Peer Review on "Social Activation and Participation"

Host Country Discussion Paper - Belgium

Social activation: an effective stepping stone out of social exclusion?

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary

This paper looks at policies to promote the social activation and participation of socially excluded people or people at high risk of social exclusion.

Belgium faces a number of very major challenges in the area of social inclusion. Its overall employment rate is well below the EU average, mainly driven by very poor labour market outcomes for specific groups such as low-skilled people, migrants and people with disabilities. Moreover, the share of individuals living in low work intensity households is exceptionally high in the EU context.

It is in this context that policies have emerged to promote the social integration of people deemed to be far removed from the labour market. Such social activation policies are distinct but not entirely separate from the broader set of activation policies that seek to promote professional integration and mobility.

Social activation and participation policies aim to stimulate participation in society and to break social isolation by encouraging and facilitating people to engage in socially meaningful activities, either as an end in itself or as a first step in a process of socio-professional integration, possibly paid re-employment.

To this end federal government provides a yearly allowance to the local welfare offices to finance initiatives to promote social activation and participation. Within the general framework of the measure, there are three main lines of action.

First, promoting social participation of individuals. This includes all activities and initiatives aimed at allowing people to participate in cultural, sporting and social activities and promoting their access to new information and communication technologies. A second line of action is the organisation of collective modules which can complement individual support. The intention is that participants in a collective module acquire knowledge, skills, insights that they can apply in their daily life. Examples of such modules are courses and workshops on budget management, healthy eating, language acquisition, attitude training, dealing with authority, taking public transport independently, upgrading the self-image. In addition, a third line of action involves the fight against child poverty.

As Belgium is a federal state, the regions also play an important role in social activation. The regions deploy additional policies to promote the social integration of people at risk of social isolation and exclusion. These, again, consist of a mix of individual and collective initiatives. Some of these policies are aimed at specific target groups such as people with disabilities, psychological and related challenges or at new migrants.

There is very little systematic and scientifically validated evidence available on the impact of such measures, in part because of inherent difficulties in measuring and monitoring improvements in social capabilities and integration. It is known that a wide range of activities are offered, including recreational and socio-cultural activities, voluntary work and individual allowances for participation in sporting and cultural activities.

As far as the evidence goes, social activation initiatives can have positive impacts on people's daily lives. Yet it is not clear whether participation in social activation projects brings durable improvements in participant's societal position. It is also not known whether the most socially excluded are effectively reached.

Research suggest that for social activation to succeed it is necessary to carefully map needs first. These tend to differ quite substantially among the usually very diverse target population, necessitating diversified actions. Projects need time to grow, both in terms of numbers of participants as in terms of content. Participation thresholds need

to be kept as low as possible. Flexibility with regard to the content and pace of the project is also seen as a good practice, especially since social activation tends to serve as an end in itself.

More generally, it is seen as crucial that the people running the activation projects are enthusiastic, motivated and committed, especially because successful social activation requires time, energy and effort. For people to be motivated, they need time and recognition for their work. Staff must also have enough creative space and freedom to experiment. For that it is important that welfare agencies are incentivised to run social activation programs. Mere funding is not necessarily enough.

1 Situation in the host country

This paper looks at policies to promote the social integration of people deemed to be far away from the (non-sheltered) labour market in Belgium[1]. It is therefore relevant here to sketch out the current context, especially the high barriers to labour market entry.

In a broader view, Belgium performs relatively well on some of the indicators of the Social Scoreboard supporting the European Pillar of Social Rights, ranking among the best performing EU Member States when it comes to such outcomes as gender equality, childcare and fair working conditions (European Commission, 2020a, 2020b).

Nevertheless, **Belgium continues to face a number of very major challenges in the area of social inclusion.**

Belgium's employment rate continues to be well below the EU average, mainly driven by very poor labour market outcomes for specific groups.

While unemployment is just below EU average, **there is significantly more long-term unemployment than elsewhere in the EU**. This is especially the case in certain regions, mostly in the French-speaking part of Belgium, in Brussels and in the bigger cities, including in Flanders. The employment rate of immigrants in Belgium is particularly low and the gap between foreign born and natives is among the highest in the European Union. Older workers' employment rates remain especially low. There has also been significant inflow into long-term sickness and disability over more recent years.

Moreover, **the share of individuals living in low-work-intensity households continues to be exceptionally high in the EU context.** People with disabilities face challenges with respect to poverty, educational attainment and employment outcomes.

Monetary poverty (AROP) has increased slightly to 16.4% in 2018. The AROP rate is high among people with low qualifications (32.1%), the non-EU born (42.3%), people with disabilities (21.7% in 2017) and people living in very low-work-intensity households (72.8%), suggesting **a strong correlation between low employment rates and the prevalence of poverty**.

The fact that underemployment persists even in the context of strong demand for labour may have to do with the way the Belgian labour market is institutionally embedded. Organisations such as the European Commission and the OECD have long argued that the functioning of the **labour market is being hampered by many rigidities** in the areas of hiring and firing, working times, wage setting and working conditions. Product and service market regulation are also extensive, hampering job creation in certain sectors as well as mobility across sectors and jobs. Successive Country Specific Recommendations by the European Commission have called for reforms in all these areas.

The cost of labour, particularly low-skilled labour, remains among the highest in Europe. The fact that there has been no growth in low-paid employment is especially striking. According to OECD figures for 2015, less than 4 per cent of workers in Belgium work for relative low pay as the OECD defines it, against 9 per cent in France, 15 per cent in the Netherlands and 18 per cent in Germany.

Why does Belgium have so few lower paid jobs? Belgium does not have a statutory legal minimum wage but there is a minimum wage on which employers and trade unions agree at the national level. This mainly serves as a benchmark. Effective

[1] My thanks to David De Vaal, Arne Proesmans, Marjolijn de Wilde, Ludo Struyven, Wim Van Lancker, Yannick Vanderborght, Enya Marchal, Ine Bogemans and Peter Raeymaeckers, for their guidance and insights.

minimum floors (i.e. pay scales for the youngest, least qualified and least experienced workers) are negotiated at the sectoral level and tend to be considerably higher than the nation-wide minimum wage (Vandekerckhove & Van Gyes, 2014).

Those elevated wage floors combined with social security contributions, which are among the highest in the EU, make labour - especially less skilled labour - expensive. As a consequence**, productivity requirements are high, putting people who are less skilled or hampered by other (physical, mental health-related or social) challenges at a disadvantage.**

In short, **barriers to labour market entry are particularly high** in Belgium. In order to help people overcome these barriers, **a whole arsenal of active labour market policies (ALMPs) has been deployed** in Belgium. According to OECD and Eurostat statistics, Belgium ranks, relative to its GDP, among the highest spenders on ALMPs in Europe. **Much of ALMP spending is on employer subsidies**, mostly in the form of (targeted) employers' social security reductions. The rationale behind such efforts is the perception on the part of policy makers that Belgium's exceptionally low employment rate among low-skilled people and other disadvantaged groups owes to insufficient demand from employers due to Belgium's high cost of labour, especially low-skilled labour.

A relatively newer trend is the subsidization of low-paid workers themselves. The so-called Belgian 'Work Bonus' was introduced in 2005 and has been augmented since. The work bonus reduces personal social security contributions for low wage workers. The reduction is highest at wage levels around the minimum wage and is gradually tapered away. The primary rationale of this measure is to increase the incentive to work, especially to take up relatively low-paid work.

In addition, **a sizeable share of ALMP spending goes on counselling, job-search assistance, training and vocational placement.** These are organised through various channels aimed at different sections of the workforce, the unemployed (including newcomers), those already in work as an employee and the (aspiring) self-employed.

But, **despite all these significant efforts, many people clearly continue to face formidable barriers to regular employment in Belgium**. Employment growth remained weak even in the pre-Corona context of strong economic growth and additional government efforts to boost employment, including a massive and permanent reduction in employers' social security contributions (the so-called tax shift). Employment rates among the low-skilled remained on the decline and more and more people were exiting the labour market because of chronic illnesses.

Moreover, and most importantly in the present context**, the number of people resorting to local welfare agencies for financial and other support has increased steadily** over the past decades. Again, this happened prior to the Corona crisis in the context of strong economic growth. In 2020, there was a further increase in the number of people applying for welfare support although the increase was perhaps not as dramatic as might have been expected.

It is in this context of structural exclusion from the labour market of large sections of the population that social activation, explained in further detail in the next section, has particular relevance in Belgium.

2 Policy measure

Social participation rights are among the fundamental rights enshrined in the Belgian Constitution.

Article 23 of the Belgian Constitution states: 'Everyone has the right to lead a life in dignity. To this end, the law, federate law or rule [...] shall guarantee economic, social and cultural rights, the conditions for the exercise of which shall be determined. These rights include, in particular: [...] 5° the right to cultural and social development.'

Belgium's public welfare offices have a legal mission in this respect. Article 57 of the law of 8 July 1976 states that it is their task to ensure not only supportive or curative help, but also preventive help. The law also clarifies that one of the specific tasks of the local welfare offices is to promote the social participation of users.

Social activation and participation policies are distinct but not entirely separate from the broader set of activation policies that seek to promote professional integration and mobility. **Social activation and participation policies are there specifically for people who are deemed to be far removed from the labour market** because of health, housing, care, sociopsychological or other difficulties. **They aim to stimulate participation in society and to break social isolation by encouraging and facilitating socially meaningful activities**, either as an end in itself or as a first step in a process of socio-professional integration, and possibly paid re-employment.

Belgium is a federal state. Social security and social assistance remain mostly federal competencies. Family benefits are one notable exception. While income support remains for the most part federal, many policies that can be categorised as falling under the umbrella of social activation are organised and executed at the regional level. As a consequence of this, there is considerable regional variation in the shaping and praxis of social activation policies. This makes sense to a large extent since needs and challenges differ across Belgium's regions. Important parts of the Walloon Region are still recovering from large scale economic restructuring. Unemployment and underemployment remain the most important problems there. Employment levels among low-skilled people, foreign born people and people with disabilities also remain low in Flanders, especially in the larger cities and some sub-regions. Brussels is facing formidable problems of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion.

That said, **the federal level also has a very important role when it comes to social activation and participation policies**. The funding of social assistance remains a federal competency and the broad framework is also set out there. As elsewhere, the main function of social assistance is to serve as a final social safety net.

Benefits can be granted on the basis of two acts, namely the 'Right to Social Integration' and the 'Right to Social Assistance'. The first act applies by and large to long-term residents while the second act roughly applies to recent migrants without permanent settlement status. The federal statutory framework is administered by 589 local welfare agencies, one in each Belgian municipality[2]. Funding is shared by the local agency and the federal state.

The role of Belgium's local welfare offices in the area of social and professional integration has grown steadily (Hermans et al., 1999; Nicaise, 2001). This trend stems from the generalised turn towards 'the active welfare state' over the past two decades. The role of local welfare agencies is no longer limited to guaranteeing benefits, but it has expanded to stimulating and facilitating certain behaviours that are deemed beneficial to clients and society at large.

[2] Known in Belgium as "Openbaar Centrum voor Maatschappelijk Welzijn" (OCMW) in Dutch and "Centre Public d'Action Sociale" (CPAS) in French

Local welfare agencies, having evolved from local poverty relief initiatives, historically **have a high level of autonomy** (Raeymaeckers et al, 2017). They do more than providing minimum income protection provision; they also provide medical help, housing, legal and financial, including debt and general counselling. But priorities and approaches can differ quite substantially across localities, especially when it comes to approaches to activation (Raeymaeckers et al, 2017; De Wilde, 2018).

Social activation and participation policies were put into place for people who are deemed to be far removed from the labour market because of health, housing, care or other difficulties. As already indicated, these policies aim to stimulate participation in society and to break social isolation. There is no clear legal distinction between social activation and professional activation.

The target group is not confined to minimum income beneficiaries. Basically, the policies **are aimed at the broader clientele of local welfare agencies**, including people who seek help for medical, mental health and/or social problems.

The **activities offered can be very diverse**: voluntary work, employment-related activities, cultural excursions, sports activities, collective modules on healthy eating, debt relief, access to ICT, self-care, recycling and upcycling, etc.

The **federal government provides a yearly grant** to the local welfare offices to finance initiatives to promote social activation and participation. This distribution is a related to the level of poverty in a given city or municipality and the caseload.

The purpose of the grant is to financially support social activation and participation initiatives in the local welfare offices. The aim of these is to increase the self-reliance, resilience and social involvement of welfare clients and to break their social isolation by allowing them to participate in socially meaningful activities. This can be done as an end in itself or as a first step in a pathway for socio-professional inclusion.

Within the general framework of the objective of the measure, three main lines of action have been identified:

First, promoting social participation. This includes all activities and initiatives aimed at involving local welfare in the life of society and making them an integral part of society by allowing them to participate in cultural, sporting and social activities and promoting their access to new information and communication technologies. The grant may be used for: **financing of participation in social, sporting or cultural events**, including membership fees and the supplies and equipment necessary for participation.

Again, this is an individual benefit and the emphasis is on membership fees and supplies for participation in associations (insurance, equipment, or transport costs). Associations include youth movements, cultural circles, women's associations, sports clubs, but also less formally defined groups such as a reading club. Funds can also be used for supporting and financing initiatives that promote the target group's access to and participation in the new information and communication technologies.

A second line of action within the social activation funding stream is the organisation of collective modules which can complement individual support, be it in the context of individualised social integration projects or not.

Collective modules are defined as a **coherent set of multiple activities carried out in groups** with a view to achieving a specific goal (= pathway approach). The aspect of group dynamics is very important here. Participants are selected depending on the theme and the intended result.

The **intention is that participants in a collective module acquire knowledge, skills and insights which they can apply in their daily life**. Examples of such modules are courses and workshops on budget management, healthy eating, language acquisition, attitude training, dealing with authority, taking public transport independently, upgrading the self-image, etc.

Note that the objective is not to promote or support professional activation. Following the most recent State reform, the responsibility of professional activation was transferred to the regions. As a result, it is no longer possible to finance initiatives from the federal level that fall under the competence domain of 'professional activation'. Only initiatives aimed at developing and learning general skills are eligible for the allowance for participation and social activation. Initiatives aimed at acquiring professional skills are not, as they fall under the responsibilities of the regions.

A **third line of action involves the fight against child poverty**. The part of the federal grant given to local welfare offices is reserved for the fight against child poverty. It can be used for the **financing of social services to promote the social integration of children** through participation in social programmes. These include social services in the context of educational support as well as social work in the context of psychological or paramedical support for the child or for parents. It can also be used for the purchase of pedagogical material and games.

In addition to federal initiatives, the regions undertake actions that can be categorised under the heading of social activation. As this is not a legal category the choice of what falls under social activation and what not (particularly what qualifies as professional activation - an exclusive competence of the regions) is somewhat arbitrary[3].

The **Flemish Region offers mentored unpaid work in various organisations** (public, profit and non-profit) to provide people deemed to be far away from the labour market with a daily structure, to increase their self-esteem, to help them build a social network and to foster their self-development. People placed in such unpaid jobs will typically have a social assistance benefit. The job themselves are not subsidised, however the people mentoring the beneficiaries are, as are the operating costs.

This is part of a broader approach towards people deemed not capable to access paid employment (subsidised or not) in the short or medium term because of medical, mental health and/or social problems. This assessment is made by the public employment office, using specialised screening instruments. This integrated approach ('Geïntegreerd Breed Onthaal') is aimed at making sure that people deemed in need of extra support find the way to the support and services available to them, including benefits, welfare and care support, supported employment and meaningful daytime activities. In addition, a host of initiatives exist aimed at specific target groups, including people with mental health problems or disabilities.

Likewise, the **Walloon Region promotes social activation with the aim of helping disadvantaged people to widen their social links** and to enable them to gradually 'accept and assume individual and collective responsibilities, such as getting up in the morning, eating properly and regularly, having decent housing, managing one's budget, educating one's children, having self-confidence, listening to others, expressing oneself..., behaviours or activities that need to be relearned before thinking about finding a job or employment.'

The **primary aim is to improve the social situation** of people. It is something that is offered, not something that people are obliged to participate in. People can progress at their own pace and are under no obligation to find a job or training when they leave the service. The Walloon Region funds staff and operating costs in social integration services which are composed of non-profit associations and public welfare centres.

The German-speaking community is Belgium's smallest with some 77,000 inhabitants. Still the German-speaking community has developed various projects that seek to achieve similar objectives as the policies we have already discussed, for similar target

[3] In the context of this peer review the regions supplied documents spelling out their actions. I will not list all here since some fall somewhat outside the core focus of this review, as they concern policies for people with specific needs requiring specific care and support, for example people with severe disabilities.

groups. There are initiatives that aim to support socially isolated and marginalised people. These seek to promote social participation and conviviality and also to offer social and practical support. The idea is to improve people's skills in dealing with various situations. The purpose is also to connect participants with relevant institutions, both in the private and professional sphere, as well as in publicising lifelong learning opportunities such as language or computer courses.

3 Results

A key challenge in any programme evaluation is separating out 'policy impacts' from the much wider set of forces shaping the outcomes of interest. So, what are the outcomes of interest in this context? **The goal of social activation policies is fairly broadly defined: to increase the self-reliance, resilience and social involvement of welfare clients and to break their social isolation by enabling them to participate in socially meaningful activities.**

In some cases, the stated objectives are somewhat more explicit. For example, the goal of the federally funded collective modules described above is 'that participants in a collective module acquires knowledge, skills, insights which they can apply in their daily life.' (POD Maatschappelijke Integratie, 2021).

Still it remains much harder to identify relevant outcome variables and indicators than, for example, when evaluating active labour market policies. These tend to have fairly clearly defined 'one-variable' objectives such as lifting people out of unemployment or increasing their participation in paid employment. With social activation, the range of desirable outcomes is wider and also more subjective.

A further complication is the **lack of systematic policy impact evaluation** in Belgium. That is not to say that there are no systematic reporting requirements. Agencies responsible for the execution of the various initiatives are usually required to report on a yearly basis what has been done, how many people have participated and how money has been spent. But that is not the same as ascertaining the impact of a policy, especially when the objectives are not clearly defined and indeed inherently hard to measure.

There are ex-post impact evaluations, but these remain mostly sporadic and do not occur on a systematic or periodic basis. This is important because we know from the extensive policy evaluation literature that there can be vast discrepancies between what ex-ante theories and modes predict and what the actual outcomes of various measures are.

Within the Federal agency responsible for social integration (POD Maatschappelijke Integratie/SPP Intégration Social), there is a taskforce on social activation that meets at least yearly. Within this taskforce experiences are shared and discussed so as to foster peer learning.

The most comprehensive study of social activation in Belgium, hereafter referred to Van Dooren et al (2012), found **that a very wide range of activities are offered by local welfare agencies**. The long list is led by recreational and socio-cultural activities, individual allowances for participation in sporting and cultural activities or in playgrounds (so-called leisure allowances; cheque 'art. 27'), voluntary work and education or training outside the professional sphere. In Flanders volunteering is much in the foreground while in Wallonia and Brussels workshops and discussion groups are relatively more important. Only very small municipalities have no social activation projects or activities.

Most local welfare offices aim to **reach a broad target audience**. In the majority of the local welfare offices, everyone living in the municipality/city is eligible for social activation. The larger municipalities tend to offer a wider range of services but they also try to cater to stricter target groups because of their large caseloads.

Most **local welfare offices use own and other resources** in addition to the funds earmarked for social activation. The **European Social Fund serves as one important additional source.**

To create further leverage, local welfare offices also **work together with other departments** within their municipal organisations and also with other **local**

organisations and actors, including training and education providers, social economy projects and public employment offices.

However, the study by Van Dooren et al (2012) did not answer the most important question: what does social activation actually do for the integration of people relatively far removed from the labour market and society? Does it alter their behaviour? Does it alter their attitudes and skills in a way that durably improves their societal position? To answer these key questions we still lack systematic and scientifically validated evidence.

Front line case workers feel that social activation initiatives can have very positive and in some cases even critical impacts[4]. **Projects can make a substantial difference in vulnerable people's lives**, if only offering a degree of relief to the loneliness, isolation, despair and loss of self-esteem they can encounter on a daily basis. Simple activities such as cooking together can bring a **social dimension to people's lives** that would otherwise not be there. The main benefits lie in breaking social isolation and also in **improving people's self-image and their ability to communicate** and to stand up for their rights. Initiatives like a project in one municipality where people simply learn to ride a bike are very popular and are said to have **emancipatory power**. The idea is not just that people - often migrant women- learn to ride a bike but also that they develop a sense of independence and a voice. Newly arrived migrants with few social ties can benefit greatly from activities aiming at social integration and the improvement of communication and self-expression skills as their prime objective. The social ties they develop there can help in finding work or housing.

However, people involved in advocacy organisations for the poor point out that welfare beneficiaries are **sometimes obliged to participate** or experience pressure to participate, for example as part of the social integration contracts they have to sign in order to receive support[5]. It is also claimed that some local welfare agencies do not give sufficient recognition to voluntary organisations and initiatives people may already be involved in. It is argued that there could be more cooperation between the official social activation initiatives and the more informal, spontaneous ones. On the other hand, social workers in public welfare offices point out that not all voluntary organisations are equally open to cooperation, especially when it comes to catering to people with limited language skills or with severe psychosocial issues.

[4] For this paper I talked to a number of people involved in or familiar with in the daily execution of social activation projects in order to get a better grasp of what the reality on the ground looks like. These impressions are of course not to be taken as representative but even if anecdotal I believe they provide insights that are useful for the debate.

[5] People applying for welfare support are required to enter a so-called individualised integration project, a tailored trajectory that is laid down in a contract. A consequence of non-compliance can be a curtailing of support.

4 Difficulties and constraints

The Van Dooren et al. (2012) review of social activation practices in Belgian welfare offices sought to identify constraints to successful activation using both quantitative and qualitative analysis. A survey of 234 local welfare offices identified **lack of staff (time) as the most serious bottleneck**. Local welfare offices complained of overall staff shortages which also affected the time available for social activation initiatives. This was seen as a major hinderance especially because many social activation activities require significant staff time. (It is important to note here that since this study took place the number of clients has continued to increase in a very significant way.)

Another bottleneck is that participants drop out. About half of local welfare agencies mentioned this as a major difficulty. A third bottle neck mentioned was a **lack of financial resources**. In addition, local welfare offices stated that while they have federal funds available, they have **little financial incentive** to use them, especially when they are already burdened with many other responsibilities.

Social activation **requires significant time, energy and effort**. The Van Dooren et al (2012) study found that staff working on social activation projects sometimes lacked the time they really needed and that they performed work outside their paid working hours, which they experienced as a lack of recognition.

People currently involved in social activation with whom I talked confirm that this is still an issue especially since **activation into paid work has gained even more importance** over recent years. People involved in social activation feel even less recognition for the efforts they put into activities that do not have getting people into work as their prime finality. They say that this is sometimes reflected in the resources, staffing and time they have available for social activation.

5 Success factors and transferability

First, **needs need to be known**, Van Dooren et al. (2012) found. This is very much echoed by people on the ground today. A good practice is to map first what the profile of potential participants is and what their needs are. That usually means that different activation projects are set up for different target groups. Lone mothers, for example, have needs that are different from those of newly arrived sole migrants or people with psycho-social challenges or people with addiction problems. Diversity is key.

To reach out to target groups a **mix of communication channels** can be used: local media, social networking sites, flyers, outreach techniques, word of mouth and active promotion by local welfare offices and partner organisations.

Patience may be required in that **projects need time to develop**, both in terms of numbers of participants and content. With time, word of mouth can do its job thus expanding reach. However, **realistic expectations** about the reach of social activation activities are necessary: a great deal of effort is sometimes needed to engage only a limited number of people.

In order to make access as easy as possible, it is important to **keep thresholds to participation as low as possible**. Low participation costs are a good practice. Other commitments can be an obstacle, for example childcare duties. This can be solved by admitting children to certain activities. In rural municipalities mobility can be a problem.

It can take effort to keep participants on board once a first threshold has been taken. **Long interruptions are best avoided**, for example during school vacations. People are best reminded when they stay away from the project for a long time, for example by text messages or a home visit. The **group-binding** effect also ensures that people continue to come. Once participants are truly integrated into the group, they typically do not drop out but for external reasons, for example returning to the labour market or moving.

Some social workers cited in the study also stated that compulsory participation does not have to be negative. In some case there is the experience that, over time, an obligation becomes intrinsic motivation. **Mandatory participation can** thus be seen as a **helpful** push. But as I already indicated, advocacy groups for the poor have reservations about this.

It seems important not to define the target group and content of the project too rigidly. Several projects have had good experiences with mixing participant groups, for example mixing welfare clients with other participants from other organisation in order to avoid perceptions and feelings of stigmatisation.

Staff involved in social activation projects say that mixing clients with others, for example volunteers, can lead to nice results. In the town of Mechelen for example there is a project where social activation participants - mostly new migrants with limited local language skills and networks - go jogging with volunteer citizens. This project seems to foster lasting social ties with clear advantages, for example when it comes to job search or finding housing.

Flexibility with regard to the content and pace of the project is also seen as a good practice.

More generally, it is seen as crucial that **employees are enthusiastic, motivated and committed**. Motivation and commitment are deemed essential because social activation requires time, energy and effort. For people to be motivated they **need time and recognition for their work**. This is a feeling very much echoed by some of the front-line workers with whom I spoke in the context of preparing this paper.

Staff must also have **enough creative space and freedom** to experiment. Sometime scale is a problem. People responsible for social activation in smaller places

work alone or quasi alone. Yet working in a team has important advantages, especially if creativity requires that people have sounding boards.

Cooperation with people in other departments and organisations can help to share work (organisational, budgetary, administrative) **and cost**. It helps when the organisational unit responsible is already part of a larger network of associations in a municipality. Partners may also make additional resources available or be instrumental in securing further funding.

When thinking about cross-country transferability, the key issue is how context specific the observed outcomes of certain policies and initiatives are.

The challenge of integrating people facing various disadvantages into society is clearly a shared one all across Europe. In every Member State there are people who face difficulties fully participating in society because they lack the resources or because they have other challenges.

Yet contexts differ in crucial respects. These need to be kept in mind when thinking about potential cross-country transferability. Let me name a few.

First, **barriers to labour market entry are not everywhere equally high in the European Union**. Some countries have much more inclusive labour markets than others. This is clearly evident when one compares employment outcomes across countries, especially for people with fewer skills, a migrant background, a disability or other challenges. Belgium faces a particularly severe problem of structural labour market exclusion. The potential target group of the policies under focus here is thus comparatively wide and numerous. This being said, social activation measures in Belgium at this time mainly target social welfare recipients, who make up only a minority of the much larger non-active population of working age. The people receiving social assistance at any given time make up around 1.5 per cent of the Belgian population, which is of course only a fraction of the non-employed population.

Second, **whether disadvantaged people can participate in society arguably depends on the adequacy of minimum income protection provisions and related services**, for example, social housing and health care. There is very wide variation in the adequacy of poverty relief across Europe, as countless studies have documented (European Commission, 2020a; Marx, 2019). Minimum income protection provisions for various segments of society fall well short of widely accepted poverty thresholds in many countries, including Belgium (Marchal and Sioland, 2020). Research has clearly demonstrated that people on social assistance in Belgium can often barely afford the most essential goods and services necessary for survival, let alone having spare money for leisure and social activities, even very low cost ones. That is not much different in most other European countries (Penne et al., 2019; Penne, 2020)

Third**, the cost of participation in cultural, sports and social activities differs across countries**. Belgium stands out as a country with a very large and well-subsidised cultural sector offering a wide range of events at usually very reasonable prices or for free. Sports facilities are equally extensive and well-subsidised. The same applies to youth and social movements. In addition, special rates are often offered to people who are on social assistance or unemployed. In that sense, financial thresholds to cultural participation are low. Public transport is heavily subsidised and thus relatively cheap. However, in rural and some suburban areas public transport options may still be scarce.

Other conditions may differ across countries, for example the legal room there is for people on benefits to enter non-professional activation trajectories. In Belgium this is only possible for some segments of the claimant population and under certain conditions.

6 Key findings and conclusions

Social activation and participation policies seek to stimulate participation in society and to break social isolation by encouraging and enabling people to engage in socially meaningful activities, either as an end in itself or as a first step in a process of socio-professional integration, possibly paid re-employment. These policies are primarily aimed at people for whom professional activation is not deemed feasible or desirable.

The Belgian federal government funds local welfare offices to finance initiatives to promote social activation and participation. A very wide range of activities are offered, including recreational and socio-cultural activities, workshops, individual allowances for participation in sporting and cultural activities or in playgrounds, voluntary work and education or training outside the professional sphere. **In addition, regional and local governments deploy a wide range of initiatives** that seek to promote social integration.

As far as the evidence goes, **social activation initiatives can have very positive impacts on people's daily lives**, especially if participation is not perceived as a precondition for receiving welfare or other support. Yet it is **not clear whether participation in social activation projects brings durable improvements in participants' social status**. It is also not known whether the most socially excluded are effectively reached.

Research suggests that for social activation to succeed it is necessary to carefully **map needs** first. Projects **need time** to develop, both in terms of numbers of participants as in terms of content. Participation thresholds need to be kept as low as possible. **Flexibility** with regard to the content and pace of the project is also seen as a good practice.

More generally, it is seen as crucial that the **people running the activation projects are enthusiastic, motivated and committed**, especially because successful social activation requires time, energy and effort. For people to be motivated they need time and recognition for their work. Staff must also have enough **creative space** and freedom to experiment. For that it is important that welfare agencies are incentivised to run social activation programmes.

The most important question we cannot answer. That is: what does social activation actually do for the integration of socially isolated people or people struggling with this issue because of lack of money or other reasons? To answer that key question, we still lack systematic and scientifically validated evidence. Gathering more evidence on what social activation actually does for people, in the short term and in the longer term is clearly a priority.

From what we know and especially from the brief interviews conducted in the context of this paper **some important issues** emerge for further debate, also drawing on the excellent questions in some of the briefs provided by the regions:

- Can social activation and participation projects, which tend to be limited in scope, time and intensity, really help overcome social exclusion in a lasting and structural way? Especially in a context where barriers to integration through work are formidable, as is the case in Belgium? Does social activation really make enough of a difference to the socio-economic status of the most disadvantaged? Simply put, is it enough to tackle Belgium's serious social exclusion problem?
- What role should obligation play? One the one hand there are voices arguing that encouraging people to participate in activities they would not spontaneously engage in but that they may eventually like and find rewarding, is necessary. On the other hand, people sometimes experience participation in

social activation activities as an obligation, and even a sanctioning or stigmatizing one. What is the right balance? What is a legitimate balance?

- Can stigma, or feelings of stigmatisation be avoided? Does it help to mix people who belong to the prime target groups and other people?
- If social activation is a task of local welfare offices that have many other duties, not least of which is professional activation, how can these agencies be incentivised to make meaningful social activation a reality?
- How can citizens, neighbourhoods, employers and other organisations be involved? What are successful ways of involving local residents so that people with medical, mental health and/or social problems can find a place in the community? How can cooperation with voluntary organisations be enhanced so as to create leverage?
- What is the best way to finance social activation? Is it better to finance organisations or units dedicated to social activation? That has the potential advantage that expertise and experience accumulate over time within that organisation. Project financing has the potential advantage that it brings more experimentation and innovation albeit at the risk that effective approaches are not sustained. It is also possible to finance clients themselves so that they can seek and access the help they most need. But then the question is whether they have the capability to do so.
- What are practically feasible ways of measuring and monitoring the impact of social activation initiatives? What are good, timely and above all practical indicators of social integration? How can the learning capacity of organisations involved in social activation be increased and how can good practices be diffused? While administrative accountability may require a quantitative approach to impact assessment, learning may require more qualitative, interpretative approaches that seek to understand why certain actions work and others have less of an impact (Boost et al, 2020).

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