



Peer Review on “Comprehensive Follow-up of Low-income Families”

Oslo (Norway) 28-29 November 2019

Peer Country Comments Paper - Belgium

**Miriam project – empowering single-
parent women**

DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion



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1 Introduction

This paper has been prepared for the Peer Review on "Comprehensive Follow-up of Low-income Families" within the framework of the Mutual Learning Programme. It provides a comparative assessment of the policy example of the host country and the situation in Norway. For information on the host country policy example, please refer to the Host Country Discussion Paper.

2 Situation in the peer country

2.1 Single parenthood in Belgium

Belgium has relatively high proportions of single parenthood. At national level, 17.5 % of all households with children are single-parent families (Eurostat, 2017), placing Belgium among the countries with the highest proportion of single-parent families in Europe. According to the OECD family database on single-parent households among all different types of households (with or without children), the proportion of single mother households in Belgium is 6.33 % (1.39 % for single father households¹). The same data for Norway gives a proportion of 5.63 % single mother households and 1.61 % for single father households (OECD, 2016).

In the Brussels-capital region, the proportion of single-parent families of all households with children is 32.8 % (BCSS, 2015), in the Walloon region 30.1 % and Flanders 21.5 %. The single-parenthood phenomenon is much more prominent in urbanised areas; most big cities in Belgium have similar proportions of single-parenthood as Brussels (Francq & Wagener, 2012). There are significant differences between the regions when it comes to the public welfare situation. On average across Belgium, 4.9 % of single-parent families receive social integration allowances, whereby the proportion in Brussels is 11.2 %, in Wallonia 5.6 % and in Flanders 2.5 %. The overall unemployment rate of single-parent mothers in Belgium is 16.4 %, with important variations between the regions: 27.8 % in Brussels, 8.9 % in Flanders and 22.2 % in Wallonia (Defeyt, 2015). At the national level, the risk of poverty rate (AROP) is 20 % in Belgium, whereas 41.3 % of single-parent families are at risk of poverty. More generally, households with no work-related income and with children face a poverty rate of 84.7 % (STATBEL, 2019). Data obtained from public welfare services shows that single-parent families represent 54.1 % of all of the households with children that receive public welfare allowances (SPP-IS, 2015).

2.2 Towards a public policy

In the 1990s, after three decades of rising divorce rates, single parenthood entered the public debate in Belgium. A series of research has been conducted to better understand the advent of single parenthood (particularly for women) and the issues these families are facing (Wagener, 2019). In 2003, the first (federal) Platform for Single Parent Families was created, and a report (Cantillon & Verbist, 2003) elaborated a first scientific definition of the category "single-parent families", highlighting the combination of poverty-related criteria. A broad consultation of professional actors and academics was conducted within the framework of the "General States of the Family" between 2004 and 2007 (Casman et al., 2007). They recommended universalist policy measures to address the poverty of single-parent families (e.g. work-family balance, accessibility of early childhood education and care services, recognition of the diversity of family forms, recognition of gender issues). A regional platform was also created in the Brussels-capital region in 2008 with organisations from public welfare, employment and housing, social work and early

¹ Note that Belgium has a relatively high proportion of single father households. This is partially the case due to different tax regimes in Belgium where it is an advantage in situations of co-parenthood to declare the child with the parent who earns most.

childhood professionals, as well as representatives of family and children services and academic members. This group analysed single parenthood based on qualitative and quantitative research and discussed public policy orientations which led to the publication of a book about the main findings related to the diversity of single parenthood in Brussels and policy recommendations (Lemaigre & Wagener, 2013). Other research followed (Koning Boudewijn Stichting, 2014), but relatively few specific policy measures were taken to address single parenthood. The overall policy regime regarding single parenthood could be seen as a universalistic approach with some adaptations and substantial shortcoming to provide social protection for single-parent families (Wagener, 2019).

2.3 Organisation of welfare and work policy in Belgium

The Kingdom of Belgium has a rather complicated political structure with varied territorial and language-related competences. In addition, there are many actors and instances for planning and implementing social work and policies. In a nutshell, the Belgian welfare policy functions at four different levels:

- **The federal state** regulates taxes, health and social security. The federal administration of social integration may initiate projects on poverty alleviation (cf. the Miriam project). It also funds other projects in the fields of child poverty and homelessness.
- **The regions** are (originally) defined by spatial competences such as urbanism, traffic, forests and waterways. There are three regions: Wallonia, Flanders and the Brussels-Capital region. Following the latest state reforms, the regions are also responsible, among other things, for the organisation of unemployment assistance, health services, social cohesion policy, child benefits, urban policy and security policy.
- **The communities** are oriented towards the language and culture of their citizens. The three main communities are the French-speaking community (Federation Wallonia-Brussels), the Dutch-speaking community (Flanders) and the German-speaking community (East Belgium). In Brussels, in addition to the competences of the Communities, there are three specific Commissions (the Dutch, French and bilingual Community Commissions). Non-governmental social work in Belgium is most often implemented by communities. Most educational services (schools, universities, continuing education) are organised through community competences.
- **The municipalities** encompass one of the most important actors of Belgian social policy, the Public Centres of Social Welfare (PCSW; cf. CPAS: Centre Public de l'Action Sociale/ OCMW: Openbaar Centrum voor Maatschappelijk Welzijn) are active at this level (the general legislation is negotiated at federal level - and since the last state reform also at regional level). The municipalities are the closest political unit to the citizens.

3 Assessment of the policy measure

3.1 The Miriam project in Belgian public welfare services

The Miriam project was set up in 2015 by the federal administration of social integration with the objective to contribute to the empowerment of single mothers, to combatting poverty and to tackle isolation in order to improve their chances of social and professional integration through offering intensive, gender-sensitive and holistic support (Pourcq & Vandevooort, 2016). The Public Centres for Social Welfare (PCSW) of Namur, Charleroi, Molenbeek-Saint-Jean, Leuven and Ghent participated in the first wave of the project. Case managers were hired in each PCSW to aim for a personalised approach through individual and collective support. Counsellors from the

Vrouwenraad (the Dutch-speaking council of Women of Belgium) accompanied the case managers and participated in the construction of the methodology. The first wave of the project was co-constructed and evaluated by a team of researchers from the Karel de Grote Hogeschool (cf. University of applied sciences), and the results and recommendations were published in a report in 2017 (Pourcq & Vandevooort, 2017). The creation of a statistical tool (cf. empowerment-meter) made it possible to measure the empowerment of the beneficiaries on ten axes (e.g. psychological wellbeing, participation, housing, work, income and living conditions).

The authors of the first study observed a slight overall improvement in the situation of female participants compared to the control group. At this stage, an important bias was found: the single mothers showed an improvement in confidence that explains some of the more critical, or honest, responses at an advanced stage of the project. Thus, the more the condition of the mothers improved (and the more confidence they had in the case managers), the lower some of them assessed their own situation. The researchers also noted the difficulty of extrapolating the results to all PCSW beneficiaries due to the small sample size (60-90 parents per year were accompanied). The report makes a series of recommendations at local, regional and federal level in several policy domains (housing, childcare, access to support and social services, labour, income, debt mediation, health, maintenance claims services).

The second wave (2018-2019) of the Miriam Project continued in six new cities (Antwerp, Brussels, Genk, Liège, Mons and Oostende) with nearly the same set-up regarding case management and project supervision, but with less counselling from the Vrouwenraad. As the first evaluation mainly looked at outcomes at individual and project level, the federal minister in charge of social integration wanted to address the organisational structures and local social policy networks around the Miriam project in order to better understand possibilities of future implementation on a broader scale. A new scientific team (Ass. Prof. Martin Wagener, UCLouvain-CIRTES and Carole Bonnetier, UCLouvain-CIRTES) started the evaluation in January 2019 and the publication of the report is foreseen in April 2020. Even if the evaluation is not yet finalised, the following argumentation is based on different research methods: semi-structured interviews with all 11 case managers (first and second wave), focus groups with single mothers and with actual case managers, semi-structured interviews with PCSW directors or locally-elected officials in charge of social policy, as well as the supervision of case managers and project development coordination with officials from all implicated services.

3.2 Comparing the implementation of Miriam and the HOLF model

In order to provide a comparison between two countries and two labour markets and social welfare policies, the below presents the similarities and differences of the Miriam project and the Norwegian HOLF-model by focussing on four points: the organisation of the welfare services, the role of the case workers and project management, the selection of the candidates and the role of evaluation.

3.2.1 Organization of welfare services and local policy

The HOLF model was developed through the NAV administration and offices (local Labour and Welfare offices), which allows to simultaneously address questions related to the labour market, social welfare and continuing education programmes. The programme favours the coordination of case work and of different welfare services. In Belgium, Miriam was financed by the federal administration of social integration and implemented by municipal PCSW. The local centres implemented the projects in their specific organisation. In small-size PCSWs special services were created. In bigger cities, the project was integrated in either community development actions or projects related to intense case work. Informing the single mothers about their rights and opening up access to specific collective or individual resources was an important part of the work of the case managers and the single mothers. The projects were expected

to build strong connections with local women's organisations, but in practice, loose connections were observed as they intervened only occasionally on specific issues (e.g. gender-related violence, divorce, housing and health). Other measures related to continuing education, training and access to the labour market were mainly organised in cooperation with services depending on other policy measures. It is also worth noting that the most active PCSWs are those engaged in local coordination of social policy. Future recommendations include a better negotiation on city-level or above (region, community) in order to tackle important issues of non-take-up for single mothers.

3.2.2 The role of case workers and project management

The HOLF model intervenes on two interacting levels (work with families and inter-professional collaboration) in order to address four follow-up areas: employment, income, housing and social inclusion. The Norwegian coordinators had a caseload of 21 families for two coordinators. Their function was not described as classic case work with the families, but they had rather to function as coordinators in a network with colleagues who carried out the actual casework. The case managers of Miriam accompanied between 10 and 15 single mothers and aims to foster a broad vision of empowerment through individual case work with the single-parent mothers as well as opening up perspectives through group work. Such occasions for exchange between parents were organised at different moments (weekly or multiple times per month).

In both countries, cooperation between fieldwork, project coordinators and research to develop tools for counselling, coordination with colleagues and other activities (guidance plans, handbooks, adequacy of measurement tools, etc.) could be observed. Peer experts participated at different stages in order to better integrate the views of parents in poverty situation. Various seminars and opportunities for exchange were organised to share important issues and to train the case managers or coordinators. These different tools can be used in the concrete case work with the families to achieve a shared vision about goals and measures, as well as with the parents, and in line with the overall project. Even if there is a difference regarding the type of project partners, similarities in project design could be noted.

3.2.3 Targeting and selection of the participants

The Norwegian measure mainly focuses on low-income families and emphasises the need for action regarding child-poverty and intergenerational poverty. The selection criteria of the HOLF model focused on families who perceive social assistance as a main income, who rely on social assistance measures and have up to four children under the age of 16. Parents who were already participating in other family projects, who received special treatment regarding serious mental health and/or drug abuse issues or who were investigated by child welfare authorities were not accepted in the project. The participating 512 families with HOLF follow-up were selected in 29 NAV offices through randomisation.

In Belgium, the selection criteria included being a single mother with weak social support, with at least one child under six years of age, in a situation of structural precariousness and with a low level of education and a minimal knowledge of French or Dutch. In the first year, the criteria were broader, but a more targeted approach was later favoured with a focus on single-parent families with clear challenges regarding social, cultural and labour-related participation. There were no strict exclusion criteria in Belgium, but the single mothers had preliminary discussions with the case managers to ensure they were willing and able to engage in the project. Overall, the different waves of the project accompanied between 60 and 90 single mothers per year.

Even if the selection criteria and the scope of projects were different, it seems that nearly three quarter of the families in Norway were composed of one parent. It could

be interesting to compare the projects more specifically in relation to single-parenthood.

3.2.4 Evaluation

In both countries, there is a scientifically grounded decision (cf. literature review) on why it is important to focus on specific target groups. In both projects, the academic evaluators not only kept a distant view, but they engaged in a co-construction process related to project management and scientific evaluation. The projects used different evaluation methods, for instance in Norway the use of experimental and control groups was more important, also due to the much higher number of cases.

The first wave in Belgium also started with a 'classic' control and experimental group setup. The size of the experimental group was considered too small (around 50 families per group) to be able to generalise the results of the research. In the second year, the size of the groups became bigger (72 mothers in the experimental group and 71 in the control group) and the researchers tried to decrease the possibility of bias during the selection procedure by introducing a randomised attribution between experimental and control group. In the first wave, there was also a randomised control group, whereas in the second wave only an experimental group participated in the project.

The follow-up of the research tools with the control group also became important for the case managers. It was foreseen that the single-parent mothers answer the questions themselves, however the case managers ultimately had to ask the questions individually due to language and/or cultural skills/differences. In the second wave statistical measurement was used only with the experimental group and a more qualitative public policy and project evaluation approach was chosen. Case managers, parents and officials were interviewed with either collective or individual methods. A better understanding of the organisational factors in the linkages with local social policy measures and service organisation was set as an important goal.

4 Assessment of success factors and transferability

Whilst important similarities and differences can be found between the two projects, one of the main differences lies in the different organisation of the welfare state and of related competences. Belgium has a long tradition of negotiation between different language groups, territories and political entities. The Miriam project is clearly situated in PCSWs but also relies on the good collaboration with other local welfare, work and childhood policies.

The Norwegian evaluation is based on a much bigger group of families which permits to draw stronger conclusions based on statistics as regards project efficiency. The comparison between control and experimental groups in Belgium showed only slight differences in outcomes, but the last report was rather positive based on a broader vision and supplementary qualitative methods.

There were no effects of the use of the HOLF model on employment, income, housing and children's situation. One important issue is the necessity to rely on colleagues and undertake considerable efforts to convince them, in order to ensure access to different measures or services. In Belgium the case managers had different functions: most of them worked together with the regular case workers, others took over all aspects of individual casework. Whilst this second option was perceived as rather positive, especially in terms of decision-making and implementation of the measures, the case managers were subject to more responsibilities. This was perceived as a challenge, especially when there are only few opportunities for exchange and interaction with colleagues.

Both projects co-created different tools through cooperation with local offices, project coordination and universities. This is an important step to more comprehensive social

policy models. The results in Belgium also show the importance of working in close cooperation with parents and peer experts to verify the adequacy of tools.

A positive outcome was found regarding the self-declared competences of the family coordinators in Norway. They declared a much more positive outcome regarding follow-up processes and relational alliance. This could be very interesting to implement in the third wave of the Miriam project. As a matter of fact, the individual and collective interviews with the case managers give strong indications towards a more positive work experience. They feel much more implicated in the Miriam project than with the normal case work in PCSWs due to lesser administrative work. They noted professional challenges in the project due to more individualised and comprehensive case work and also underlined the importance of group work. There was a clear difference between the Belgian and the Norwegian projects in the group work domain. In Belgium, single mothers considered the collective aspects very positive, speaking more frequently with peers and reporting a stronger social participation within as well as outside of the project.

While the Norwegian paper argues that local NAV offices have different ways to follow-up low-income families, nearly all case managers in Belgium stressed that they could not have helped the single mothers in their former functions. The substantial caseload they are facing does not allow qualitative social work.

It is important to take into consideration the time scale of the project. In Belgium, some procedures, as for example 'stating a divorce (separation)' and the decision about modes of (shared) custody in courts, often take more than a year. An official statement of a court is needed to apply for secured childcare allowances by the state. Such procedures are very long and complicated, and the maximum duration of one year of the Miriam project is thus considered too short by all interviewed persons. The time needed for changes in individual trajectories and for access to services needs to be taken into account on a larger time scale. Some PCSWs decided to continue the Miriam project on local funding.

The Norwegian case showed that the HOLF project brought the child perspective on the agenda in the participating offices. In Belgian PCSWs the importance to work with single-parent mothers, and more broadly gender-related issues, were often discussed in PCSWs during elections and in specialised conferences (anti-poverty strategy, employment policy, early childhood education and care, etc.) during the implementation of the Miriam project. Even if these effects are not clearly measurable, it is still important to see them as part of an interacting process of public policy formation (Gusfield, 1971; Wagener, 2019).

The Norwegian paper strongly argues the importance to not only carry out case work with parents, but to address barriers regarding the accessibility of work, education/training and housing. This is also the case in Belgium: while the project opens new horizons on the possibilities to accompany and find solutions in local PCSWs, it also reveals existing inequalities, non-take-up, discrimination and vulnerabilities which have to be addressed through broader, coherent and integrated policy measures in multiple domains.

5 Questions

- Could you further describe in which way "comprehensive" is understood related to social work theory?
- How many single mothers participated in the project? Did this variable have an impact on the overall outcomes of the project?
- Why did the project only choose for coordination and not more intense case work? Describe links with regular case workers?
- Where there any regional effects?

- From the Belgian perspective, the 'single point of contact' is very interesting in opening up rights and coordination of services, nonetheless the paper argues that coordinators have to do a lot of effort to convince colleagues. How is it possible to simplify collaborations?
- Was there any resistance (or misunderstanding) from families and/or coordinators to fill in the measurement tools?

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Annex 1 Summary table

The main points covered by the paper are summarised below.

Situation in the peer country

- high proportion of single-parenthood
- slow public policy adaptations
- federalised state with complex organisation
- universal-corporatist regime with weaknesses regarding single-parenthood
- persistent precariousness of part of single mothers

Assessment of the policy measure

- empowerment of single mothers in local social welfare centres
- increased access to rights for single mothers
- case management and collaborative social work
- co-construction between the field, federal administration, the council of women and university (colleges)
- innovative project and scientific evaluation in order to assess drivers for further implementation

Assessment of success factors and transferability

- co-construction (collaboration with the field, policy coordinators and academia)
- empowerment and access to rights
- gender-mainstreaming on the policy agenda
- need for stronger collaboration between services to ensure rights
- need to take into account temporalities and structural barriers

Questions

- *How many single mothers did take part at the project? Had this variable some explanation value?*
- *Why did the project only choose for coordination and not more intense case work? Describe links with regular case workers?*
- *Where there any regional affects?*
- *Where there any resistance (our misunderstanding) from families and/or coordinators to fill in the measurement tools?*

Annex 2 Example of relevant practice

Name of the practice:	Miriam – empowering women in local social welfare centres
Year of implementation:	2015 - ongoing
Coordinating authority:	Federal administration of social integration Belgium
Objectives:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • empowerment of single mothers • human rights approach • combat poverty • social and cultural participation (breaking isolation)
Main activities:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case managers have been hired in 5-6 PCSW (Public Centres of Social Welfare) to aim for a personalised approach through individual and collective support; • Case management; • Collective social work; • Co-construction of case work and measurement tools (PCSW, Federal Administration, Dutch-speaking council for women's organizations, University (colleges)).
Results so far:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • slight measurable increase in empowerment through the measurement tools • increases in empowerment on the individual level through qualitative methods • importance of collective social work to open up spaces and to tackle social isolation • need for a better coordination within services and a better access • need for a better recognition of non-take-up, discrimination and barriers to social, cultural and work-participation

