



Opinion of the Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU 2020 for the National Reform Program 2020

In 2011, as part of the Europe 2020 strategy, the Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU2020 was founded under mandate by the Inter-Ministerial Conference “Integration in Society”. This was an analogy of the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion.

The Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU2020 forms the central consultation body for preparations and monitoring of European and Belgian policy relating to poverty prevention and social exclusion in function of the preparation and follow-up of the National Reform Program and strategic reporting as part of the strengthened Open Method of Coordination (department of social inclusion). The Belgian Platform meets at least 4 times a year.

In addition, every two years, the Belgian Platform organises an open meeting to maximise the opportunity for all stakeholders to participate in the policy processes.

The fifth Open Platform day was held on 31 January 2020. A total of 80 people attended from a wide selection of stakeholders: federal, regional and local authorities, administrations, bodies and advisory boards, aid organisations, social partners, civil society organisations, research institutions and universities, and people who live in poverty, represented by their associations in which the poor are given a voice. This wide variety, involving all policy levels, guarantees that the complex phenomenon of poverty and social exclusion are approached from different perspectives and positions.

The purpose of the Open Day was twofold:

- To draft an opinion of the Belgian Platform about the recent poverty-prevention policy in Belgium, further to the creation and monitoring of the National Reform Program.
- To develop and launch a process with which to evaluate the Belgian poverty prevention policy, developed as part of the EU2020 strategy.

This opinion is based on 5 themed expert memos, divided according to the strategic priorities in the chapter Social Inclusion in the National Reform Program 2019 and their discussion in a panel debate with experts and interaction with those participating in the Open Day. These recommendations target all stakeholders, and the federal and federated entities in particular.

Conclusions - Recommendations:

I. General

- The current anti-poverty policy is not on track to achieve the target and commitment made in the National Reform Plan 2011, namely to reduce the number of people in poverty by 380,000 by 2020. The number of people in poverty or social exclusion (Europe 2020 objective) has been in slight decline since 2016 and, in 2018, following some slight increases earlier on, was approximately back to where it started in 2008 (2,250,000 compared to 2,194,000 in 2008).
- In the NRP 2019, we read more than anything a summary of different measures with no vision or strategy about how poverty must be dealt with in a structural manner. The link between the measures taken and achievement of the poverty target is not described. The policy measures are often lacking in ambition, have no impact on poverty and can even cause poverty.
- The conclusions and recommendations in the evaluation of the Federal Plan against poverty 2016-2019 should be included as fundamental principles when creating the next Federal plan.
- The fight against poverty and social exclusion should be a communal and genuine priority at all levels in Belgian policy, and target maximum coherence, mutual agreement and complementarity. The fact that there was not one meeting of the Inter-Ministerial Conference Integration in the Community during the last period of legislature is also deplored. The Cooperation Agreement between the federal state, communities and regions relating to the consolidation of the poverty policy (1998) determines that this Inter-Ministerial Conference should meet twice a year in order to guarantee that discussion takes place between the various governments.
- This priority should be translated into an integrated and coherent National Plan to fight poverty, in which the following matters are key:
 - One vision and strategy to fight the structural causes of poverty;
 - Participation of people in poverty during the development, implementation and evaluation of the plan. It is therefore essential to build capacity by supporting the organisations facilitating such participation.
 - Realising international commitments made by Belgium as part of the UN's Sustainable Development Objectives and the European Pillar of Social Rights;
 - Following up the Inter-Ministerial Conference (IMC) and the Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion.
- Poor strategy must be avoided. The poverty test must be integrated by law at all policy levels and its quality must be guaranteed.

2. Working with indicators, targets and sub-targets

- Much work has already been done on the quantitative monitoring of poverty in Belgium, and at more or less all policy levels. Facts and trends are quantified using indicators. However, this collection of data does not ensure (political) action. Identifying the situation with data and indicators is a first step, but then action must be taken. It is very important to link the indicators, on the one hand, and the monitoring, on the other. Both must be part of an integrated strategy grounded in a results-oriented and evidence-based policy.
- Information relevant to the policy can be of both a quantitative (numbers) and qualitative nature. Both types of information are necessary to support the policy. They are complementary. When discussing indicators and targets we focus on quantitative

information. The problem is that not all important information can be captured in figures. Furthermore, a number of important target groups in the fight against poverty are not included in the figures, such as the homeless or those facing a sanction as part of a social protection rule. The use of qualitative information is necessary to interpret the result of quantitative indicators, such as the two-yearly report by the Support Centre for the Prevention of Poverty.

- In the current context of multi-level governance, there is a danger of creating different indicator sets in parallel. This implies different reporting requirements and a heavy workload for those producing indicators, which is of no benefit to the quality of collected data. Coherence between the different policy levels and reporting requirements is therefore desirable.
- Targets are useful in realising and monitoring policy. They help in getting the action process going and keeping it running. It is important to continue formulating (quantified) objectives and ambitions in order to continue stimulating and guiding the political effort required.
- Monitoring, indicators and data all increase visibility of the problem of poverty, however, there are in fact no instruments to reduce poverty. Care must be taken that statistical changes and innovation are not abused to artificially reduce poverty.

3. Ensuring the social protection of the population

At 16.4%, the poverty risk (AROP) is significantly higher than at the beginning of the observation period (14.8% in 2005). In fact, the poverty risk has reached its highest level since systematic monitoring began. The indicators also reveal that the efficiency of social protection is declining, particularly for people of a working age and children.

In 2018, social transfers caused the poverty-risk figure to drop from 25.1% to 16.4%, representing a decline of 34.7%. Between 2005 and 2016, the effectiveness of social transfers in the total population declined slowly from 47.7% to 44.2%. This decline went much faster over the last 3 years.

It is positive that benefits have followed the evolution in prosperity, but many people are still way below the European poverty line. This is despite the fact that the commitment to raise the benefits to the European level is in the federal government agreement.

The mindset of blaming the individual can increasingly be perceived in more recent policy. This vision makes access to social rights and social protection in general stricter and more difficult, and endangers people's fundamental rights and liberty. This has led to reforms limiting access to social rights or even entirely excluding people, such as the stricter control procedure in guaranteed income for seniors, stricter requirements for activation benefits and the generalisation of the integrated project for social integration.

The National Reform Program also contains no reference to the essential revision of the types of cohabitation in legislation relating to the right to social integration, as agreed in the government agreement. The problem in this respect is the fact that the status of living together significantly reduces benefits in a way that is disproportionate to what people actually save by living together. The status seriously curtails the rights and liberties of those classified as living together.

The launch of the app MyBenefits is a positive step, but insufficient in preventing the non-take up of social rights.

Recommendations

- The minimum income should be increased to above the European poverty line, including a proper phased pathway and sufficient budget to actually put this measure into practice. Adequate and accessible incomes must be an absolute priority to effectively reduce poverty in Belgium.
- The connection between an entitled person's replacement and integration income and their family situation must be reviewed. In doing so, the simple scrapping of the status of living together must be assessed as quickly as possible in an aim to individualise rights and give people the freedom to define their own family situation.
- The reforms that make it harder for or even prevent people from gaining access to social rights must be revoked.
- Rather than continuing to add conditions in social protection, preference should be given to universalism, in order to increase social support. Furthermore, a high-quality public service must be reinforced, whereby focus is transferred from control to support, in order to realise everybody's right to a life of dignity.
- The approach to the non-take up of social rights should be a priority, whereby people's experiences in poverty and existing reports of such should be included as criteria.

4. Reducing child poverty

Over the last decade, child poverty in Belgium has remained relatively stable, but in recent years it has risen again to 23.2%, bringing it close to the EU average. The poverty risk is extremely high among children from one-parent families (50%), quasi-unemployed families (83%) and children of non-EU origin (54.3%). In the latter group, administrative, language and cultural barriers, but also discrimination, play a role that should not be underestimated. A specific focus group is the growing group of Roma children, with severe issues relating to accommodation, deficient nutrition and health problems, begging and early school leaving. We should also mention asylum-seeking minors, accounting for 30% of all asylum seekers. One in six of these children is an unaccompanied minor. In addition to the problems relating to migration there are also psychic traumas to consider. For another focus group, children in institutions, there are not even any elementary statistics. The main issue with this group is the mismatch in the shelter provided (excessively long residential placement and accommodation in unsuitable facilities such as boarding schools). For children with a handicap, the biggest bottlenecks are long delays in the allocation of a personal assistance budget and the lack of inclusive childcare and education.

The child-guarantee initiative from the European Parliament is therefore a welcome way to remobilise the required political support to eradicate child poverty and insecurity. It is also important to note that the recommendation from the European Commission of 20 February 2013 on "Investing in children, breaking through the vicious circle of deprivation" highlights three pillars for integrated strategies: access to adequate means via the parents, access to affordable and quality services and the children's right to participation. The following recommendations focus on the second pillar in the recommendation, although this cannot be considered separately from the other dimensions in the fight against child poverty.

1. Guaranteeing adequate nutrition

In addition to the small percentage of children who have insufficient access to fresh vegetables, fruit and protein (2-3%), we are seeing an increase in obesity (20%) in Belgium, which also reflects an imbalanced diet.

We recommend investing in cheap school meals and meals provided by local partners (such as social restaurants or social grocery stores). The support to schools can be combined with an increase in social benefits and more compulsory regulations regarding the quality and price of school meals.

Meanwhile, this allows schools with an underprivileged audience to focus their operational means on pedagogic support rather than food assistance.

2. Free healthcare

In Belgium, there are already all kinds of social benefits making healthcare cheaper for low-income groups, as well as a limited number of free treatments for children. However, there are many deficiencies in this situation, and de facto we see that access to healthcare for children still very much depends on people's income and their residential status (national resident or EU citizen, 'legal' migrant, asylum seeker or undocumented migrant). Furthermore, when it comes to accessing healthcare, the gap between rich and poor increased considerably during the crisis years, partly due to economies in government funding and increasing patient contributions.

So, until now, selective support has not been particularly effective in guaranteeing access to (preventive) healthcare by the most disadvantaged groups. For example, children of asylum seekers theoretically have free access to healthcare but, in reality, families often get tangled up in complex administration or put on waiting lists (e.g. for mental healthcare).

EU support could stimulate innovative funding measures to benefit children in poverty - namely in preventive and mental healthcare - along with outreaching programmes. In Belgium, it would be necessary to evolve towards a rule that disassociates the right to free healthcare for (underprivileged) children from people's residential status.

3. Free education and equal opportunities in education

Despite recent restructuring, the Belgian educational systems remain relatively expensive and highly inequitable. By the age of 15, students from the 10% richest families in Belgium are already about 4 study years ahead of students from the poorest 10% in the population. The gap between native and immigrant students is about 1.5 school years.

The child guarantee could help alleviate the load of school costs for underprivileged groups, for example, with higher school subsidies for students or more priority funding for schools with many students from underprivileged groups. Yet, equally important is that it encourages structural change to desegregate schools and get rid of social discrimination (for example, actively encouraging the social and ethnic mix in schools, inclusive education, reducing year repetition and delaying the study choice). This requires further investment in pedagogic and student guidance. Furthermore, teachers' social and intercultural skills must be continuously reinforced with basic and refresher training. Finally, additional efforts are still necessary to prevent and deal with early school leaving.

4. Decent housing

4.8% of Belgian children live in a poorly heated home; 7.5% live in a household that struggles with the costs of housing. Of course, the households facing such issues tend to be poor.

There is a dire imbalance in access to accommodation in Belgium, due to the absence of a comprehensive rule for accommodation subsidies and the marginally small share of social accommodation in the residential market. The child guarantee could therefore target further investments in social housing, namely social rental offices, while the Belgian governments should also work on a system of housing grants to cover the needs in the private market.

In order to better protect children from the risks of homelessness and inadequate accommodation, the situation of children should be used as a criterion in actively tracking down unsuitable homes, the building and allocation of social housing, and eviction protection. Furthermore, in the private housing market, there is a need for a powerful anti-discrimination policy (including regular reality checks).

5. *General principles for an effective policy*

Belgium has some experience with integrated plans relating to child poverty and children's rights. However, the institutional patchwork seems to make the development of such integrated plans constantly harder; and none of the previous plans have ever been combined with budget commitments. The allocation of EU funding can be used to make progress by conditioning support to submitting such integrated and budgeted plans.

Meanwhile, Belgium does have considerable experience in dialogue with associations where the people experiencing poverty voice their opinion: their participation in the negotiations about support programmes can be very useful in stimulating social innovation upon the allocation of EU support. Ideally, the child guarantee should also encourage system reforms in favour of families in poverty situations. It should prevent stigmatisation of the target audiences and the substitution of national social policy measures with European funding.

5. Active inclusion of people who are distant from the employment market

The fight against poverty cannot be limited to an activation policy. An anti-poverty policy is required in which the focus lies on realising all basic rights. The right to employment is among them, but is certainly not the only one. Strategies and objectives for professional and social integration must be based on a wider approach. The employment market must become more inclusive and invest more in people who are not active on the employment market.

- Care must be taken that public services that are currently performed with an employment contract are not converted into voluntary activities or activities with maintained benefits. Otherwise the employee's status and situation risk becoming just as precarious as the service to the community.
- An employee's wage should allow him/her to lead a life in human dignity. Underpaid work does not contribute to better active inclusion, but actually reinforces the processes of social exclusion.
- Employment initiatives in prisons or companies adapted to those with a handicap must provide emancipatory employment conditions and may not yield to excessive profit.
- Education systems must take powerful measures targeting the most vulnerable students, in order to turn exclusion paths into emancipatory experiences targeting investments in the future.
- There is a need for a policy in which
 - Essential local services are identified that match a vision of voluntary work, or even masses of jobs of this type are created in the public sector, with the involvement of specific players.
 - Rather than obligatory employment, we want a policy where people's free will motivates them to become active once more on the employment market.
 - The sense of working for a community is connected with local life, social life, people's needs and the environment.
- There should be a complete evaluation and review of all negative and impoverishing measures which were taken with regard to the exclusion from unemployment, the reduction of unemployment benefits, limits to the right of social integration in the Public Centres for Social Welfare via the integrated projects for social integration and employment paths, the mandatory return to work for those with an illness, the complexity of statuses and the differences between them, and the opportunity for employers to work with precarious employment contracts
- Employment opportunities must be reconnected with the meaningfulness of employment. And only in this way can poverty be fought using employment opportunities, work and training.

6. Tackling inadequate accommodation and homelessness

1. Setting out an inter-federal strategy to tackle homelessness that puts the ambitions of the cooperation agreement of 12 May 2014 into practice

Homelessness, and more generally, the exclusion from housing, is a complex phenomenon that must be tackled in a transversal manner by working together with all parties concerned (the federal state, regions, cities, civil society and those directly involved). Although this theme does seem to be on the political agenda, many problems remain unresolved and the number of people affected seems to be increasing rapidly.

Of crucial importance in the solution is a structural, collective, coordinated, quantified and long-term strategy, which puts the ambitions of the cooperation agreement of 12 May 2014 into practice.

In May 2014, the homelessness cooperation agreement was concluded between the federal government and federated entities. It defines the role and responsibility of each level of government in the fight against homelessness.

This cooperation agreement requires an additional protocol, containing a general and inter-federal approach to combating homelessness, according to the terms recommended by the European Parliament in its resolution of 16 January 2014 as well as the terms in the European pillar of social rights. In the long term, this strategy must be quantified and founded on empirical evidence and regularly evaluated to test its effectiveness and to tackle all forms of homelessness, as foreseen by the ETHOS typology.

This protocol should contain a technical and political discussion mechanism making it possible to monitor the different elements in the agreement. The PPS Social Integration should guarantee to provide the relevant secretariat and technical support.

An inter-ministerial conference should create the terms for suitable dialogue and discussion, allowing a structural decrease in homelessness to be achieved, taking into account the distribution of authority.

2. Increasing and deepening the comprehension of homelessness

As part of the second federal plan for combating poverty (2012-2016) it was decided that a research would be carried out, aimed at providing a quantitative instrument to monitor homelessness. This objective was partly accomplished during the legislature 2014-2019, via the MEHOBEL research and thanks to collaboration with the Federal PPS Science Policy (BELSPO).

The recommendations in the MEHOBEL research should hence be closely analysed during discussions between governments, both at federal level and at the level of the federated entities, aimed at identifying the best interdependence between the authorities at each governing level, in order to:

- be able to specifically measure homelessness and exclusion in Belgium
- to translate these figures into realistic and quantified objectives (targets)
- to develop the most efficient support and guidance mechanisms
- to assess the efforts made in the light of perceived trends and, where necessary, to adjust the inter-federal strategy.

3. Allowing and reinforcing access to sustainable, high-quality and affordable accommodation

The characteristic shared by homeless people is the fact that they are more or less excluded from housing in the long term. A sustainable solution is only possible when homeless people are given access to a sustainable, high-quality and affordable form of housing. Efforts to beat global warming also make it important to invest in high-quality, sustainable housing.

Therefore, this inter-federal strategy to ban homelessness must:

- make access to and remaining in (eviction protection, etc.) housing (accessible, sustainable and high quality) the pillar in every government initiative to tackle homelessness
- provide sustainable, high-quality and affordable homes (including by investing in social accommodation) for homeless people
- promote access to private housing using financial support, rent mediation and further development in the system to assist people in their search for suitable and sustainable accommodation
- combat energy poverty.

4. *Preventing homelessness*

The most efficient way to combat homelessness is to prevent it in the first place. In order to limit the stream of people ending up on the streets, a systematic study is required to determine the effect of certain policy measures in order to eliminate the negative impact relating to homelessness.

This also means that transversal measures must be taken which directly impact the occurrence of homelessness, such as access to a decent income and, in a wider sense, the effectiveness of the fundamental rights (right to care, right to accommodation, right to human dignity, etc.), measures relating to debt prevention, non take-up prevention, the reform of Mental Healthcare which is currently causing people to end up on the street, managing the cost of rent, etc.

When it comes to the policy on the prevention of homelessness, many accompanying measures need to be added: prevention of eviction, preparing people for their departure from institutions (youth care, reception centre, psychiatric hospital, prison, etc.) by actually offering access to sustainable accommodation immediately upon leaving these institutions, combating intrafamily violence, etc.

5. *Investing in efficient and structural solutions*

Various experiments and government strategies at home and abroad known as 'Housing First' have demonstrated that this approach offers a sustainable way forward in significantly reducing homelessness. More than 80% of those involved in the Belgian initiative had a roof over their head until at least two years later. It is essential to combine government intentions with action by considerably increasing the resources available for this approach, as the Brussels government has done.

Besides Housing First, which targets the most 'wrecked' homeless people, it is also necessary to encourage a policy focusing on a sustainable way of removing homeless people from the streets, thanks to rapid access to their own home ('housing led policies') and the introduction of ad hoc support, rather than resorting to measures which attempt to deal with homelessness more specifically by providing extra emergency beds. Although emergency accommodation is necessary to prevent people having to sleep on the streets, it may certainly not be viewed as a replacement for structural measures to accommodate people in a sustainable manner. No such provision will ever banish homelessness if a structural social security policy does not proactively deal with homelessness in order to prevent all forms of homelessness as much as possible.

7. Shelter and integration for people with a migration background

16.4% of the Belgian population currently are migrants, i.e. people who were born in another country. Most migrants are of European origin (54% of the migrant population), followed by migrants from Africa (25.8%), Asia (15.6%), America (4.2%) and Oceania (0.1%). Studies confirm that migration contributes to Belgium's' economic development. They also highlight a clear link between migration

and poverty. Indeed, in 2018, the risk of poverty and social exclusion in Belgium was 47.8% among non-EU migrants, compared to 14.4% among natives.

The poverty risk for non-EU migrants is one of the highest in the European Union, while the poverty figure for locals is one of the lowest in the European Union. The gap between the poverty figure for locals and non-EU migrants is one of the biggest of all EU countries.

The low employment rate among non-EU migrants is one of the key causes of poverty within this population group in Belgium. The employment figures for people with a migration background in Belgium are indeed among the worst in the European Union: the employment level of those aged between 20 and 64 is 53.9%, compared to 72% among the native population, which is a difference of 18 percentage points, compared to a European average of 9.5 points. These differences in employment level between locals and non-EU migrants in Belgium can be partly explained by a difference in training level. Besides the training level, an integral requirement to access the Belgian employment market is learning the language. However, the difference in language skills does not fully explain the low employment level of non-EU migrants in Belgium.

Belgium struggles with a number of structural problems that are specific to our country and which explain the limited level of employment of non-EU migrants. Among these problems are the administrative difficulties faced by migrants, more specifically the complexity of the different procedures concerning the accreditation of diplomas and competences, which is governed by the communities. In 2016, 43% of the 97,820 unemployed job seekers in Brussels were unable to gain accreditation of their foreign education. The difficulty in recognising diplomas not only makes it harder to find work, it also causes the migrant population to become overqualified. As a result, one in three migrants (33.2%) is overqualified for his or her job in Belgium, compared to just one in five natives (19.8%). These results imply a lower income for the working migrant population, and thus a greater risk of poverty or social exclusion.

Also, the long and complicated procedures involved in acquiring a work or residential permit make life difficult for the migrant population. Many migrants are unable to quit their job as they otherwise risk losing their residential permit. This makes them vulnerable towards their employer and can affect their income levels. Furthermore, migrants from outside the EU have only limited social protection rights, except for those who enjoy international protection, and migrants from countries with bilateral social security arrangements. Migrants who remain in our country illegally are naturally a particularly vulnerable category. They are excluded from social protection rules, other than emergency medical assistance. Their financial obligations and daily fear of being deported make them extremely dependent on their work and/or environment.

Yet even those who are employed illegally enjoy a number of employment rights: a minimum wage that they receive regularly and independently of the employer's profit or loss; the freedom to spend their wage as they wish; the reimbursement of travel costs, etc.

The problem with people remaining in our country illegally is a symptom of a wider issue, namely the lack of safe and legal access channels.

Discrimination is a key cause for the fact that non-EU migrants struggle to find work in Belgium. Tackling public opinion is essential to combat discrimination, particularly because this discrimination also increases the risk of poverty and exclusion on the housing market. Discrimination on the housing market means that newcomers encounter difficulties in finding a decent and affordable home. Once again, this results in geographical segregation based on income, ethnicity and/or legal status (e.g. people who enjoy international protection).

The following recommendations are made based on previous analysis and discussions:

- Offer more opportunities for safe and legal migration, in particular for people requiring international protection (namely by respecting Belgium's commitments regarding

resettlement and the increased quota) and for other migrants (namely by focusing on an ambitious employment migration law at Walloon and Brussels level), while simultaneously conducting a family unification policy that respects the family unit.

- Set out a policy focused on better integration of migrants (language courses, recognition of diplomas and competences, support for social services, etc.).
- Protect the basic rights of all migrants, including their employment rights.
- Make legislation relating to equality and the prevention of discrimination and racism more effective, including when it comes to employment, accommodation and education, and also relating to government policy, business practice and trade union activity.
- Invest in knowledge about the relationship between poverty and discrimination.
- Focus on positive rather than polarising public discussion about migration and migrants.

More information about the Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU2020 and the Open Day on 31 January 2020 can be found [here](#).