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REFUFAM

From policy gaps to policy innovations: strengthening the well-being and integration pathways of refugee families.

Promotor(s)

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Introduction

In the world of migration and integration governance, Belgium represents a strikingly complex case. Competences of migration (e.g. asylum and family reunification) and integration (e.g. education, work and housing) are divided between federal, regional and municipal governance levels, while support services are dispersed across a range of civil society organizations and state actors. Compared to neighbouring countries like the Netherlands, Germany or France, Belgium's lack of central coordination has created substantial 'policy gaps'. In the interstices between governments' competences, a wide variety of actors have stepped in providing all kinds of ad hoc support to refugees. However, we know surprisingly little about the effects of Belgium's complex institutional configuration, nor of the innovative potential that can be found in emerging support structures. This lack of knowledge is puzzling as integration continues to dominate public debates.

REFUFAM will therefore provide evidence-based recommendations on how government policies and support practices can be reformed to better facilitate refugees' overall integration process. Our interdisciplinary research design builds on three interlinked approaches, each drawing on a different set of methods: a legal-political approach to the institutional configuration of Belgium's of asylum and integration policies; a psychosocial approach to refugee family members' mental well-being; and a socio-spatial approach to document their local integration pathways. This will enable us to identify Belgium's policy gaps, and trace their impact on refugee families' psychosocial well-being, and their integration pathways.

In analysing this multi-layered integration process, REFUFAM innovatively takes refugee families as its central analytic unit. Within the vast scholarly literature on refugees' integration, the role of family dynamics often remains out of view. Most studies on refugees road to 'work', for instance, focus exclusively on individuals, aggregated by nationality, education or legal status. Similarly, we have limited knowledge on how complex family dynamics shape individual refugees' aspirations in terms of finding a place to live, a job, or acquiring new educational degrees. Recent research, however, convincingly shows that refugees' family lives – including individuals' gendered and generational positions within their families – are crucial to understand this complex integration process. This project builds on this novel, emerging line of research, and applies it systematically to Belgium's peculiar policy context.

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POLICY GAPS AND EMERGING SUPPORT STRUCTURES

Migrants' integration is a notoriously contentious concept. For a long time, scholars have conceived integration as a two-way process, in which both migrants and their host societies adapt themselves to each other (e.g. Berry 1997; Ager & Strang 2008). In practice, however, scholarly theories, empirical research and government policies have almost exclusively focused on how well migrants perform, and how their relative success can be explained by individual characteristics such as nationality, ethnicity, gender, age or class. The impact of receiving societies' policies and institutional configuration on migrants' ability to find work or obtain new educational credits, for instance, has for a long time received scant attention (Crul & Schneider 2010; Phillimore 2020).

In this project, we take as our point of departure an aspect of these policies that is particularly salient in the Belgian context: 'policy gaps'. Belgium's configuration of asylum and integration policies is exceptionally complex, with

competences divided over federal, regional and municipal policy levels, and in which a traditionally strong collaboration with autonomous civil society organizations has started to give way to privatization (Martiniello 2013; Vandevoordt 2019). This fragmented, complex configuration creates 'gaps' between policy domains, leaving refugees, bottom-up initiatives and municipal public services to address barriers to integration themselves (Beeckmans & Geldof, forthcoming; Boussetta et al 2018; Vandevoordt 2019).

Refugees' access to housing constitutes a clear example. After being granted international protection, refugees in Belgium have to find accommodation without support from the government. However, in order to access the support offered by municipal social services, refugees need to formally register their residence within that municipality. In the context of Belgium's housing crisis, this pushes migrants into precarious accommodations in super-diverse, disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods (Beeckmans et al 2018 and 2019; Saeys et al 2018). As a result, refugee families feel forced to suspend their efforts to attend civic integration courses, obtain new educational credits or find work, as their search for housing takes priority. As several studies have shown, without access to adequate housing, it seems difficult to start 'integrating' (Beeckmans & Geldof 2020; Fozdar & Hartley 2014; Saeys et al 2018).

Policy gaps such as these are often filled with emerging support practices: Belgium's integration policies have historically emerged less through a centrally designed policy, than through a series of ad hoc measures taken by a variety of non/state actors (Vandevoordt 2019). Returning to the example of refugee housing, since 2015 a variety of civil society actors and municipal governments have developed different kinds of support, from 'housing cafes' (where volunteers help refugees search for housing) to housing cooperatives (where citizens buy and let properties to refugee families). This has instigated several policy innovations, including an administrative process that facilitates the co-habitation of refugees and citizens during the former's search for housing ('Meldpunt Tijdelijk Wonen') (d'Eer et al 2019a and 2019b), as well as the organized involvement of volunteers to support refugees' integration process – as evidenced by Flanders' recently introduced 'firth pillar' of civic integration, which centres around volunteer support at the municipal level.

This raises three crucial questions. What are the effects of these policy gaps on the overall integration process of refugee families? To what extent do emerging support structures address the effects of these policy gaps? And how could they lead to policy innovations?

Most analyses of Belgium's policy gaps consist of exploratory research on specific cases, set within the context of particular spaces (Boussetta et al 2018; Lietaert et al 2020) or life domains (Beeckmans and Geldof, forthcoming; d'Eer et al 2019). What is lacking, however, is a systematic examination of how refugee families in particular are confronted with these policy gaps and emerging support structures from the moment they arrive in Belgium. The first part of this project will therefore analyse the institutional set-up of Belgium's migration and integration policies, including all policy domains relevant to the integration of refugee families: family reunification, housing, employment, education, et cetera.

In doing so we adopt a legal-political approach that centres on human rights and on institutional organization. First, taking the rights of refugee families as our point of departure (e.g. the right to respect for family life), we identify through which actors and institutions these rights can be practiced. In doing so we build on a recent development in human rights studies, which adopts a 'users' perspective' to analyse how individuals' access to human rights is (not) realised in practice (Brems & Desmet, 2014; Desmet 2018). Second, we adopt an organisational-institutional perspective to analyse emerging support structures for refugee families. In doing so, we examine both the creative potential and the unequal access this generates in refugee families' access to support.

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In the second part of this project, we examine the impact of these policy gaps and emerging structures on refugee families' psychosocial well-being. For a long time, studies documenting the well-being of refugees have adopted a strictly psychological or psychiatric approach, emphasising the pathological effects of trauma due to conflict or the migration trajectory (Chatty 2007; Ryan et al 2008). In recent years, however, more scholars have explored the effects of post-migration factors (e.g. separation of family members, access to social networks, living conditions) on refugees' psychosocial well-being (Derluyn & Broekaert 2007; Groeninck et al 2019, 2020; Ryan et al 2008). In identifying these post-migration factors, it has proven crucial to adopt a longitudinal approach allowing researchers to trace the impact of changes in refugees' family status, social networks and living conditions (Vervliet et al 2014).

This project builds on this literature by examining the impact of policy gaps and emerging support structures have on refugee family members' psychosocial well-being. We proceed in two steps. First, we document how family members' psychosocial well-being changes throughout time, depending on their *gendered and generational position* with the family, and their migration trajectories (e.g. 'principal migrants' are likely to have acquired stronger socioeconomic resources than those who follow through family reunification) (cf. Bonizzoni 2009; Bonjour & De Hart 2020; Bonjour & Kraler 2015; Bailey & Boyle 2004; Kofman 2004). Second, we examine how the policy gaps and emerging support structures identified in the first part of the research impact family members' psychosocial well-being. Refugee families' transition from a collective asylum centre to the private housing market, for instance, can have a *direct impact* on their psychosocial well-being, depending on how quickly they find adequate housing. In addition, their search for housing is likely to have an *indirect impact* on family members' social and structural resources, as they gain or lose substantial parts of their social networks. In this sense, policy gaps and emerging support structures can influence how well refugee family members are able to cope with psychological stress. This in turn, as scholars have documented, is likely to influence their integration process (Beaton et al 2018).

INTEGRATION PATHWAYS

In the third part of the project, we focus on 3 'functional' domains of integration: housing, education and work (Ager & Strang 2008). Building on recent research (Brun 2015; Carlier 2020; Meeus et al 2020), we assume that these domains are strongly shaped by spatial and temporal processes: where people live and what futures they aspire to, are crucial to understand their integration pathways. Especially in a national context that is characterized by policy gaps and emerging support structures, we hypothesize that local spaces, including the resources they provide, play a crucial role in shaping refugees' access to housing, work and education.

These 'functional' domains of integration have received considerable attention. Several studies have shown that refugees in Belgium, as in other West-European countries, have less access to housing (Beeckmans and Geldof, forthcoming; Crisisplatform Wonen 2017), work (OECD/EU 2018; Rea et al 2014) and education (Koehler and Schneider 2019) than the more established parts of the Belgian population. The constraints and opportunities to access these domains are often tied to specific spatial and temporal dynamics. In Flanders, for instance, the housing market is characterized by a relatively high degree of home ownership and a low degree of social rental properties (Vlaamse Woonraad 2017). This pushes disadvantaged groups such as refugees, into a prolonged state of crisis trying to find appropriate housing, making it difficult to work towards future aspirations (Saeys et al, 2018).

A useful way to study these constraints and opportunities is through the notion of 'integration pathways', inspired by Clapham's (2002) concept of 'housing pathways'. These 'pathways' have two dimensions. On the one hand, they

include refugee families' *objective trajectories* in their search for housing, work and education, as well as their subjective strategies and aspirations within these domains. Using this straightforward approach allows scholars to concentrate on pivotal moments in which refugees make a transition between two objective statuses, and to analyse the precise conditions that shape this transition. As refugee families move from federal asylum accommodation to the private housing market, this approach helps to foreground the precise resources enabling them to find adequate housing. In doing so, we take into account not only the agency of refugee family members, but also the broader opportunity structures generated by these spatially embedded life domains (e.g. the housing market in Brussels, Flanders and Wallonia).

Summing up, the main objective of this project is to examine the effects of Belgium's complex configuration of asylum and integration policies on refugee families' overall integration process. on This consists of 4 more specific objectives, each corresponding to one Work Package (WP) as discussed in the section on methodology.

1. To identify policy gaps and emerging support structures within the field of Belgium's migration and integration policies;

2. To assess the impact of policy gaps on the psycho-social well-being of refugee families;

3. To examine the impact of policy gaps, and psychosocial well-being on refugee families' integration pathways.

4. To formulate evidence-based recommendations for policies and support practices that can better facilitate refugee families' well-being and integration pathways.

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