

# CONTRIBUTION OF BAPN TO THE ONLINE CONSULTATION CONCERNING THE EPSR

## INTRODUCTION

The Belgian Anti-Poverty Network (BAPN) is a national network and consists of the four regional networks all established with the aim to fight poverty in a structural way. The participation of people experiencing poverty is the core stone of our work. Together with them and starting from their stories, experiences and recommendations, we advocate for the development and implementation of national and European policies which lead to the eradication of poverty.

For our European policy work, we work closely together with the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN). This network consist of national, regional and local networks, involving anti-poverty NGOs and grassroot organisations as well as European organisations, active in the fight against poverty and social exclusion. Together with EAPN, we already wrote a contribution to the online consultation focusing mainly on the European level: [https://www.eapn.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/EAPN-EAPN-Proposals-on-Action-Plan\\_Summary-4515.pdf](https://www.eapn.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/EAPN-EAPN-Proposals-on-Action-Plan_Summary-4515.pdf). This contribution is specific from a Belgian perspective.

## WHY IS THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EPSR IMPORTANT?

Belgium is a very prosperous country, and yet a lot of people live in poverty. In 2019, 14.8% of the Belgian population was as at risk for monetary poverty (AROP). The anti-poverty policies in Belgium during the last decade have not led to achieving Belgium's Europe 2020 poverty target, namely to reduce the number of people in poverty by 380,000 by 2020. The number of people in poverty or social exclusion has been in slight decline since 2016 and, in 2019, following some slight increases earlier on, was approximately back to where it started in 2008 (2.197.000 compared to 2.194.000 in 2008). And these are just the numbers from before the COVID-19 crisis.

The health crisis and its accompanied measures have further increased the inequalities and vulnerability of many families and individuals in Belgium. This is specially the case for people who worked under precarious contracts and are not covered (sufficiently) by the social protection system. Also people depending on social benefits to make ends meet have been hit hard by the crisis. Most social benefits in Belgium were already far below the poverty threshold before the crisis. Because of the increase of living costs, people living on social benefits face even harder times to get through the end of the month. It is therefore not surprising that a large city like Antwerp received 42% more social assistance requests<sup>1</sup>, and the food banks received 15% more applications and distributed 55.4% more food<sup>2</sup> during this crisis. From the ground we hear as well that structural over- indebtedness of households is on the rise, as people can't pay anymore their bills for basic needs (energy, education, etc.)

More than ever it is time to put poverty high on the political agenda and to eradicate it at its roots, both in Europe and in Belgium. An ambitious implementation plan for the European Pillar of Social Rights is therefore urgent and indispensable.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.hln.be/antwerpen/vraag-om-steun-bij-ocmw-antwerpen-stijgt-met-42-we-worden-wat-overspoeld~a0887e28/>

<sup>2</sup> Belgische federatie voedselbanken, persbericht 07/08/2020: <https://www.foodbanks.be/nl/news?fbclid=IwAR1YfOgP1F-BrO3ursFqVdUUE95kERK4tNONOHXdhX1v9a9KIR-f5jECCr0>

## WHAT ARE THE PRECONDITIONS FOR A STRATEGY THAT CAN ACTUALLY DELIVER?

It is not the first time that the Commission and the Member States engage themselves to make progress to combat poverty and social exclusion. It is therefore very important to learn lessons from the past. In this aspect we are disappointed that there still has not been a thorough evaluation of the EU 2020 strategy, both at European level and at Belgian level.

Social policy are still considered too often as a cost and not as an investment in people. For instance; in the semester, we still see that the economy stays predominant at the expense of social issues. There is an urgent need for a paradigm shift. The European Union must also take binding rules, in parallel to its soft law instruments, when it comes to social policy so that when a member states fails to tackle its inequality effectively it can be held accountable.

The current monitoring system is inadequate. The social scoreboard compares all member states and uses averages. As a result, Belgium often doesn't seem to be doing very bad, while the situation on the ground is alarming! If we want upwards social convergence, ambitious targets must be set for each country. When setting ambitious targets, sufficient attention should also be paid to the development of relevant indicators.

When developing, implementing and evaluating a social strategy, it is very important that people experiencing poverty, other target groups, and the organisations who represent them, are able to participate in the relevant policy processes. In Belgium but also at the EU level more efforts are needed to take into account the voices of people experiencing poverty and civil society. The sector is heavily underfunded and in some cases even muzzled, while they are essential to create effective policies.

In this regard, we are also very concerned about the adjustments made regarding the 2021 semester. It is still not clear how civil society, people experiencing poverty and other vulnerable groups will be consulted and can participate to the development of the national recovery and resilience plans. The current health crisis is putting us in front of tremendous social challenges and strong participation of the most effected groups is more needed then ever.

### *Recommendations:*

- *We call for an evaluation of the Europe 2020 strategy, so lessons can be drawn from the past.*
- *Social issues cannot longer be treated as inferior to the economy. Binding rules for social policy are necessary if Europe really wants to tackle its inequality.*
- *Ambitious, enforceable and measurable targets should be set out for each member state.*
- *The participation of people experiencing poverty and the organisations representing them must be ensured when developing, implementing and evaluating a much needed anti-poverty strategy.*
- *The renewed European Semester for 2021 must ensure the participation of people experiencing poverty and the organisations representing them.*

## WHERE CAN THE PILLAR HELP MAKE PROGRESS IN BELGIUM?

### **Minimum income**

One of the main reasons why poverty in Belgium did not decline, is because the social protection system in Belgium, particularly for people of a working age and children, is less effective to reduce

poverty than it was before <sup>3</sup>. People who have no income from paid work often live in poverty as most social benefits in Belgium are far below the European threshold. Not only are social benefits not high enough, they have also become more conditional, resulting in less accessibility and even exclusion for some groups.

*Progress could be made to guarantee adequate, accessible and enabling incomes in Belgium by implementing principle 12, 13, 14, 15 and 17. We therefor ask:*

- *Introducing of a EU framework directive to guarantee adequate, accessible and enabling social benefits based on common definitions including adequacy linked to 60% AROP threshold, underpinned by national reference budgets.*
- *An initiative for fairer taxation, resulting in a better distribution of wealth and more equal societies.*
- *A CSR that demands Belgium to raise its social benefits to the European poverty Threshold.*

## **Labour market**

Raising the employment rate is high on both the Belgian and European political agenda. It is also a very important topic for people experiencing poverty. They want to participate in the labour market but often face difficulties to access it.

The Belgian activation politics of recent years focused mainly on (negative) financial incentives. Social benefits were limited in time and conditions were imposed. On the ground, this strategy did not lead to more employment but to more poverty, while poverty itself forms one of the biggest obstacles for people to find a job. Trainings and internships -sometimes compulsorily- are also popular instruments to help people access the labour market. However, despite the high level of participation in Belgium in such pathways, they do not sufficiently lead to an outflow into the regular labour market. In many cases these paths have only replaced sustainable jobs in the regular labour market. People in poverty feel trapped in a kind of pivot door system. They go from one training or internship to another, without any real prospect of a stable job.

Flexible and atypical contracts are also often put forward as stepping stones for people far from the labour market. However, we see that in the lower segment of the labour market precarisation took place, resulting in a higher number of working poor. Only stable jobs with an adequate income and quality working conditions can lift people out of poverty in a sustainable way.

*Progress could be made to guarantee access to quality jobs in Belgium by implementing principle 2 3 , 4, 5, 6, 7 , 8 ,9 ,10 and 12. We therefor ask:*

- *A EU legal framework guaranteeing minimum living wages, benchmarked at 60% of median wage, contextualised with reference budgets.*
- *Statutory minimum wages where none exist and support collective bargaining. Support an EU Directive on gender pay gap and require pay transparency.*
- *Make a priority of quality employment principles/ indicators for adequacy of wages, adopt a fair wage/decent work priority for CSRs with increased analysis of in-work poverty.*
- *Support increased employment security/status for all workers, collective bargaining, trade union membership, person-centred active inclusion.*

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<sup>3</sup> In 2019, Belgium still scored 'better than average' on the indicator 'impact of social transfers on poverty reduction', this indicator collared orange in 2020, which means that it must be watched.

## Housing and homelessness

About 8.6% of the population in Belgium spends more than 40% of its household income on housing. The housing cost overburden rate is higher for those renting on the private market (33.8% as compared to 27.4% for the EU average) and those living in Brussels<sup>4</sup>. In particular for low income households, renting on the private market represents a large amount of their monthly budget. In the first income quintile, 89% of renters on the private market have an income that is insufficient to live a life in dignity after paying the rent.<sup>5</sup>

There is an enormous shortage of social housing, with long waiting lists as a result. In 2016 as many as 215.000 households were on a waiting list for social housing.<sup>6</sup> Compared to the total housing market, there is only a small social housing stock in Belgium (under 10%).<sup>7</sup>

Housing problems and poverty are intrinsically linked to homelessness. Although we do not know exactly the amount of people facing homelessness, different censuses and indirect data point out that the problem of homelessness is on the rise. Not only do the homeless people not have access to housing, their lack of an address makes it also very difficult to access essential services and basic rights.

*Progress could be made to guarantee the right for accessible and decent housing and to tackle homelessness by implementing principle 19 of the EPSR. We therefore ask:*

- *Efforts should be made to provide uniform data in order to better map the problems of homelessness and housing.*
- *the EU makes the right to housing obligatory, regardless of residence status, to ensure access to rights for all.*
- *The proportion of social housing must be increased. Therefore the CSRs should treat housing as a social right, address speculation, support regulation where relevant, use EU funds to support increase of adequate and affordable housing for low income groups, including social housing*
- *Housing First should be further rolled out.*

## Education and child poverty

The Belgian educational systems remains relatively expensive and highly unequal. Educational inequality linked to socio-economic background in the Flemish and French communities is among the highest in the EU. Also much more than in other European countries, educational results in Belgium are very much determined by the school where a student is taught (OESO, PISA results 2018).

Despite many federal and regional promises, child poverty in Belgium remains very high. Over the last decade, child poverty remained relatively stable, but in recent years it increased to 1 in 5 children living in poverty, bringing it close to the EU average. According to estimates of UNICEF, this number will increase to one in four children living in poverty because of the Covid-crisis.

*Progress could be made to guarantee children the right for accessible and quality education and the right to protection from poverty by implementing principle 1, 11, 14 and 20. We therefore ask:*

<sup>4</sup> European Commission 2020, Country Report Belgium (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0500&from=EN>)

<sup>5</sup> Heylen, 2015, Het groot woononderzoek, deel 2 woonkosten, Leuven Steunpunt Wonen, p. 42

<sup>6</sup> Steunpunt tot bestrijden van armoede, bestaansonzekerheid en sociale uitsluiting, Feiten en cijfers: Hoeveel sociale woningen zijn er in België en hoeveel mensen staan op een wachtlijst? ([https://www.armoedebestrijding.be/cms/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/cijfers\\_sociale\\_huisvesting.pdf](https://www.armoedebestrijding.be/cms/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/cijfers_sociale_huisvesting.pdf))

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.oecd.org/els/family/PH4-2-Social-rental-housing-stock.pdf>

- *Implementation of the right to universal, quality and affordable education, VET and LLL throughout the life course through the Semester. Support investments in inclusive education systems, informal and non-formal education, particularly for NEETs and adult learners, accessibility, awareness raising and anti-discrimination measures*
- *Implementation of the European Child Guarantee, based on the 3 pillars of the EC Recommendation "Investing in Children" (income, access to services, participation). It is essential that access to an adequate income is also prioritised in the context of the child guarantee.*