

Social Community Teams against Poverty (The Netherlands, 19-20 January 2016)

Anti-poverty policy in Belgium – an integrated approach¹

Kristel Driessens

Karel de Grote University College of Antwerp

Josée Goris

PPS Social Integration

1. The Belgian country context

For this Peer Review, we focus on the following policy approach(es) to combat poverty and social exclusion in Belgium: a definition of poverty as a basis for anti-poverty policy, a right-based and a multi-dimensional approach, Belgian PCSW/social house as social community teams and participation of people in poverty.

An anti-poverty policy based on a common shared and scientifically underpinned definition

The Belgian anti-poverty policy is based on a common shared and scientifically underpinned definition of poverty. Since 2001, the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion (NAPIncl), a document drawn up by the federal government in cooperation with the federated entities, defines poverty as:

“a network of forms of social exclusion that extends over several areas of individual and collective existence. It separates the poor from the generally accepted modes of existence in society, creating a gap that poor people are unable to bridge on their own.” (J. Vranken)

Social exclusion refers to a process in which people do not (or no longer) manage to participate in society. There is a rupture in one or more areas of life; the generally accepted standard of living is no longer reached. Poverty is the result of this process, a network of social exclusions which often even reinforce each other (e.g. education, employment, income etc.) People experiencing poverty are often unable to bridge this gap on their own.

This definition is based on the definition of poverty as scientifically elaborated by Prof. Jan Vranken and is also used in the Flemish “Poverty Decree” and the federal anti-poverty plans since 2008.

The realisation that people in poverty cannot bridge the gap without assistance – a gap that naturally does not only exist in terms of financial deprivation – has by now been accepted as one of the structural characteristics of poverty. People experiencing poverty need assistance from the authorities, the welfare sector, and civil society. The more effective road to emancipation is the road of self-organisation; the most structural is the one whereby society is organised in a manner that would eliminate or reduce the said gaps to the extent that people in poverty can bridge them on their own.

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An anti-poverty policy based on a rights-based approach

The Belgian anti-poverty policy is aimed at the implementation of the basic social rights which are included in the Belgian Constitution.

Article 23 of the Belgian Constitution states: "Everyone has the right to a dignified existence". To this end, the law, the decree or the sentence intended in article 134 guarantees economic, social and cultural rights (taking into account the corresponding obligations) and determines the conditions for their implementation.

Concretely, these rights include:

- 1) the right to work and to a free choice of professional activity in the framework of a general employment policy which, among other things, aims at guaranteeing the highest and most stable possible level of employment, the right to reasonable working conditions and fair remuneration, as well as the right to information, consultation and collective negotiations;
- 2) the right to social security, health protection and social, medical and legal assistance;
- 3) the right to decent housing;
- 4) the right to the protection of a healthy environment;
- 5) the right to cultural and social development.

In the Cooperation Agreement between the Federal State, the Communities, and the Regions concerning the continuation of the Poverty Reduction Policy, the reference to this article of the Belgian Constitution and therefore the rights-based approach has been underwritten as a leading principle for their policies for the prevention of insecurity, the fight against poverty, and the integration of individuals into society.

An anti-poverty policy based on an integrated multi-level approach

The fight against poverty and social exclusion requires an integrated approach in several areas of life and at several policy levels. Moreover, in the federated structure which characterises Belgium (in which competences are distributed over the different levels of government) it requires active cooperation and coordination between the Federal Government, the Communities, Regions and the local administrations.

Different governmental levels are involved in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the fight against poverty. An integrated approach aims at horizontal and vertical cooperation. This not only means the incorporation of diverse sectoral policies (such as employment, education, environment, culture, spatial policy, social policy) at different organisational levels (local, regional, national and intergovernmental) to achieve a holistic territorial policy approach. It implies more than just "taking account of" the different levels of government, local and regional as well as national and EU level need to work together to ensure consistency between policies.

A structural social inclusion policy is also based on mainstreaming. This embedding within the general policy (inclusion) has a preventive function. In addition, however, specific curative attention remains necessary in the fight against poverty.



The Public Centres of Social Welfare as Social Community Centres “*avant la lettre*”

The most important local actor in the combat of poverty and social exclusion is the “Public Centre for Social Welfare” (PCSW), a public institution that exists in each Belgian municipality. A PCSW is an autonomous local government with a democratically composed council. The legal mission of the PCSW states: “Every person is entitled to social services so as to enable him/her to live a life corresponding to human dignity”.

The PCSWs are responsible to implement at federal level the regulated minimum income scheme for people at active age. The minimum income scheme is financed partially by the federal government and by the local government. This funding mechanism creates national and local solidarity and responsibility. Besides social assistance, the PCSW have the mission to organise the necessary services at local level to guarantee a life in dignity for every inhabitant of the municipality. The PCSW can decide to organise these services itself or to delegate the implementation to a third partner. But the PCSW always stays responsible for the coordination of the social services. Examples of social services provided by the PCSW include financial and material help, medical help, legal advice, psychological and social support, guidance to socio-cultural activities, etc. They can set up services such as homes for the elderly, cleaning services, social housing, early child care, hospitals, etc.

The PCSWs should not guarantee the beneficiaries only an adequate income support, but also offer them the chance to take control of their own lives independently. Thus, they can be seen as the institutions which implement the principles of active inclusion in practice on the local level (Vranken, 2005).

The Flemish Parliament Act on Local Social Policy (2004) adapted in the act (of 13th July 2012) provided for a stronger coordinating role for local administrations. Local social policy aims for maximum accessibility to services for every citizen. To this end, the local government realises a Social House. This will be the place where citizens can come with questions about social services in their municipality. The Social House must provide a response to various problems of accessibility to municipal services. The local government decides for itself how it will fulfil the three functions (information, counter and referral functions) of the Social House. There is no uniform model for the Social House in Flanders. The Public Centre for Social Welfare can play a leading role (Verschuere & Sannen, 2005).

The strengths of this model are:

- The professionals who work in the social service of the PCSW, dealing with social assistance, are social professionals (with the legally protected title of social worker). They learned to deal with social law, they know about the social map of welfare services. According to the global definition of social work they promote “social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people”. So they work with a right-based and integrated multi-level approach, in their helping relation with people in poverty.
- An accessible public service (working with generalist social workers, who can do quick instrumental social interventions) and more intensive, integral support if necessary, specialist services in back office (employment counsellors, debt mediators, etc.). The need of financial help is often a first step for a larger empowering and integrating process (Depauw & Driessens, 2014).
- Mix of social interventions and methods: with a focus on individual case management, combined with group work.



- PCSW in a coordinating function, working together with private non-profit organisations, organisations working with volunteers, associations where the poor take the floor (grass-root organisations working with poor people) and specialist social organisations.

Participation of people in poverty and structural work

In Belgium, there are some 100 associations where people experiencing poverty come and work together in a group context trying to somehow influence policy. In Flanders, most of such associations are officially recognised and subsidised via a poverty act (Dierckx & Francq, 2010). These organisations give voice to the people in poverty, and offer a place where they can meet, participate in group work, in volunteer and structural work. Some of them have projects together with their local PCSW. This kind of networking allows to better align assistance at the needs of the most vulnerable groups.

2. Key advantages and challenges of the Dutch and Belgian policies

In January 2015 Belgium hosted a Peer Review on the Children First initiative². This is a pilot project whereby local “consultation platforms” on child poverty were set up in 57 municipalities. The platforms comprise a wide range of local actors – from e.g. anti-poverty associations to child day-care centres, schools, sports clubs and student support centres. Since the final evaluation has been completed, some lessons can be drawn from it which also can inspire the Social Community Teams:

- It is better to integrate and to have an affiliation with existing structures and initiatives rather than to develop new initiatives;
- It is important to try to develop an initiative that covers a broad range of needs and that stimulates an approach from different angles;
- The evaluation stresses the importance of preventive and activating approaches;
- It is important to work in a participatory way, together with the clients and to take their perspective into account;
- Ensure the sustainability and local embedding of the initiatives in the long term;
- Provide organisational and substantive support.

The central conclusion is that a central government or institution has to act as an umbrella organisation which brings together multiple perspectives and fosters the exchange of experiences in an interactive way.

What strikes us in the case of social community teams as challenges:

- They often seem to work based on a medical or deficit model. It looks like the generalists are mostly working as “saviours” and “individual problem solvers”. To combat poverty, it is also important to take the context into account, to be a guide and a mediator, a facilitator and actor of social change in the neighbourhood (Driessens & Van Regenmortel, 2006).
- This asks for the combination with other methods of social works or social interventions like group work and community work, prevention and structural work.
- Working with social community teams is a promising innovation, but it cannot be used as a smallish saving measurement. Increased poverty and vulnerable groups asks for more social investments, so that the generalists can really work in a generalist manner (that is broader than individual case management).

² <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=1024&newsId=2100&furtherNews=yes>



- The Netherlands has a tradition in working on service-user involvement. We hope they can bring in this expertise in the social community teams as well.

3. Possible improvements of (integrated) policies tackling poverty at local, national and European level and the way forward

- A clear and shared definition of poverty and its causes is necessary to guide local practices in a common and proper direction towards sustainable and structural solutions.
- It seems important to engage more social workers, with a broad perspective and juridical competences (knowledge of social rights, social legislation, competences in financial support and debt mediation, in guiding pathways to work). These are important tasks for the front office.
- Competences to coordinate community care: cooperation with volunteers, and the strengthening of the social network of client in an acceptable way for the clients and in the correct phase in the helping process. That means not at the start of the process, where the confidence in the social worker still has to grow.
- Enough specialist services as back office for the generalists so that they can refer to specialists if necessary and are not blocked by waiting lists.
- Mix of methods of social intervention: combination with community work, group work, prevention and structural social work.
- Investment in service users' involvement, participation of people in poverty in local policy, investments in experts by experience.
- a legislative framework on the national level to prevent inequalities in social assistance and quality of care between municipalities and to avoid reduction in local social services.
- A generalist social worker in an integrated network of organisations increases the likelihood of an efficient use of helping resources (Raeymaeckers, 2014).
- A qualitative measurement instrument that can measure processes of improvement in empowerment (Depauw & Van Dop, 2015).



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