

EXPERTS BY EXPERIENCE  
IN POVERTY AND IN SOCIAL EXCLUSION

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# Experts by Experience in Poverty and in Social Exclusion

Innovation Players in the Belgian Federal Public Services

Garant

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Antwerp-Apeldoorn

Marie-Thérèse Casman, Jan Vranken, Daniëlle Dierckx,  
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# Contents

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Preface .....   | 7   |
| Introduction .....  | 9   |
| Experts by experience in poverty and in social exclusion:<br>an experiential knowledge, a methodology and a function .....  | 11  |
| A developing project .....  | 21  |
| From a theoretical project to its implementation:<br>Illustration based on ten cases of good practices .....  | 29  |
| Expert by experience at the House of Justice in Brussels:<br>cornerstone for a more interdependent Justice .....  | 33  |
| Expert by experience at the Jan Palfijn general hospital in Ghent:<br>made to measure accompaniment for vulnerable patients .....   | 43  |
| Expert by experience at the Crossroad Bank for Social Security:<br>e-government to ensure better application of the rights of the poorest .....   | 51  |
| Expert by experience in Selor: to integrate the perspective of persons<br>in a poverty situation into a policy of diversity .....   | 63  |
| Expert by experience at the National Employment Office (NEO):<br>to contribute to a fair evaluation of behaviour in the search for employment .....   | 71  |
| Expert by experience with the Auxiliary Illness and Disability Insurance Fund<br>(AIDIF): an accompaniment adapted to the needs of vulnerable persons .....   | 81  |
| Expert by experience with the Federal Public Service Economy,<br>S.M.Es. Self-Employed and Energy (FPS Economy): on the best way<br>of taking account of the rights of the poorest as consumers ..... | 89  |
| Expert by experience with the Termonde State prison:<br>preparing the rehabilitation of prisoners who have weak social capital .....  | 99  |
| Expert by experience with the National Pensions office (ONP) in Charleroi:<br>to seek out the people who have been unable to benefit from their rights .....  | 105 |
| Expert by experience with the Pensions Office in Hasselt: to seek out the persons<br>who have not benefited from their rights; extending a good existing practice .....                               | 115 |
| From a pilot scheme to the sustainability of a generic function: a critical view<br>on promising beginnings and important challenges that remain to be taken on .....                                 | 121 |



# Preface

Dear Reader,

As the European Year for Combating Poverty, 2010 should, above all else, be the year for progress in the field of social inclusion.

All efforts, good will and initiatives in this field are important and useful and I can only encourage them.

By presenting this publication, I hope to draw your attention to a project particularly dear to my heart: Experts by experience in poverty and social exclusion.

These are experts of a new kind. A new form of knowledge based on personal experiences of poverty and social exclusion, which focuses its efforts on finding new ways to reduce the divide between our very poorest citizens and the rest of society, implement their rights and exercise their citizenship.

Experts by experience in poverty and social exclusion are social inclusion professionals. They are at the heart of a new and inspiring methodology. Among other things, they contribute to better frontline reception and better identification of the needs and sources of misunderstanding between administrations and people living in poverty. They are proof that, in our society, nobody is unwelcome and that we are all entitled to contribute to community life and to take part in its functioning.

Participation is the true origin of this new function, because, regardless of our level of responsibility, regardless of the type of organisation which we work for, in Belgium we have understood that the fight against poverty is not possible without the direct and constructive involvement of people who, themselves, actually live in situations of poverty. It is a matter of principle, but also (even above all), a question of effectiveness.

Including people living in poverty in the management of the policies which concern them has been, for many years, a key practice in Belgium. I am delighted to see that it is something which is becoming increasingly common, which is hailed and sometimes even exported elsewhere in Europe; our tradition of dialogue and consultation is certainly not foreign to that. Through the Experts by experience in poverty and social inclusion, our country is confirming once again its desire to continue to be a pioneer in this field.

Whether you are a reader attentive to changes in social measures, a manager of public services, an activist watchful of governmental initiatives, do not spare us your comments, observations and criticisms. Social progress is not possible without a citizen's debate. Novelty is often synonymous with controversy.

The Fight against poverty is being and will be won by joining all our forces. With the Experts by experience in poverty and social exclusion as new partners at our sides, I am more determined than ever to make headway.

*Philippe Courard*  
*State Secretary for Social Integration and the Fight against Poverty*

# Introduction

When the federal administration, which I have the honour of presiding over, was entrusted with the implementation of the Experts by experience in poverty and social exclusion, I immediately understood its innovative and opportunity creating nature. It was a challenge which I could not refuse to accept because it is in line with our role and our vision of dialoguing with stakeholders.

The Federal Public Service for Social Integration is the administration in charge of preparing, implementing, assessing and monitoring an inclusive federal policy in favour of social integration which guarantees sustainable fundamental social rights for all. It is committed to ongoing dialogue and to encouraging a logic of partnerships with all levels of power as well as with associations representing people in situations of poverty.

Usually, public services assigned, whether explicitly or not, to combating poverty, call upon customer relation experts, communication consultants and sometimes even associations, to help them on an ad hoc basis in projects which aim to improve information documentation, or to organise seminars, and even for other types of initiatives. This traditional approach is very focused on a standard citizen profile. It assumes that services are already sufficiently accessible and that, at the most, a few alterations and some improvements are still possible.

What the Federal Public Service for Social Integration, its partners and the Experts by experience have managed to develop is a methodology whose objective is on a completely different scale. The project, of which this publication presents a non-exhaustive analysis of best practices, creates a unique function at the heart of Belgian federal public services. The expertise at work is a different form of knowledge. It is knowledge based on personal experience of situations of poverty and of social exclusion which shed new light on the organisation of services rendered to citizens. This new viewpoint helps to identify the problems and needs of people in situations of poverty through the active support of these new experts, all well familiar with the problems of their fellow citizens, and who, since their participation in this project, also understand the internal logic of public services.

However, this innovative approach would not have achieved the results hoped for without the dedicated commitment of senior civil servants, service managers, mentor col-

leagues and coaches who helped supervise the Experts by experience: I extend my warmest thanks to them.

Innovation, participation and commitment are the keywords for this project, which is unique of its kind in Europe. The Experts by experience have created a methodology which makes a major contribution to reinforcing the fight against poverty and to providing full access to the services and rights of citizens. After reading this publication, I hope that other public services and countries will draw inspiration from it.

*Julien Van Geertsom  
Chairman of the Executive Committee  
Federal Public Service for Social Integration, Fight against Poverty,  
Social Economy and Urban Policy*

# Experts by experience in poverty and in social exclusion: an experiential knowledge, a methodology and a function

The experts by experience' project aims at developing an innovative strategy within the federal public services to combat poverty by creating a new function, called "expert by experience in poverty and social exclusion", whose mission is above all, to be a "missing link" between the administration and the poorest citizens.

The departure point of this project is found in the methodology "Ervaringsdeskundigen in armoede en social uitsluiting" developed in Flanders in 1999 by De Link, a non profit organisation which aims, as in this case, to train people in the promotion of their personal experience in poverty in professional contexts; if this project is innovative, it is less so because of methodology as such – even if the latter had to be adapted to the specificities of work within an administration – it is more so because of the willingness to turn this new occupation into a generic function that is integrated into the entire federal public services.

Armed with personal experience in poverty, these experts by experience are placed in various federal administrations to help them to develop service offers that can better comprehend the needs, specificities and the expectations of the target public.

Within the framework of this project, the concept of an expert by experience is to be understood as amounting to an innovative, inclusive "methodology", like experiential "knowledge" and as a new "function" which is gradually integrated into the concrete organization of the federal public services.

## **A methodology: To structurally integrate the concrete experience of poverty to reduce the gap between the administration and the poorest citizens**

This denial of citizenship is the feeling and the position of not being able to contribute to anything, to count for nothing, to lead an uninteresting life which is not entitled to the brightness of public life; just the right to darkness. "This darkness,

more than the need itself, is the wound created by poverty." ... To create a link here, as it was attempted to do it in the dialogue, between the existential knowledge of those who live poverty, the operational knowledge of actors and decision makers and the conceptual knowledge of researchers, would be to advance towards a more efficient democratic management of problems that are common to all. This step must have a future.

*General Report on Poverty, 1994*

In Belgium, as in all developed countries, there are multiple possibilities to obtain aid and there are public measures that have been set up to combat poverty and social exclusion; however it must be noted that these services, even today, appear to be unable, fundamentally, to achieve this objective; not only do poverty and exclusion persist, but very often they still continue to be transmitted from one generation to another, leaving a very slim chance to the children born in poverty to really have access to the social elevator.

One reason that is increasingly being quoted to explain the limited effectiveness of the numerous existing plans for assistance, is that they do not sufficiently integrate the expectations of the target public and hence they remain blind to the various gaps which separate this public from the rest of society; this gives rise to multiple problems concerning concrete access to assistance and the relevance of this assistance as compared to the needs. It could even produce more perverse effects which demonstrate that these plans are, in the final analysis, counter-productive and even traumatic in certain circumstances.

These gaps are numerous and can manifest themselves in various ways from one individual to another, which greatly complicates the search for appropriate solutions. Without however claiming in any way to be exhaustive, five of these gaps are of major importance:

- The *structural gap*: this gap reveals the enormous discrepancy which the poor experience in terms of satisfaction of fundamental rights which are nonetheless guaranteed by the constitution to all concerned (education, justice, housing, health, etc). This gap is termed "structural" because it refers to collective infrastructures (schools, courts, aid organisations, etc) which, not only, do not fulfil their mission which is essentially to provide equal access to these rights, but which in addition are partly the cause of this structural gap because of the way they function (very early on, the school system contributes to directing children from poor families to vocational occupations, the services engaged in helping young people contribute to the fact that poor families are more often con-

fronted with justice for questions such as the placement of their children in care, etc) because they did not know how to act upstream to reduce their difficulties before they became real problems.

- The *participation gap*: this exclusion in all the fields of life inhibits genuine participation in society; moreover, to make matters worse, there is the fact that the poor find themselves in a state of economic dependence with regard to the systems of social allowances and in addition, they are often screened and supervised by various social and institutional workers. So, given that they are permanently subjected to the whims and the decisions taken by others for them, they are greatly dispossessed of any influence over their own lives.
- The *feeling gap*: living in poverty can create important psychological and social traumas which end up marking the individual deeply. Shame, mistrust, anxiety, depression, etc thus become a feeling gap which can constitute a major obstacle with regard to the capacity of these people to mobilize the various types of aid that are available to them or even being able to benefit from them.
- The *knowledge gap*: although they are constantly confronted with the institutions, many people living in poverty actually have only limited knowledge of how society functions and, in particular, of administrative regulations. This knowledge gap could be called reciprocal blindness; often, the poor person is not aware that he does not know something and is also unaware of where and how to seek the information which he lacks; at the other end of the scale, many of their interlocutors (welfare officers, civil servants, etc) do not realize that the poor person is unaware of certain things which appear to them to be obvious and therefore they do not even think of explaining matters to him. This situation is compounded by the fact that much of our knowledge is provided to us by informal sources, whereas many poor people have only a very limited social network and in addition to this, it is very largely composed of people who themselves are living in poverty.
- The *aptitude gap*: in view of the difficulties encountered within their family circle during their childhood (insufficient knowledge of social skills, family breakups, relational disorders, etc), many of the poor often lack the aptitude necessary to conform to the dominant social model; whether it is a question of a lack of skills: social, learning, emotional, or even management skills which are required to manage family or finance; this aptitude gap complicates interacting with and meeting up with the rest of society which makes it difficult for them to understand what is expected of them, and this in turn, makes society judge

their behaviour wrongly, because it does not try to understand its underlying cause.

The need, to fill all these gaps, to associate the target public with the development of the policies to combat poverty is henceforth clearly established at the level of the decision makers and in the decision-making processes themselves. In Belgium, the pressure to do so dates back to the publication of the first “General Report on Poverty” in 1994; this document, which represents one year of meetings and work jointly done by the political, scientific and associative world, concluded in particular on the need to continue the process of dialogue already initiated and to include on a much more systematic basis, the poor themselves to engage in the discussion on the political choices which concern them.

This dynamic of inclusion has continued to become consolidated at the institutional level and has been very convincing not only because of its democratic legitimacy in the area of participation, but also because of its utility in terms of relevance of the agreed policies.

The “experts by experience project” follows in the continuum of this step, but its objective is to extend this work of inclusion and to take it far beyond the forums of reflection and decision making, to go directly to the heart of the action and the organizations, precisely where exclusion appears and is created. The key idea is therefore to complete this dynamic of inclusion “at the top” which already exists, by a dynamic of inclusion “at the bottom”, but this time the expectations of the target public are totally present within the functioning of the administrative structures themselves, in such a way that they impel changes “from the inside”.

## **An experiential knowledge: to survive on the razor’s edge of the system**

“What do the following groups have in common: the long-term unemployed, the young person in search of employment who avidly consumes all available training courses, “the single-parent” mother, and the young couple strangled by the impossibility of paying debts and rents? They represent a particular mode of dissociation of the social link, the disaffiliation which combines non-integration through work and the loss of social bonds.”

*Robert Castel, Face à l' exclusion, a collective publication, Éditions Spirit, Paris 1991*

What kind of poverty experience would be necessary in order to lay claim to the title of expert by experience?

The question deserves to be posed given that “poverty” is in actual fact linked to very different realities. Being born in poverty is not the same as being caught in the poverty trap later in life or following an accident in life; just like someone who was part of the long-term unemployed does not necessarily have the same life experience as another person who, because of the particular difficulties he has encountered, has been homeless for several years and has been living in the street.

This project is based on the principle that the poverty experience is not uniform and that we should use this diversity positively, rather than seeing it as a methodological obstacle; it is clear that all the people who were selected to be experts by experience have not followed the same path, which in turn has not led them to develop capacities and resources that are identical (knowledge of social rights and their dysfunctional application, empathy, inclusion in the associative or militant circles, comprehension of psychosocial tensions with the consequent (de) structuring of relations between those entitled to certain benefits and the staff in charge of public services, development of an identification and a feeling of solidarity with the poor and those excluded from society, knowledge of parallel survival strategies, etc), but all these qualities can be very useful in the context of the work that they can achieve; each expert by experience is thus invited to contribute to the project by mobilizing the experiences of his own path while using the experiences of others to better complete his own story.

What is important in this step is clearly not to identify who is more legitimate than another to represent the target public, but to carefully recruit people who have been “on the other side”, who have been intimate bedfellows of disaffiliation, relegation to the margins of the system, being permanently required to adapt to the gaps that separate the functioning of the administration from the reality of daily life as experienced by those who are, in one form or another, “on welfare” and dependant on public intervention that has been set up for them.

This life experience, if it is central to the plan, constitutes in fact just the entry point to it; in order to become an expert by experience who would be useful for the project, it is necessary that this experience is:

- *Assimilated*: the capacity of the experts by experience to carry out their missions effectively requires, initially, that they have assimilated the experiences acquired all along their own life path spent in poverty. This implies, above all, that they have transcended the traumatic nature of their experience, and yet are able to express it in words, to understand it and to use it as the departure point for a

more global reflection on poverty, its causes, its consequences and the psychological and social dynamics in which it is framed. A pre-training, which is also a precondition to recruitment, makes it possible to assess the candidates on this point. The follow-up in the shape of a learning programme will then make it possible to continue with this process of assimilation.

- *Supplemented by specific training:* during the first three years of their engagement, these experts by experience follow a part-time training course which is intended to prepare them to take up their activities within the federal public services. This training has three principal aims: to continue the assimilation by the experts by experience of their own path, to add to this experience with a more “theoretical” knowledge of poverty and finally, to ensure that they are brought up to level in basic skills which are necessary to be able to work in an administration (writing skills, information technology, office automation).
- *Connected to wider horizons acquired by the exchange and the expertise of others’ experiences:* these three years of training are an opportunity for the experts by experience of similar mind to be regularly in contact with each other and to exchange thoughts on their respective paths; the training process aims, moreover, at maximizing the dynamics of exchange and expression. Each person’s life experience thus enriches the knowledge acquired by the others and contributes to the development of an expertise in life experiences that is much broader and therefore capable of dealing with a great diversity of situations.
- *Gradually enriched by professional experience:* finally, expertise acquired through real life experiences continues to be refined and to become enriched through the exercise of the profession itself; because of the nature of their work, the experts by experience are in this way, constantly encouraged to seek, understand and express the needs of the target publics, but also to find innovative ways to connect them to the realities and the constraints that are inherent to the administration. These various types of professional experiences, which are added on to their own real life experience, finally contribute to the development of true “expertise”.

## **The function: to improve the accessibility of public services and contribute to the effectiveness of fundamental social rights for all**

“The role of each expert by experience is different as it depends on the department where he works and his job description, but all of them contribute to making the institutions more accessible through a new form of dialogue... They work in the context of the feeling of incomprehension on the part of the user (the misunderstood) and the institution (which does not understand); the expert by experience is the hyphen between the parties. The goal in this case is to avoid fracture.”

*Samira, expert by experience with the AIDIF*

If this project initially started as a pilot plan which first aimed at testing and adapting this methodology to the specificities of work within the federal public services, it has now entered a consolidation phase. Here the objective is clearly to lead on to the recognition of expertise by experience as a wholly generic function and to ensure its dissemination in as broad a manner as possible within all the federal institutions.

A first step in this direction was taken by the establishment of a generic function, officially recognized as such and integrated within the functional architecture of the federal public services.

The activity of the experts by experience, such as it is established within the framework of this profile of functions, is set out on five principal axes of action and intervention; even if, in the final analysis, the specificity of this function lies less in the type of missions or activities which are carried out by the experts by experience and more in the way in which the latter accomplish their missions and integrate, in a twin objective, the expectations of the poor at the very same level as the expectations of the administrations. The five axes are:

- *To improve the reception and the information provided to the target public:* For various reasons (low schooling level or even illiteracy, psychological disorders, social disorientation, moral exhaustion, etc) people who live in a poverty situation experience more frequently than others, difficulties in understanding the intricacies of administrative procedures which they must however grasp, together with the underlying rules and regulations; just as they can often experience great difficulties in making themselves understood by administrative agents who, incidentally, are not trained to deal with the specificities of such a public and have only a limited time to devote to each client. The experts by

experience are thus called upon to play the role of “translator”, devoting the time that is necessary to understand why the person is there, to clearly explain the procedures which are expected of him and how to achieve them, to even re-direct him to the right services if it is clear that he is in the wrong place.

- *To guide, accompany and stand in for the users in their administrative activities:* continuing with the preceding points, experts by experience can also accompany the persons in their steps, in the department where they work or even elsewhere. When the person who is eligible for certain benefits is in a particularly critical situation (for example, because of a mobility problem or a serious psychosocial weakness) the expert can also stand in for this person with regard to all the procedures that need to be undertaken by doing all or part of this work for them. This type of accompaniment work can extend from making a simple telephone call to obtain specific information, to a long-term follow-up to be sure that the various administrative procedures are in line and that the dossier is being dealt with correctly by the various departments concerned.
- *To improve, in general terms, the quality and the accessibility of the services carried out by their department for the target public:* apart from this initial work, another important mission entrusted to experts by experience seeks, in general terms, to improve the quality of the services offered to the target public by their department. This can happen in various ways: proposing administrative simplifications or adapted procedures, contributing to the improvement of communication tools (forms, folders, website, etc), meeting with the target public in order to ensure their level of satisfaction, creating and maintaining networks with the associative world, sensitizing their colleagues and the management with regard to the specific needs for the poor, etc This is therefore an extremely vast mission where work is interspersed with investigation, communication, pedagogy, evaluation and improvement of the procedures in place, etc
- *To encourage interdepartmental collaboration thereby strengthening the general objective of combating poverty:* the experts by experience’ project is seen as one of the possible concrete responses to the interministerial willingness to develop an across the board policy to combat poverty within the entire federal public service; the experts by experience themselves have thus been given a mandate to contribute to the attainment of this objective, by proposing all possible avenues for interdepartmental collaboration which runs along these lines and by contributing, if necessary, to the establishment of this collaboration; within their department, they additionally play a role in the dissemination of information related to the follow-up and the progress of the National Action Plan for “social inclusion”, the “Federal Plan to Combat Poverty”, etc.

- *To relay the needs and expectations of the target publics at the political level:* Finally, the experts by experience' mission is to ensure a feedback to the political world and to civil society as a whole. In a generally collective way, they are thus encouraged to formulate opinions on political documents, to take part in opinion debates, to draw the attention of the decision makers to measures or situations which do not sufficiently take into account the needs or the specificities of the target public, etc. The specificity of their contribution, as compared to the work done by the representatives of the poor who intervene in many forums in the reflection and consultation process, gives them a privileged position from which they can approach the series of problems that are of an "administrative" nature (inadequate procedures, obstacles in terms of accessibility to rights and assistance, etc); on this topic, their twin perspective enables them to supply information which is not only extremely precise in terms of the needs of the target public, but also extremely satisfying from the point of view of the organisational, technical and legal constraints, which have a bearing on the margin of manoeuvre that is available and the capacities of the administrations to adapt to certain situations; they clarify the contents and in so doing, they also clarify the entire process plan.

In view of the extreme diversity of the tasks linked to these five axes, it becomes very clear that all the experts by experience cannot realise all of the possible activities; therefore, the experts will necessarily focus on certain types of duties, according to their personal profile and also the specificities of the department in which they work and the concrete opportunities which arise, thus making it possible to contribute to a better coverage of the needs of the poorest (nature of the specific missions of this department, existence or absence of direct contact with the target public, etc). This will be concretely illustrated in the part of this book devoted to the presentation of best practices for this project.



# A developing project

## **Context: the place of the expert by experience in the policy to combat poverty in Belgium**

The drafting of the General Report on Poverty (GRP) in 1994 constituted an important milestone in the policy to combat poverty in Belgium (see also preceding chapter). During that period the problems of poverty were given priority in the political agenda and the government wanted to mobilize the poor themselves so that they could “more effectively attack the structural causes of poverty and precariousness”.

Shortly after that, the GRP was followed by pilot projects implying the intervention of experts by experience in the fight against poverty, and a training scheme for these experts was organized by De Link, a non profit organisation. In 2003, the first experts by experience completed their training course.

In 1999, consultation and dialogue among associations where the poor take the floor and the persons in charge of combating poverty were concretized structurally by the creation of the Service to fight against poverty, precariousness and social exclusion. Belgium thus became a pioneer in the field of participation and dialogue to combat poverty.

In March 2004, the federal government decided to engage experts who possessed real life experience in poverty and social exclusion. In this way, it wanted to integrate the perspectives of poverty in federal policy and thus contribute to having a more accessible service and to realize the fundamental rights of each citizen. In 2005, a pilot scheme intended to carry out the follow-up of this decision was launched with the coordination of the Federal Public Planning Service Social Integration and sixteen experts by experience were engaged in a training course.

## **Pilot scheme with experts by experience in poverty and social exclusion**

The FPPS Service Social Integration was in charge of carrying out the decision of the Council of Ministers of 2004. In the first phase, two experts by experience were engaged within the FPPS. Moreover, possibilities of co financing for this pilot scheme were found at the level of the European Social Fund (ESF). Two coordinators were appointed to develop the framework of the project, its organization and its follow-up, as well as to ensure the supervision of the experts by experience themselves. In September 2005, sixteen experts by experience (three of whom had completed their training and thirteen

were still in the training process) were taken on and were seconded to nine federal public services. They were the following organizations:

- National Employment Office (NEO)
- Auxiliary Illness and Disability Insurance Fund (AIDIF)
- National Pensions Office (NPO)
- Crossroad Bank for Social Security (CBSS)
- NOFA (National Office for Family Allowances) NOFA
- Federal Public Service (FSP) Justice (House of Justice)
- Federal Public Service (FPS) Health, Food Chain Security and Environment
- Federal Public Service Finance (service for food aid and office of direct taxation Schaarbeek II).

The experts by experience are recruited on the basis of a full-time employment contract in the FPPS Social Integration, they follow a training course three times a week and work three times a week in the afore-mentioned services. In the initial phase, it seemed like a good idea to work on the basis of secondment, the FPPS Social Integration could thus intervene in the project and guarantee the necessary support and supervision.

To ensure this support, a plan was drawn up whereby a mentor and a coach were appointed to each expert by experience within his department. The coach dealt especially with work related questions whilst the mentor dealt with accompaniment and support at the personal level.

The general objectives laid down for this project were:

- the integration of the human dimension of poverty within the federal public services,
- Improvement of accessibility to the federal public services for all citizens, in particular for those people who were in a poverty situation, in order to contribute to the realization of fundamental social rights for all.

### **The beginning: a challenge**

As in the case of many pilot projects, at the outset, it was a question of finding the right approach. It was also necessary to associate the various public services in the scheme where the experts by experience could be put to work. However, there were two specific elements that complicated this objective:

- A lack of familiarisation with the expert concept as being “real life experience in poverty and social exclusion”: at the start of the project, the concept was generally unknown, so that, both for the FPPS and for the various services concerned, it was difficult to appreciate how and to what degree the experts by experience would constitute an added value.
- Since the objective of the project was to increase the accessibility of the public services for the people in a poverty situation, it indirectly implied a questioning of the processes and working methods set up by the services concerned. In this respect, the project also aimed at mitigating a possible lack of empathy with respect to people in poverty on the part of the staff in the various public services, which could cause conflict and tension with the secondment of the experts by experience. The idea that an external expert could come along and indicate that changes would have to be made within the services could not be accepted without reluctance.

### **The transition from the status of a pilot scheme to that of an established practice**

Meanwhile, the initial challenges as well as the doubts and the problems that arose in practice were, to a great extent, overcome. In addition, other indices show that the project had moved out of its pilot phase and that the function of expert by experience was being recognised and was well established within the services.

#### *Development of a professional profile, a professional skills profile and a generic function profile*

Since 2003, the Higher Institute of Labour (STI) worked out an initial professional profile which allowed the employers and the experts by experience to be guided in the application of this new methodology. For this purpose, five different functions that the experts by experience were likely to fill were listed (see previous chapter). This allowed the services which were involved in the project to better understand what these experts could contribute. The development of such a profile is also aligned on the long term ambition which sought to integrate the status of the expert by experience as a new official function within the federal public services.

Moreover, by thus making a distinction in the five major axes of intervention that are the characteristics of this function, a sufficient level of practical flexibility was maintained. Each situation is indeed different, and the tasks of an expert by experience can vary according to the services, their nature and their organization. The concrete contents of each

mission must thus be examined on a case-by-case basis and a too specific enumeration of the tasks corresponding to a professional profile would have had an extremely restrictive effect.

In 2006, on the basis of this professional profile, Sociaaleconomische Raad van Vlaanderen (SERV) – the Economic and Social Council of Flanders – established a profile of professional skills. This professional competence profile defines the expertise that the professional expert with “real life experience in poverty and social exclusion” must possess while taking into account the skills that apply to the professional context. Thus, there is a description of the conditions which a person must have to obtain good results in his work.

Recently, an additional step was reached with the development of the description of the generic function “of the expert by experience in poverty and social exclusion” for the federal public services. The description of this function was established through a multilateral dialogue with all the services concerned. Therefore, all the conditions are met to finally establish the function of the expert by experience in the staff policy of the federal public services.

#### *Development of a specific type of training*

As has already been indicated in the preceding chapter, a part-time specific training scheme was developed for these experts by experience. De Link, a non profit organisation did pioneer work in this area by launching, in 1999, training schemes for experts by experience in poverty and social exclusion. These training schemes, oriented towards the practice, were strongly based on experience, laid stress on self-reliance in thought processes and aimed at the acquisition of necessary skills and attitudes.

On the basis of the experiences collected by De Link, a two year specific vocational training “for experts by experience in poverty and social exclusion” leading to a certificate was programmed for Dutch-speaking and French-speaking regions. At a later stage, it was expected that this training would lead to the acquisition of a higher secondary education diploma.

“Without this training, I would not be where I am now. It enabled me to better position the story of my life, as I experienced it, and to take responsibility for it. Thanks to this training, I am now more open-minded, I am no longer filled with fear. I can also now use my experience to help others.”

*Marie-Louise, expert by experience with the National Pensions Office in Hasselt.*

*Over the long term, the results of a certain number of secondments are convincing*

A good number of the first experts by experience who started work at the end of 2005 are today still working in the same service and are well integrated there and well established in their duties.

In a certain number of services, the experts by experience are not just engaged in one isolated project, but have found their place in the internal structure of the service and their job has thus become an integral part of the specific mission of this service.

*Increase in the number of experts by experience and partner services*

In May 2008, the project entered a new phase when twelve additional experts by experience (six French-speaking and six Dutch-speaking) were taken on. In the past years, due to various circumstances, some of these experts withdrew, but in general, their total number rose sharply (increasing from sixteen to twenty-seven). In the same manner, there was an increase in the number of services requiring an expert by experience. As of now, the following services also participate in the project:

- Administrative Streamlining Agency (ASA)
- National office for annual holidays
- Saint-Pierre University Hospital in Brussels
- Federal Public Service Social Security (Directorate-General for handicapped persons)
- Federal Public Service Home Affairs (Directorate-General for institutions and population).

The fact that the project has already shown positive results has, undoubtedly been a motivating factor for these services.

*Support of the European Social Fund (ESF) for the period 2007-2013*

After granting an initial financing at the beginning of the project, the European Social Fund earmarked an amount of 2.800.000 € for the period 2007 to 2013 for the expert project. This is a clear recognition of the fact that this project is an interesting action within the framework of the objective to fight against the discrimination of the ESF.

*Setting up a network for experts by experience*

In the course of its evolution, the project developed an additional dimension which was not explicitly present in its initial phase. The experts by experience indeed created a net-

work which is particular to them and which enables them to exchange information and to draw from the lessons learned from the experiences of others. The monthly meetings with the Federal Public Planning Service Social Integration gave them excellent advice when setting up this network. The subjects which are discussed are very varied: they stretch from practical questions to discussions about the best way to manage certain conflicts and the results thus obtained.

These meetings also led the experts by experience who were engaged in various services to reflect on the way in which collaboration would be possible to further improve the services to help people in poverty situations. Thanks to the expert presence, structural collaboration links, which did not exist previously now exist between these various services.

“I regard the monthly meetings with the complete team of experts by experience working in the FPPS Social Integration as being very important. One can exchange information and ask other people questions to clarify certain obscure points. Then, one can discuss these with them. That is a great help and it is very useful.”

*Koen, expert by experience with Selor*

“Jurgen, who was also on the training scheme with me, now works at the Jan Palfijn hospital in Ghent. We will soon get together around the table with the social services of this hospital to see how we can concretely organize our collaboration with respect to the patients. They are patients who are insured with us or others who are not as yet insured and whom the hospital would like to have insured with us. We will see how we can communicate on this subject and how we can solve the problem and how we can, as experts by experience, play a part in this respect. There is, moreover, another expert by experience who works in another hospital in Brussels and we will be able to collaborate with him at a future date.”

*Marianne, expert by experience with the auxiliary insurance Mutual for sickness and disablement*

### *Function recognized as good practice in the policy to combat poverty*

In the National Action Plan in Belgium for Social Inclusion 2006–2008 and 2008–2010, the project was once again used as good practice in the policy to combat poverty. On the international level also the project was recognized as being good practice. Thus a publica-

tion appeared in 2009 by the European Anti-Poverty Network on the participation of those people in a poverty situation (Small steps – big changes Building participation of people experiencing poverty) which highlighted the project as being one of the good examples in Europe.

All these elements indicate that the project has, in the meanwhile, completed its pilot phase and is acquiring the status of an established practice in the policy to combat poverty in Belgium. In a later phase, the idea of working with experts by experience should extend to other Member States within the European Union so that the poverty perspective can be integrated into all public services.



# From a theoretical project to its implementation: Illustration based on ten cases of good practices

In order to illustrate this new profession of expert by experience and to concretely show what exactly its practical implementation involves within the federal public offices and that it constitutes a rich and innovative approach as regards combating poverty, we will present and illustrate on the pages which follow, ten cases of secondment of experts by experience within different services.

These ten cases were regarded as good practices because each of them represents a situation of successful functional integration; i.e.:

- That they show how this methodology indeed leads to the development of structural innovations as regards reduction of gaps which separate the poorest from the rest of the population and, especially, the question of access by these people to the federal public services.
- That the tasks carried out by the experts by experience in these ten cases are not “peripheral” and are not separate from the current activity of the department, but that they are indeed well integrated in it and become a fully fledged component of the whole; the contribution thus made, with respect to the target public is through a contribution to the service missions and the way in which the given department carries them out.
- That the expert by experience is integrated into the team and is recognized as a fully fledged colleague in the exercise of his work responsibilities.

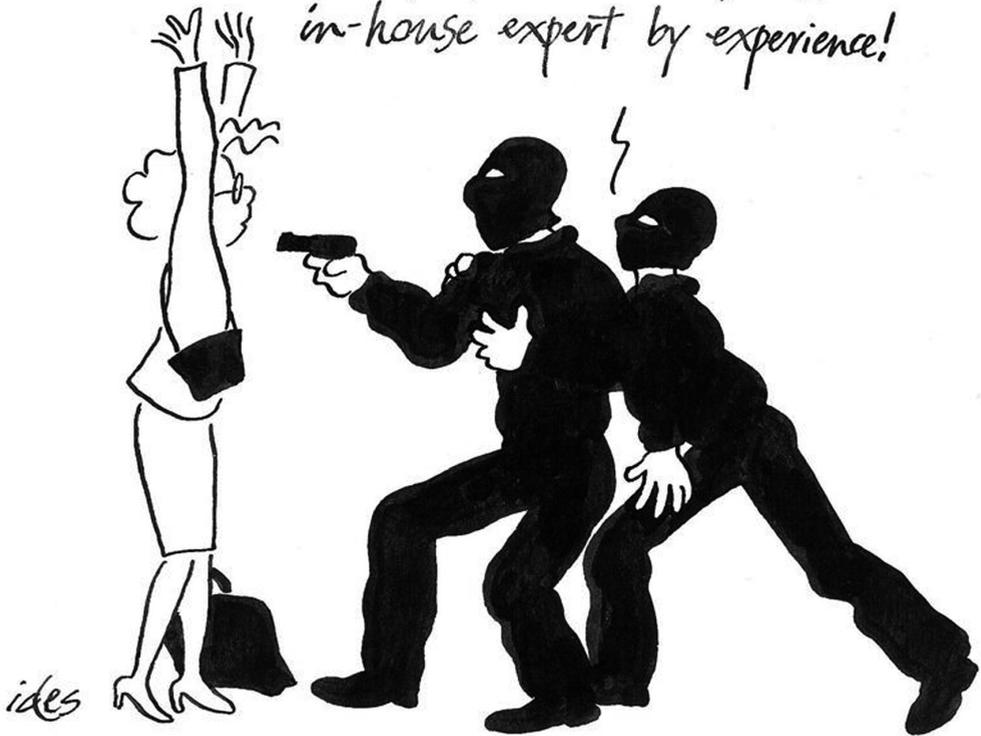
These ten cases were also selected with the objective of illustrating the diversity of the missions likely to be carried out by the experts by experience according to the varying contexts in which they work.

Each service necessarily has its own characteristics; be it with regard to the nature of its organisation (direct contact or not with the public, small or big in size, small number of staff or, on the contrary, very qualified personnel, etc), to its mandate (which may or may not include specific challenges with respect to the people living in poverty) or even concrete opportunities which could arise from it, in terms of reducing the gaps that separate the poorest from the rest of the population.

Each case will thus be presented in its own context, to show how the five axes of intervention defined in the generic function profile of the experts by experience, can adapt and adjust themselves to be as close as possible to the realities of the terrain.



No, don't! That's our  
in-house expert by experience!



# Expert by experience at the House of Justice in Brussels: cornerstone for a more interdependent Justice

“What gives me the most satisfaction in becoming an expert by experience, is that I manage to help people much more easily than when I was a voluntary staff member in an association; the fact of being employed in a public service opens doors; social workers deal with my requests more quickly than if I ask for something on behalf of the people concerned and there is less opposition to the demands and less resistance to satisfy the same. However, I find that this raises questions about the operation of social welfare services; shouldn't these requests be treated in exactly the same way regardless of the status of the applicant? ”

*Jocelyne, expert by experience with the House of Justice in Brussels)*

Jocelyne, an expert by experience, was seconded to the House of Justice in Brussels in February 2006. She works there in close cooperation with the justice assistants where her primary concern is to first help people awaiting justice and the victims, whether it is by directly accompanying them in their procedures in the various services and organizations wherever they might be, by disseminating information on a regular basis concerning the different types of social welfare aid that is available in the region of Brussels so that they themselves are in a position to provide it to the people concerned.

## **Houses of Justice: coming closer to the citizen**

The Houses of Justice – there is one in every legal district throughout the country – were instituted in June 1999 with the aim of bringing justice closer to the citizen. They execute various types of missions: reception and assistance services to help victims in their legal procedures, legal aid and front line social reception services, organization of penal mediations (voluntary procedures to settle disputes without the intervention of a judge), monitoring and guidance of those answerable to the courts but on early parole or serving sentences that are an alternative to imprisonment, social investigations carried out at the request of a judge concerning families, etc

These missions are carried out by justice assistants who all hold diplomas in social sciences, psychological or criminological matters. The House of Justice in Brussels employs about a hundred of them.

## Houses of Justice: what are their challenges in the fight against poverty?

“The general report on the state of the poverty in 1994 had already denounced the inequality of the poorest with regard to the Justice system and the 2005 report confirms the lack of progress in this field. The poor citizens seldom contact the Justice services to obtain their rights, but on the other hand, they often defend themselves, without really having the means to do so, in particular when they are unable to pay the rent, the heating charges, the water bills or meet other vital expenses. It is this report which led the Federal Public Justice services, in the face of other useful services, to organize front line legal and social aid”

*Jocelyne, expert by experience with the House of Justice in Brussels*

If in theory, all are equal before the law, the poor are not necessarily confronted in the same manner as the others with the legal apparatus and when they are awaiting trial or are victims, it does not result necessarily in identical consequences for them as it would for others:

- The lack of financial resources can be an important obstacle to benefit from one's rights or even to obtain professional legal counsel.
- To live in a situation of poverty increases the risk of being confronted with the Justice system on questions connected to crimes and offences relating to goods, of children being removed from their family circle, the problems of over-indebtedness, evictions from living quarters, etc
- The victims must await the end of the legal procedure to hope to be compensated for the expenses (medical, material, etc) which are connected to the offence committed against them; this can seriously compromise the financial situation of the poorest.
- Alternative prison sentences and release on parole are often conditional to the requirement for those awaiting trial to furnish proof of their willingness to reintegrate society and stabilize their situation; however while poverty is often an important cause of failure to reintegrate society and the root cause of destabilization in the first place, it is also a considerable hindrance to eliminate these ills.
- Etc

The Houses of Justice that were created with the objective of bringing Justice closer to the citizen constitute a particularly privileged area to reflect upon new ways of reducing the gap between the poorest and the rest of society, in the exercise of this fundamental mission which is to ensure that the law is applied to all without any discrimination whatsoever.

## **Tasks of the expert by experience within the House of Justice in Brussels**

### *To strengthen front line social reception*

The Houses of Justice have a particular role to play in organizing a front line social reception to inform and guide the users to the right services. The people who contact these structures which are open all the time, have requests which can be very diverse and which, in addition, are not always confined to the field of expertise that the justice assistants possess.

In order to provide them with adequate support on the matter, the first mission entrusted to Jocelyne was to produce a “social guide” adapted to the needs of the justice assistants; this guide became voluminous to the point where it is now on the internet server of the House of Justice.

Its utility has been so widely recognised that a part of Jocelyne’s working hours are devoted to updating it, which she does through regular contacts with aid associations in Brussels; these contacts are the occasion for her to keep up to date with the changes that occur, to disseminate useful information to all the justice assistants, to collect folders that can be displayed for the benefit of those who use the Maisons de Justice, etc

Far from limiting herself to just the provision of a simple listing of addresses, Jocelyne also seeks to collect and circulate a wealth of concrete information on various types of aid available and how to obtain them.

### *To accompany the persons awaiting trial and the victims in the procedures required by the institutions and associations for social assistance*

“I noted that a great number of people in a poverty situation are completely destitute, even discouraged by the complexity of our institutional, administrative and legal structures. The procedures that they must follow to solve the least little problem are so difficult that they could drain them of all the energy they possess and which they need just to live from day to day...”

*Jocelyne, expert by experience with the House of Justice in Brussels)*

A significant part of the work done by Jocelyne is devoted to accompanying those awaiting trial or the victims in the procedures required by the various institutions and associations for social aid.

Her activities in this field are extremely varied and are dealt with on a case by case basis: helping a seriously handicapped victim who has been attacked to obtain a financial aid from the CPAS where the reimbursement depends on the compensations that the victim will finally receive at the end of the legal procedure, or to accompany a person released on parole in the search for lodging, etc

### **Added value of an expert by experience in this context**

#### *Concrete knowledge of services available in the area of social aid*

“In the context of a prior associative engagement, I specialized in guidance and the accompaniment of people in difficulty in order to help them with the procedures that were required to regulate their situation. It is difficult to list all the organizations with which I was in regular contact; CPAS, family welfare organisations, mutual insurance companies, psychiatric centres, shelters and homes for persons in need, social housing agencies, the Office dealing with matters concerning foreign nationals...”

*Jocelyne, expert by experience with the House of Justice in Brussels*

To know which welfare services exist in the “formal” sense of the term, as they are listed in a social directory, is very different from knowing them “in the real sense” because they were contacted very often – either for oneself or when accompanying other people in their quest – this also implies that one is familiar with their operations, their personnel and the procedures which must be carried out there to obtain various types of aid that is being sought.

The capital in experience that Jocelyne possesses on the matter is in a way “not standardised” because she has nearly 20 years’ experience in front line voluntary work with the poor in Brussels and its surrounding area; she is very well acquainted with the functioning of social welfare organisations and has many contacts in the associative and institutional services in Brussels; it is very rare that she does not know where to go, who to contact and which procedures must be carried out to achieve the desired goal.

In order to avoid confusion, let us specify clearly that if this experience were an integral part of Jocelyn’s real life experience as an expert and that it necessarily was a factor

that facilitated her appointment to the post in a fast and effective manner to the House of justice in Brussels, it is by no means a pre-requisite that is essential to the exercise of the profession of expert by experience. Several of them, like her, guide and assist people living in poverty with regard to administrative procedures or with their requests for various types of assistance; these are tasks which they undertake without any preliminary experience comparable to that of Jocelyne's, that they can draw upon when accompanying and guiding persons.

Of course, it is very useful to have knowledge about the institutions that offer aid and this is obviously an integral part of the work of an expert by experience working as a front line operator, but this type of knowledge must, above all, be developed in the course of one's work, in a way that is specifically adapted to the service in which one operates. The essential resource that an expert by experience brings to bear is not knowledge of the institutions – even though this one can contribute to the success of the missions – it is rather deep comprehension of the feelings of those who are down and out; it is therefore, above all in this direction that it is necessary to understand the notion of “concrete knowledge about the welfare services and social assistance”.

*To provide to those who are awaiting trial, an accompaniment quite distinct from the supervision in view of their conditional status*

“The gap can only become wider when those who are awaiting trial read in the judgment that has been rendered on their condition, that they must respect a whole series of guidelines under penalty of violating the terms of their release, whereas these conditions are very often unrealizable; it is for example not rare that illegal residents without papers read in their judgment that they must find a job whereas their status of illegal resident without papers does not give them the right to a work permit! How can one speak about social rehabilitation, after imprisonment, without having the minimal tools to make a fresh start in life?”

*(Jocelyne, expert by experience with the House of Justice in Brussels)*

If the justice assistants are entrusted with numerous aid missions (victim support, front line legal assistance, etc), others missions concern guidance work which combines assistance and verification of the conditional plan. For such missions, the setting up of a fully fledged assistance plan can be more difficult to realise; firstly because the need to verify the conditional plan presupposes maintaining a sufficient critical distance, particularly with respect to the stipulation concerning those awaiting trial, that they take full responsibility for their situation; moreover, because the justice assistants are, in this particular

context, mandated by a judge and that the guarantee of confidentiality which they can offer is reduced by the formal undertaking that they have given, to relay any information that could be useful for the legal dossier; which, for the persons awaiting trial, does not necessarily constitute the ideal conditions for inspiring confidence and bringing them to the point where they would want to express their problems openly. However for people who have personal experience of great social exclusion (likely in addition to be reinforced by time spent in prison and by being physically cut off from society) support and constant, personalized accompaniment can be of capital importance, so that they can become responsible and avoid the spiralling of a higher degree of punishment with regard to their situation; which, precisely, is the objective of alternative sentencing and parole.

Even if Jocelyne's work is complementary to that done by the justice assistants, she intervenes only on the question of assistance and welfare aid and absolutely not to verify the details of the conditional sentencing; in addition, since she has not been mandated by the judge, she can give an absolute guarantee as regards confidentiality to those awaiting trial. She is therefore more capable of creating the confidence necessary to the setting up of a relationship of complete and total assistance, while, at the same time allowing the House of Justice to reinforce its mission of assistance by coming closer to the citizens, without diluting the requirements which are hers as a legal operator.

## **Obstacles and solutions**

The main difficulty which Jocelyne had to face in the beginning of her secondment was to gradually obtain the confidence and trust of all the justice assistants and to establish, with them, the rules for collaboration which respect the professional boundaries and requirements of all concerned.

In fact, the work of the justice assistants requires extreme precision, in fact; particularly with regard to those awaiting trial with respect to whom they must succeed in maintaining a balanced compromise which is a line drawn between assistance and control. The justice assistants are often university graduates, trained to execute their specific missions; all of them did not, at the outset, appreciate the fact that an "amateur" without a recognized diploma could come along and "get involved" in their activities; some also contested the fact that she would enjoy an absolute guarantee of confidentiality in the talks which she would have with offenders, stating that she should abide by the same rules as they did on the matter. Finally, in addition to all this, many justice assistants were very much attached to the fact that they were in charge of verification, but also had assistance work to do; they expressed reservations with regard to delegating part of this work to someone else.

*Respect for boundaries and complementarities: no interference in legal problems, not allowing the legal procedure to encroach upon the accompaniment procedure*

If Jocelyne's effectiveness was sufficient to bring a growing number of justice assistants to seek her collaboration, the management of the House of Justice also contributed efficiently to this aspect by circulating, as soon as the first tensions started to appear, an internal memorandum specifying in very clear terms, the objectives for which it had wished to integrate an expert by experience and also spelled out the modalities of collaboration that it intended to have respected concerning her work. In order to avoid any ambiguity, the accompaniment missions which Jocelyne carries out have since been organized with two strict rules in mind:

- The first is that she always intervenes at the request of a justice assistant and then, only to help the person to solve the precise problems for which the justice assistant has requested her intervention in the first place.
- The second is that she never interferes with the legal part of the dossier; neither on her own initiative (she does not question the person on this issue and does not offer an opinion either, nor advice, nor information), nor at the request of the justice assistant (who cannot for example request her to play the role of intermediary between an offender and a victim).

On the other hand, she enjoys great autonomy to decide on the best way of helping a person and is particularly free to accompany him in all the procedures which he is likely to have to undertake outside of the House of Justice, as well as a guarantee of total confidentiality with regard to what this person might say to her and the information that he would give her; she must however inform the justice assistant of the steps taken to comply with the unwritten rule of transparency.

*The balance between social assistance and justice: accompaniment without losing the sense of responsibility*

Jocelyne very frequently serves as an intermediary between those entitled to benefits and the services to be contacted to solve the problems of the person concerned, be it by telephone or during face to face discussions, but she never does so without the person being present at these talks; this is particularly important with regard to those offenders who have been given alternative sentences and from whom the Courts expect to see a sense of responsibility with regard to their situation.

## Assessment and the future

“The process of integrating our expert by experience in poverty and social exclusion is moving ahead in a context of dynamic and enriching exchanges. Even if initially the coherence of the requirements of the post prompted many questions and debates, it must be noted that today the number of justice assistants in the Maison de Justice in Brussels are increasingly numerous to call upon her resources and benefit from her concrete knowledge. On the basis of her real life experience in poverty coupled with her personal tribulations, “speaking the same language” as the offenders who are living in exclusion, Jocelyne manages, in many cases, “to decode” situations that are sometimes inextricable in the context of social exclusion and to find concrete solutions, that are adapted, and that seek to give these people another chance. There is in this role a real added value and, for the justice assistant, to call upon an expert by experience, is not to use her like a “prop”, but to benefit from her invaluable grassroots skills.

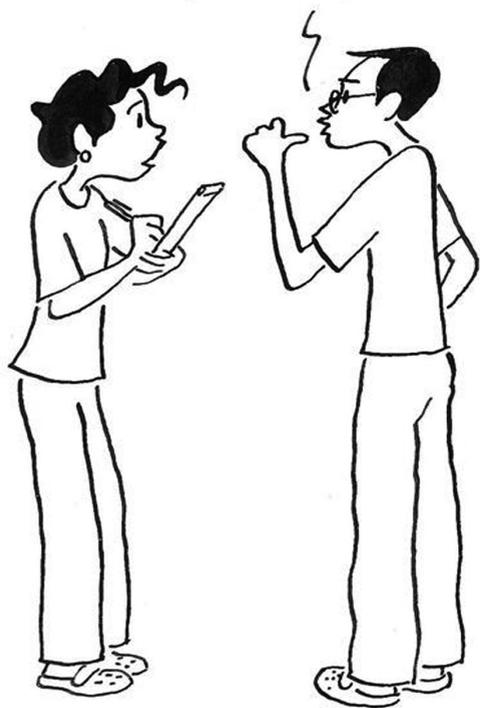
In parallel with this job of “resource person” to the justice assistants, Mrs Talon is in charge of relaying to the staff, relevant information relating to the services and social institutions, that have been obtained during meetings, service visits while working for the target group, conferences or participation in seminars, which enables us, in turn, to maintain an updated data bank on problems of poverty and exclusion. This is an extremely useful tool, amongst other things, for the front line services in the House of Justice.

Our ambition for the future is to enrich this collaboration by going even further by considering new ways of mobilizing the contribution of our expert by experience, as regards accompaniment of the offenders; we are particularly thinking in terms of a partnership with prisons, which would make it possible for Jocelyne to start this accompaniment process before even the person is released; thus by acting before the offender returns to society and faces the sometimes difficult situations in life that it generates, we hope that she will be able to contribute even further to eliminating the obstacles made even heavier by poverty, which weighs upon the process of reintegration into society.”

*André Fauville, Attaché, management with the House of Justice*



I think he...



Hey! I am the in-house expert by experience!



# Expert by experience at the Jan Palfijn general hospital in Ghent: made to measure accompaniment for vulnerable patients

“I generally introduce myself by saying: “I am an expert by experience in poverty and social exclusion and I will help you to find housing”. The majority relatively quickly understand what I do.”

*Jurgen, expert by experience at the Jan Palfijn general hospital in Ghent*

Jurgen has been working since September 2009 with the social services of the Jan Palfijn general hospital in Ghent, an independent care establishment), after having been seconded there by the Federal Public Service (FPS) Health, Food Chain Security and Environment. He works with the Sociaal project in Financieel Advies voor Ambulante Patiënten (Service for Social and Financial advice for out patients – SOFIA). He deals especially with patients in precarious situations and/or those who are in need of support.

## The Jan Palfijn general hospital in Ghent: a short introduction

Algemeen Ziekenhuis Jan Palfijn Gent AV (Jan Palfijn General hospital in Ghent) is an autonomous healthcare institution that employs 1 000 staff members and 130 doctors. It offers a broad range of services in the field of emergency medical aid. Moreover, it has a certain number of departments for the long-term revalidation of persons with chronic diseases and has a unit for palliative care. As a hospital in an important pluralist city, it functions in a multidisciplinary manner and in collaboration with the attending practitioners, healthcare professionals and welfare officers as well as other hospitals which are partners in the region.

*website of the AZ Jan Palfijn Hospital Ghent AV*

The social services help patients in the following areas:

- difficulties related to hospitalization
- search for information related to financial and administrative problems and intervention at the level of mutual insurance companies, pension services, family allocations office and other institutions
- personal, social and mental problems
- preparation for discharge from hospital and especially:
  - the request for care at home, assistance to old people, meal supply services at home, and stay in convalescent homes
- information and advice concerning assistance after hospitalization
- Referral to the traditional aid circuits and/or working in collaboration with them.

In these fields, the social workers, together with the patients seek the most appropriate solution for their problems.

### **The Jan Palfijn general hospital in Ghent: what are the challenges in the fight against poverty?**

The social services are regularly in contact with people who are confronted with a diversity of problems (financial, social, and mental) who therefore are in need of support. Moreover, there are patients who live on the margins of the community and who often have difficulties to undertake necessary procedures to obtain their dues from the welfare services, or even those patients who are sometimes somewhat mistrustful with respect to hospitals. So, with a view to making the hospital accessible to vulnerable groups, the Sociaal project in Financieel Advies voor Ambulante Patiënten (Services for social and financial advice for outpatients – the acronym is SOFIA) was set up in 2008. After collecting the necessary data, a training scheme was organised for the personnel in the polyclinic (doctors, nurses, and administrative staff) in order to make it possible to better understand how to deal with this specific target group. A full-time social assistant was available to accompany the outpatients.

The FPPS wished to know if it would not be interesting to appoint an expert by ex-

perience in the context of the SOFIA project. The collaborators in the SOFIA project as well as the colleagues in the social services were open to this proposal, because of the added value which it would bring to the question of assistance available in the service.

## **Tasks of the expert by experience in Jan Palfijn**

### *To serve as a link between the staff and destitute patients*

On the basis of his own past experience, Jurgen is more easily accepted by the very poor patients as someone they can trust and he can serve as a link between the social worker and the patient. In this way, there is a better quality of contact with the patient, which in turn improves the quality of the welfare services.

“My first patient was a homeless woman who could not be admitted to hospital because her behaviour was very aggressive. The police had gone to bring her, but they could not calm her down and she even refused to get out of the police car. I went to speak with her, and after just ten minutes, she got out of the van. I continued to speak with her and we smoked a cigarette together and after half an hour she was totally calm. We went back to the hospital where she could receive the necessary care. Then, I was involved in the consultation that took place with the medical staff and this woman and I was able to introduce a completely different point of view in the discussion, on the basis of what I had learned when chatting with her.”

*Jurgen, expert by experience at the Jan Palfijn general hospital in Ghent*

“Jurgen is a person of confidence for the patients. There are patients who very quickly place their trust in Jurgen, and thanks to him, they find the courage to contact the help services to be able to be re-integrated into society.”

*Martine, Jurgen's mentor at the Jan Palfijn general hospital in Ghent*

### *Accompaniment of destitute patients*

Most of Jurgen's time is spent accompanying the patients: he helps them to be up to date with the administrative formalities, provides them with information, and together with

them looks for housing possibilities and listens to what they have to say... In these areas, he is the ideal person for this type of work because he can more easily establish bonds of contact with the patients and they too are more open with him.

In this way, Jurgen also helps the social workers. In his official duties, he can devote as much time to a patient as he thinks is necessary. In this manner, certain things are possible which would be not easily realizable if there were a lack of time: to accompany the people in their search for housing, to accompany homeless people, to help them to fill out a lease agreement, and just by his presence, to lend support to whomsoever might need it. Thanks to his own past experience, Jurgen is quite aware of the challenges and the problems which the people are faced with and because he can better understand the patient's situation, he therefore can give a more precise opinion on the subject. No one else knows the social map of Ghent like he does.

"When I introduce myself, I say, most often, that I am an expert by experience in poverty and that I am going to help them. Almost always, their reaction is: "Ah, then you know what I am talking about". For the others however, it is not always so clear, so then, I say that I am there to "accompany" them. This is what I do, I accompany people. They have a good contact with me, and a patient once said to me, whereas we were in the bus, "look there is my dealer". They would never say that to a welfare officer, only to me. The patients start a conversation more easily with me, telling me what worries them, the problems with which they are struggling. To tell the truth, that is the essence of our work, to be able to help these people."

*Jurgen, expert by experience at the Jan Palfijn general hospital in Ghent*

#### *To sensitize and inform the personnel on poverty related problems*

"When a person smells or is badly dressed, one often sees that the staff automatically feels superior and speaks to the person without looking at him, in the third person whereas the person is in front of them. They carry on as if this person had not noticed it. When this kind of things occurs, I explain things to them. I know how it is, I was once on the other side, and I know how it feels when two welfare officers discuss you as if you were not there, whereas you are present."

*Jurgen, expert by experience at the Jan Palfijn general hospital in Ghent*

By carrying out the two above-mentioned tasks, Jurgen has also a rather detailed idea about the way in which the various categories of hospital staff behave with destitute, penniless patients. When he observes behaviour that can be improved or adapted, he points this out to the person (s) concerned and, through dialogue, he tries to make the necessary changes. He is attentive to the way in which patients are treated, so that the staff is also aware of these problems.

In a very short space of time, Jurgen intervened several times over and the feedback is positive both with regard to the patient, the welfare officer and Jurgen himself.

“I notice that certain colleagues are now more attentive and have adopted a different attitude with respect to poor people and their situation. My colleagues are also willing to have Jurgen intervene.”

*Klara, Jurgen's mentor at the Jan Palfijn general hospital in Ghent*

## **The added value of an expert by experience in this project**

### *Better understanding of the various situations thanks to personal experience*

Beweging van mensen met een laag inkomen in kinderen (the Movement in favour of low income persons with children – BMLIK) needed to be more accessible on the question of health care for people trapped in poverty. The SOFIA project was then launched to respond to this demand. One noted that the staff continued to think and act on the basis of its own experiences and perspectives, in other words, like the middle class. Thanks to his own experience and training, Jurgen could understand other people who were in a poverty situation, and thus widen the possibilities to help those people receiving medical care.

By adopting another point of view, Jurgen notices things that others do not necessarily see and would not have noticed in other circumstances. Moreover, he can more easily put himself in other people's shoes when it comes to poverty, so that they are more inclined to trust him and to be open with him.

## Obstacles and solutions

At the beginning, Jurgen was seconded to the FPS Public health. It was however difficult to find tasks that were appropriate for an expert by experience. There were some small projects that were available, but they were limited in time, but the search did not end there. After some time Jurgen became increasingly demotivated because he had been given just a few concrete tasks and he started to doubt the utility of his secondment. After a year, it was proposed to second Jurgen to the Jan Palfijn hospital in Ghent.

All this shows the importance of careful preparation during which one reflects well in advance on the tasks that can be entrusted to an expert by experience. Certain services will lend themselves more easily to this process than others, and it is important to be attentive to this factor to avoid failure.

### *Importance of working well in tandem*

A major element for the success of this secondment was a good level of comprehension between Jurgen and his two mentors (part-time). Jurgen was motivated and the mentors were ready to devote the necessary time and effort to ensure the success of this secondment, especially at the beginning stages. The mentors were also ready to reflect on matters and ask themselves questions about the way in which they could organize the workload so that it was practical for Jurgen. If all the staff had not completely supported this secondment, or if their attitude had been too rigid, the project would certainly have ended in failure.

Jurgen's work also constituted an emotional charge but his mentors did their best to help and support him.

## Assessment and the futur

"I would very readily continue to carry out this work in the coming years. I have never felt as good as I do now in my present post. I am, at the moment, busy trying to pass my driving test. When I get my licence, I will spend less time in travelling between my home and my place of work, and that will be even better."

*Jurgen, expert by experience at the Jan Palfijn general hospital AV in Ghent*

“The proposal to take on an expert by experience in poverty in our social services came at a time when our service had started to offer more care to outpatients who require special attention. Our working group was not only made up of people who were in a poverty situation but also of all patients who had difficulty to be admitted to hospital.

Jurgen was taken on with much enthusiasm, and at the request of the social services, he has the role of a link between the patients and the carers. A long process of adaptation was necessary for him to integrate the structure and the functioning of a big organization, and the punctuality and the management of the appointments are undoubtedly still problematic for him. His mentors must also devote much time and energy to accompany the expert by experience himself.

He has already succeeded in helping certain patients to half-open the door and this in itself helps the welfare officer in his attempt to accompany or guide the patient.”

*Patrick Bode, head of the social services department at the Jan Palfijn general hospital in Ghent.*



# Expert by experience at the Crossroad Bank for Social Security: e-government to ensure better application of the rights of the poorest

“For me, my work is to simplify the administrative procedures for destitute persons who contact the administration, but also for the welfare officers, the administrative employees and the workers in the associative sphere who are in contact with this public. It also makes it possible to highlight the disfunctioning of the service or other complications that arise in it”

*Xavier, expert by experience at the Crossroad Bank for Social Security matters*

Xavier, an expert by experience, is seconded to work in the service dealing with “Projects and development” of the Crossroad Bank for Social Security (CBSS) since June 2006. His work there is primarily to identify the requirements for administrative simplification in order to remove the need for “paper” attestations, which are necessary to request social assistance, and he also works on the automation of rights which derive from a particular social status (such as benefitting from social integration allocations)

## **The Crossroad Bank for Social security (CBSS): overview of its area of operation**

“A well organised electronic exchange from and to the different public services constitutes the guarantee for the citizens and companies that their contacts with the authorities will be considerably reduced. Information will have to be communicated just once and the public services will be able, in many cases, to offer services to citizens and companies at their own initiative, without the latter having to request it”

*website CBSS*

With the increasingly rapid development of Communication and Information Technologies (TICs), administrations are confronted with immense challenges, not only to integrate these technologies into their operations, but also to seize the opportunity offered by these technologies to rethink their work modalities and to develop new services which would enable them to better and more quickly respond to the needs of companies and citizens.

The common term is “e-government” which describes the entire reorganization of the public service in the area of TICs which intend, in particular, to use these technologies to avoid the need for certificates and exchange of information on paper; this is not only to reduce the ecological footprint, but also to shorten the time taken to deal with the dossiers and to limit any travel to the minimum, as well as to reduce the length of procedures for the applicants.

The CBSS is the engine and the coordinator of e-government services in the social sector; one of the vital operational tasks of this body is to support the automation of the administrative procedures by establishing “flows” which permit an electronic exchange of information between the various operators in the social security field (on a purely illustrative basis, the implementation of flows between the National Office for Social Security – employers are obliged to inform this organisation about every single worker, when he enters the labour market and when he leaves it – this includes the National Employment Office– which is in charge of paying unemployment benefit – this considerably reduces the time necessary to carry out these procedures, which the persons concerned must undertake to obtain a substitute income when they are unemployed, or to stop this payment when they find another job; comparatively speaking, these flows allow the National Pensions Office to be able, at any given time, to consult all the information on the career of a particular individual, which is necessary to calculate the amount of his pension or to estimate the amount due to him at the end of his career; etc).

This mission is far from being an easy one, given that the functioning of the social security services is dependent on many very varied institutions (mutual insurance companies, public federal services, and those at the regional or communal levels, private organizations working in the area of social security benefits such as energy supply at reduced rates, etc) which concern different authorities, which organize their data bases and their procedures according to their own particular needs and in addition, take care to maintain the confidentiality of all the information that they have on their clients, affiliates or beneficiaries.

In view of the tasks that it carries out, the CBSS mobilizes primarily qualified personnel and highly specialized (lawyers, programmers and network managers).

## **CBSS: what are the challenges in the fight against poverty?**

“Citizens and businesses are empowered by e-government services that are designed around users’ needs and developed in collaboration with third parties, as well as by increased accesses to public information, strengthened transparency and effective means for involvement of stakeholders in the policy process... We will develop inclusive services that will help to bring down barriers, experienced by digitally or socially excluded groups. Efficient e-government services built around the needs of users will increase trust in government and contribute to higher user satisfaction whilst achieving efficiency gains”

*Ministerial declaration on e-government, EU*

In order to obtain and maintain the social aid from which they should or can benefit, the persons who are living in a situation of poverty are frequently brought into contact with social security operators; just in terms of time and cost, the challenge of a higher degree of automation in the administrative process is thus considerable for them. But it is far from being the only benefit that they are likely to have.

“I realized that during the ten years of struggle and despair which I had just gone through, I had not benefited from a quantity of rights that I was unaware of. Let us make these rights automatic if we want to help people to move out of a situation of misery; it is completely useless to vote laws which confer rights on the interested parties who will not benefit from them because they have no information about them...”

*Xavier, expert by experience at the Crossroad Bank for Social Security*

This situation is even more important because it would allow for a more complete and rapid activation of these rights; many people who live in poverty, do not indeed benefit from the multiple forms of aid which could help them, either because they are completely unaware of their existence or because they do not know how to obtain them; the social assistance sector is indeed very complex (it is organized around a multitude of operators, social categories, types of assistance and legal conditions for granting the same) and very often it is not very “visible” to those who are entitled to these rights.

It would also reduce the psychological burden that weighs heavily on these people

who are constantly required to ask for assistance and to obtain it, they are regularly made to reveal details of their precarious life.

“When one observes the humiliating procedures which an unemployed person had to take a quarter of a century ago, one can only say that the situation has greatly improved. It was necessary to clock in each day at a different time. You were pointed out in a long queue and you were unable to organize your life and your job search, because you were haunted by the thought that you would have to clock in at a precise time about which you were informed the day before. But even today, many social workers are of the opinion that one should not standardize the aid and that those entitled to it must follow the required procedures to obtain it; as far as I am concerned, this is to ignore the psychological aspects suffered by those concerned during these procedures. It is not easy to go and beg for one’s rights, even if one is legitimately entitled to them. One does not know how one will be received, all that one knows is that one will be lectured to in a patronising way, that very indiscreet questions will be asked and you will be judged, whereas you are only asking for what is yours by right...”

*Xavier, expert by experience at the Crossroad Bank for Social Security*

In a less direct way, automation is likely to bring about other positive effects. For example, it is probable that it would allow the target public to benefit from a more stable and more predictable budget (by limiting the risks that one is continuously exposed to administrative difficulties, to paying overheads to deal with one’s dossier, to pay the costs imposed by the bailiff or to face the constraints of spiralling debt and the long waiting time to process requests for assistance, etc); it is also realistic to think that it would considerably reduce the necessary time spent on verifying certain points and on the administrative management that social workers are engaged in, which, in turn, would enable them to devote themselves entirely to really accompanying people with the objective of opening up the possibilities of a better life for them.

## Tasks of the expert by experience with CBSS

*To identify and chart opportunities for administrative simplification to respond to the needs of persons in a precarious situation*

A significant part of the current work done by Xavier lies within the scope of a project carried out jointly by CBSS and the FPPS Social Integration, with the objective of simplifying the activation of the rights derived from various types of status of those who are on social benefits (“derived rights” are those from which a person can benefit because of his particular status; thus, for example, the fact of benefiting from aid that derives from social integration, gives one the right to a higher rate of refund of health expenses, to obtain reduced rates for public transport, etc).

In parallel with this project (exclusively devoted to derived rights), its mission consists of identifying all the needs for simplification which are likely to be solved by the establishment of a “flow” to help the target public.

For this purpose, he is in charge of collecting basic information, useful for charting these needs as completely as possible to accelerate the simplification process; he thus has many occasions to “observe” within the CPAS (Public Centres for Social action, whose mission is to ensure that people and families receive the assistance due to them from the community and, in particular, to ensure that social integration payments are made to those who are not entitled to receive other types of assistance), at the level of the communal authorities and the associations where the poor can express their needs, in order to make an inventory of the documents which must be produced by those entitled to these rights when they make a request, as well as the various procedures that must be undertaken in order to obtain these documents.

“The observations with regard to the CPAS consist in following the various phases that a user would have to go through (waiting time before the doors open, reception, constitution of the dossier, discussion with the welfare officer, another discussion to have the opinion of the CPAS board), the visits to one’s home for the social investigation or for the services of assistance at home, talks within the services concerning over-indebtedness, etc I am also engaged in discussions with the various actors at the centre to understand the problems which the staff could encounter”

*Xavier, expert by experience at the Crossroad Bank for Social Security*

*To contribute to the comprehension and increased use of the banking services available at the Crossroad Bank for social security operators and aid associations for the destitute*

For second or even third line operators, the CBSS is little known to field workers and this ignorance in addition creates a certain “paranoia” with respect to the risks which this organization could represent in terms of respect of private life.

In the context of the frequent contacts that he has with social workers and the associative actors in institutions where he carries out his observations, Xavier is in a position to do publicity work for the CBSS and disseminate information on the latter. His missions enable him not just to clarify the challenges that are involved in the automation of administrative procedures for the target public, but also to reassure those with whom he is in contact about the solid guarantees that have been set up in terms of security and respect of the confidentiality of personal data.

“My contacts with the field staff also enable me to publicise the operations of the Crossroad Bank and to dispel its “Big Brother” image. They also enable me to give feedback to CBSS about the problems encountered with the electronic flows. In short, I serve as a liaison person “

*Xavier, expert by experience at the Crossroad Bank for Social Security*

This information work contributes to giving CBSS a better image, and it also contributes to encouraging the use of its services by social welfare professionals. The fact that flows exist does not imply that they are automatically used; the obstacles can be varied: lack of knowledge, lack of computer equipment, uncertainty as regards the security of the tool, difficulty of the routines, willingness to maintain a constraining phase to instil a “sense of responsibility” in those who are entitled to these rights, etc. Through his work of information and observation on the terrain, Xavier is also in a privileged position to identify the possible situations of non-use of flows and to encourage the professionals to make use of it.

*To weave a social network around the Crossroad Bank*

“It is frequent that a welfare officer in a CPAS that I visited, a member from an association that I met or a CBSS project leader requests to me to provide information in connection with a certain case. I try to find the solution within 24 hours or to inform the decision makers if there is no solution”

*Xavier, expert by experience at the Crossroad Bank for Social Security*

The contacts that Xavier has established with various social aid workers in the course of his investigations has enabled him to create a “network” where he represents a point of

contact not only with CBSS, but also with all the experts by experience who are seconded to other services; it is thus not rare that he is regularly requested to provide information that is useful for the processing of a dossier; the information which he provides is derived from his own resources or based on the knowledge of one of his colleagues.

In a parallel sense, the network that is made up of the entire group of experts by experience facilitates his own work, by acting as a relay or entry point, thus helping him to have easier access to various institutions where he can then carry out his investigation and awareness building work. Additionally, this ensures a wider dissemination of the information collected by Xavier; in view of the fact that they themselves provide this information to their own colleagues and their own contact persons in various institutions and associations, all the experts by experience have indeed helped to extend the range of the work carried out by Xavier, to familiarize social workers with CBSS and thus contribute to a better use of the flows already developed by the latter.

## **Added value of an expert by experience in this context**

### *Across the board legitimacy*

“The objective of the CBSS is not to have contacts with associations, people or the CPAS. With some exceptions, it only has relationships with the institutions in its primary networks; that is to say, those entitled to communicate directly with it. This applies to the 589 CPAS which the CBSS is not supposed to know. They are indeed represented by the FPPS Social Integration and the city federations and the communes”

*Santé, Xavier's mentor at the CBSS*

Although the role of the CBSS is to promote e-government in Belgium, it has only limited possibilities to contact the various Social Security institutions, which strongly reduces its capacity to identify on its own, their needs as regards flow or to evaluate the use that they make of existing flows; this is beyond the terms of its mandate and any initiative that it might take in this field would inevitably be perceived as interference.

As a member of the FPPS Social Integration seconded to the Crossroad Bank within the framework of an across the board project to combat poverty, Xavier is not confronted with the same barriers and can thus directly evaluate the situation in the area. By collaborating in the experts by experience project, the CBSS can thus benefit from a point

of contact which improves the effectiveness of its missions; in return, this increased effectiveness also benefits the real life experience Expert project, because it is initially beneficial for the target public.

*A greater understanding of the situations observed*

“The fear that ties your stomach into a knot as soon as you enter the CPAS... is something which one cannot ever understand if one has always been on the other side of the barrier...”

*Xavier, expert by experience at the Crossroad Bank for Social security*

More specifically, the usefulness of the expertise that Xavier possesses in real life experience is that it enables him not to limit his observation work to simply identifying which administrative procedures should be simplified. He can also at the same time better understand and therefore more clearly explain the multiple consequences that these various procedures could have on the target public, be it on the financial, logistic and/or psychological levels.

This identification work done from a multidimensional angle is not, strictly speaking, “central” to the CBSS (given that it does not modify anything in the technical aspects of the work which it will potentially have to undertake in order to establish the necessary flows). On the other hand, it has considerable “peripheral” utility, and the argument is in favour of the importance and utility of the various simplification opportunities thus identified (the choice, or not, to incorporate them does not fall under the remit of the CBSS, this work is carried out by many Official Authorities in the institutions involved). So to reinforce the work of awareness building carried out by Xavier for those who are active in the field is to encourage them to make a more intensive use of existing flows.

## **Obstacles and solutions**

In view of the specific context of the CBSS (no contact with the public, realization of very technical tasks) it was not obvious, at the outset of the secondment, to identify which mission could be entrusted to an expert by experience. Doubts were cast before long, because of Xavier’s technical “incompetence” and the extra work load which his integration would put on the team.

Even the project seeking to identify and organize flows that could simplify administrative procedures for the target public was met with a certain degree of incomprehension inside the organisation, as it did not tally with the usual work processes at the Crossroad Bank; the department in charge of “Projects and development” at the CBSS is indeed organized on the basis of highly autonomous teams which work individually on specific rights; the objective to target the needs for a given public thus implied the necessity to coordinate the work of a multitude of different project teams (since the challenge here is to mobilize a multitude of different types of rights), which implies a considerable level of adaptation within the department.

*Strong support from the hierarchy for the project*

“The services must be tailored to the user’s point of view and not according to the logic of the social security institutions”

*Website CBSS*

If this secondment was maintained and ended up giving conclusive results, it is due initially to the will of the persons in charge of the FPPS Social Integration and CBSS; this is proof that if the experts by experience project often owes a significant part of its effectiveness to the new ways of working in the field, it could not function within the framework of the federal public services without the support of institutional authorities, which are sufficiently confident with the what is being done, to give it the time required, to support the logistic constraints and to accept, above all, that it can question the organisational routines of their own departments.

*Clear distribution of the tasks in a dynamic of close cooperation*

“The start of our collaboration brought me a considerable volume of work. We began with a relatively technical study on secondary legislation which dealt with concepts that Xavier had not as yet grasped. Later on, his work progressed to include visits and reports, subjects with which he was more familiar. At the moment, we can speak about complementarities because one has to call upon the other in order to make progress...”

*Xavier’s mentor in health matters at the CBSS*

Another essential element that made Xavier's secondment possible beyond the initial critical period and allowed him to feel comfortable in his work, was the very good collaboration which he enjoyed with his "mentor" at the Crossroad Bank. Right from the outset, the mentor developed a strong rapport with the project and he very quickly understood and accepted the fact that Xavier was not there to become a specialist in the technical tasks at the Crossroad Bank, but to act as an interface with the outside world, and in this capacity, to offer a kind of new work perspective, where he too was called upon to make a great effort to adapt. In practice, Xavier has to draw up observation reports specifying what he has noted at the grassroots level, while his mentor deals with transposing the information thus collected into technical terms, adapted to its final processing by the CBSS; gradually, each person concerned became familiar with the way in which the others worked and their collaboration settled into a state of efficient dynamics.

After the project has been running for four years, one can state, on this point that this binomial work, if it is not essential to the system, often contributes in actual fact to optimize the functional integration of the expert by experience in the service to which he has been seconded; and more especially so in the work context which contains an important technical component.

## **Assessment and the future**

"Via the electronic services that the CBSS has set up and via the automation of rights that is the logical outcome of this work, the CBSS is – and could be even more so – an important structural support to combat poverty; but one should remain realistic, given the fact that our action in this field is indirect; at the end of the line, it is the persons in charge at the administrative and political levels of the various sectors in the social security arena who have the responsibility to make use of our services and to move from a logic of "rights on request" to a logic of "automatic activation of rights".

As a civil servant and assistant manager at the CBSS, I am responsible for recentering the things proportionately and to be clear about the fact that our challenges, in participating in this project are necessarily limited by the nature of our missions which are, essentially, to set up electronic services "on request" for the various institutions dealing with social security as well as for other public authorities.

By taking on an expert by experience, we do not claim to have directly influenced poverty reduction but, through this project we at least have a relay person in our midst; in the long term, this could indeed contribute to this important objective. I would therefore say that for that to happen, it would however be necessary that an expert by experience who is entrusted with the same missions as Xa-

vier, be established in each sector, precisely where the decisions to automate and simplify can be effectively taken.

Beyond this question of the real utility of our contribution to this project, I would like to make it a point to stress the excellent quality of the work achieved by Xavier, both in terms of identifying the needs for automation of the rights of those who are socially eligible, as well as in terms of information for the associative structures and the front line institutions in order to sensitize them about our existence and our missions; the impact of this information work is obviously difficult to measure, but one can, in any case, hope that by thus sensitizing an increasing number social actors about the services which we have made available and their usefulness for destitute sections of society, it will contribute to an increasing use of the existing services and thus to more social pressure being exerted so that in the future decisions will be taken to automate more rights.”

*E. Quintin, Assistant Administrator General with CBSS*

Other glasses won't give us a new look on the matter, but an expert by experience might?



# Expert by experience in Selor: to integrate the perspective of persons in a poverty situation into a policy of diversity

“Since the middle class is not really aware of the problems experienced by persons who are caught up in a poverty situation, it cannot really understand it and therefore react to it effectively. I describe in concrete terms the perspective of persons in a poverty situation. Vincent sees this, idiomatically speaking through his spectacles as I do with mine and the combination of these two visions give us a wider and more realistic image.”

*Koen, expert by experience in Selor*

Koen has been working since February 2009 with the diversity unit of Selor, the federal authority office for selection. In this capacity, he deals with several projects, mainly concerning accessibility to the activities proposed by Selor for target groups.

## Selor: a short introduction

You can go to Selor, the selection office of the federal administration if:

- you are in search of employment within the administration,
- you are a civil servant and wish to give another orientation to your career,
- you want to obtain an official certificate for your linguistic knowledge.

*The Selor Internet site*

The Diversity process was launched in 2003 and constitutes one of the support processes at Selor (it works with the innovation unit within Research and Development). Currently, a team of four people works full-time for the promotion of equal opportunity in the widest sense of the term.

Thus there is a project entitled “Reasonable Adaptations for Handicapped Persons”

which is studying how various types of tests and procedures could be adapted, so that a possible handicap does not constitute an obstacle to participate in a test.

For the ethno-cultural minorities, a network of experts from Selor created the “Employment of Ethno-cultural Minorities” in 2005. The objective is to disseminate information on the process of diversity within Selor and on “employment in the public sector” in general. In this way, they intend to improve communication with this target group.

A third important task of the Diversity process relates to the recognition of skills previously acquired, which accords less importance to diplomas and certificates and stresses the skills that people have in the selection process. Thus one works on the basis of tests which seek to determine whether a person who does not possess the required diploma, nevertheless has the skills necessary for the exercise of a specific employment.

Apart from that, it is necessary to refer to a series of projects (more or less important) within the Diversity unit, as for example “Test the tests” and “Top skills”. Here is a short outline:

- verify the cultural neutrality of the selection tests (“Test the tests”),
- a “tour of Belgium” organized with the help of the organizations representing people of foreign origin, to inform this group about the possibilities of having access to an employment in public administration,
- intensified use of the communication channels within the Diversity unit and establishment of a communication network with the employers as well as with the candidates in the target group, such as handicapped persons, foreigners, etc,
- to propose training courses in diversity to the persons in charge of the selection process in Selor and to the members of the jury, and to integrate this in a certification process managed by Selor,
- to establish a listing of management skills so that women can become aware of their real qualification levels (“Signal Skills”),
- in collaboration with the concerned associations and experts, to develop a procedure to evaluate the knowledge level of sign language and then to grant the necessary certificates.

### **Selor: what are the challenges in the fight against poverty?**

Selor attaches a great deal of importance to the respect of the equal opportunity principle for various target groups during the job allotment process within public administrations. Persons of immigrant origin constitute one of these groups which are the subject of very careful attention. This vulnerable group is confronted, much more than the average, with problems of poverty and is frequently less qualified. A better knowledge of their environ-

ment and their problems can help to determine how this target group can benefit from closer contact. Moreover, the target group whose acquired competences one tries to establish, often has very low qualifications so once again, a better understanding of the possible obstacles with which they have to deal, would make it possible to improve the utility of Selor in this respect.

## **Tasks of the expert by experience in Selor**

*To observe how the selection process operates and to formulate proposals to improve it*

Koen observes the various aspects of the operations in Selor and analyses the degree to which they are adapted to the target group of destitute persons or those with very low qualifications. It could be the questions which are posed during an interview or clarity in the presentation of a case study during a written examination, or even the way in which a data-processing test is structured. Koen gives information feedback on these questions and, as far as possible, makes proposals for improvements which are then examined.

“During the interviews, I realized that at the beginning, the majority of the questions were specifically directed at professional experience. For these people who had been unemployed for long periods of time or during extensive periods in their career, it was not a pleasant experience, and they were not at ease at the start of the interview. I suggested that these questions should rather be put at the end of the interview so that the candidate would feel less uncomfortable.”

*Koen, expert by experience in Selor*

“We put a document on line where Koen could note his proposals for improvement. We have regular discussions and we then examine those suggestions for improvement and we decide which of them could possibly be included in a mini-project.”

*Vincent, Koen's mentor in Selor*

*To help the weak groups at the call centre or the information desk*

The registrations for the selection process are always carried out on line. That poses a problem for the candidates who do not have a PC or an Internet connection, and who often have few qualifications or are destitute. When a candidate experiences difficulties of this kind, Koen is contacted and he comes along to lend a hand. The call centre can also call upon Koen whenever necessary.

*The functioning of the internal barometer in Selor*

“When I took part for the first time in the working group, I had the impression that level C and D workers were under-represented. When I pointed this out, they first thought that I was mistaken, but after carefully examining the situation, it proved to be true. One thus sees at a glance the added value that my presence could bring.”

*Koen, expert by experience in Selor*

At Selor there is a working group called the “Barometer” within which all the teams are represented. This informal network meets every month and measures the wellbeing in Selor, on the basis of a list containing nine questions related to motivation, work pressure, stress levels and conflicts at the individual level, both in the teams themselves and in the organization. A barometer which evaluates these results and helps to follow-up the progress, is accessible via the Selor Intranet. Each participant may also, during the meeting, make proposals to improve certain aspects of the operation. It was noted that the lower level workers were represented within this working group and Koen will now try to actively involve them in it.

“It was important that the job of the expert by experience become better known within the organization. That took time, but I notice now that they are beginning to understand all the possibilities that it holds. In the other Selor teams also, they are starting to call upon Koen more often.”

*Vincent, Koen’s mentor at Selor*

## **The added value of an expert by experience in this project**

### *New ideas thanks to personal experience and knowledge*

Owing to his training and his own experience, Koen was able to bring in new ideas which represent an added value for Selor. He has extensive knowledge about the best channels to contact the destitute persons and those who have very low qualifications. In this way, Selor can contact these target groups much more easily. In the field of the communication also, and thanks to its experience and specific knowledge, Koen is in a position to determine the degree to which Selor is adapted to certain target groups.

## **Obstacles and solutions**

At the beginning of the secondment, a job description had been established, spelling out a certain number of tasks that they intended to entrust to Koen. In practice however, it became clear that these tasks did not correspond at all to Koen's skills and interests. This is why, in the first months that followed, it was a matter of seeking the right set of tasks for him, but meanwhile, improvements were made and a whole series of well defined tasks was set out, with which Koen felt at ease. An additional practical problem lay in the insistence on the application of the ICT in the work environment at Selor. At the beginning, Koen did not possess all the necessary skills in this field. This is why, during the initial months, he had to really concentrate on this aspect and, after a certain lapse of time; the good results were beginning to be apparent.

### *Important: working well in tandem*

A good level of comprehension between Koen and his mentor undoubtedly played a part in his integration in the Selor team. Every week, Koen and Vincent meet to examine his work and to see how they can translate Koen's proposals into a concrete mini-project which can improve operations in Selor. Through Selor's internal communication system, Vincent informed the other colleagues about the importance and the orientation of an expert by experience's activities. In this way, they do not have the impression that Koen is verifying their work and the majority of them realize that this a constructive project, the aim of which is to improve Selor's operations.

## Assessment and the future

“At the beginning, we had to look for tasks which were appropriate but I think that we have succeeded in doing so. Meanwhile, the people who are involved in the other processes at Selor are also available for me and my work. Very soon I will start my observation activities during the selection interviews, and I have great hopes that all will function smoothly.”

*Koen, expert by experience in Selor*

“We have gone through a long adaptation period, the project deserves a good investment, but, in the meanwhile, I see that we are already starting to reap some of the fruits of our labour. Our investments within the team are starting to be profitable, but it goes even further. I also see that, as far as Koen is concerned, certain skills have greatly improved during the past year, precisely thanks to his activity. That gave him a very useful qualification in the field of data processing, the knowledge of the Selor structures, and also with regard to team work.

After a year, we have just made our evaluation, which is positive, and we will surely continue with the project.”

*Vincent Van Malderen, Koen's mentor at Selor*



*You only want to have  
papers, but I want a job!*



# Expert by experience at the National Employment Office (NEO): to contribute to a fair evaluation of behaviour in the search for employment

“For me, my work as an expert by experience in a federal administration is to facilitate the contact between citizens and administrations, to draw attention to the comprehension of the rules which, if they are not understood, could worsen the situation of the users who are in a precarious situation. I have the opportunity to be able to see the administrations from the inside, which enables me to be more objective and to perceive the reality (within the framework of my associative engagement) of their role vis-à-vis the users, by explaining the functioning and the constraints imposed by the regulations in order to benefit from the services that are available”

*André, expert by experience with the National Employment Office*

André, an expert by experience, has been working in the “Internal Audit Department” of the National Employment Office (NEO) since January 2006. His contribution is to see that the specificities of the target public are better taken into account, through the way in which the reception and the interviews within the various NEO services are organised in liaison with those who have social insurance.

## **Internal Audit Department of the NEO: to improve the quality of its services**

The NEO is the federal organization in charge of applying the regulations concerning unemployment for the whole of Belgium; it is, in particular, responsible for the decision to grant unemployment benefit, as well as the evaluation and follow-up of the beneficiaries, with regard to their strategies to actively search for employment. This mission that it carries out on a continuous basis with the regional and Community organizations (FOREM, VDAB, ACTIRIS) which are responsible for the placement and the training of the job seekers.

The Internal Audit Department is in charge of carrying out audits concerning the management of the services, the effectiveness of the organization and its compliance in the legal and ethical sense, with regard to the processing of the dossiers. It follows up on the services in the realization of different actions to have improvements in these various fields.

### **The NEO: what are the challenges in the fight against poverty?**

“In the context of the activation procedure for job seekers, the most vulnerable persons and the least qualified run a higher risk to be sanctioned for several reasons... The agreement of the government envisages an evaluation of the activation policy, to draw lessons from it in order to improve the quality of the accompaniment of the job seekers in the framework of a stricter follow-up... The Minister for Employment has provided for an analysis of the situation of these people, in order to define a specific approach which corresponds to the realities experienced by the most vulnerable sections of the public and those who are furthest away from the labour market and to offer a personalised form of accompaniment for persons in a poverty situation...

*Federal Plan to combat poverty, 2008*

The great specificity of the Belgian unemployment insurance system is that it is granted for an indefinite period of time; even if “to be available for employment on the labour market” has always been a formal condition to granting and maintaining the allowances. This specificity makes it an essential structural support to combat poverty, but it can also be the cause of a lack of incentive to actively seek work and to encourage the abuse of the system.

It is for these reasons that an important reform was introduced in 2004 and, since the maintenance of the unemployment benefit became conditional to the evaluation of the concrete effort made by the beneficiary to seek employment; a stricter follow-up was thus introduced. If the person concerned does not make a serious effort to reintegrate the labour market, this can henceforth lead to sanctions (temporary reduction of the allowances, exclusion). The NEO has been entrusted with this mission to evaluate the behaviour of the job seeker in his search for employment; with this intention in mind, it set up the services called DISPO (meaning “available for the labour market”) in all the unemployment offices in the country; within each of these services there are “facilitators” who are in charge of evaluating and guiding the job seekers in their strategies to actively search for work.

If this type of verification can lead to sanctions being imposed, it is, above all, a preventive measure; repressive measures are used only at the end of a long procedure during which several discussions and interviews are carried out with the person, in order to evaluate his situation (qualifications, professional project, family problems, mobility or health issues which could be an obstacle in the search for employment, the steps already taken to seek employment, etc) and to define, via a dialogue with the person, realistic actions that could be carried out to improve his chances of finding work. These actions can be very varied and are fixed by taking account of the various parameters (age, social and family conditions, educational level, possibilities of transport and dependent children, labour market situation close to the area where he resides, etc). It is only the non-respect of the actions that have been drawn up, that could lead to sanctions, not the fact of finding a job or not.

Despite the emphasis laid on preventive actions and the specificities of individual situations that are taken into account for each person, it is clear that this reform entails a new risk for the poorest concerned, who might see their situation becoming even more precarious (since it can result in the loss of unemployment benefit). There is also of stigmatization insofar as they are now faced with new requirements which could lead them to encounter greater difficulties in trying to adequately comply with the stipulations; the many and varied gaps which separate them from the rest of the population indeed constitute major obstacles in their access to the labour market, as is also their weakened capacity to actively search for employment, which often does not make any sense to them in the light of their slim chances of finding a job and the conditions for recruitment which are more precarious than they could hope for.

## Tasks of the expert by experience at the NEO

### *Participation in several think tanks and working groups*

“In the past, as an associative militant, I was regarded as a terrorist by the staff in the institutions; now that I myself am integrated in the institutions, they look upon me as a credible and valid interlocutor”

*André, expert by experience with the National Employment Office*

The NEO organizes various working groups to make it possible to gather various types of expertise for joint projects. André has taken part in several of these groups as an expert by experience in poverty:

- *DISPO WORKSHOP*: this group brings together the directors of the office for unemployment and the coordinators of the DISPO services of the country, in order to analyze the decisions taken by the facilitators and to agree on common rules on how to interact and work with the users. This group works primarily on the basis of real problematic dossiers presented by each director for discussion. This helps to understand what is dissimulated within the “dossiers” in terms of the reality experienced and perceived by the target public.
- The *FORMULA working group*: this group works on the simplification of the forms used by the NEO in order to make them more comprehensible and easier to fill in by the users; 25 forms have been simplified to date. It is a complex step because it is necessary to simplify as much as possible, while preserving the essential technical and legal elements. André made an important methodological contribution to this field by organizing groups to proof read (bringing together other experts by experience and members of associations where the poor can express themselves) which greatly contributed to drawing up an inventory of the comprehension problems which arose and also to check the veracity of rephrasing that was done.
- The *working group on ethics in NEO for agents in contact with the public*: in the context of this group, André participated very actively in the drafting of the new NEO code of ethics; particularly in the chapters devoted to contacts with the public.
- The *working group on sensitizing the NEO agents to poverty*: this group aims at developing solutions for NEO agents and the services concerned so that they can better understand this problem.

*Observation of the discussions in the unemployment offices: to contribute to the evaluation and the improvement of the contacts between the NEO agents and the public*

“The facilitators are not the ogres described by the associative and trade-union press; they are very attentive to the psychological profile of those who have social insurance and try, in the case of the most vulnerable persons, to first renew their self-esteem before proposing actions that are purely connected to the search for employment. When one speaks to young people who come from precarious situations about a CV or a covering letter, this does not form part of their vocabulary; they do not understand economic, social and political jargon, nor the reasons why they have been asked to come to the NEO. They are physically ready to go for a job interview, with an ad-

dress that is provided, but they are ignorant of all the administrative procedures; as a job applicant once said to a facilitator “what you want, is just papers; me, I want work”

*André, expert by experience with the National Employment Office*

André also regularly visits all the NEO offices in the French-speaking part of the country to observe the discussions between agents and users; to date, he has carried out around three hundred such visits.

As an expert by experience, he is asked to pay very detailed attention to the following:

- The accessibility of the NEO agents, judging by the way they speak
- Respect for the dignity of people, in compliance with the NEO code of ethics, during interactions with the public
- Work procedures which could be a source of impoverishment for users

At the end of what he has observed in a particular office, he draws up a report and makes suggestions on the possible improvements which could be incorporated in the conditions of reception. This report is sent to the Internal Audit management and also to the management of the office of unemployment concerned, as well as to various project leaders to enable them to view the reality of the situation at the grassroots level, to highlight the needs, and the good practices which could be applied elsewhere.

These numerous observations also enabled him to acquire a wealth of experience on the interactions between the NEO and its users, which can be profitably used by various working groups with which he collaborates.

#### *Drafting of a social directory for the facilitators*

From my point of view, information is of utmost importance; many people don't know a great deal about the administrations, the services that are available and the associations which can help them and inform them about various elements, such as housing, health, family, psychological, legal, cultural aspects, etc. For example, it has been noted that those who have social insurance do not receive their invitation letters because they have housing problems; if this difficulty were resolved, many no-shows would be avoided. It is obvious that the facilitators are not supposed to look for housing for them, but if they can direct them to the right service, it would be advantageous for both parties concerned.

*André, expert by experience with the National Employment Office*

Various social problems can constitute an important obstacle both in terms of capacity as well as the availability of an individual to engage in an active search for employment; the facilitators are regularly confronted with people on welfare, who have no other choice but to explain the difficulties that they experience in life, in order to justify that they have not been very actively looking for employment.

For this reason, André drew up a social directory (document which contains the coordinates and the objectives of the social services and aid associations) adapted for each unemployment office, with useful addresses in their local environment. This directory is at the disposal of the liaison agents who deal with the public, so that they can direct people to the necessary services which will deal with their particular needs; recent observations show that this document is being used more and more frequently.

## The contribution of the expert by experience

### *Complementary types of knowledge and second sight*

“We all work in groups that bring together a whole series of people who make various contributions; people from Human Resources management, communication, social services, lawyers, managers from offices for unemployment, etc André reflects in common with others which can help to widen the scope of his observations; he provides a frame of reference for this. Since he has sat in on hundreds of discussions, he can testify to things which he has observed; it is important for us; it is a safeguard which enables us to be sure that we are not creating poverty.”

*Barbara Waeterloos, André’s hierarchical supervisor at the NEO “Internal Audit management”*

The reform undertaken in 2004 brought with it important requirements of adaptation within the NEO, from the point of view of its missions and its service philosophy (with respect to the unemployed, it had to henceforth combine its primary mission which was social and financial support, with a mission of verification and actively incentivising the return to the labour market) and adapt this in practical terms to its organization. Nothing of the sort existed before; so it was necessary to recruit the facilitators, train them, adapt and equip the various offices for unemployment with reception facilities, set out the administrative instructions to frame their work, create the necessary documents and the data-processing applications that were required, etc

If the foundations for this work are now well established, the NEO remains attentive to achieve permanent improvement of the plan with a twin objective:

- To respect the principles and procedures stipulated in the legislation
- To offer correct and fair treatment for those with social insurance; this implies that if the spirit of the law must be interpreted in the same manner for all, its application must be sufficiently flexible to take account of the inequalities of individual situations.

It is a task which initially is executed by “Internal Audit management”; the reason for why the NEO made a strategic choice to recruit an expert by experience was so that he could contribute, through his specific expertise, to the permanent mission for evaluation and reflection in this service, to improve work procedures and public relations.

The knowledge which he brings is complementary to that of the other experts who collaborate in this mission (lawyers, managers of human resources, etc) because it is not initially technical, but it fits in perfectly with the concrete experience of what it means “to be unemployed over a long period of time”; not only because it is a reality which he experienced personally, but also because he has been active for many years now within the “Committee for Unemployed Citizens” (an association where the poor can speak and which fights in particular for the right to information, and the right to dignity of the people on welfare), which enabled him to be confronted with the realities experienced by a multitude of other unemployed persons.

His capacity to contribute to the objectives of the “Internal Audit management” in addition developed considerably as time passed by. The fact that his activities enabled him to clearly comprehend matters from the inside including the legal constraints which weigh on the activities of the NEO, thus enabling him to develop “second sight”. Far from stifling his expertise, this aspect remains well anchored thanks to the multiple discussions between agents and those on the dole, which he could observe (and continues to observe) in the unemployment offices.

## **Obstacles and solutions**

“One must first of all have unshakeable self-confidence to speak in front of an auditorium filled with directors...”

*Barbara Waeterloos, André's hierarchical superior at the NEO “Internal Audit management”*

The integration of André within “Internal Audit management” of the NEO so to speak, did not encounter any real difficulty, which can undoubtedly be explained by two key elements:

- Initially the fact that the potential utility of an expert by experience compared to the strategic challenges in this service are quite obvious. To manage to get a grasp on the perspectives and realities experienced by the publics who have great difficulties to find a place on the labour market (where the poor are numerous) has, in fact, become a capital challenge for the NEO, since it was entrusted with the mission of evaluating and, if necessary, sanctioning non conformist behaviour on the part of the unemployed in the search for employment; it wants to be above reproach as far as possible on the matter, and in addition, it is under constant pressure in this context, since its activities are closely monitored by the trade unions and associations that fight against poverty. They are of the opinion that the 2004 reform has organized a “hunt for the unemployed” and that it creates a higher risk of increased impoverishment for those who are already in a very precarious situation.
- André was already quite familiar with the unemployment problem and, in addition, he often had the opportunity, in the context of his prior associative involvement, to negotiate and discuss on this subject with institutional actors; this was an experience which had prepared him well to become familiar with the dynamics of dialogue and joint reflection which characterize the various NEO working groups. This clearly underscores the fact that the expertise acquired through real life experience is always somewhat specific to each individual, and that it is therefore important to establish, as far as possible, a precise match between the expert’s profile and the service in which he has to work.

## **Assessment and the future**

“When I arrived at the Internal audit management unit in April 2007, André had already been working there since January 2006.

In fact, he had been taken on, together with his Dutch-speaking colleague at the beginning of the project, at the initiative of the executive level of civil servants and the director of HR, who were convinced by the pilot scheme of the Federal Public Planning Service Social Integration, to engage mediators with field experience in the federal public services. The choice was made to clearly offer the two experts by experience a long term contract. The general administrator of the NEO found that it was simpler and especially more correct for these people.

The two experts by experience were seconded to work in the internal audit services, under the management of Barbara Waeterloos. She thus simultaneously became their mentor, their coach and their superior. The experts by experience worked part-time because they were in training for two days at the Federal Public Planning Service Social Integration unit.

Then, Carine, the Dutch speaking expert left, because she was committed to working in a non profit organisation located close to where she lived.

When I got to know André, he appeared to me to be well integrated in the unit. Although his tasks differ greatly from those of his colleagues, he is cheerful with a very flexible character which makes the others regard him as a colleague. His office is on a floor with 10 other people and he plays an active part in the routine tasks of this service. His work is important: thus, the NEO leaders are sure that all the conditions are in place to receive the public correctly.

For example: thanks to him, they found out that sometimes, illiterate people came to the Office without “acknowledging” that they were unable to read or write. So, the staff at the Office handed them documents to be read or forms to be filled in, without realizing that this was the root cause of their distress. Facilitators drew up engagement contracts for them taking into account their availability on the labour market, without knowing that they were unable to read them. Following this report, the NEO has just set up a training course for all staff who are in contact with the public, so that they can detect the signs of illiteracy in collaboration with a non profit organisation that is specialized in this field. André will attend all these training schemes to make his observations on what is happening and will advise his colleagues accordingly.

The ideal situation would be the possibility to re-enlist the help of an expert by experience who is Dutch speaking, in order to be able to extend the benefits of this service to the northern part of the country. However, at the moment, there are no more candidates”.

*Diane Lambrighs, General Advisor to the NEO*

I've been here too.



# Expert by experience with the Auxiliary Illness and Disability Insurance Fund (AIDIF): an accompaniment adapted to the needs of vulnerable persons

“When I was in training as an expert by experience, this project was proposed to me, I immediately thought that it was the kind of activity which would be appropriate for me. Moreover, I was more than fifty years old and I realized that I would have difficulties to find a job in the private sector. When I read the brochure published by AIDIF and learned that there was the possibility of working in collaboration with a welfare officer, I was immediately interested. This function suited me perfectly.”

*Marianne, expert by experience at AIDIF*

Marianne has been working since December 2005 with the Auxiliary Illness and Disability Insurance Fund (AIDIF) with Samira, her French-speaking counterpart. She works in the social services unit as an assistant to the welfare officer, particularly so, during the services in the various regional offices.

## **The Auxiliary Illness and Disability Insurance Fund (AIDIF): a short introduction**

AIDIF is a public institution for social security. It provides all the services related to compulsory insurance, health care, and allowances just like the mutual insurance companies, but within the framework of a public institution:

- Intervention in the cost of the health services
- Allowances to compensate for the loss of salary (birth, adoption, disease or disability)
- Allowances for funeral expenses.

*Website of AIDIF*

The sickness and invalidity insurance system is one of the pillars of social security in Belgium. To be able to benefit from this insurance, it is necessary to be member of one of the five mutual insurance companies or to be affiliated to the Auxiliary Illness and Disability Insurance Fund (AIDIF). Owing to its status as a public institution, AIDIF is obliged to register any person who is officially resident in Belgium and who has requested affiliation.

The social services of AIDIF organise minimum services in the various regional offices. Here, the members can ask questions about their rights and obligations within the framework of the welfare scheme (for example, as regards pension, or illness and disability insurance, etc). In addition to this information service, the welfare officers also help with any problems related to the dossiers or other complex problems. In addition to these minimum services, they also go on home visits when necessary.

### **AIDIF: what are the challenges in the fight against poverty?**

Within the framework of the availability of basic social services in the various regional offices, the staff members frequently come into contact with destitute people. When they become aware of the existence of complex poverty related problems, they often do not have a sufficient amount of time to accompany these people properly to help them to solve a whole series of problems.

### **Tasks of the expert by experience at AIDIF**

#### *Accompaniment of destitute persons*

At the beginning, Marianne accompanied Dries, the welfare officer who is at the same time her mentor, when he visited people in their homes. In the initial phase, Marianne was especially content to observe, but gradually, she was given more responsibilities and carried out her tasks while becoming progressively more and more autonomous. For example, when a person needed a walking frame, Marianne dealt with the necessary formalities. In the same way, when a consultation with several care providers concerning one of the members was arranged, Marianne took part in the organisation of the dialogue with the welfare officer.

Marianne could also use part of her time to personally accompany destitute persons and go with them to the various services to regulate their problems.

“At the beginning, I regarded my work as a training course in observation; I did not want to take on too much. During the initial weeks, Dries introduced me as a trainee and I did not like that very much. Later on, he introduced me as an expert by experience and, consequently, people started to understand the range of my activities. Thus direct contact was established between the members and myself and they started to ask me questions which often were beyond the scope of the operational framework of AIDIF.”

*Marianne, expert by experience at AIDIF*

### *Activities concerning the general provision of services for people in a poverty situation*

Marianne also tries in many ways to improve the general offer of services at AIDIF for persons in a state of poverty. In collaboration with Samira, her colleague, she drew up a detailed social chart containing data on all the organizations to which very poor people in could go to find solutions for a whole series of problems. In this way, the employees in various offices can transmit this information to destitute people.

In Belgium, low income persons are entitled to a special status (OMNIO) which gives them access to certain advantages, inter alia a higher rate of refund of health care expenses. Nevertheless, owing to the fact that these people must, themselves, take the initiative to ask to benefit from this rule, a great number of them do not benefit from this advantage because they are not informed or because as they see it, the administrative procedures are an obstacle. Marianne solves the problem by informing people about these possibilities and by helping them to fill the forms themselves to obtain OMNIO status.

“I knew all the competent organizations in Ghent because I live there but, as regards the other cities, I sometimes have to do some research to obtain this information. Then we had the idea of making a social chart. However, at the beginning, we ourselves did not know how to proceed. In the final analysis I did it twice, once with the electronic addresses as a reference and once with the addresses of the sites. Finally, it is now quite a practical instrument for all the colleagues in the regional offices, but certainly also for the social services.”

*Marianne, expert by experience at AIDIF*

*In search of more effective communication with the destitute*

One of the principal tasks that Marianne has to take care of is the improvement or the adaptation of the communication system between AIDIF and the destitute. She is part of a working group on communication which brings together members from the various services, to check the legibility of the documents. Marianne reads various documents (booklets, folders, posters, etc) and makes recommendations on how to make the texts more comprehensible for the people in a state of poverty. In a certain number of cases, she works with the external services whose activities relate to the target group of destitute people in order to make them re-read the texts.

AIDIF also works to promote health matters, a subject on which it is very difficult to reach the destitute. This is why Marianne also collaborates in the drafting of folders concerning health promotion.

**The added value of an expert by experience***Taking account of the problems of poverty in AIDIF's activities*

The social services of AIDIF had not been operational for a long time when the experts by experience project was launched. At this point in time, the service was still developing and it was not quite obvious to understand how the experts by experience could mobilize their experience and their knowledge, and integrate poverty into the activity of the service. This was done in a structural way by adapting the communication to the destitute people. Also at the level of the practices, the experts by experience had the possibility to specifically deal with those members who were confronted with a complexity of poverty related problems.

“Most of the time when I introduced myself to people, I said “I am an expert by experience in the field of poverty. I experienced what you are experiencing at the moment, and together we will try to find a solution”. Most of the time, this attitude is directly understood and appreciated, and confidence is immediate. A social worker adopts another attitude when dealing with people, it is difficult for those who have never been exposed to this situation, to fully understand what we have experienced.”

*Marianne, expert by experience at AIDIF*

“During the first months, we started to exchange our impressions on the subjects which we were dealing with. Little by little, I began to recognize the characters and situations in Marianne’s stories. I started by listening to what she was saying and I understood that she really had things to relate, and that she could really teach me something.”

*Dries, Marianne’s mentor at AIDIF.*

## **Obstacles and solutions**

Initially, it was very testing for Marianne to work and follow her training course at the same time. During examination time, this was even more difficult. Moreover, the days on which Marianne had to be present at AIDIF changed regularly, so that it was difficult to set out a regular schedule with her. Most of the trips to the regional offices were also difficult for her.

Nevertheless, the social services at AIDIF are very compact, so the personnel could be sufficiently flexible and make the necessary adaptations so that Marianne could feel better about the whole situation. Therefore, it was decided that Marianne should work for most of the time in Ghent, because she lives in the area. After a certain time, when her training course was completed, her workload consequently became considerably lighter.

“At the beginning, it was very difficult to follow a training course and, at the same time, while carrying out my activities at AIDIF, I also had household responsibilities and an adolescent son to care for. I experienced great uncertainty, all these colleagues from the various departments, did they know who I was and where I came from?”

*Marianne, expert by experience at AIDIF*

## *Importance of good team work*

“I always started with the question “which activities are you particularly at ease with?” Then we try to carry out these activities, and most of the time, that worked well. Now, Marianne is in Ghent for most of the week, I only see her on Friday, but I trust her, I will not check up on her too strictly.”

*Dries, Marianne’s mentor at AIDIF.*

A crucial factor in the success of this secondment was great understanding between Marianne and Dries, her mentor. After some hesitation at the beginning, they developed bonds of trust between them, which in turn led to a good level of collaboration. In this respect, it was very important that they could discuss things openly, thanks to this bond of trust particularly when challenges or problems arose and a solution had to be sought together. From Dries' point of view which was shared by AIDIF, it was understood, right from the beginning, that, in the first phase, time was necessary to train the expert by experience and to give her all the knowledge she required, and that results could not be expected in the short term. Moreover, Dries was always ready to take the talents and the interests of Marianne into account, when defining the tasks which were entrusted to her, and they were not immediately discouraged by failure.

## Assessment and the future

"I get along well with Dries and also with Samira, my French-speaking colleague and her mentor; together we make a good team. If my health permits, I hope to be able to continue to work here in the coming years."

*Marianne, expert by experience at AIDIF*

"We became part of this undertaking because it gave us the possibility of working with an innovative project, which is also important for our company. We then saw the possibilities of incorporating the expertise acquired by an expert by experience in the objectives of our social system.

The experts by experience carry out various tasks here: administrative work, field work, they are on duty in the regional offices in Ghent and Brussels, but they are also engaged in team work, for example on a project to measure satisfaction levels or the drawing up of the social map.

In future, we would like to create a new function "to inform and communicate with the public" and to set up good practices for a new form of dialogue between the people in situations of poverty and our services.

The function changes constantly. It corresponds to a certain number of new needs and makes it possible to resolve problems which our company and its institutions find it difficult to deal with."

*Joel Livyns, administrator general at AIDIF.*





Unfair! I don't have  
a computer!



# Expert by experience with the Federal Public Service Economy, S.M.Es. Self-Employed and Energy (FPS Economy): on the best way of taking account of the rights of the poorest as consumers

“Too often, the people who are in precarious situations and on low incomes are confronted with practices which are unconsciously reserved for them. It is not a question of fate, but rather of the logical extension of facts and their consequences. Indeed, are not the sources of conflict often found in products or bottom-of-the-range services which “contain” more possibilities of breakdowns and dysfunction? Part of my work is to encourage reflection on this type of reasoning and it enables me to help the vulnerable consumer through the services rendered every day, by my colleagues “.

*Michel, expert by experience with the FPS Economy*

Michel, an expert by experience, has been working since February 2009 with the Directorate-General for Verification and Mediation (DGCM) – in the Mediation Department of the FPS Economy. He works here for the development of an Internet site to facilitate matters for a wide public audience and the use of procedures for an alternative way of handling commercial disputes through mediation. His specific mission is to make this site and its utilisation accessible to the highest number of people, while bearing in mind that there is a handicap known as the “digital divide”. In a similar manner, he also contributes to encourage the participation of various associations representing the poor in the “local market platforms” which are supervised by the Mediation Department in each province of the country.

### **“Mediation department”: actor in the area of economic pacification**

The FPS Economy is, at the national level, charged with multiple responsibilities related to surveys, supervision and stimulation of the goods and the services market; one of its principal missions is to verify that federal legislation in this field is correctly applied.

The Mediation Department aims to encourage all the economic actors (this includes companies and their customers) to resort to the possibilities of “alternative settlement of disputes” (RAL) in the event of contractual conflict, rather than to systematically go to court; the increase in the number of lawsuits in this field has indeed created a series of hindrances in economic life: cost and duration of the procedures, bad publicity for the companies, loss of confidence on the part of the customers, etc

Within the framework of a RAL, the settlement takes place directly between the parties (who enter into a dialogue with each other, write to each other,...), with the help of a third person (referee, mediator, conciliator, ombudsman) who intervenes to re-open the communication channels between the people concerned and to help them to find a solution via an “out of court settlement”.

The name “Mediation Department” is obviously a short form which expresses the nature of its work entails; mediation as such is only one of the possibilities that RAL offers; but it is undoubtedly one the more known kinds of work it does.

Let us specify that the Mediation Department itself does not play a role of conflict resolution between the parties concerned; it does nothing more than encourage and promote initiatives in this field; in more concrete terms, its activities are carried out around three poles:

- It initially plays an information role by responding to any questions submitted to it in writing, that are related to contractual disagreements and then proposing possible solutions to the applicant.
- It stimulates the creation of sectoral mediation plans in areas where they are, as yet, non-existent and where the high rate of litigations indicates that a need for this type of service exists.
- It manages local market platforms. These are meeting places for dialogue between company representatives, consumers and local authorities, which make it possible to find out which needs and difficulties could be tackled by the goods and services market, at the level of the communes and provinces in order to react to them and thus to prevent problems arising in the first place.

## **Mediation Department: what are the challenges in the fight against poverty?**

A first major element here with respect to the target public is the relatively low cost of the RAL as compared to a legal procedure; it can even be free of cost for people whose incomes do not exceed certain thresholds. They are less litigious in nature, and are also faster; which is an important advantage for people who are not always financially able to replace the purchase which is at the heart of the litigation, without having to await the resolution of this problem.

On the other hand, another question comes to mind here: the knowledge that these possibilities exist and their accessibility to the target public. If recourse to mediation grows in popularity (and this could happen in many very different fields: civil mediation, family, social, penal, etc), the RAL's are not very well known to the general public and, obviously, even less known to the poorest sections of the population, because of the knowledge gap with which they are often faced. This is an obstacle which could become even more difficult in the future; the Mediation Department is indeed developing a virtual platform (ODR: Online Dispute Resolution) which would make it possible for any person, not only to find practical information relative to an amicable settlement of commercial disputes, but also to directly activate a request for a RAL adapted to his situation. This type of platform will simplify procedures considerably and will even accelerate them, but it is also likely to reinforce the inequality of access by adding one more problem in addition to the knowledge gap – that of the digital divide.

Lastly, the local market platforms are places which aim to encourage and support dialogue between all the actors present on the goods and the services market, including those consumers in a precarious situation; they are also actors on this market, even if they are in a weaker position here; it would thus be advisable to take into consideration their interests also.

## **Tasks of the expert by experience with the Mediation department**

*To raise the level of comprehension with regard to the difficulties and needs of the poorest*

“I work in a service where the word “mediation” is not a hollow one; on the basis of a pre-supposition that the individuals are of good faith, an attitude which I appreciate, to propose a discussion, an exchange, moderation, listening to the different points of view, etc the occasion arises for me to propose my perception of the

“experts by experience” project and my colleagues always communicate their reflections to me on the series of themes related to the fight against poverty; questions and answers allow for a real exchange”

*Michel, expert by experience with the FPS Economy*

Since the beginning of his secondment to the Mediation department, Michel agreed to discuss the multiple facets of poverty with his colleagues and the way in which it can have an impact on the relationship of people with consumption. This procedure is greatly facilitated by the reduced size of the service, which makes it possible to primarily work through the medium of virtual exchanges. In this way, Michel does not seek to directly modify the work procedures that are in place, but rather to support his colleagues and to encourage an in-depth comprehension of the implications of poverty, so that they can first assimilate it themselves and then incorporate it into their daily work.

To support this objective, he in particular undertook to regularly write pages of articles which he entitled “Perceptions of an expert by experience” which take up a set of themes each time dealing with the relationship that exists between poverty and consumption (the hire-purchase system, over-indebtedness, etc); these articles make it possible to compare different points of view and thus enrich the thought process.

### *Making on line mediation accessible to the highest number of persons*

“The “digital divide” was a term generally used to summarily describe the gap which separates the haves and the have nots, in the area of computer equipment and access to the Internet. Today, in view of the tremendous increase of its new applications and of the frenetic race to “have everyone on line”, it should be defined more precisely; it is a space which separates those who participate, without fear or complexes, in the evolution of a communication system where they are simultaneously the subject and the object from those who approach new technologies with caution and utilise them occasionally, be it either for lack of means, or training or by choice “

*Michel, expert by experience with the FPS Economy*

Michel is associated with the launching of the project to set up the ODR platform (the objective, as mentioned above, is to facilitate calling on the RAL via Internet) whose mission is to maximize its accessibility for the people living in poverty and, in the wider

sense, for all the sections of society which are likely to be concerned with the digital divide. This global mission refers to three major types of tasks where Michel is required to develop his own work ideas:

- *To maximize accessibility to this platform:* In order to guarantee the access of consumers who are in a precarious situation to the future ODR platform, Michel is, for the moment, looking towards the organizers of the Public Digital Spaces (EPN). The EPN (nearly 600 throughout the country) are structures proposing free access to Internet, training and accompaniment in the area of information technologies; the EPN can be found in very diverse places (libraries, associations in the social and cultural sectors, town halls, etc) and are likely to be frequented by the weakest sections of society. In addition, their role is to adapt their activities to the needs of their users, which frequently leads the EPN organizers to help people in very varied procedures (on line services, job search, contact with the administrations, etc).

Michel's objective is to mobilize them in a twin dynamic: initially to meet with EPN organizers to listen to their observations on the ODR project and its possible use in the places which they act as discussion leaders; then to inform them on a regular basis about the progress of the platform so that they can help their users and also use it themselves where necessary.

- *To guarantee the legibility of its contents:* when the project arrives at the self-development phase of the platform, Michel will participate in the "users" tests and will oversee the user friendly aspects, such as easy to follow instructions of the site for people having little experience in navigating on web sites. This is a task for which he is already preparing by meeting with the EPN organizers (who have a special place to observe the difficulties experienced by the target public in this field) and he will invite his expert by experience colleagues to benefit, also, from their experience and their respective points of view.
- *To identify possible specific needs other than accessibility itself:* if the lack of accessibility and knowledge are the main obstacles which should be removed to strengthen the use of the RAL by the people living in poverty, it is not necessarily the only one.

Seen from this angle, Michel especially drew the attention of his colleagues to the fact that the ratio between the cost of resolution of litigations and the financial benefit that the plaintiff could expect, would be very problematic for the target public taking into account its lack of possibility for financial manoeuvre; it would be thus useful if the ODR platform put together a plan by which everyone could make a precise estimate of the cost and benefit ratio of the litigation.

He also proposed that a data bank be created, containing all the complaints, the way they were processed and their results which could then be put on the site of the future ODR platforms; this data base would provide a concrete reference frame making it possible for the users to better understand the utility of going through a RAL for any litigation in which they might be involved. This proposal, like the preceding one, is of general utility, but becomes even more important for a public whose aptitude gap and low educational level can often make things not very accessible, if the language is too abstract or too formal.

*To see that those associations likely to represent the interests of the poorest participate in the local market platforms*

“Poverty is a phenomenon which can greatly affect local economies; for example in 2009 we noted that an increasing number of self-employed persons contacted the social welfare services to manage to make ends meet. Michel brought in a whole network of key actors to the local platforms who are traditionally found in forums very different from our usual participants; it is very stimulating”

*Maurice Charles, chief adviser, Mediation department*

Since his arrival at the Mediation department, Michel established a series of contacts with important associations and networks that could play a representative role in the interests of the poorest in the goods and services market (such as the “Alternative Finances Network”, the “Walloon Network to combat Poverty”, etc). After having explained to them what the local market platforms were all about, he encouraged them to become active participants in this area.

### **Added value of an expert by experience within this framework: an essential role of catalyst**

“The work of expert by experience needs to be integrated in the policies that are drawn up, relative to the basic concerns of the people who are in a precarious position because of extreme poverty and the inequalities that exist in society. It is a special job which requires original initiatives to be taken to make “things move”; daring audacity executed with confidence is the key quality here. The results are not systematically measured; the actions carried out in the field have an effect in

time; they also happen because of a gradual awakening of conscience in the entourage of the expert by experience”

*Michel, expert by experience with the FPS Economy*

The added value of an expert by experience is becoming increasingly more difficult to concretely pinpoint, especially when he works in a service that carries out second or third line missions without having direct contact with the public; in such services, his action “is necessarily more diluted” and seldom results in directly measurable results.

One very clearly sees it in this case; Michel especially plays the role of a “catalyst” at the Mediation Department; primarily through reflection, debate, putting things into perspective and establishing new forms of partnerships; he thus stimulates a better awareness of poverty which gradually finds its place in the dynamics of work; this then becomes the background against which the awareness of the actors helps them to learn how to recognize their responsibility and the capacity for action at their level.

## **Assessment and the future**

“The mission of the FPS Economy consists in “creating the conditions for a competitive, durable and balanced functioning of the goods and services market in Belgium”; the term “balanced” clearly conveys the idea that there is a need to take account of the inequalities which one encounters in our society and to attack them; it has become an essential priority in a country where recent statistics reveal that 15% of the population live below the poverty line. As a public utility oriented towards economic life, the important question for us is to understand how to integrate awareness about these inequalities in the missions which we carry out on a daily basis; above all there is this need to adapt our institutional dynamics to offer a better service to the most vulnerable citizens which motivated us to participate in this project.

From the point of view of the Mediation Department, the integration of an expert by experience appears to be extremely enriching; Michel opens up new work perspectives for us and we would have had difficulty to think of them ourselves, and in addition, we would have had neither the resources nor the time to develop them, because of the reduced size of our service. The ODR project is an excellent example of this; it is certain that, without Michel, we would have made this platform accessible to the blind and partially-sighted persons; it has become a reflex for a number of public services to do so and the tools to achieve it are now easily

accessible; but it is very probable that we would absolutely not have been able to develop a whole new specific approach meant for the poorest, such as he is doing for us and with us; we would undoubtedly not have thought of it. There are many other projects where his contribution would be useful for us and I hope that this collaboration will be possible for a long period of time “.

*Maurice Charles, advisor general at the Mediation Department*



I don't understand what  
I am supposed to do and not to do!



Me neither...



# Expert by experience with the Termonde State prison: preparing the rehabilitation of prisoners who have weak social capital

“When I explained to the advisor in charge of the regional employment services that I was looking for work which would enable me to use my real life experiences, he proposed a vacant post as an expert by experience to me. I immediately applied for this job, passed a certain number of tests and interviews and I was accepted. They proposed two possibilities, a hospital and a prison. I immediately chose the prison because that interested me more.”

*Joskina, expert by experience with the Termonde State prison*

Joskina has been working since September 2009 with the State prison of Termonde. She works in the library so that she can maintain contact with the prisoners and then accompany them in the social services procedures.

## The State prison of Termonde: a short introduction

The Termonde prison is a traditional penal establishment, built according to the Ducpétiaux principles. The building is star shaped and has three wings and three levels. The total capacity is for 160 male prisoners. In theory, each prisoner has his own cell. Nevertheless, in practice, he often shares the cell with a fellow-prisoner.

The institution is built on a plot of land of approximately one hectare. Apart from two promenade areas, the prison does not have too many other open spaces.

*Introductory leaflet describing the Termonde State prison*

The Termonde State prison fulfils two major functions: on the one hand, it is a prison where male prisoners are held in custody and, in addition, there is the other part where sentences are executed and where the prisoners serve their sentences.

The activity of the prisoners is directly connected to employment and a vast range of activities is therefore proposed in the domestic services range or technical maintenance. Certain initiatives are also taken to guide prisoners who are close to their date of release, so that they can find a work adapted to their capacities as soon as they are freed. This activity is carried out in collaboration with the assistance services for persons awaiting trial, which offers help to prisoners and social services are available also (accompaniment, organization of visits of their children, assistance as regards over-indebtedness, etc). The psychosocial service is also involved. The psychologists and the welfare officers working in this service accompany the prisoners in the execution of their sentences and take care to verify that the loss of liberty is carried out under conditions which guarantee the right to a humane existence.

### **The State prison of Termonde: what are the challenges in the fight against poverty?**

The prison is filled to overflowing with groups of destitute people and those who are the most vulnerable. Many of them are thus battling with complex problems of poverty. When they are not accompanied as they should be, a new spiral of destitution starts for them. Prisoners must often struggle with all kinds of social, emotional and financial problems. This is why there is reason to search for an adequate employment for after their release, in order to prevent them from falling into financial problems yet once again. Nevertheless, the social, mental and emotional problems with which the prisoners struggle, must also be tackled during their term to improve their wellbeing and to support their rehabilitation after their release.

### **Tasks of the expert by experience at the Termonde State prison**

#### *A liaison person between the prisoners and the prison's social services*

Joskina's point of departure is her work in the prison library. From there, she can establish contacts with the prisoners. She is a person who makes the connection between the prisoners and the social services and she assists them. She has discussions with the prisoners and, when necessary, transmits certain requests or questions to the welfare officer. In future, they also intend to see that the psychosocial services put Joskina into contact with those people who have problems of poverty. In the long term, it is expected that Joskina will also be able to help during the discussions and interviews that take place between social workers in the prison and the prisoners themselves.

It provides the prisoners who will be released within a short time all information

which they need on the rights that they can exert and the services to which they can appeal when they leave the prison.

“The prisoners can also come along to chat with me when they feel bad. That gives them a very good feeling because they can speak and express their innermost feelings. I listen and they realize that I understand what they are experiencing and they trust me enormously. I note that many of them have had a difficult past. In fact, I come face to face with myself and I understand that it is difficult to get out of this situation. But that obviously makes them feel good just by being able to speak about it.”

*Joskina, expert by experience with the Termonde State prison*

“For certain specific problems, our prisoners are referred to professionals. Thanks to her experience, Joskina can more easily convince our prisoners to collaborate and to convince them of the positive aspects of doing so. This is an important added value.”

*Filip Leroy, head warden at the State prison and Joskina’s mentor*

### *To make communication accessible*

A certain number of documents which are used in prison are couched in very legal language and are thus not always easy to understand nor accessible for the prisoners. Joskina examined the brochure setting out the prison internal regulations and made suggestions to make it more readable. Apart from that, there still are a certain number of texts which are written in very legal language on which Joskina will work during the coming weeks to make them more accessible.

“Joskina reworked our internal regulations to make them understandable for a wider audience. There still are a certain number of texts which she will be able to examine in the future. In the final analysis, this is nevertheless important: the internal regulations must imperatively be respected, but how can this be possible if they are not understood?”

*Filip Leroy, head warden of the State prison and Joskina’s mentor*

*To transmit recommendations to the management authorities*

In the framework of her official duties, Joskina has a clear idea on how the prison operates. She makes notes on a certain number of things in practice, which have inspired her with ideas on how to improve the general management of the prison. She plans to assemble all these notes and present them in the form of a series of recommendations to the various authorities who are involved in the management of the prison. In the future, she will transmit these recommendations to the Secretary of State to combat poverty.

**The added value of an expert by experience in this project***More time and increased possibilities to work for the wellbeing of the prisoners*

Joskina's presence in the prison makes it possible to work better for the wellbeing of the prisoners. The important point here is not just the fact that there is an additional person to deal with them. Thanks to her own experience and her training, Joskina has a better quality of contact with the prisoners and can therefore better understand them and they open up more easily to her, than to the other staff members.

"As an expert by experience, I work on an emotional basis while the social services are unable to do that, mostly because they do not have time for it. They deal with the paper work, but do not give sufficient attention to the people or their preoccupations. These people are entitled to happiness, many of them are very talented but that does not show. I can clearly feel that that makes a difference; recently, someone said to me "when one talks with a psychologist, one might as well speak to a wall". I tried to change this perception by really listening to them."

*Joskina, expert by experience with the Termonde State prison*

**Obstacles and solutions**

The project took time to be launched because of staff transfers. So it was necessary to reconsider this job profile and discuss it, so the project only started much later than previously imagined. The fact that Joskina was seconded to Termonde at the beginning of the FPPS Social Integration, caused a certain number of practical problems: thus Joskina could not follow the training scheme which prison staff normally follows and she was not entitled either to the complementary allowance that prison personnel are paid. Moreover,

the staff working in social welfare services for prisoners awaiting trial, where it was best for Joskina to be seconded, does not form part of the prison staff itself and is considered to be an external service.

“In practice, it would have been easier for us to have recruited Joskina ourselves so that she could have been employed on the basis of a contract with the social services which provide assistance for prisoners awaiting trial. We will examine this situation together with the FPPS Social Integration to see what could be done.”

*Filip Leroy, head warden of the State prison and Joskina's mentor*

## **Assessment and the future**

“I would really like to stay here, besides that is what is envisaged. Initially within the framework of this pilot scheme and then after being taken on, I now have the feeling that it will be O.K. I also want to continue to accompany the prisoners in their rehabilitation, to assist them as much as possible.”

*Joskina, expert by experience with the Termonde State prison*

“I think that it will be possible to have added value here, thanks to this project, I am very positive on this question. Until now, the project was also supported by the prison associates. The prisoners also try to have contacts with her; they are obviously attentive to the advice that Joskina gives them.”

*Filip Leroy, head warden at the Termonde State prison and Joskina's mentor*



# Expert by experience with the National Pensions office (ONP) in Charleroi: to seek out the people who have been unable to benefit from their rights

“As I see it, the expert by experience is like a fox; he has to resort to all kinds of ruses to deviate from the accepted way of doing things and to find other possibilities of achieving the objectives, while at the same time, complying with the rules of the game”

*(Véronique, expert by experience with the ONP at Charleroi)*

Véronique, an expert by experience is seconded to the office of the National Pensions Office (ONP) in Charleroi since May 2009. Her work there mainly is to seek out those potential beneficiaries who have not started the necessary procedures to be able to benefit from their rights; she also ensures an administrative accompaniment and orientation to the right assistance services for people in difficulties, who contact the office of the ONP in Charleroi.

## **The National Pensions Office: pensions manager for the guarantee of income to the aged**

The National Pensions Office is the public service for the whole country, charged with the attribution and the payment of pensions of salaried workers and the guarantee of income to the aged; In addition, it ensures on behalf of the INASTI, the payment of the pensions to self-employed workers.

The Office fulfils three essential missions:

*To inform:* the ONP informs pensioners proactively on their rights as regards pension (via the detailed notification of the amount of the pension due, together with detailed communication of any modification in the amount to be paid); it informs future pension-

ers (sending an estimate of the amount of pension to the worker at 55 years; it has made an Internet site available, where a simulation of the future pension can be calculated, etc). The ONP is a decentralized organization with several regional offices which, like the one in Charleroi, make it possible for the local population to contact its services. With the objective of coming closer to the citizen, the ONP also has set up skeleton structures in a great number of communes.

*To attribute:* the ONP is in charge of informing and notifying all the pension schemes of all the employed persons and the guaranteed income to old people.

*To pay:* the ONP assumes the responsibility of paying all the pensions of salaried workers and self employed persons, as well as giving income guarantees to old people.

### **The National Pensions Office: what are the challenges in the fight against poverty?**

“In order to protect the highest number of pensioners from the risks of poverty, the Belgian authorities have set up during these past years, first, a minimum right to pension, based on the years of work, starting from 15 years or more of a career; on the other hand, there is a system of aid that is conditional to the availability of resources, for people whose right to the pension scheme is non-existent or insufficient”

*National Reform Plan 2005-2008, Lisbon strategy*

According to Eurostat, 91% of old people would be living below the poverty line, if they did not have a pension; this is to show the importance of a pension as a structural tool to combat poverty.

The amount to which a pensioner has the right varies greatly, however, according to his professional career and the length of time during which he subscribed to the pension fund; on examining the facts, it will be noted that for some persons, the amounts can be very reduced and largely insufficient to live in dignity. In order to prevent such situations, in Belgium there is a system known as “Guarantee of Income to Old People” (GRAPA) which ensures a threshold of minimum income to any person who is more than 65 years old and who requests it. The attribution and the amount of this income, calculated by the GRAPA vary according to the other resources that the person may have and his life situation (living alone or cohabiting, possibly with dependents, etc).

Despite the efforts made for several years now by the ONP to manage the pension files more proactively (automatic activation of the pension for those who go on pension at the legal retirement age, etc), certain people have still slipped through this security net, because they have not officially applied for a pension and because the ONP is not in a position to activate an automatic management of their file, for lack of sufficient administrative information (which is, particularly the case for homeless people who do not have a legal address); new ways of seeking out this section of the public still remain to be invented, to make it possible for every person to obtain what he is entitled to, and thus to reduce the situations of great poverty of seniors in our country.

### Tasks of the expert by experience at the ONP in Charleroi

*To be on duty in small structures set up within aid associations that seek to help the poorest, so as to make contact with the beneficiaries, who might not have taken the necessary steps to activate their rights to a pension*

“Before my secondment, I knew that my mission would be to “take part in research to find this category of beneficiaries” in order to regularize their situation; this was included in the draft-agreement between the FPPS Social Integration and the ONP. I wondered how I was going to be able to do that; I reflected on it, I also discussed it with other experts by experience. I right away thought of the homeless persons, who, if they had to go to the ONP offices, would have found it very difficult indeed to do so: travel, appearance, fear of rejection, etc. I said to myself that it was necessary to go to their territory, where they would be much more at ease. Right from my first day of work at the ONP, I therefore proposed to the management to try to organize small structures in associations like the soup kitchens; they found the idea interesting”

*(Véronique, expert by experience with the ONP in Charleroi)*

A significant part of Véronique’s work is devoted to managing these small structures in four associations situated in the Charleroi region which help people living in poverty. There she does what is necessary to come into contact with people who are more than 65 years old, who do not have a pension and often live in extremely precarious conditions; she does her best to convince them to regularize their situation so that they can at least benefit from the GRAPA conditions or any other legal pension, if they have right to it, because of their career situation in the past. It must be noted that Véronique herself does

not manage the pension files of these people, but she is precisely a bridge between them and the ONP.

The fact of being present personally and regularly in a given place is important, as well as to take the necessary time to establish a relationship based on trust and confidence. This is the case very often for socially isolated people who live with no contact with the outside world; many of them are also very wary with regard to the institutions and they are therefore reticent to spontaneously make contact with them; they belong to a generation which managed with very little and living by their wits was more the norm. It is not enough either to come into contact with the person and to convince him to agree to start the procedure; it is also necessary to be able to see him on a regular basis so that the file can move forward and to regulate the various administrative problems as and when they come up; thus, every single time, this turns out to be a long-term process which involves a great deal of going to and from the association, the ONP and other administrative services that must be contacted to regularize the situation of the person concerned.

*To accompany and help those entitled to these rights but who encounter difficulties in life or with administrative problems*

“When you are unemployed, on the day you celebrate your 65th birthday, it is the ONP which takes over. There are deadlines which sometimes delay the processing of the file and people find themselves without an income; the CPAS (Public Centre for Social Assistance) can intervene to give them advance payments, but when the ONP has processed the file, the person must refund the advance payments made by the CPAS, before he can receive his entitlements; it happens that the CPAS takes several weeks to calculate the amount that must be refunded and people again find themselves penniless; so, in the meanwhile, they must be directed to the services which can help them to deal with their most urgent needs”

*(Véronique, expert by experience with the ONP at Charleroi)*

Another part of her work consists of setting up small structures within the offices of the ONP in Charleroi; within this framework, she acts as a relay and finishes the work started by the other employees when they were dealing with destitute users, whom they think could benefit from a specific accompaniment, whether it is to complete – and above all to understand – the procedures necessary for the regularization of their file; or perhaps because their situation has certain complications which do not fall under the specific mandate of the ONP or the particular private resources of the staff.

According to cases, Véronique can thus direct the people to the services that are

adapted to their needs (food aid, urgent financial assistance, housing, etc) and/or take the time necessary to make sure that the people have clearly understood the various procedures which they must accomplish; if need be, she does these procedures with them and sees them once again after a certain lapse of time, to make sure that the situation is proceeding as it is supposed to.

## **Added value of having recourse to an expert by experience in this context**

### *Approach and communication modes that are more adapted*

“I really like the system of the “broken record”, because it helps to instil confidence; I always repeat what the people have said to me to make sure that I understand them correctly; I then clearly explain the steps to them and what they must do and then I repeat all this once again to be sure that they have understood each phase correctly also; I also set out the whole procedure on paper so that they are free to go about it as they wish and I propose to accompany them if they need me to do so”

*Véronique, expert by experience seconded to the ONP in Charleroi*

One of the greatest assets that Véronique has, is her capacity to explain things in simple language, but also to set in motion a dynamic of a relationship which takes account of the frequent vulnerabilities that are the hallmark of the target public (lack of self-confidence and lack of trust in the others, weak language skills, difficulty in understanding institutional logic, stress and emotional distress, etc).

This is know-how which is acquired from several sources. Initially one's own life experience which has been marked by very difficult relationships, often with the institutional actors, which gives the person, by contrast, a very clear idea about the behaviours and attitudes which he must avoid. She was trained as an educator, a course which she had been following before deciding to work for the experts by experience project; here she acquired the theoretical tools which she was always looking for to improve her practical skills. Finally, she worked for several years as voluntary staff in one of the neighbourhood houses (Maisons de Quartier) and thus acquired considerable field experience on how to establish a relationship based on trust and confidence with people living on the margins of society, and her primary concern is always to first restore a sense of self esteem in these persons.

*The capacity and the willingness to enter “the other’s territory”*

A closer examination of Véronique’s secondment reveals an important concept of “territory” in the overall picture. In order to reduce the gaps between the poorest and the rest of the population, it can be relevant to take a service offer to the world in which the other person lives, rather than to wait until he himself comes along to claim what is rightfully his, in the institutions that have been set up with this objective in mind.

Just like the public can experience an unwillingness in its capacity to contact the institutions because they do not feel at ease there, setting up small structures in aid associations as Véronique has done, also requires the adoption of an attitude and a certain behaviour that are sufficiently adapted to the place to be considered acceptable; the situation is all the more complex here because it is a question of coming into contact with such associations in the capacity of an employee of a public service, which once again raises a very important problem, which is respect of territories; such a visit could easily be viewed as an intrusion and consequently be refused by such associations, especially because they often have the feeling that by their action, they are compensating for the insufficiency of the public services. Therefore, this is a task which can be carried out more easily by an expert by experience; initially because he or she is more likely to have personal experience with such associations, and also because the specificity of the expert’s function within the federal administration rather increases his possibility of being perceived as an individual invested with a social objective, rather than as a “civil servant”; it can thus facilitate the acquisition of a certain legitimacy with respect to the users and managers of such associations.

**Obstacles and solutions**

“Knowing that a file has been successfully approved, gives one a feeling of victory, because it means that somebody has left the shit and has obtained his dues; but when you are not always successful, you ruminate on what you did not do; that bothers me terribly; if I did not manage to succeed the first time, will I succeed the second time around?”

*Véronique, expert by experience seconded to the ONP in Charleroi*

The missions of an expert by experience who is working in direct liaison with the target public can be difficult to manage at the psychological level, initially because they deal with situations which are often extremely hard, humanly speaking, and which constantly

bring them face to face with people in great distress; then because the specificity of their job requires them to enter into a relative relational intimacy with the public and that is particularly delicate in such a framework, the right balance must be established between personal and professional investment.

In view of the currently experimental nature of this project, there is as yet no norm established on the matter, which could help to train the experts by experience to achieve a correct balance with regard to their involvement on the one hand, and managing their emotions on the other hand; each expert still has to learn all of this by himself by testing to see where his personal limits lie.

“By himself” does not however mean alone, and this is precisely the reason for which each expert by experience is closely supervised so that he does not feel isolated in the context of his work, and that he has several resource persons to whom he could turn if he needed to discuss the various difficulties that he encounters: each expert, therefore, has a mentor and a coach within the service where he is seconded; regular contacts are established with the project coordination cell within the FPPS Social Integration, meetings with “external” coaches are also organized more specifically, to allow each expert by experience to take stock of his progress in a more neutral dynamic. One could never sufficiently emphasise the added importance of regular meetings that take place between experts by experience; they allow for the exchange of good practices, as much as they help in the development of a shared vision which offers the opportunity to those who have just started to work in this area, to benefit from the concrete experience acquired by those who have been there much longer.

This type of supervision will obviously become lighter as this project moves out of its pilot phase, but it is vital at this stage, to closely supervise the experts by experience in the discovery and the ownership of a new profession, which is still seeking to clearly define its limits and its modalities.

## **Assessment and the future**

“In addition to accomplishing its basic missions – to attribute and pay the pensions – the objective of the National Pensions Office has, for several years now, been to improve the quality of the information provided to potential beneficiaries. We have set up a free telephone service and an Internet site which allows the interested parties to simulate the amount of their pension. The Help Desk at the Head office in Brussels and in the regional offices, as well as many other points of contact in the communes, make it possible for the public to connect with our services. This information policy has enabled us to implement a proactive system of file management, in particular with regard to the allocation of guaranteed incomes to old people.

This being said, the objective is still difficult to attain with respect to certain categories of the public, particularly the people subject to escheat law. It is indeed required that people must take the first step to contact our services. As regards the guaranteed income to old people, the allocation of this right is subordinate to an application that must be made by the person concerned and then a series of assumptions must also be cleared.

Other functional difficulties can also arise; thus, if the person does not have a personal legal address or a reference, the attribution and the payment of his dues can be compromised.

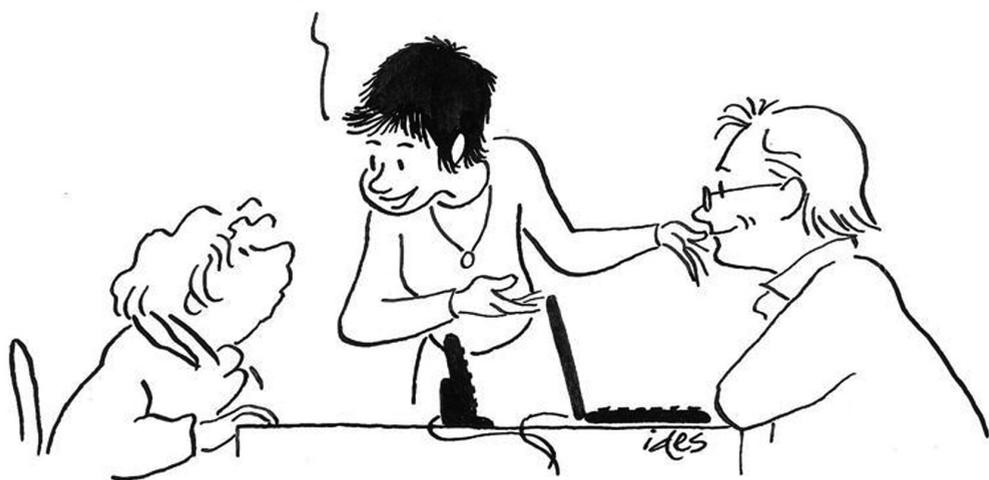
In the light of this type of difficulties, coupled with the fact that they can have an unfortunate impact on old people with limited financial resources, made us to examine the potential benefits of the services of the experts by experience project; by associating ourselves with this project, we hope to facilitate the access of these people to their rights.

It is still too early to make a real assessment on the impact of this collaboration, but the smooth integration of Véronique at the office in Charleroi and the first convincing reports on the results we have received have encouraged us to go one step further by taking on a second expert by experience for the office in Hasselt; in addition, negotiations are ongoing for a third experiment of its kind at the office in Liege“.

*Jocelyn Melchior, Director General, Common Services, ONP*



You do not need  
to be afraid of him!



# Expert by experience with the Pensions Office in Hasselt: to seek out the persons who have not benefited from their rights; extending a good existing practice

“The training I received as an expert by experience in poverty and social exclusion enabled me to use my past experience. It was difficult at the emotional level, but that strengthened me. Without this training, I would not be where I am now.”

*Marie-Louise, expert by experience with the National Pensions Office in Hasselt.*

Marie-Louise has been working at the National Pensions Regional Office since November 2009. We had decided to suggest two secondments to various National Pensions Offices to highlight certain elements to which we will return in the next chapter.

Indeed, this case makes it possible to illustrate how, at the beginning of a secondment, one is sometimes confronted with a certain number of challenges:

- the challenge that consists of determining, in the initial stage of the project, which tasks can be entrusted to an expert by experience in a given department.
- the challenge that consists in defining how an expert by experience can set up innovative practices within this department to combat poverty,
- matching the needs of the department with the capacities and the motivations of the expert by experience,
- etc

Moreover, this case also illustrates how one can draw on the lessons of the experience acquired from previous secondments and how they, in turn, can be used as discussion threads to integrate experts by experience in new services.

## Tasks of the expert by experience at the ONP Office in Hasselt

“At the beginning, when this project was proposed to me, I myself was not clear about the nature of the tasks that an expert by experience could carry out in our office, and I had been given very little information on this subject. Then, I was put into contact with colleagues in the Charleroi office where there already was an expert by experience, and they explained to me the type of tasks that were entrusted to this expert who was on secondment to their office.”

*Kenneth, Marie-Louise’s mentor at the National Pensions Office in Hasselt*

### *To serve as a liaison person between the staff and destitute persons*

During the first months, Marie-Louise participated in the discussions with the destitute persons who came to us to ask for information or to discuss their case. Thanks to her presence, they were less aware of the distance between themselves and the ONP staff and they appeared to be more at ease too. This is a way to facilitate contact with the client and the discussions proceed more smoothly. The expert by experience also carries out this task in Charleroi, but, at the Hasselt office, it is even more challenging, because one must be conversant with a wider set of regulations.

“When I started here, I initially concentrated on consulting the various pension files and I also wanted to learn about how they were dealt with. Now, I know the whole process and I also know that certain procedures should be followed, and that there is a waiting time too. This is why I can also explain these points to people who come to me and I reassure them.

When I am present, people feel it. They are more open, they are more at ease and speak more easily. I also reassure them when they have emotional reactions when relating their problems. My colleagues sometimes say that people react in a completely different manner now, merely because I am present. I also think that it is because I can put myself in their shoes, because I experienced many such problems in the past.”

*Marie-Louise, expert by experience with the ONP office in Hasselt*

*To seek out the old people who are destitute and inform them of their rights*

In Belgium, there is an allowance (income guarantee paid to old people or GRAPA which is the French acronym) which makes it possible to financially aid old people, whose means of livelihood are insufficient. All those who are entitled to this allowance, do not in fact benefit from it, either because they have forgotten to apply for it, or because they do not even know that it exists. For these reasons, destitute people and especially those who are homeless do not always receive this allowance, to which, nevertheless, they are entitled. So, to inform the persons who fall in this target group and to spur them on them to apply for their rights, one must try to reach them through other channels, since, in the majority of cases, they do not spontaneously contact our offices. So, in future, Marie-Louise will go out looking for these people with the help of institutions and aid organizations (social restaurants, food banks...). Then, she will inform these people of the existence of the GRAPA and explain to them why they are entitled to an allowance.

These tasks were carried out for a long period of time by Véronique at the Charleroi office, who was one of Marie-Louise's colleagues (preceding case). Through contacts made with the people concerned at the office in Charleroi, we knew that things there were going along rather well, and that it was also an option for Marie-Louise.

"I know the different aid organizations in the area, and that is an advantage. I will soon visit them to ask these people if they know that the GRAPA exists and that they have rights there. I think that it is important because people who are living in poverty are not always informed about their rights or come up against a whole series of obstacles so that, in practice, they just don't go any further."

*Marie-Louise, expert by experience with the Pensions Office in Hasselt.*

## **The added value of an expert by experience in this project**

### *Good knowledge of the aid organizations through training and personal experience*

Destitute people find it very difficult to come personally to the ONP offices. This is why it is important for the expert to be proactive and seek out the old people who are living in poverty, and to inform them of their rights and, in a certain number of cases, to convince them to ask for the allowances which they could then obtain. The offices themselves do not have a complete idea of the various aid organizations which exist to help the destitute, and are also unaware of the channels through which they could make optimal contact with this target group. Marie-Louise originates from this area and, on the basis

of her own experience and the expert by experience training that followed, she has a good idea about how she could make contact with these destitute persons and the channels which could help her to do so. In this way, the office can widen the scope of its action and reach out to more people than it could before Marie-Louise's arrival.

## Obstacles and solutions

### *From initial uncertainty to structural innovation*

Sometimes, the expert by experience finds the beginning of a secondment period to be difficult: after having lived for years away from a professional environment, he suddenly finds himself plunged into an environment which is governed by administrative rules and legal provisions which it is necessary to know and follow. In such a situation, it is normal that one cannot expect him to launch innovative actions right away, and it should be understood that a certain period of time is necessary before the expert can learn about all these things and familiarize himself with them.

The ONP environment has not escaped from this rule; pension legislation is a relatively complex matter. Moreover, the situation of Hasselt is particularly so with regard to this matter; as Hasselt is geographically situated close to the Dutch and German borders, there are indeed many employees who had worked abroad during a part of their career, so it is necessary to also be conversant with the Dutch and German legislations. If one is to successfully follow up on these personal files, a good knowledge of these legislations is important. So, it is not easy to study all this in the short term. Moreover, when one is currently occupied in transferring files from the paper medium to an electronic support system, it becomes imperative also to learn how to use the new data-processing programmes. This combination is relatively difficult for Marie-Louise to handle.

On the other hand, it is also necessary for the services to understand what an expert by experience is and to discover his skills and how he could be of use to them. For these reasons, therefore, the services often initially prefer to assign to the expert by experience those tasks which are stipulated in a strict framework, which makes it easy to strictly verify whether they are being carried out or not. In the case of Marie-Louise, that meant participating in the discussions with the clients and observing them. Such a task has obviously very little potential for innovation, in comparison with the good practices which are detailed in this work. In a certain number of cases, the secondment was limited to tasks of this type, which can finally lead to tensions, and in certain cases, could even mean the end of the collaboration.

This however was not the case for the ONP in Hasselt; if we place this secondment in the context of the good practices of this project, it was also because the integration of

the expert by experience was progressing positively. We drew valuable lessons from the experience acquired in the case of Véronique's secondment to Charleroi; we could more readily consider other innovative tasks which would make it possible to adopt a better approach to the problems of poverty.

## **Assessment and the future**

"I was very well integrated here and completely accepted by the colleagues right from the beginning. I do this work very willingly and very soon, I myself intend to go in search of people to inform them of their rights."

*Marie-Louise, expert by experience with the National Pensions Office in Hasselt.*

"The project is going ahead well and I am satisfied with Marie-Louise's work. She collaborates well and she has a clear vision of who her target group is. The follow-up of the pension files is not an easy task but Marie-Louise is motivated to learn everything she can, and there is still room for us to adapt the tasks which we intend to entrust her with, if that becomes necessary.

Soon, she herself will meet the people in her working group. I expect that this project will bring many results; she can undoubtedly bring added value to it. One should still wait awhile to see how things will turn out, but I am confident".

*Kenneth, Marie-Louise's mentor at the National Pensions Office in Hasselt*



# From a pilot scheme to the sustainability of a generic function: a critical view on promising beginnings and important challenges that remain to be taken on

If the experts by experience' project began life as a small scale pilot scheme, its objective in the long term is certainly to introduce the sustainability and the dissemination of a new generic function across the entire federal civil service. As we hope to have been able to prove, on the basis of the ten cases of good practices that were presented in the preceding chapter, this ambitious objective makes a great deal of sense; the gaps which separate the poorest from the rest of the population – access to the administrative services that have been implemented for everyone – form a dense reality which stands out across the board, regardless of which public service one examines, quite apart from its missions or even because it is or is not in direct contact with the potential beneficiaries. To increase the number of experts by experience who work actively within the administrations is undoubtedly not the only action to launch to effectively combat poverty, but it is a prospect which is full of promise, if one realises the diversity of the bridges that could be built, figuratively speaking, that would make it possible to establish, even within the institutions, the reduction of the multiple forms of gaps that exist in this sphere.

This project is henceforth steadily moving in the direction of structural consolidation and an increase in the number of experts by experience in activity; Despite the positive results that have come about during the pilot phase, the methodology and the development of the management tools that were made available during the initial phase need to be refined, and we must always be aware of the important challenges that remain to be dealt with. We do not have sufficient space here to develop in detail, all the difficulties that this project ran into and the consequent adaptations which had to be made to it; we refer the reader who might be interested in obtaining more precise details, to the evaluation reports of this project which are available on the Internet site of the FPPS-SI: <http://www.mi-is.be>

## To make the function more widely known

A first important challenge therefore, will be to continue to work on communication with reference to this new profession of expert by experience, in order to ensure that it is fully understood as well as the development of similar representations at the level of all the actors in the federal civil service.

What is an expert by experience? What are his skills? What differentiates him from other professionals who are active in the social welfare field? Etc...

The first series of secondments showed us that there were many uncertainties with regard to such questions, and that the answers that were provided by the project managers were not always easily understandable for the other recipients, because they were too abstract and not sufficiently connected with familiar things.

It is not a problem that is specific to the expertise of experts by experience, but is inherent to all new professions. Who, apart from the professionals themselves, would have had even a vague idea of what a “network manager” would be or an “e-learning designer”? Today, even without precisely knowing what these professions are, we are, in the majority, able to determine the field of competence and expertise of such professionals because Internet has become a tool that is used daily and the concepts connected to it have therefore become familiar to us.

This is the same for the expertise acquired by the experts by experience; the function will remain difficult to grasp so long as a sufficient critical mass of people will not have been able to become familiar with what this new concept is all about, and that common representations will not have been able to develop around it.

The pilot phase allowed for the creation of a generic profile for this function; it is an important tool and not only at the structural level – because it gives this new profession an official recognition in the architecture of the functions of the federal public services, which also extends to the legibility of the concept of expertise by experience. The new secondments do not, any longer, start from zero; the most recent actors on the scene, who become involved in this work, can make use of this tool, which provides them, to a certain degree, with a guide which helps them to understand the types of tasks that can be carried out by a real life experience expert, even if every single time around, a whole volume of work needs to be done to make it possible to adapt these generic tasks to the specificities of the service and the missions which the expert must carry out; this operation often continues over a period of several months.

Seen from this angle, the range of practices that already exist are tools of great importance; if the profile of a specific function provides an overall structure and sets out generic categories of tasks, the examples of past secondments make it possible to understand how they can be concretely used in the work contexts, which are necessarily always

specific and particular; they facilitate the appropriation of the concept of expertise by experience while trying to see how it can be used and incorporated in practice.

As the two cases of secondment described in the ONP context show that out of the 10 cases of good practices presented (see preceding chapter), it is becoming increasingly easy to integrate, in functional terms, new experts by experience in services because precedents now exist, and the recently involved actors can seek inspiration from the older ones or even try to duplicate their ideas in their own work. The emergence of such strategies that can be replicated, prove clearly that the plan has entered a dissemination phase, facilitated by the possibility to reproduce the missions; moreover, even if these two cases also testify to the fact that the integration of an expert by experience has not become “natural as yet” and that it still requires specific work despite everything, in the area of development and reflection. Only time and an efficient communication system on this new profession will make it possible to go even further.

### **Accelerating integration in the functional processes**

Any work process generally supposes a sequence or an overlap of tasks carried out successively or jointly by several people who occupy different posts; around such a process, a routine settles in which is known to all, and the integration of a new function is a step which is not always obvious, because it implies a total readjustment in the chain of work which could affect the distribution of the tasks for all those who are involved in it.

This difficulty obviously becomes more important when the function to be integrated is new, and the actors who are involved have no reference points which would give them the possibility to anticipate the impact that the work could have on their own activities; beyond an uncertainty and initial difficulty to coordinate matters, this situation could even create resistance, because the professionals who are already there, are afraid that the coherence of their work might be upset and that they would be dispossessed of a part of their duties; this is a phenomenon which is particularly well illustrated in the case of the secondment to the House of Justice in Brussels (see preceding chapter) where the arrival of the expert by experience raised concerns with certain justice assistants, who perceived a risk in that they could be relieved of an assistance function in which they were working.

At the present time, the situation is made even more complex by the fact that the experts by experience are appointed to a post even though they have just started their training; within such a context, it is not easy for them to know what their precise field of expertise is exactly and how to mobilize it in a professional area, where they don't know a great deal. In the long run, it is obvious that the experts by experience will take up their duties only when they have completed their training course, but with the time constraints im-

posed by the pilot scheme, it was evidently not possible to wait until they had completed three years of training before concretely starting work.

The facts which could be drawn up in this respect, at the time of the first secondments, have particularly highlighted two aspects that facilitate work in this field:

- The first is the importance, as soon as the expert by experience starts his work, of having effective communication to all his new colleagues, in order to clarify the challenges, the methodology and the impact of his activity. This need will disappear as soon as this new profession becomes better known, and when the actors involved will become more capable of comprehending to what it corresponds, but at the moment, it is essential to encourage active collaboration and to limit the risk of resistance or even rejection.
- The second is to introduce a better support system for the coaches and mentors in the exercise of their missions and to make sure that they are sufficiently motivated to take up this responsibility. Indeed, they have a central role to play in accompanying the experts by experience in their job integration in the department; it happens that many secondments often revolve around a work situation, in a narrow binomial relationship with the mentor, until the time when the expert by experience gradually emancipates and moves away from this supervision, and therefore more fully integrates his activity into that of the department. But it is a heavy responsibility which, in addition to the fact that it requires a considerable level of investment, it is also very complex to carry out because coaches and mentors themselves are unaware of all the professional facets of the expert by experience. Once again, this is a need which will be phased out in time, but which remains, at the present stage of dissemination of this new profession, an unavoidable support system for success.

The extent of the difficulties noted in terms of integration of this new function into the work processes of the various partner services, is not however, entirely connected to the relatively unknown profile of this new profession; seen from a more global point of view, it also highlights important challenges which still exist within the public services as regards the management of human resources; it is precisely in view of the requirements for organisational adaptation of this nature, that there is need to develop a true policy for the reception services, training and accompaniment of the workers to rise to the challenges in the modernization of the administration.

## **To look for new partnerships that would create posts for the experts by experience**

All new professions must find their place on the labour market and that necessarily means convincing the management that the skills that they bring with them are useful and that it would be interesting to utilise them. The labour market to which we are referring here, can at first glance seem limited, since these are the federal public services, but they already represent a very vast unit made up of a myriad of various institutions, which themselves consist of a multitude of departments. If we include the fact that these institutions are part of the same unit and have certain elements in common as regards human resources management, it should be noted that each of them is responsible to an Official Authority, which is particular to each of them and that this Authority has a high degree of autonomy in the decision making process.

The ambition, over the long term, is that additionally, this project could serve as a structure of opportunity for a wider dissemination of the plan, within the federated entities and local public services, such as municipal authorities, the CPAS, social housing agencies, youth aid services and the services for very young children, etc.

As regards the extension of this function within the federal public services, the fact that this project is supported by an interministerial decision, obviously makes things easier, but this alone is insufficient to arouse real interest and effective involvement on the part of presidents, administrators and general managers who, even if they took on board the fact that the fight against poverty had become a universal objective, and that they were mandated to contribute to it, they may not necessarily be convinced of the relevance of this project. In addition, they could also be initially preoccupied by the overall total management of the institution for which they are responsible.

If some of them have agreed to play the role of pioneer here, many others are still waiting for proof of the effectiveness of this plan; i.e. that it can demonstrate that it is indeed an effective support in the fight against poverty, in the operational context which is specific and varied at the same time in the federal public services.

The ten examples of good practices presented in this book show that this is indeed the case; not only do the experts by experience manage to build innovative bridges between the administration and the target public, but, in addition, this function is sufficiently flexible to adapt to the characteristics of a multitude of different services and to contribute in a specific and coherent manner to the missions which are entrusted to them.

Once again, time and constant communication remain the principal supports to rise to this challenge, and avoid the wait-and-see policy; the stabilization of formal management tools also contributes to it. The progress of this project shows that the first positive results that have been observed during the verification phase, have facilitated the setting up of new partnerships; this has also induced a certain number of already existing part-

ners to increase their level of involvement, by taking on more experts by experience in their respective centres, following the ONP example. These facts are encouraging and are proof that this new profession is gradually being integrated into the federal civil service.

## **Stabilization and statutory recognition**

As is the case, yet once again, with all new professions, the function of expert by experience has not yet found a stable place within the statutory plans, which would ensure the recognition and promotion of a profession on the labour market. The drawing up of a generic profile for the post that is officially recognized in the architecture of the functions of the federal public services is already an important stage to reach, but there at least two others which are equally important for the sustainability of this function.

The first relates to the statutory recognition of the skills of the experts by experience. The challenge on this matter is twofold:

- On the one hand, the recognition and the development of “skills acquired elsewhere”, i.e. skills and knowledge which were not acquired within the career context in the federal public services (and guaranteed by the processes of internal validation) and which are not officialised by a diploma. Such skills can be very varied in nature and relate as much to professional experience acquired elsewhere, rather than to experience which is more related to the course of one’s life, as is the case for the experts by experience.

Since 1937, the diploma or certificate is indeed the basis for recruitment of statutory agents within the Belgian administration and it is undoubtedly a major element which explains the structural rigidity of the public service. The willingness to introduce changes in this field became clear and the recognition of skills acquired elsewhere, has been for a few years now, an official objective of the federal public services which have, through the changes that have been made, the twin objective to attract to their centre more experienced staff, but, at the same time, to develop a true policy of diversity within the administration.

It is thus about a set of themes which go well beyond just the function of the expert by experience, and which supposes a total change in the human resources management within the administration, even if this progress is a capital stake for the stabilization of this new function; one can, in addition, change one’s way of looking at this situation and state that the real life experience experts project is an opportunity for the federal public services to implement this ambition for change in a pilot scheme.

- In addition, there is the question of the recognition of the training course which these experts follow, which constitutes an official equivalent to higher secondary education. The challenge here is not just to facilitate their statutory recognition within the administration, but also to enable them to develop their talents if they so wish, later on, to pursue professional integration, apart from this project in which they are involved at present.

A formal application was made on this particular point and was sent to the relevant authorities at the time when the project was launched, but this procedure takes time, and in addition, implies important arbitration on the methods and the contents of the training scheme, to be sure that it sufficiently covers the subjects which are supposed to be examined on completion of the secondary education studies.

It is a requirement which is not easy to deal with, insofar as the knowledge that must be acquired so that the expert can really be said to be qualified in the professional sense of the term, is not necessarily identical to the knowledge that is necessary for the recognition of equivalences in this domain. Apart from this difficulty (a temporary one), it seems especially important for us to underscore the fact that this project is, even at present, timely and essential to question the structural rigidity of our institutional framework, if we really want to respond to the fundamental collective ambition, which is to become a more inclusive society.

The second important step to achieve in terms of statutory stabilization of the experts by experience is their direct recruitment by the services which employ them. At the time when this pilot plan was initiated, it was indeed decided that all the experts by experience would be recruited by the FPPS Social Integration (FPPS-SI) and then be seconded to various partner services, to take up duty there; secondments which are moreover done on a multiannual basis and are subjected in the long term, to a joint evaluation for possible renewal, even if it is rare that the decision is made against renewal.

This was a choice which made sense at the start of the project because it made it possible for the FPPS-SI to remain the initiator of the project, and to coordinate it as long as the project had not stabilised. Also, the concrete methods of the practical application of this methodology still remained to be tested, and to be stably formalized; so the principle of secondments for a fixed period of time, with possible renewal, in addition made it advisable for the partners to be prudent in collaborating in the project, as without this condition they would undoubtedly have been fewer to agree to play the role of a test field.

Now that the pilot phase is over and that one is moving towards the consolidation of this project, this centralization will gradually lose its relevance; in addition, it will become difficult to manage and coordinate, as the number of experts by experience in activity will increase; it is necessary to have a system of direct recruitment by the services, to ensure

the sustainability of the project and to register the experts by experience in system of durable professional insertion, even if prudence invites one to consider the dismantling of the secondment process from the perspective of progress. This capital phase for the medium-term future of the project was carefully examined during the last evaluation (see web site of the FPPS-SI: <http://www.mi-is.be>) and they are now reflecting on how to define the operational stages and the modalities in this context.