.2. Avoiding stigmatisation and low take-up

Given the fact that one's eligibility to receive benefits per se does not always mean that this eligibility is effectively utilised, it is essential to do more than simply publicise the existence of one's right to these benefits.

To this end, one of the goals set forth in the National Plan to Combat Child Poverty is to do a better job of communicating the conditions under which persons under the age of 18 qualify for income support⁸. The federal government will also ask the PCSWs to make a proactive effort to better familiarise their clients with this measure. This proactive approach is intended to result in a lower rate of non-take-up of benefits.

In addition to this, the PPS Social Integration is planning to distribute a range of brochures to the general public between 2013 and 2015 in an effort to inform people about the benefits for which they qualify. This is based on the conclusion that there still exists a large group of people who are (still) not making use of the benefits to which they are entitled.

To conclude this section, two recommendations can be made for further improvements of the social transfers to children and families in need:

- A reform of the child benefit system, based on the principle of progressive universalism, in order to strike a better balance between security for all families and effectiveness in preventing child poverty;
- Further efforts to extend the non-coverage of social assistance to all potential beneficiaries, through a combination of information and proactive detection.

3. Access to affordable high-quality services

3.1. Education and childcare in early childhood

In Belgium, the risk of poverty among young children (0-5), is considerably higher than in the rest of Europe. Early childhood (0-3), including the prenatal phase, is a crucial time for breaking the inter-generational cycle of poverty. When there is deep-seated and persistent poverty in the early years of life, the negative impact on the future is serious (De Boyser et al., 2011). According to James Heckman, the winner of the Nobel Prize for Economy, family support programmes for parents and children who struggle with poverty and social exclusion in early childhood produce a very high return on investment for society.

In periods when childcare places are scarce, it is the most vulnerable families who have the most difficulty gaining access to places in crèches. Therefore, an increase in the number of means-tested childcare places is recommended. As we mentioned earlier, the challenge is to give job-seeking parents or those who are following a training course access to childcare services. Offering new childcare places also contributes to improving equal opportunities for employment for women.

In spite of the fact that childcare is often a crucial factor in women gaining entry to the labour market, the demand for childcare still exceeds the supply. The shortage of

⁸ This benefit applies in exceptional circumstances, e.g. teenage mothers.

places forces a great number of women to take parental leave or to work part-time. Both decisions have a negative impact on income. In Belgium, there is a distinct inequality in the childcare services offered as well as differences in the training and salary for staff and differences in the ratio between children and staff. The type of childcare also differs between the different Communities.

There is insufficient official childcare to meet demand so in consequence one third of children end up in the unofficial sector, where there are no guarantees of quality. There are also enormous differences between the Flemish and French Communities. What's more, the services are also spread very unequally within the Communities themselves. In spite of the political commitment to create extra places, the shortage seems to be structural (Schepers & Nicaise, 2012).

Despite the gaps in childcare provision in early childhood, the federated entities place a great deal of focus on this theme. One of the actions of the Flemish Action Programme on Child Poverty created by the Government of Flanders in 2011 was to launch a specific project fund dedicated to the fight against child poverty with a particular emphasis on children aged from 0 to 3, given that this is a crucial period in the development of intellectual, emotional and social skills among young children, and thus in breaking the spiral of poverty. In addition to focus on the children themselves, a certain focus was placed on the conditions of parents in the labour market. There is also a plan to increase prenatal care. The intention is to increase early support for families within the Child & Family preventive family support programme in order to prevent the effects of deprivation on the future children as early as during pregnancy. Action will also be taken to ensure affordable, high-quality, accessible and adequate provision of childcare for vulnerable young children and their parents. An additional 2.9 million euros has been put aside for the increase in childcare in 2013 and 2.1 million euros for additional subsidies for childcare provision to compensate for income-related contributions⁹. The focus here will be on the importance of language and language stimulation, priority rules for income-related contributions and the social role of childcare.

The Wallonia-Brussels Federation will increase the range of flexible childcare, crisis childcare and occasional childcare. In addition, all the players in childcare benefit from the implementation of the quality code that guarantees that the International Convention on the Rights of the Child is observed in terms of childcare provisions. The Federation will transform the prenatal consultations of the Birth and Childhood Office in Wallonia as part of the ongoing project for (free) general preventive follow-up by the Birth and Childhood Office.

In the Brussels-Capital Region the shelters that take in children in need along with their parents receive 5.5 million euros of further financial support. The role of the shelters is to take in and provide shelter and appropriate psycho-social help to beneficiaries in order to promote their independence, physical well-being and reintegration into society. On 12 July 2012, the government of the Brussels-Capital Region approved a new financing mechanism for the Crèche Plan (2007) that targets the creation of new childcare places. The Region now contributes 6 million euros per year to the Community Committees so that they can invest in this sector.

Because the problem of (in)sufficient affordable childcare has been around for years, we cannot expect the problem of shortage to be solved speedily. But the specific actions undertaken by the three Regions should be considered a positive step.

⁹ In the income-related childcare, the parents pay a financial contribution according to their income. The childcare providers receive a compensating subsidy from Child & Family until a guaranteed fixed daily fee per child is reached.

Nevertheless, the different initiatives give the impression of being a catalogue of measures rather than a coherent strategic framework.

Furthermore, more attention must be paid to the perinatal period and the importance of breastfeeding in particular. Research has shown that breastfeeding has a number of positive effects on the health of babies and their intellectual and socio-economic development. Breastfeeding campaigns for instance can help reduce the impact of social inequality. At the time of writing the proportion of mothers who breastfeed their babies is a lot lower among mothers from vulnerable families than among middle-class mothers. Campaigns to raise awareness (aimed at fathers too) can go some way to tackle this inequality (Eeman & Nicaise, 2012).

3.2. Increase the capacity of the education system

In the light of the changes taking place in the labour market, it is becoming increasingly important to prepare young people as well as possible for the labour market. The matching between the basic qualifications of school leavers and the skills demanded by employers is of crucial importance when it comes to employability and ensuring a good match. Education and lifelong learning are essential in this respect.

In the short term there is a need, due to a slight demographic growth, to ensure sufficient places in compulsory education. As part of this plan, the Brussels-Capital Region has put out a call for tender among the different organising bodies, for a total budget of 12.5 million euros, in order to create additional places in primary and secondary education. This plan will create more than 3,800 places by 2015. It is expected however that it will be necessary for 18,000 additional places to be created in primary education (kindergarten and primary education) and 4,700 places in secondary education. The Brussels-Capital Region is aware of the need to open up as many schools as possible in the short run and has consequently launched its Schools Plan. In November 2011, 29 projects were selected and split up among 12 Brussels municipalities. This initiative by the Region will make it possible to create 3,818 places. The vast majority of the places were created in 2012 (2,849 in 2012 and 969 in 2013).

In addition to quantity, the quality of the education provided is also of great importance. To this end, Flanders has put aside a budget in 2013 and 2014 for the increased support for kindergarten education and the accompanying transitional measures. This involves an additional investment of 60.5 million euros in 2013 and 57.6 million euros in 2014. In 2012 moreover, new regulations were drawn up to reduce the number of children per teacher. Given that the chance that pupils will fall behind in their first year of school is considerably greater among children from the lower social classes, regular attendance and early participation in kindergarten are absolutely essential. This type of initiative is also necessary because large kindergarten classes do not provide sufficiently high-quality education and because they put parents off.

With regard to the affordability of the education, the Flemish Community plans to implement automatic allocation as well as an additional increase in the school grants by 2014. Given that savings will be made on the national school bonus (see above) and because the latter involves relatively small amounts, we should not overestimate its importance. Another disadvantage of the national school bonus is that it is a lump sum payment for everyone. As a result, it leaves no room for providing the poorest families with extra support. This is why a more selective allocation of these resources (after their transfer to the Communities) would be more effective in the fight against child poverty. Furthermore, making education affordable will also be guaranteed by improved communication about the existing and new measures. The financial aspect can be a barrier to underprivileged parents in sending their children to school. Thanks

to the 'maximum invoice' in kindergarten and primary education¹⁰ and thanks to school grants, the financial burden for parents has already been drastically reduced. Parents are perhaps not always aware of this. The financial barriers in secondary and (above all) higher education remain substantial.

Given the high (horizontal and vertical) mismatch in skills (Schepers & Nicaise, 2012b) it is necessary for students to gain more adequate information about their future chances of employment while still at school. They must be better informed about the impact that qualifications have on their career prospects. There is also a need for a more direct link between the education system and the labour market. Company visits and other activities where students can familiarise themselves with different occupations can form part of the solution in this regard. It is essential to ensure that as many young people as possible complete a recognised course and to prevent pupils from leaving school early, possibly via alternative avenues.

The federated entities have also drawn up specific action plans to combat early school leaving. As part of this, the Brussels-Capital Region has indicated that it will provide 1.5 million euros per year in financial support for a truancy prevention programme. Thanks to this programme, the Region aims to encourage the schools in the 19 municipalities to combat absenteeism, violence and inappropriate behaviour. The Truancy Prevention Programme supports local or intermunicipal projects that promote truancy prevention. The German-speaking community is also carrying out a number of campaigns relating to education and vocational training to prevent school dropout. This involves, among others, the "time-out" project aimed at encouraging secondary school pupils who have dropped out to return to school.

3.3. Improve the responsiveness of the health system

There is a direct link between poverty and (physical and mental) health problems among children and young people. A great number of risk factors are associated with an increased prevalence of health problems among children and young people. These risks must be correlated with family and society.

The federal authorities aim to ensure harmonisation with the new policy described in the *Gemeenschappelijke verklaring voor de realisatie van netwerken en zorgcircuits in de geestelijke gezondheidszorg voor kinderen en jongeren/Déclaration conjointe pour la réalisation de réseaux et de circuits de soins en santé mentale pour enfants et adolescents* (Joint declaration on the creation of networks and care provision in mental healthcare for children and young people), as approved by the Interministerial Conference on Public Health. The new policy prioritises intersectoral cooperation. This means that emphasis will be laid on creating and supporting a network that includes players within the health sector, school environment, social services, etc.

The Wallonia-Brussels Federation will oversee that greater focus is laid on the mental health of the future mother and young child as part of the health-parenting projects.

The "children" and "adolescents" teams within the Brussels-Capital Region will be expanded within the services for mental healthcare. In terms of mental health it is possible, thanks to recent efforts, to carry out better analyses of the mechanisms that cause inequality and by so doing, to optimise the individual investment process in different phases of the lifecycle. The circumstances around development at a very early age are particularly defining for the mental health, competences and employability of individuals when they become adults. As part of the mental health care available, support is provided for different teams for children and adolescents.

¹⁰ The 'maximum invoice' measure is a (very low) ceiling on the amounts that parents can be charged for school-related costs such as materials, extra-curricular activities etc.

And the district health centres are also given support. They play an essential role in prevention among children and their families. In the district health centres, GPs act as the health specialists who are responsible for the follow-up, prevention, health care and treatment of sick people in their community based on a long-term vision of the health and well-being of those who come to see them. The GP's field of care is horizontal, while other specialists take a more vertical approach when it comes to a specific medical problem. GPs are familiar with the history of their patients. They are best placed to evaluate their patients' state of health and to estimate the risk factors.

The German-speaking community is modernising and restructuring the psycho-medical-social centres and healthcare centres. The emphasis will be placed on supporting children aged 0 to 3. However, there is some doubt about the practical implementation given that the proposed initiatives are somewhat vague.

The measures, both federal and regional, can normally be expected to have a positive impact on the improvement and affordability of healthcare for vulnerable groups. But no details are being made available about their effective implementation. In the light of the austerity measures on the other hand, a decision was taken to limit the expenses for the healthcare sector "in order to guarantee sustainable growth in that sector". The norm for growth is limited to 2% in 2013 and 3% in 2014 (Schepers & Nicaise, 2012). As a result of this, it is unclear how far the various initiatives of the government can actually be implemented. Furthermore, it is necessary for the federal government to review the healthcare system in order to be able to reduce the costs of healthcare for the most vulnerable families.

3.4. Provide adequate housing and living environment

Housing is also an important lever when it comes to reducing child poverty. A child's home will influence his or her play area, social integration, health and safety and access to quality services such as healthcare, transport, education, etc.

Given the importance of good housing in the fight against child poverty, the National Plan to Combat Child Poverty includes different initiatives taken by the federated entities. The Walloon Region for instance plans to allocate housing and rent allowance to emancipated minors. A decree amendment has also been proposed in order to include the interests of children when allocating social housing. A general definition also exists stating that access to housing must be simplified for vulnerable large families. The Flemish Action Programme on Child Poverty states that the presence of children must form an explicit element when evaluating the right to (possibly social) housing. This is the case when programming social housing, calculating rent, the rent allowance, renovation allowance and the improvement and adjustment allowance. The Public Centres for Social Welfare (PCSWs) will also take explicit account of the presence of children when assessing the minimum supply of natural gas. Given that people who live in caravans are one of the priority target groups for the policy on integration and poverty, emphasis has also been placed on the circumstances in which children grow up. One of the focus areas for example is providing child-friendly surroundings when building and renovating caravan sites. In specific terms this means making an effort to make caravan sites as child-friendly as possible and creating an environment that gives children the opportunities they need to play, to blossom and develop.

For the time being there is no enforceable right to housing in Belgium. This is seen as an important policy priority by a number of stakeholders - certainly for families with children. However, the remark is always made that priority policy for young families may not take place at the expense of other vulnerable groups. Another problem is the fact that the current social housing policy in Belgium is too (spatially) concentrated and as a result fosters the creation of ghettos. A more balanced distribution would

counter other problems as well such as segregated education and criminal activity. One positive side effect of increasing the number of social housing is that it will drive down prices on the private rental market. This will make rental housing more affordable for all low-income families. On the private market itself, there is also a need for a more creative and flexible use of existing accommodation. It should be possible for parents with young children to make more intensive use of underutilised houses by promoting mobility and flexibility (Eeman & Nicaise, 2012).

3.5. Enhance the quality of family support and alternative childcare

The family, extended or close, is the most important source of support for many young people. As long as there is a certain bond with their parents, older brothers and sisters or other relatives, certain difficulties can be overcome more easily. This is probably one of the reasons why teenagers who live in an institution until they are 18 usually have a more difficult adult life than others. Staying in an institution often means a strong disconnect from their family. Educators and social workers in institutions therefore try to maintain, create or strengthen bonds with the parents from within the institution. It is very important that particular attention is paid, within the existing measures, to the bonds with family and to ensure that regulations do not hinder the relationship with the family. One problem for families with children for example is that the living wage of the parents is reduced when a child of theirs reaches the age of 18.

Among the essential services for poor children, special youth care is without a doubt one of the most controversial provisions. For many decades, putting poor children into care has been a widespread practice in Belgium. To the present day, it is often accompanied by great tensions and problems. One of the reasons for the complexity and tensions that this type of help causes is the systematic confusion between a social and judicial approach. While the special youth care was initially voluntary and aimed at supporting families and children in "problem situations", the voluntary nature of the support was often violated by social services (through forced placement in care among others). Offering help was moreover often limited to placing the children in residential care, which was often an extremely traumatic experience for the parents and the children alike. In recent decades, semi-residential and volunteer care has grown in importance, but it often led to an increase in the social control of poor families. Although most reforms were assumed to place the family at the core of the issue, a great many parents felt (and feel) ignored when measures were taken for their children (Frazer, Marlier & Nicaise, 2010).

Given the large impact of putting children in care, it is advisable that the legal framework be reviewed to avoid children being placed in care. In this respect, it is important to provide families with as much social and financial help as possible so that the parents can fulfil their task properly. If this is not possible, putting a child into an institution must be the last possible option. It is also necessary to regularly follow up decisions to put children into care and to review those decisions where possible. Projects and action plans that lead to the restoration of family bonds must be developed in this regard. Special assistance is required to ensure this, even after children have been returned to their families.

The overview in this section has shown that serious efforts are being made to improve access to – and quality of different types of services to children and young people (child care, education, health care, housing, youth protection). Two areas in particular deserve special attention in the near future:

- Housing, because until now government expenditure in this area has systematically prioritised owners over tenants, and lagged behind in extending the provision of social housing;

- Youth protection, because poverty continues to destroy family bonds and past efforts appeared to be largely insufficient to reduce the proportions of children placed in care.

4. Addressing child poverty in the European Semester

The National Plan to Combat Child Poverty is clearly based on a European model. The three principal areas of focus (access to adequate resources, access to services and opportunities and active participation) form the strategic goals of the plan. The target is to achieve different operation goals via specific corresponding actions. This is completely in line with the European recommendation "Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage".

4.1. Child poverty in the National Reform Programme

Each year, all Member States must show the European Union how they translate the European goals at a national level. The Member States report on this in their National Reform Programme (NRP). In the Belgian National Reform Programme, the fight against child priority has been raised to priority status.

In the NRP of 2012, the federal government had already stated its intention to come up with a plan to reduce child poverty. In the NRP of 2013 this plan was announced for June. The National Plan to Combat Child Poverty that has now been adopted is the result of this partnership. Like in the NRP of 2012 a separate section is reserved in the NRP of 2013 for measures against child poverty. According to policy-makers, this specific focus on living conditions is essential given the increasing growth in the proportion of children in poverty.

In the most recent NRP, considerable attention was paid to the initiatives to combat child poverty at lower levels of government. Thanks to the implementation of the sixth state reform, the Regions and Communities will have more tools to implement their own policies. The different plans and actions of the federated entities are discussed in the NRP. For more detailed information in this regard, the reader can consult the "Assessment of progress towards the 2020 objectives" report (Schepers & Nicaise, 2013).

The subject of child poverty was much less prevalent in the Social Strategic Report (SSR). This is logical as this document is intended to be read together with the NRP. Nevertheless, the appendix of the SSR contains a detailed overview of the progress of the indicators.

We can conclude that the subject of child poverty has been extensively discussed in the previous National Reform Programmes in which the federal as well as regional initiatives were announced.

4.2. Specific goals to reduce child poverty

As part of the Europe 2020 strategy, the national government agreed to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion by 380,000 by 2020 compared with 2010. According to the latest estimates based on EU-SILC data, the number has actually risen to 457,000. In the recent National Plan to Combat Child Poverty, there is no mention of specific new goals. This can also be seen as a missed opportunity.

In spite of the unfavourable evolution of poverty, the Belgian government authorities have not made an ex-ante assessment of the social impact of the measures that have been taken. Consequently, the recent introduction of the "poverty proof" in Flanders has to serve as an example for the other policy levels (Schepers & Nicaise, 2013).

In the Flemish Action Programme on Child Poverty, the Government of Flanders set the target of reducing the number of children growing up in poverty by 50% by 2020. In practical terms this means that the Region is aiming to reduce the proportion of children growing up in poor families to 4% by 2020. At present this percentage is still hovering at around 10%. In the Brussels-Capital Region and the Walloon Region, child poverty is one of the transversal points of attention, but no specific targets have been proposed. The absence of specific targets for child poverty is apparently due to the fear that not reaching such goals would provoke sanctions on the part of the EU.

4.3. Mechanisms for policy monitoring

An important monitoring instrument in the battle against poverty (including child poverty) is the Interfederal Poverty Barometer, issued by the PPS Social Integration. The Poverty Barometer also enables comparisons to be made with the situation in other European countries. The Poverty Barometer is based on indicators that measure the different facets of poverty and social inequality: income and debt, healthcare, work, education, housing, participation and child poverty. The Interfederal Poverty Barometer was created as part of the Federal Poverty Reduction Plan. The selection and monitoring of the indicators was coordinated by the working group for social indicators¹¹. In the fight against child poverty, a 'child version' of the AROPE indicator is monitored, by analogy with adults. By so doing, it is possible to summarise an issue as broadly as possible using one single indicator. The AROPE indicator is made up of three sub-indicators: AROP, LWI and SMD.

A national scoreboard will also be linked up to a national child poverty plan in order to monitor the multi-dimensional aspect of child poverty. This scoreboard will include a set of indicators (including the AROPE indicator) for each of the three priority action areas. These indicators cover income, labour market position of parents, education, housing and living environment, participation, material deprivation, risk behaviour, etc. The aim is also to make use of child-oriented indicators. This scoreboard is intended to make it possible to analyse the situation regarding child poverty in Belgium and to provide an annual status of the situation. Moreover, the use of a scoreboard will increase the transparency of the fight against child poverty. The scoreboard will be created within the Interfederal Poverty Barometer. This type of initiative is certainly useful given the fact that the National Plan to Combat Child Poverty contains hardly any quantified goals.

When monitoring the different measures of the National Plan to Combat Child Poverty itself, the policy monitor developed for the Federal Poverty Reduction Plan will be used. This policy monitor will provide an inventory of the policy measures and monitor them in a coherent, dynamic and integrated fashion. Monitoring the National Plan to Combat Child Poverty will be carried out twice a year. The State Secretary for Social Integration and Poverty Reduction will coordinate this monitoring and report on this to the Interministerial Conference on Integration in Society via the Permanent Working Group on Poverty. This working group may propose possible amendments based on the result of this reporting. Each authorised minister will provide monitoring information for his/her actions to the State Secretary for Social Integration and Poverty Reduction.

In Flanders, the Child & Family's Risk Poverty Index defines how many children are born into a poor family based on six criteria: available income, educational level of the parents, work situation of the parents, level of stimulus, housing and health. In the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, the interactive atlas of the Observatory of Children and

¹¹ Interfederal Service for the Fight against Poverty, Economic Insecurity and Social Exclusion, *Poverty Barometers*, Brussels (<http://www.armoedebestrijding.be/armoedebarmometers.htm>).

Youth provides a spatial breakdown of different data. In the Brussels-Capital Region, policy is monitored by the well-being barometer. It must be said that few indicators are specifically designed to map out the situation of children.

In terms of country-specific recommendations (CSR), we can state that the recommendations for Belgium were only exceptionally and indirectly associated with child poverty. It is above all the tightening of the regulations for young job seekers (with stricter conditions for a waiting allowance) as a response to an earlier country-specific recommendation for Belgium that is relevant in this respect, although in a negative sense. As mentioned earlier, these young adults are the parents of tomorrow and in consequence it is important that they have sufficient resources, including financial resources.

5. Mobilising EU financial instruments

The Belgian labour market is characterised by rather low employment. An identification of risk groups based on employment levels shows that women, non-Belgians, the elderly, the lower qualified and single parents are underrepresented on the labour market.

In the 25 to 54 age group, employment levels are comparable with the EU27 average, but for young people (15 to 24) and the older age group (55 to 64) it is much lower. The low employment level among young people also needs to be looked at in the light of an obligation to go to school until 18 and a high participation in higher education.

Based on a SWOT analysis and the results of the previous programming period, the emphasis of the 2007-2013 ESF programming in the field of Social Integration is also laid on mobilisation of target groups that are currently underrepresented on the labour market. Improving employment opportunities for different groups that use the services of the Public Centres for Social Welfare is another objective. Indeed, this strategy fitted in well with the priorities of the ESF, namely enhancing the social integration of the underprivileged with a view to sustainable integration in the work process and the fight against all forms of discrimination on the labour market. Emphasis was also placed on specific interventions that are better suited to the needs of different risk groups receiving benefits where activation measures were observed to be working less effectively. This involves in the main young people from 18 to 25, heads of single parent families, immigrants and people aged 45 and over. Given the importance of the work needed in order to escape from poverty, these types of measures are also an important element in the fight against child poverty. Children in poverty are also overrepresented in these target groups (PPS Social Integration, 2006).

In the national ESF Operational Programme for the 2014-2020 period, efforts will focus on the multidimensional aspect of poverty and social exclusion in accordance with the poverty target set in the Europe 2020 strategy. Public Centres for Social Welfare will be given room to set up innovative actions relating to social activation for those entitled to social services, and their children. To this end, the Public Centres for Social Welfare will be able to set up actions, also for young people and children of people entitled to social services. These actions must promote the social inclusion of the target group and thus reduce the gap in the labour market.

The State Secretary for Social Integration and the Poverty Reduction is also campaigning for the continuation of the ROMED programme of the Council of Europe and the European Commission in Belgium during 2013-2014. Mediation is very important in order to eliminate the inequalities with which the Roma are confronted. The goal of the ROMED programme is to provide additional training to Roma mediators

throughout Europe in order to enhance their skills and improve the quality of their services. The mediation programme is intended to help Roma families and their children gain better access to services. In the meantime, the ROMED II programme has been launched. This programme focuses on the community and their participation in democratic governance through mediation. The second phase of the ROMED programme will thus work simultaneously on both Roma citizens' ability to participate and the authority's ability to respond.

Flanders is not requesting European resources in the fight against poverty for the time being. However, a working group will work towards ensuring a greater focus on poverty and child poverty in the (draft) operational programme for 2014-2020 as prepared by the Flemish ESF agency. Efforts are being made for instance to focus more closely on the fight against child poverty within the fight against poverty section, by ensuring high-quality and accessible provisions and services such as childcare and public transport among others for people in employment. Emphasis is also laid on the fact that it must be possible to combine employment with educating (young) children. The right allocation and therefore the right sums to be allocated to the different investment priorities are currently the subject of political debate. Wallonia is not requesting ESF resources that are directly linked to the fight against child poverty either. However, initiatives are being taken that are targeted mainly at promoting employment among certain risk groups. It is possible in this way to have an impact on the lives of children from these types of families. In the Walloon Region, in addition to the possibility of requesting ESF resources there is also the "fruit and vegetables at school" programme which benefits from Walloon co-financing. The programme reached 162,407 pupils during the 2011-2012 school year and was self-financed to the sum of 606,000 euros, with 617,207 euros being financed from European resources. In the Brussels-Capital Region, the Public Centres for Social Welfare on the one hand and Actiris on the other benefit from the above-mentioned projects to promote employment. There are no specific initiatives however in the fight against poverty and child poverty that are able to call on the resources of the EU.

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