



# Peer Review on Experimental methods for impact evaluation of social inclusion policies

Peer Country Paper – Belgium

**Unveiling the impact: the role of experimental  
designs in social policy evaluation**

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## 1 Introduction

This paper has been prepared for the Peer Review on experimental methods for impact evaluation of social inclusion policies held in Spain. In order to potentially inform the host country's approach, the paper provides an assessment of impact evaluation methods used in Belgium in the field of social inclusion policies.

For information on the host country policy example, please refer to the Host Country Paper.

## 2 Situation in Belgium

In 2021, 19% of the Belgian population found themselves in a situation of poverty or social exclusion (EU-SILC; Statbel, Eurostat, Statistics Flanders). This represents approximately 2 144 000 people in Belgium who have an income below the poverty threshold, experience severe material and social deprivation, and/or are characterized by low work intensity. Belgium thus ranks eleventh in the European ranking for this EU2030 indicator. Despite the COVID-19 crisis and the subsequent rise in energy and food prices, leading to high inflation, this indicator has remained relatively stable in recent years, with minor fluctuations just below 20% (EU-SILC; Statbel, Eurostat, Statistics Flanders). This stability is partly due to government interventions, such as the automatic indexing of wages and social benefits and the reduction of VAT on energy. However, in recent years there has been a significant increase in the number of requests for assistance and support, illustrating that the overall situation is certainly not improving.

In Belgium, there are significant regional differences when it comes to poverty and social exclusion. In 2021, the proportion of people in poverty or social exclusion in the Flemish Region was 12%, while in the Walloon Region it was 25%, and in the Brussels-Capital Region as high as 35%.

The policy to address poverty and social inclusion is shaped at various levels: federal, regional, and local. At each of these levels, there is also an awareness that combating poverty and promoting societal integration and social inclusion requires a cross-sectoral policy that spans various policy domains.

To achieve this, cross-cutting action plans for poverty reduction and societal integration are developed at each level. At the federal level, the awareness that coordination between various federal public services is necessary for a policy on poverty reduction and social inclusion is also evidenced by the existence of a Federal Public Planning Service for Social Integration, anti-Poverty policy, Social Economy and Federal Urban Policy (PPS SI), which has precisely this as its goal.

In terms of policy evaluation, Belgium is generally characterized by a weak demand for policy evaluation (OECD, 2023<sup>1</sup>) although there is recognition of the importance of policy evaluation, as evidenced by the federal government agreement (2020-2024), and there is increasing attention to it, partly due to the growing importance attached to evidence-informed policy by EU institutions. This is exemplified by the establishment of the Directorate-General Budget and Policy Evaluation in 2017 within the Federal Public Service Policy and Support (BOSA) and the introduction of spending reviews.

Different types of shortcomings related to policy evaluation can be identified. Firstly, there is a lack of quality assurance and the expectations regarding the type of policy evaluation are often not clearly defined. Secondly, policy evaluation is not embedded within the policy cycle. And thirdly, there is little coordination of evaluation research, resulting in little cross-

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<sup>1</sup> OECD, 2023. Improving decision making through policy evaluation in Belgium. OECD Public Governance Policy Paper, no. 31. Paris, OECD Publishing. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1787/08f7aef5-en>> [Accessed 21 November 2023].

sectoral policy research. These shortcomings are also noticeable in the area of policies aiming at poverty reduction and social inclusion.

In relation to specific policies to address poverty and promote social inclusion, there are some structural initiatives to promote policy evaluation, though. There is an intergovernmental policy support centre (Steunpunt) for combating poverty, existential insecurity and social exclusion which is responsible for preparing a biennial evaluation report on existential insecurity, poverty and social exclusion and the implemented policy. There is the Poverty Barometer, which monitors, among other things, the strategic objectives of the Federal Plan for Poverty Reduction. Furthermore, there is significant investment in BELMOD<sup>2</sup>, a successor to microsimulation model MIMOSIS, to perform simulations and ex-ante evaluations concerning adjustments in social protection and to have an overview of all measures being taken. However, the general tenor is that rigorous evaluation research remains exceptional and ad hoc, and it not carried out systematically.

Nevertheless, in this policy area in Belgium, several interesting counterfactual impact evaluations have recently been conducted, offering important lessons both substantively and methodologically. However, these studies also illustrate the lack of a structural framework for (counterfactual) policy evaluation in the field of poverty reduction and social inclusion. The next section will delve deeper into three of them<sup>3</sup>.

### 3 Assessment of methods for impact evaluation of social policies in Belgium

The use of experimental research designs in Belgium on poverty reduction and social inclusion policies is demonstrated through three recent cases, each originating from a different policy level. The first example concerns the evaluation of MIRIAM (2015-2017), a federal initiative. The second example is the evaluation of CREActief (2020-2022), part of Flemish policy implemented through ESF (European Social Fund) calls, and the third example, MISSION (2016-2019) is a local initiative supported by the European EaSI programme (Employment and Social Innovation).

For each example, the policy initiative and the context of the evaluation are first outlined. This is followed by a description of both the main characteristics of the methodological approach and the substantive conclusions. The discussion of each example concludes with an overview of the main challenges and possibly the current status of the measure.

#### 3.1 MIRIAM

The MIRIAM project was initiated in 2015 with the support of the State Secretary for Poverty Reduction. The coordination was undertaken by the Dutch-speaking Women's Council, with support and follow-up provided by the PPS SI. The initiative consists of offering intensive, gender-sensitive, and holistic guidance to single mothers through the Public Centres for Social Welfare (PCSW). The aim is to empower this vulnerable group, reduce poverty, and

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<sup>2</sup> BELMOD is a project coordinated by the Federal Public Service Social security and funded by the European Commission. Its purpose is to modernise the current microsimulation model of the FPS Social Security (MIMOSIS) and draw up an inventory of policy measures to reduce the non-take-up of social rights in Belgium. Website: <https://socialsecurity.belgium.be/en/shaping-social-policy/belmod-project/project-description-belmod>

<sup>3</sup> In addition to the mentioned studies, a counterfactual study of Housing First and TAKE was also conducted on a federal initiative, and within the same project call as the one that gave birth to CREActief in Flanders, other evaluation studies took place, which had to meet the same quality requirements. At the federal level, however, it was decided to focus on MIRIAM as it is better documented and directly followed up by the government representative who contributed to this peer country review. At the Flemish level, CREActief was chosen as an example due to the focus on vulnerable job-seekers.

break the social isolation they often find themselves in. In this way, the project ultimately contributes to the socio-professional integration of single mothers.

The project started in 2015 with the participation of 5 PCSWs (Charleroi, Namur, Sint-Jans-Molenbeek, Ghent, Leuven). In each of the PCSWs, case managers were appointed to provide guidance to the single mothers. The guidance consisted of both collective sessions and individual support.

In the first two years, the project's impact was studied using an experimental design. This evaluation was conducted by an external party, the Karel de Grote University College.

In the first evaluation year, each case manager guided ten mothers. The intervention was not defined as a fixed set of actions, but rather based on achieving objectives. The intervention lasted 9 months. For each participant in MIRIAM, the case manager selected a comparable single mother for the control group, who received standard PCSW support. The impact measurement was based on three surveys with validated scales. In addition, the mothers in the experimental condition were asked about their experience of the intervention. The intervention was also monitored through intervision meetings where case managers shared their experiences.

In the first year, a baseline measurement was taken for 115 participants, 63 in the experimental condition, and 52 in the control condition. 78 participants were considered full cases with both pre- and post-measurements available.

In the second year, the intervention was slightly adjusted: the number of mothers per case manager increased from ten to fifteen and based on good practices from the first project year, the intervention was more uniformly implemented across the PCSWs. The target group was more narrowly defined, and the assignment to conditions was further objectified. The number of measurement moments was also reduced from three to two, and the questionnaires used were shortened.

The adjustments to the intervention and research design reflected strengths and weaknesses that had emerged in the first evaluation cycle. The experimental design seemed very promising for unequivocally demonstrating the impact of MIRIAM. The desired evolutions were visible on all target indicators. The subjective experience of the intervention reported by the participants also indicated a positive effect of the intensive guidance. It seemed that variations in approach between PCSWs and the small sample size had hindered the unequivocal demonstration of the effect. By starting with more mothers per case manager and simplifying the measurement, both a higher number of participants at the start and less dropout were pursued.

These adjustments proved successful. In the second research cycle, the targeted changes were significantly observed in the intervention group. However, some aspects remained challenging: there were still significant differences in approach between some PCSWs, the validity of the measurement instrument remained delicate (outcomes were sometimes highly dependent on the participants' mood of the day) and guiding and measuring participants who were non-native speakers remained challenging. The evaluation also encountered systemic obstacles that lay outside the intervention but sometimes hindered a structural improvement in the situation of single mothers. Additionally, dropout between baseline and final measurement remained significant, although it was greatly reduced by the measures taken.

This project illustrates the complexity and challenges of experimental impact evaluations in this policy context, but also shows the potential of the approach and the importance of good design.

Today, MIRIAM still exists and has been rolled out in as many as 35 PCSWs, guiding nearly 1 000 single women annually. Monitoring of the participants and their progress on the target indicators continues, but the comparison with a control group has been omitted. The value



of the approach has been established, and as the project evolved from experimental to structural, the focus has shifted from impact evaluation to scaling and monitoring.

### 3.2 CREActief

CREActief is a project that emerged from a Flemish ESF (European Social Fund) call for innovative projects aimed at strengthening the position of workers or job seekers. (Innovation through adaptation). The call stipulated that projects should first develop and iteratively test a new service, before implementing it in a pilot and concurrently testing its impact.

CREActief represented a new service for vulnerable job seekers. The project ran from 1 January 2020 to 30 June 2022. Specifically, a structured trajectory consisting of an intake, several group sessions, and a retrospective was developed and tested. During the group sessions, exercises inspired by creative methodologies and insights from psychoeducation (musical assignments, drama, movement) were conducted. The goal was to foster personal growth in terms of self-acceptance, self-expression, and self-knowledge and reduce the distance of the job seekers to the labour market through these alternative means. Each trajectory (intervention) lasted 5-6 weeks, allowing a maximum of 10 participants per trajectory. The trajectories were repeated multiple times to involve enough participants.

The sample for the evaluation consisted of 46 individuals in the intervention group and 32 in the control group. The evaluation showed that the CREActief sessions indeed had the desired person-strengthening effect. However, some effects were not significant due to the (too) small sample size.

Apart from the subsidy framework, which provided several quality assurances (involving an external impact evaluator, involving the impact evaluator in the development of the intervention, a playbook for impact measurement approved by the subsidizing authority required to progress to the pilot, training sessions for impact evaluators), this example is also interesting because, unlike other guidance interventions in this policy area, the guidance was strictly defined beforehand (number and spread of sessions, number of attendees per session, exercises to be provided, profile of guidance, etc.). This approach ensured high comparability between sessions, but also imposed stricter conditions for including observations in the analysis and potentially less learnings about the reasons for effects from variations.

The project's course also illustrated that despite thorough design, an evaluation does not always proceed as intended, necessitating a certain flexibility to maximize its yield. Firstly, CREActief took place amidst the COVID-19 crisis, which obviously impacted the ability to organize group sessions. Recruiting candidates proved more challenging than expected, leading to adjustments in the recruitment strategy (originally pipeline approach) during the project. Finally, the analysis of the baseline measurements revealed too many differences between the control and experimental conditions, necessitating a shift to a difference-in-difference approach instead of the originally planned classic t-test.

Nevertheless, the evaluation demonstrated the intervention's effectiveness. This outcome led to the service being validated by the ESF managing authorities, and CREActief became eligible for additional funding to scale up the project through a SCALE call. CREActief is currently running under this scaling-up call and is being rolled out across various regions in Flanders. The proven outcomes help to convince partners elsewhere in Flanders to adopt this approach. A train-the-trainer program has been developed as well and is successfully deployed.

### 3.3 MISSION

The 'Mission' project (Mobile Integrated Social Services Increasing employment Outcomes for people in Need) is an example of a local initiative made possible by a subsidy from the

European Commission under the Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EASI)<sup>4</sup>. It ran from December 2016 until November 2019 and was coordinated by the Public Centre for Social Welfare in the city of Kortrijk (PCSW Kortrijk). It relied on close collaboration with the Flemish Agency for Child and Family Welfare (Kind en Gezin) and scientific support provided by the Herman Deleeck Centre for Social Policy at the University of Antwerp, in collaboration with Vives University of Applied Sciences and Howest University of Applied Sciences.

The project focused on vulnerable families with children who struggled to find the right help in the fragmented local support landscape. The purpose of the project was twofold: to develop a methodology and to evaluate it. Specifically, the project stands for 'outreaching case management'. The question was whether this methodology worked to increase the use of local assistance, promote the uptake of financial support, and improve the living conditions of vulnerable families.

Five outreaching case managers (OCMs) were sent to families and started an average one-year trajectory of guidance. The OCMs served as the central point of contact for the family and the aid organizations. Their interventions were defined based on guidelines rather than detailed and strict activity prescriptions. Over the three years of the project, a total of 133 families were guided by the OCMs.

The evaluation of the project was carried out via a randomized controlled trial (RCT) with three measurements: a baseline measurement, a measurement after six months, and a measurement after twelve months. In total, 112 families were included in the sample including 56 in the experimental condition, who were guided by an OCM, and 56 who, like everyone else, could make use of pre-existing services and continued to receive the same help they had been getting previously. Due to the different start times, all baseline and follow-up measurements did not occur simultaneously. In the evaluation, participants, OCMs and relevant aid organizations were involved. Additionally, administrative data about the participating families were included in the evaluation.

Peer-to-peer learning meetings between the OCMs and detailed logbooks were used to keep track of the precise activities, to make improvements throughout the guidance, and to better understand the working principle behind the intervention. Researchers were also involved in this process.

To bridge language barriers when questioning participants, translators were deployed.

The results showed that the OCM had no direct effect on structural living conditions such as income, housing, or employment, but did have significant effects on knowledge of rights, receipt of additional financial support and benefits, and participation in employment programs. The trust of the families proved crucial to the success of the service.

Despite the very well-considered setup, the project also faced significant challenges: first, finding needy families not already known to the aid organizations, second, dropout of (potential) participants throughout the project (of the 281 approached families, only 112 participated in the baseline measurement and 94 in the post-measurement). Finally, the position of the OCM as an advocate for the families sometimes created tension with his or her position as an employee of the PCSW.

Nevertheless, like CREActief, the MISSION project is an example of how social innovation and a scientifically high-quality evaluation study can go hand in hand. It resulted in convincing evidence to deploy OCMs for the guidance of vulnerable families and guidelines on how best to implement the practice elsewhere.

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<sup>4</sup> The total cost of the project was EUR 1.9 million, of which 80% was subsidised by EU funds.

## 4 Assessment of success factors and transferability of practices

Counterfactual evaluations are a powerful tool for unambiguously testing and demonstrating the effect of policies, which can contribute to the continuation or expansion of measures. However, as evidenced by the Belgian examples, there are significant challenges in applying an experimental design in the context of poverty reduction policy or policy aimed at social integration.

A major challenge is reaching and maintaining a sufficiently large and representative sample, particularly due to high attrition in the hard-to-reach, vulnerable target groups. Randomly assigning individuals to control or intervention groups is often difficult to achieve, leading to a lack of equivalence between the groups. Moreover, the requirement to execute interventions identically, regardless of the beneficiary, often creates tension with the need for tailored guidance. Operationalizing and validly measuring the expected effects in this target group is also challenging.

Furthermore, counterfactual impact evaluations cannot always provide comprehensive insights into the reasons why an intervention is effective.

Despite these challenges, the cases from Belgium suggest several good practices for successfully countering these problems, which may also be valuable and applicable to evaluations elsewhere. Recommendations for a successful approach include:

- Setting clear quality standards at the start of the research and developing a detailed playbook.
- Involving impact evaluators in the design of the policy to refine the intervention theory.
- For successful recruitment of the target group: cross-referencing administrative data and employing outreach.
- For sufficient and valid measurements: complementing simple, accessible objective measurements with the reports of subjective experiences of participants and good monitoring of drop-outs.
- For insight into mechanisms of action: intermediate peer-to-peer learning meetings and a precise log of activities during the intervention.
- Dealing with unforeseen circumstances: allowing flexibility in the design and also considering theory-based impact evaluations.

The Belgian practice also suggests using counterfactual evaluations preferably to evaluate new interventions, but once the effect is proven, to focus on continuation and scaling up of the measure.

Finally, the structural shortcomings in the evaluation practice in Belgium also imply recommendations: setting up longitudinal studies, anchoring evaluation policy in law, involving the cost in evaluations, ensuring structural anchoring of policy evaluations in the policy cycle, and providing cross-sectoral policy evaluations that identify and address systemic obstacles beyond the reach of specific interventions.

## 5 Questions

- To what extent is there attention within the counterfactual designs for gaining insight into the underlying mechanisms of change? Will the impact studies provide sufficient basis for targeted policy advice and optimizations of the measures taken?

- To what extent has a methodology been developed to ensure that the outcomes of the evaluation studies are translated into adjusted policy? Can the current evaluation practice be considered an integral part of the policy cycle?
- What is the status of the 'Policy Lab'? Does it have staff? Is it a formal institution?
- Is it possible to provide more information about the specific content of the inclusion pathways? Which specific interventions are provided and evaluated?

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## Annex 1 – Summary table

The main points covered by the paper are summarised below.

### Situation in the peer country

- In 2021, 19% of the Belgian population were in a situation of poverty or social exclusion, with regional differences: 12% in the Flemish Region, 25% in the Walloon Region, and 35% in the Brussels-Capital Region. Despite the COVID-19 crisis and rising energy and food prices, the poverty rate has remained relatively stable due to government interventions such as wage and social benefit indexing and VAT reduction on energy.
- Policies to address poverty and social inclusion are implemented at federal, regional, and local levels, requiring cross-sectoral action plans for poverty reduction and societal integration. The Federal Public Planning Service for Social Integration, Anti-Poverty policy, Social Economy and Federal Urban Policy (PPS SI) coordinates various federal public services for poverty reduction and social inclusion.
- In the area of social inclusion policies, while Belgium is promoting initiatives to promote policy evaluation, rigorous evaluation is not the norm, illustrating the current lack of a structural framework for policy evaluation. Nevertheless, several counterfactual impact evaluations have recently been conducted.

### Assessment of experimental methods for impact evaluation of social policies

- Examples of experimental research designs on poverty reduction and social inclusion policies can be found at different policy levels in Belgium.
- The experiences led in Belgium illustrate the complexity and challenges of experimental impact evaluations in social policy, linked to maintaining a sufficient sample size, achieving random assignment, executing interventions identically, measuring effects accurately. They also demonstrate that fact despite a thorough design, an evaluation does not always proceed as intended.
- Experimental methods for impact evaluation have served to demonstrate positive results of interventions and supported the scaling up of the projects.

### Assessment of success factors and transferability

- The Belgian cases highlight several good practices: setting clear quality standards, involving impact evaluators in policy design, effective recruitment strategies, ensuring valid measurements, gaining insight into mechanisms of action, and dealing with unforeseen circumstances through flexible design and theory-based impact evaluations.
- Structural shortcomings in the evaluation practice in Belgium also imply recommendations such as setting up longitudinal studies, anchoring evaluation policy in the policy cycle, and providing cross-sectoral policy evaluations that identify and address systemic obstacles beyond the reach of specific interventions.

### Questions

- To what extent is there attention within the counterfactual designs for gaining insight into the underlying mechanisms of change? Will the impact studies provide sufficient basis for targeted policy advice and optimizations of the measures taken?
- To what extent has a methodology been developed to ensure that the outcomes of the evaluation studies are translated into adjusted policy? Can the current evaluation practice be considered an integral part of the policy cycle?

- What is the status of the 'Policy Lab'? Does it have staff? Is it a formal institution?
- Is it possible to provide more information about the specific content of the inclusion pathways? Which specific interventions are provided and evaluated?

## Annex 2 – Example of relevant practice

Name of the practice:	MIRIAM
Year of implementation:	2015-2017
Coordinating authority:	Dutch-speaking Women's Council and PPS SI
Objectives:	Empower, break the social isolation and contribute to the socio-professional integration of single mothers.
Main activities:	Case managers of the Public Centres for Social Welfare were appointed to provide guidance to the single mothers. The guidance consisted of both collective sessions and individual support.
Results so far:	In the first two years, the project's impact was evaluated using an experimental design by an external party. Adjustments to the intervention and research design were made in the second phase and targeted changes were significantly observed in the intervention group. The measure has been continued and has been rolled out in 35 Public Centres for Social Welfare, guiding nearly 1000 single women annually.

Name of the practice:	CREActief
Year of implementation:	2020-2022
Coordinating authority:	Flemish ESF (European Social Fund) authorities
Objectives:	Support personal growth for vulnerable job seekers to reduce their distance to the labour market
Main activities:	Intervention of 5-6 weeks including an intake and several group sessions in which exercises inspired by creative methodologies and insights from psychoeducation (musical assignments, drama, movement) were conducted.
Results so far:	The measure was evaluated through an experimental method involving an external impact evaluator. It showed that support provided did achieved expected impacts on participants, while some effects were not significant due to the small sample size. CREActief is currently running under this scaling-up call and is being rolled out across various regions in Flanders.

Name of the practice:	MISSION - Mobile Integrated Social Services Increasing employment Outcomes for people in Need
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PEER REVIEW ON EXPERIMENTAL METHODS FOR IMPACT EVALUATION  
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Year of implementation:	2016-2019
Coordinating authority:	Public Centre for Social Welfare in the city of Kortrijk (funded by EASI Programme for Employment and Social Innovation)
Objectives:	Providing outreaching case management to vulnerable families with children to increase their use of local assistance, promote the uptake of financial support, and improve their living conditions
Main activities:	Outreaching case managers were sent to families and started an average one-year trajectory of guidance, based on guidelines rather than detailed and strict activity prescriptions. Over the three years of the project, a total of 133 families received support.
Results so far:	<p>The evaluation of the project was carried out via a randomized controlled trial. One of the key challenges was the dropout of participants throughout the project.</p> <p>The results showed that while the outreaching case managers had no direct effect on structural living conditions such as income, housing, or employment, it did have significant effects on knowledge of rights, receipt of additional financial support and benefits, and participation in employment programs.</p>

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