

Peer Review on Children First – pilot local consultation platforms on child poverty (Belgium, 13-14 January 2015)

Children First: local consultation platforms for prevention and identification of child poverty¹

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1. Introduction: Poverty and social exclusion in childhood. The Belgian context

a. Child poverty and social exclusion in Belgium: some figures²

Poverty hits children in Belgium hard. Children born into poverty are deprived from the start of opportunities to fully develop and use their talents. Compared to the rest of the Belgian population, children run a higher risk of living in poverty. In 2012, the poverty risk for children between the ages of 1 and 17 was 16.7 % compared to only 15 % for the Belgian population in general. However, the number of children at risk for poverty is decreasing. The poverty risk for children in 2008 was 17.2 %.

The poverty risk in Belgium is higher for young children (0 - 5 years of age) compared to the rest of Europe. In addition, various factors influence the risk of poverty for children³. The most influential factors are: the family configuration (such as single parent families), the employment status of the parents and whether the children have a migrant background. The educational level of the parents is also reported to be an important factor.

¹ Prepared for the Peer Review in Social Protection and Social Inclusion programme coordinated by ÖSB Consulting, the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) and Applica, and funded by the European Commission.

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² Source EU-Silc 2012.

³ A few numbers (EU-Silc 2012):

- Of single parent families in Belgium, 33.2 % are confronted with the risk of poverty.
- In persons younger than 18 years of age who live in a family where there is no (or little) employment, 71.2 % live under the poverty line.
- When we look at the degree of poverty risk in children based on the country of birth of their parents, we see that the children of parents with a 'foreign country of birth' have a 33.6 % risk of poverty, while the children of parents born in the 'reporting country' is 9.6 %.
- When we look at the degree of poverty risk in children based on the citizenship of their parents, we see that the children of parents with a 'foreign country of birth' have a 37.3 % risk of poverty, while the children of parents born in the 'reporting country' is 12.1 %.
- When we look at the degree of poverty risk in children based on their parents' educational level, the at-risk-of poverty rate for children whose parents have only obtained pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education (levels 0-2) is 47.2 %. For children whose parents have achieved an upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education (levels 3 and 4), the corresponding figure is 16.9 %, and 8.1 % for children whose parents finished the first and second stage of tertiary education (levels 5 and 6).



These indicators only measure 'monetary' poverty, exclusively considering the income level of an individual or a family to determine whether they live in poverty. But poverty is about more than just a lack of income. Housing, employment, education, societal participation and health must also be taken into consideration. In other words, childhood poverty has many faces. The AROPE indicator underlines this multidimensional character. In 2012, 23.1 % of children in Belgium were confronted with the risk of poverty and / or social exclusion (AROPE). By this we mean that these children are confronted with the risk of poverty (AROP, 16.7 %) and / or were battling serious material deprivation (SMD, 8.6 %) and / or were members of a household where work intensity was particularly low (LWI, 13 %).

b. Combating childhood poverty: a political priority⁴

During the past decade, the fight against childhood poverty has received increasing attention in the social policies of the EU and many of its Member States. Taking on this major social problem through EU and national policies became more pressing as it was prioritised by several consecutive EU Council Summits starting in 2006 and was one of the central themes in 2010, the EU Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion. The Belgian Presidency of the EU Council in 2010 also made the fight against childhood poverty a key theme.

Moreover, the 'Europe 2020'-agenda⁵ has put 'social inclusion' forward as one of the five main objectives for the European Union to become a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy. In order to reach the EU target of reducing poverty and social exclusion by at least 20 million by 2020, the European Platform against poverty and social exclusion⁶ sets out actions. Eradicating child poverty is considered a key challenge of this platform. Further, the European Recommendation 'Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantages'⁷ (published within the social investment package⁸, which uses a life-cycle approach and seeks to strengthen people's current and future capacities) urges the Member States to draw up and execute a policy to tackle child poverty and social exclusion and to promote child well-being by adopting a multidimensional approach.

The need to step up the fight against childhood poverty is underpinned by the fact that, in 2012 one in five children (under the age of 18 – 20.8%⁹) throughout the European Union still lives in households with an income beneath their national at-risk-of-poverty thresholds. Children of many countries are at a greater risk of living in poverty than adults and childhood poverty as such can have other – and more severe or lasting – effects than adult poverty. This is also the case for Belgium, even though Belgium can be considered a prosperous country and an example of an active welfare state.

Moreover, in the last few decades, research findings from different scientific perspectives (social sciences, economics, medical and neurosciences) have coalesced into a large knowledge base on the short- and long-term risks of growing up in poverty for the individual child (and future adult) and for society, in terms of (future) human and economic capital. Growing up in poverty affects children's short-term well-being, as they are faced with the material and immaterial consequences of inadequate income, poor housing, health problems and low

⁴ Host country report Peer Review on combating child poverty through measures promoting the socio-cultural participation of clients of the Public Centres of Social Action/Welfare, Belgium, Katrien De Boyser 2012.

⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index_en.htm

⁶ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=961&langId=en>

⁷ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32013H0112&from=EN>

⁸ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=1044>

⁹ EU-Silc 2012.



participation in society as a whole. Moreover, it affects their mental and physical well-being in general, not only in the present but also in the future. Early childhood experiences and circumstances are particularly fundamental for future learning processes and behaviour.

c. The Belgian approach: a shared challenge¹⁰

Belgium, as a federal state as well as its regions, has been putting forward strategies to prevent and eradicate childhood poverty and social exclusion. Belgium has a complex institutional model as a federal parliamentary state made up of communities and regions that have their own governments and powers. This results in powers related to childhood poverty being spread across these policy levels. This complexity of powers requires coordination and a strongly integrated approach towards common goals that is needed in the fight against childhood poverty.

The conviction that tackling poverty needs to be addressed through a multidimensional and multilevel policy framework has also grown and found solid ground at different Belgian policy levels during recent decades. The multidimensional approach means that childhood poverty and social exclusion are addressed in the life domains where they appear: in income, work, housing, health, education and family life as well as participation in different kinds of social, cultural and sporting activities.

Belgium translated the EU target of reducing poverty and social exclusion into a national target and commits itself to reducing the number of people at risk of poverty by at least 380,000 by 2020 (compared to 2008)¹¹. Reducing childhood poverty became a key objective in the National Reform Programmes that Belgium handed over to the European Commission in the past few years.

Two policy measures included in the National Reform Programme of 2014¹² deserve to be mentioned within the context of this peer review: the national child poverty reduction plan (2013) and the federal measure for the support of local consultation platforms for the prevention and detection of child poverty.

The national child poverty reduction plan¹³ situates the fight against child poverty and social exclusion right at the core of the Europe 2020 strategy. Concretely, and in analogy to the European Recommendation 'Investing in children', this national child poverty reduction plan was shaped around three policy areas that are fundamental in the fight against poverty and the promotion of child well-being, namely: (1) access to adequate resources, (2) access to quality services and (3) opportunities for and active participation of children in society. A fourth strategic objective, to set up horizontal and vertical partnerships between different policy areas and policy levels, completes the action plan. Each strategic objective is pursued via different operational objectives, to which 140 concrete actions are linked. These actions are aimed at children as well as their mothers and fathers. This action plan should lead to a better situation for the families. These actions by the Federal Government, Communities and Regions must also contribute to the achievement of global poverty targets.

With the federal measure for the support of local consultation platforms for the prevention and detection of childhood poverty, the Federal Government released EUR 2 million in 2013 to support PCSWs in launching a local, innovative

¹⁰ Host country report Peer Review on combating child poverty through measures promoting the socio-cultural participation of clients of the Public Centres of Social Action/Welfare, Belgium, Katrien De Boyser 2012.

¹¹ http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/targets_en.pdf

¹² http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/csr2014/nrp2014_belgium_en.pdf

¹³ http://www.mi-is.be/sites/default/files/doc/nationaal_kinderamoedebestrijdingsplan_nl.pdf



consultation platform with schools, day care centres, poverty organisations etc. The intention is to ensure that child poverty is detected in a preventive and proactive manner and to look for joint remedies.

On 9 October 2014, a new Federal Government was installed in Belgium. The federal governmental accord¹⁴ requires that the government set up a multi-year¹⁵ federal action plan to combat poverty. Each authorised minister will be asked to present and implement the following targeted, specific and structural measures within his or her policy domain to formalise and monitor the fight against poverty. Within the action plan, there specific consideration will be dedicated to the fight against childhood poverty (including single parents) and poverty in migrant families. In addition, the governmental accord states that, after evaluation and in consideration of the policy recommendations from the associated study, the existing consultation platforms on fighting childhood poverty should be further financed.

In her policy memorandum, the Secretary of State for the Fight against Poverty further emphasises the need for a new national child poverty reduction plan. This action plan will start with an approach to children's rights and the 'three pillar approach'. The action plan will, according to the analogy of the European Recommendation: 'Invest in children: breaking the vicious circle of inequality', be built around three policy domains which are fundamental for the fight against childhood poverty and promote the welfare of children, namely: access to adequate resources; access to quality services and opportunities for and active participation of children in society. The secretary of state will use a broad definition of 'childhood poverty'. Indeed, it is about poverty stricken families. Help children out of poverty by helping the entire family. Considering the multidimensional character of childhood poverty, there will be efforts for coordination and communication with all key actors. A childhood poverty objective will be developed by analogy with the European poverty objective. In order to observe this objective and the multi-dimensionality of childhood poverty, ultimately a monitoring instrument will be developed based on specific indicators, statistics and impact analyses.

Even the current Federal Government accord places the fight against child poverty on the agenda, albeit in other words.

2. Breaking the intergenerational circle of poverty: The role of Public Centres for Social Welfare

The Federal Public Planning Service for Social Integration (PPS SI) strives to implement a programme aiming to guarantee a decent existence for all persons who slip through the cracks of the social security system and who live in poverty. The PPS SI is responsible for preparing, implementing, evaluating and monitoring an inclusive federal policy for social integration, so the social basic rights can be guaranteed to everyone in the long term. The PPS SI achieves this, among others, by helping to prevent and combating all the dimensions of poverty and exclusion, through a permanent dialogue with all the policy levels, on equal footing, as well as with associations representing various target groups, by stimulating and supporting the development of the powers of its local partners. The PPS SI believes in respect for and the development of each individual, as well as in equal opportunities and diversity.

¹⁴ http://premier.be/sites/default/files/articles/accord_de_gouvernement_-_regeerakkoord.pdf

¹⁵ In imitation of two previous federal action plans on the fight against poverty (2008 and 2012).



The most important partners of the PPS SI in achieving this mission are the Public Centres for Social Welfare¹⁶ (PCSW or local public social services). The PCSWs' work in the field to enable the socially and economically underprivileged to fully participate in society. To this end they have a number of tools at their disposal, including income support, employment and career guidance, emergency medical assistance, installation premiums for the homeless, rent guarantees, culture and sports vouchers and so on. In other words, the PCSWs should not give the beneficiaries income only, but offer them the chance to take control of their own lives independently.

Childhood poverty has a multidimensional character. Coordination among all key sectors is also an absolute necessity. Action 126 of the National Child Poverty Reduction Plan (2013), as well as Action 53 of the second Federal Poverty Reduction Plan (2012), pointed to the Belgian PCSWs as the key actors in taking a preventive and proactive role in identifying hidden (child) poverty. However, it has been found that different actors working with children in cities and municipalities do not always know each other – or the services they offer – and do not always share their expertise and experiences. Yet structural consultations between these parties would benefit the children, both those living in poverty and those from families at risk for poverty. Therefore, as mentioned above, the Belgian government encourages the PCSWs to fight child poverty proactively and promote child well-being to ensure that these children and their families can break the cycle of intergenerational transmission of poverty. The PCSWs are stimulated to launch local, innovative pilot projects in the form of consultation platforms with local actors.

In other words, the PCSWs have many instruments and the necessary expertise to fight childhood poverty and help poverty stricken children and their families. But because the services of a PCSW or another institution such as childcare or educational support are often insufficiently known, the PCSW sometimes becomes involved in a problem situation (too) late, namely only when a family is in an emergency situation. Via the local consultation platforms, the PCSWs can now also take a proactive approach to poverty or poverty risk situations.

3. Children First: the concept

Through the project called Children First, the Belgian government supports PCSWs in playing a leading role on the local level in the fight against childhood poverty through the launch of local consultation platforms with local actors. The intention is to detect hidden childhood poverty with the goal of promoting child well-being to break families out of the cycle of generational poverty.

The Belgian government also launched the pilot project Children First to offer a more specific response to the European Recommendation 'Investing in children' that recommends the Member States strengthen coordination between the different actors involved; to streamline their policy in all relevant areas; to promote stakeholder participation and exchange best practices.

In total, 57 pilot projects started on 1 May 2014. The projects were selected after a call for projects of great resonance. The selection was based on a few advance objective criteria¹⁷. The available budget limited the number of participating pilot

¹⁶ Centres Publics d'Action Sociale / Openbare Centra voor Maatschappelijk Welzijn.

¹⁷ In the first phase, the project proposals submitted were reviewed for independence criteria (is the project realised by an PSWC or a non-profit organisation? Is the project complimentary to the already existing policy in the community or city? etc.). In a second phase, the projects submitted were scored based on a 100-point scale and selected based on the following criteria: the content quality of the project; the quality of the cooperative



projects. All pilot projects will run for 12 months. Of the 57 pilot projects, 50 are borne by a PCSW. Seven non-profit organisations also assumed the role of project bearer. The PCSWs also play a prominent role in these seven consultation platforms.

a. Tasks and objectives of the local consultation platforms as described in the call for proposals¹⁸

The local consultation platforms retained for subsidy through Children First must assume various tasks, including:

- Sensitising local actors (such as child care workers, teachers, etc.) about poverty, as well as informing them of the existing aid channels.
- Offer general support to local actors (such as teachers, caregivers, etc.) through social workers. On one hand, the platform methods should work to provide an exchange of information, and on the other, the physical presence of social workers may be desirable, such as for parent contact.
- Offer concrete support, on one hand, on a specific individual level and, on the other, on a collective level¹⁹. This always occurs in consideration of privacy protection.

Based on the performance of the first tasks, the local consultation platforms Children First strive for a number of mutual objectives, namely:

- Proactive detection and prevention of childhood poverty: The goal of the platform is to effectively and preventively reduce the degree of poverty in children. The exchange of information, whether about individual cases or generalised tendencies in the community, must make it possible to attack poverty at an early stage. In this, the consultation platform will design a working framework in consideration of the privacy of individual exchanges of information.
- The sensitising of local partners: Via the consultation platform, the actors will exchange expertise and they can be educated about poverty; how to recognise poverty; and what can be done to raise the alarm with regard to poverty. The platform can also undertake actions to sensitise partners in the community or city about childhood poverty.
- Stimulation of cooperation: The policy brings partners to the table that have not yet met with regard to childhood poverty, or want to work in a more structured way. The platform unites various partners from communities or cities: partners who receive the signals of childhood poverty, but who do not necessarily have the knowledge and/or resources to take decisive action, and organisations which do have these things, but do not come into sufficient contact with children and their families to detect poverty from a prevention point of view.
- Stimulate local support and projects: The platform addresses acute emergency situations based on its findings, both on an individual and collective basis. Over time, the proactive presence of the platform should lead to acute aid being superfluous.

links to other local organisations and the quality of the methodology for setting up the projects, in consideration of SMART formulated objectives. In the selection, we strive to achieve a representative sampling of Belgian cities and communities by size. There is also a drive to maintain an equal regional ratio among projects.

¹⁸ <http://www.mi-is.be/be-fr/doc/politique-de-lutte-contre-la-pauvrete/appel-a-projets-les-enfants-d-abord-plateformes-de-concert>

¹⁹ It is in no way the intention that the platform assumes the tasks of the PCSW within the framework of individual client support, but that it acts as a supplement.



In order to realise these goals, cooperatives are a necessity. The consultation platforms are stimulated to bring the following local actors to the table:

- Schools and childcare institutions: teachers and childcare workers can quickly recognise the signals of possible child poverty situations. They are in daily contact with children and their parents, but they do not have the necessary knowledge and resources to address these situations.
- Poverty associations and neighbourhood associations are very aware of local situations, whether or not they are district related. They know the families with problems and provide direct aid, whereby they also play a mediation role between these families and official institutions. They have a great deal of expertise on specific problem situations and how to intervene, which can be shared with the other partners in the consultation platform.
- PCSWs have the resources and expertise at their disposal to help children and their families in poverty.
- Others: depending on the local situation, others can be involved in the platform such as Huizen van het Kind, Centres for Student Support (CSS), sports associations, youth services, Kind en Gezin, parent associations, etc.

In other words, the consultation platforms must initiate cooperation where it does not yet exist, or if it exists, reinforce it according to local needs. Connections must constantly be sought with the existing policy and dynamics in the community or city.

b. The target group(s) of the local consultation platforms as described in the call for proposals²⁰

The target group of the consultation platforms are children aged 12 and under, in poverty or at risk for poverty. The consultation platforms pay special attention to early childhood (0-5 years). Not only is the risk of poverty in Belgium the highest among the youngest children, early childhood is also crucial in proactively preventing and fighting poverty.

It goes without saying that the children cannot be detached from the context of the family in which they grow up. This means that their parents and the family as a whole are also part of the consultation platform's target group.

c. The financing of local consultation platforms²¹

The maximum financing per consultation platform is determined on the basis of the number of residents of the cities/regions of the submitting organisation.

- Category 1: Large cities with more than 130,000 residents: max. EUR 75,000;
- Category 2: Cities/communities with between 30,000 and 130,000 residents: max. EUR 50,000;
- Category 3: Cities or communities with less than 30,000 residents: max. EUR 25,000.

The resources can be used for staffing costs (via application or exemption) and for operational costs. A maximum of 10 % of the subsidy can be used to cover costs which arise within the framework of the platform activities for individual or collective needs and which contribute to the support of children. This can involve individual actions such as intervention for an unpaid school bill or registration fees,

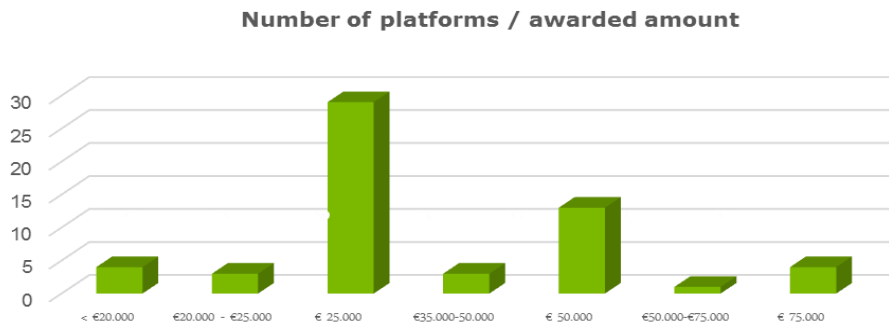
²⁰ <http://www.mi-is.be/be-fr/doc/politique-de-lutte-contre-la-pauvrete/appel-a-projets-les-enfants-d-abord-plateformes-de-concert>

²¹ Ibid.



or collective actions such as a training session for teachers and childcare workers on sensitivity issues and in certain areas, support for early development, etc.

The total subsidy amount is EUR 1,991,125. In consideration of the pilot projects, the financing will be provided for 12 months. The image below shows the distribution per granted subsidy amount.



Total amount = €1.991.125

4. Description and task analysis of the active platforms: interim results of an accompanying study

In order to insure the sustainability of the consultation platforms, a study is conducted throughout the course of the project. The intention of this study is to support the exchange of experiences and expertise, to create a manual or playbook (methods, required partners, possible tasks, impediments, success factors, etc.) and to formulate federal policy recommendations based on an analysis of the function of the platforms during their pilot year. These recommendations must make it possible to perpetuate the projects and use their experiences for the further planning and implementation of the poverty prevention policy.

Additional concrete sub-assignments of the study are: the description and analysis of the consultation platforms, setting up efficacy indicators, organising two exchange meetings with various project coordinators and striving for 'best practices'.

PPS Social Integration assigned performance of the study to KMPG Advisory. The study will cover 15 months and begin on 1 May 2014.

a. Methodology

The first phase of the study focused on describing and analysing the local consultation platforms that were selected for funding. Therefore it was important to have an overview of what the different platforms are doing or are planning to do. To have such an overview, the different project applications that were submitted and honoured with a subsidy were screened and analysed for information on how the platforms are organised. Important questions asked during this screening were: (1) What are the described local needs? (2) How do the platforms strive for local integration? (3) What is the concrete target group? (4) What kind of partners do the platforms suggest collaborating with? (5) How are the platforms actually functioning?



Another important criterion for sorting through this information focused on the actual tasks and activities of the platforms. In order to systematically describe this, five tasks, each containing different types of activities, were identified:

- **Task 1:** activities that have to do with enabling or facilitating the exchange of information;
- **Task 2:** activities that focus on providing support for professional care workers, this also includes sensitisation and sharing information;
- **Task 3:** general support for the target group, including 'sensitisation', spreading information and making sure that existing help is known and accessible to those who need it;
- **Task 4:** concrete, specific and targeted support of the target group and providing care in more urgent situations;
- **Task 5:** activities that promote the sustainability of the project / the fight against child poverty.

Finally, the platforms were categorised on the basis of the region in which they are situated (Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia) and on the basis of the number of inhabitants of the city / municipality (see the three categories mentioned above) in which the platforms are active. Indeed, as we are talking about local consultation platforms, we might imagine that there may be different needs and therefore also different ways of functioning between the platforms, depending on the region and the size of the city or municipality.

b. Some interim findings on how the platforms are organised²²

1. Information on local needs

Looking at local needs across the three regions and irrespective of the size of the cities/municipalities, a couple of elements were described by many platforms.

- **Too much fragmentation:** there seem to be a number of existing initiatives and sometimes partnerships. However, these partnerships are not always organised in a structured way, which means that the internal cohesion and internal coordination is not always optimal or not performed systematically. Because of this, people seem to work 'on their island' and next to one another rather than with each other.
- **Isolation:** Sometimes, finding partners or finding and connecting to the right partners appears to be difficult, which translates into a lack of coordination and communication. This results, in turn, in more isolation between the work of these actors.
- **'Help' often does exist, however, that 'help' is often given to the same people, while (a part of) the target group remains under the radar, even though they might be the most vulnerable.**
- **Existing help is not always offered for various reasons (e.g. it is not accessible enough; people may not understand it; etc.).**

²² Based on the interim results of the accompanying study performed by KPMG Advisory contracted by the PPS Social Integration. In this phase of the study, no data are available yet on the degree to which the activities are truly successful.



Taking all these bottlenecks into account, the local consultation platforms seem to describe a couple of common needs, such as:

- Optimising resources / working in a more efficient way;
- Better ways to reach the target group, and especially the ones that are usually not easily reached;
- Better content-support; though professionals in different settings may be confronted with child poverty, they do not always know how to deal with it;
- More information on how to deal with poverty, what to do once it is reported, more clarification on potential next steps;
- More collaboration with different or new partners. One type of collaboration in particular that is mentioned is the collaboration between welfare and education.

When we look at local needs based on the number of city/community inhabitants in which the platforms are active, we can come to the following general conclusions:

'Big' cities (more than 130,000 inhabitants):

- Need for better contact with / being heard by local policy makers. If this is optimised, it can have the advantage of connecting the different initiatives, promoting the dissemination of knowledge and a more sustainable way of building a platform, unifying existing and new expertise.
- Referrals to promote a more rapid response in the truly 'acute situations'.

Cities with 30,000 to 130,000 inhabitants:

- A need to engage the target group themselves. Rather than leaving the target group as a passive recipient of aid, the idea here is that the target group should be a part of the interventions as an active partner;
- A need for more resources and manpower;
- A need for more and better integration of the children (this was more specifically mentioned by the participating cities of Brussels and Wallonia).

Small municipalities (less than 30,000 inhabitants):

- A need to be heard by local politicians;
- A need for more visibility;
- A need for greater and more effective detection of general problems in the community rather than focusing only on individual cases;
- A need for more structural solutions.

2. Information on how the platforms strive for local integration

Obviously, the majority, if not all, of the local consultation platforms mentioned that they only engage in activities that help to solve local problems and are in line with the specific needs of a city.

3. Information on the target group

According to the call for proposals, the target group should consist of children age 12 and under and their parents. This is indeed something that is described by virtually all platforms. However, the requirement to also involve the youngest children age 5 and under was not always described in the applications. Of course, we cannot conclude that this means that it will not actually take place.

An interesting finding is that some platforms are considering expanding the age bracket to 18 years.



In addition, some platforms also want to focus on specific subgroups, such as single parents, in-work poverty, families with parents who suffer from psychiatric problems, etc.

4. Information on local partners.

In general terms, the assessment reveals good representation in the platforms of childcare institutions and schools. Changes in neighbourhood actions and poverty associations will be noted regularly, but not given priority.

When we look at cooperation with local partners by region, we see that Flanders, on a municipal level, reports the most cooperation with childcare and educational institutions. A majority also works with poverty associations and a minority with local associations and neighbourhood groups. This situation is reversed when applied to the Flemish communities.

Brussels already has many initiatives and cooperatives. These also require some special balancing. In Brussels, the platforms work less with educational institutions compared to Flanders.

In Wallonia, there is a strong impetus towards cooperation with childcare initiatives. There is also a strong push to connect to the 'Plan de Cohésion Sociale'²³. Cooperation with poverty associations is not described.

5. Information on the functioning of the platforms

The first aspect which recurs in all consultation platforms is the use of extra manpower. This involves hiring a completely new member of staff, releasing an existing staff member for this purpose or both.

One way of gaining extra manpower adopted by a number of consultation platforms is calling in an expert by experience²⁴. This is not yet a predominant trend, and we also see this only in the Flemish consultation platform. The reasons for using an expert by experience are varied: some platforms want to call in an expert by experience to provide a structure to aid workers; other platforms want an expert by experience in an advisory role (such as creating brochures about how to tackle childhood poverty). For other platforms, the expert by experience is there to provide general consulting.

The second important aspect is the organisation of the actual policy. The platforms primarily ensure that cooperation on a local level is actually coordinated. From an analysis of the application files, it appears that the frequency of this type of deliberation varies greatly.

Ultimately, the PCSWs primarily assume the role of project coordinators. The exact fulfilment of this role is approached in very different ways. Possible roles involve the organisation of general coordination; monitoring objectives, facilitation (in general terms), active content support and finally offering administrative and logistical support.

²³ Wallonia has implemented a social cohesion policy in line with the interpretation by the Council of Europe, which has defined social cohesion as "society's capacity to ensure the well-being of all its members, minimising disparities and avoiding polarisation, to manage differences and divisions, and to acquire the means of ensuring the social welfare of all its members". Social Cohesion Plans (SCP) are established in the local communes and involve initiatives designed to achieve greater social cohesion in the local area in order to ensure that every individual can live in dignity. The administrative side of the PCS will be simplified in order to reduce the burden of monitoring procedures both at regional and local government level.

²⁴ <http://www.mi-is.be/en/anti-poverty-policy/hands-on-experts-in-poverty>



c. Some interim findings on the actual tasks and activities of the platforms²⁵

1. Task 1: enabling or facilitating the exchange of information

The vast majority of the local consultation platforms takes task 1 into the greatest consideration.

A few examples: setting up a reporting point, possibly with a referral function; organising formal deliberation meetings to discuss general tendencies in the city/community; formation of a privacy protocol for information exchange.

2. Task 2: providing support for professional care workers, this also includes sensitisation and sharing information

Generally, a very high percentage of the local consultation platforms focuses on this task. A careful interpretation could be that there may be a great need for more knowledge and support regarding how to approach childhood poverty. Emphasis is placed on this task particularly in the Brussels Capital Region. This possibly suggests a great need for information and knowledge from local aid workers.

A few examples: creating a manual or methodology about recognition, reporting and dealing with childhood poverty and designing specific tools such as the reporting bundle.

3. Task 3: general support for the target group, including 'sensitisation', spreading information and making sure that existing help is known and accessible for those who need it

Two things become apparent in task 3. Consideration is not only given to sensitising parents within the target group, but also to sensitising society at large. There is also a great deal of emphasis on finding better ways to provide existing aid to the target group.

Quantitatively, we generally see a great effort put into task 3, but less than for tasks 1 and 2, for example. There is a great deal of emphasis on this task in the Brussels Capital Region.

A few examples: better publication of aid via information sessions; actions which lower the threshold for aid (such as home visits); dissemination of information via school campaigns.

4. Task 4: concrete, specific and targeted support of the target group and providing care in more urgent situations

The fulfilment of this task differs greatly from platform to platform. However, a global differentiation can be made between two forms of concrete support, namely financial and non-financial support. Despite the fact that completion of this task cannot always be specified with regard to content, we see that this task is generally applied very often, and primarily in Wallonia and Flanders.

A few examples: financial intervention for school bills, financial intervention for the cost of sports clubs, educational support classes, homework tutoring.

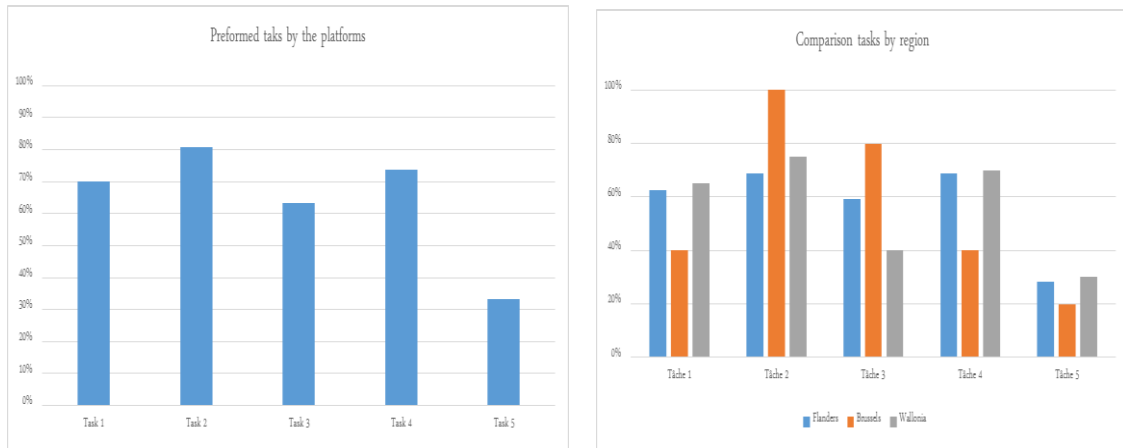
5. Task 5: promote the sustainability of the project / the fight against child poverty

Globally, we see that there is less emphasis on this task compared to the others. This applies to all of the regions.

²⁵ Ibid.



A few examples: self-evaluation activities, reporting pursuant to policy.



In the figure on the left, we see a general overview of the percentage of the platforms in all of the regions that put effort into a certain task. In the figure on the right, we see this split by region.

Finally, we must note that the interim results above only give an idea of what is planned by the consultation platforms. This is therefore not necessarily a representation of current activities / priorities of the consultation platform.

d. Next steps

The mandate follows a step-by-step methodology consisting of three phases: (1) description and analysis of the consultation platform, (2) creating 'best practices' and a playbook and finally (3) the formulation of federal policy recommendations.

In the second phase – based on the findings of phase 1 and input from exchange meetings with all project coordinators - best practices should be created for the consultation platforms. These will be summarised in a playbook. During this phase, two workshops will be organised with the relevant stakeholders to further refine best practices.

In the third phase, federal policy recommendations will be formulated and all of the information will be consolidated in a final report.

5. Questions for discussion

- Are there similar initiatives in your Member State to bring the various services which play an important role in the fight against childhood poverty together on a regular basis to stimulate cooperation? Which partners are brought together in this? Or would be brought together in an ideal case? Does this occur on a local, regional or national level?
- If yes, are there evaluations of these initiatives?
- The Belgian experiment is now half over. If positively evaluated, it is planned that the platforms will become structurally anchored. Do you – based on your experience – have general suggestions to make a local consultation platform function well?

