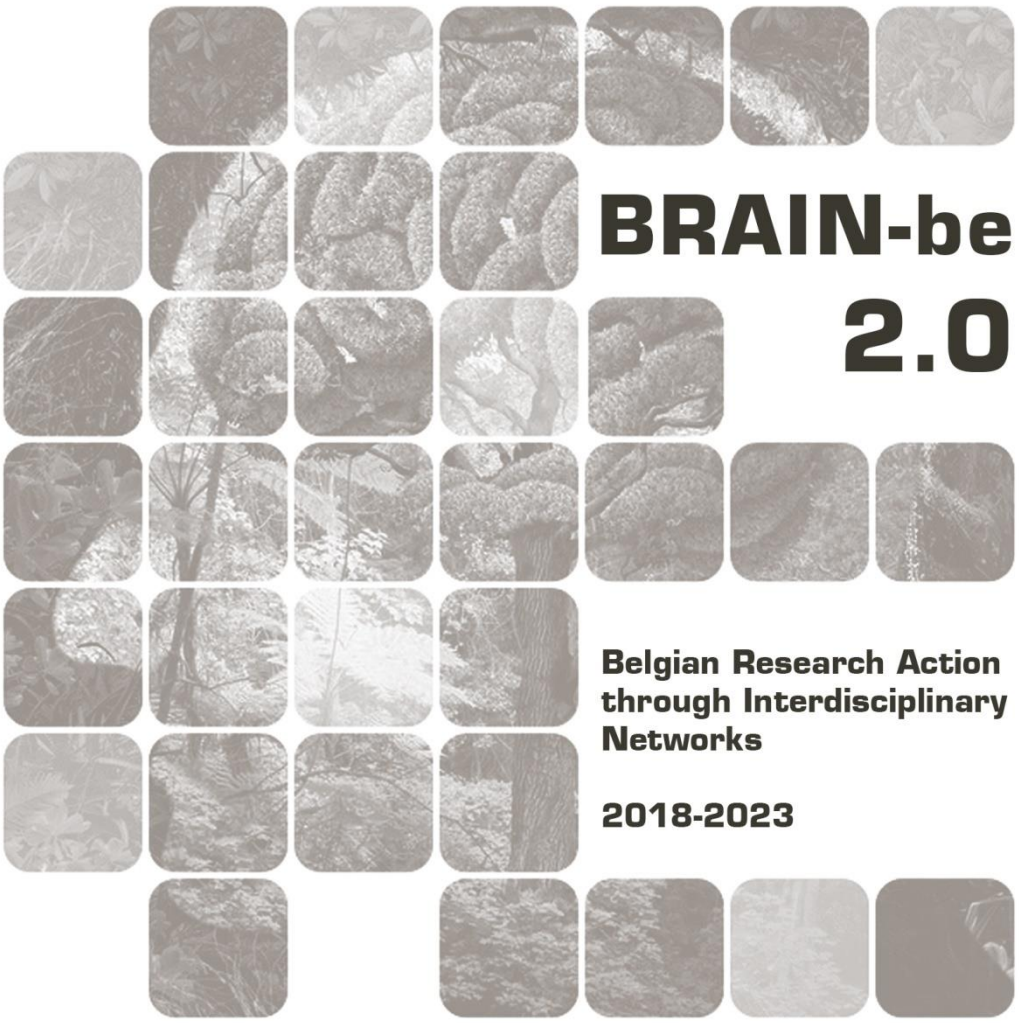


BBOX

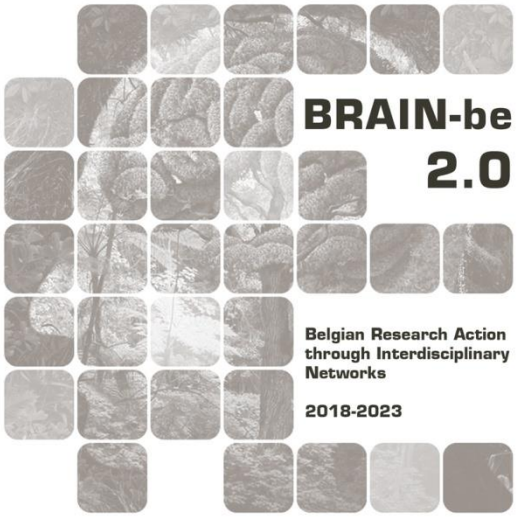
OCMW/CPAS & new migrants/refugees: opening the black box of policy in practice

Peter De Cuyper, Marije Reidsma, Hanne Vandermeerschen, Michelle Crijns (HIVA-KULEUVEN)

Elsa Mescoli, Jérémy Mandin, Jean-Michel Lafleur & Angeliki Konstantinidou (CEDEM - Université de Liège)

Adriana Costa Santos, Youri Lou Vertongen, Carla Mascia & Abraham Franssen (CESIR - Université Saint-Louis, Bruxelles)

Pillar 3: Federal societal challenges



NETWORK PROJECT

BBOX

OCMW/CPAS & new migrants/refugees: opening the black box of policy in practice

Contract - B2/191/P3/BBOX

FINAL REPORT

PROMOTORS: Peter De Cuyper (HIVA - KULEUVEN)
Jean-Michel Lafleur (CEDEM-ULiEGE)
Abraham Franssen (CESIR-FUSL)

Peter De Cuyper, Hanne Vandermeerschen, Marije Reidsma, Michelle Crijns (HIVA-KULEUVEN)
Elsa Mescoli, Jérémy Mandin, Jean-Michel Lafleur & Angeliki Konstantinidou (CEDEM - Université de Liège)
Adriana Costa Santos, Youri Lou Vertongen, Carla Mascia & Abraham Franssen (CESIR - Université Saint-Louis, Bruxelles)

Published in 2024 by the Belgian Science Policy Office
WTCIII
Simon Bolivarlaan 30 bus 7
Boulevard Simon Bolivar 30 bte 7
B-1000 Brussels
Belgium
Tel: +32 (0)2 238 34 11
http://www.belspo.be
http://www.belspo.be/brain-be

Contact person: Aziz NAJI
Tel: +32 (0)2 238 36 46

De Cuyper P. et al., BBOX/CPAS & new migrants/refugees : opening the black box of policy into practice. Final Report. Brussels: Belgian Science Policy Office 2024 . (BRAIN-be 2.0 - (Belgian Research Action through Interdisciplinary Networks)).

The present report has to be considered as a summary of the BBOX research with a focus on the policy perspective. An in-depth discussion of the state of the art, methodologies and scientific results is provided in the Open Access book 'Newcomers navigating the Welfare state: Experiences of Immigrants and Street-Level Bureaucrats with Belgium's Social Assistance System'. For more details please download the book at: https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/85783

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

The increased diversity in current societies pose a number of challenges, not in the least to public service delivery, as the diversity among the users requires variety in its responses. This can be witnessed in Public Centres for Social Welfare (PCSWs, or OCMW in Dutch and CPAS in French), amongst others, where the influx of immigrants have led to an increasing share of foreigners among the beneficiaries: in 2019, over 1 in 4 beneficiaries of an integration income was of non-EU origin (based on data of the Federal Public Planning Service for Social Integration, 2019). Recognized refugees and newly arrived immigrants who have been granted subsidiary protection constitute a large share of this group.

The impact of PCSWs on migrant newcomers cannot be underestimated, as PCSWs play a crucial role in the settling process and integration of newly arrived migrants. Moreover, for many of them, the contact with social workers represents one of the first or main contacts with local society. In addition, decisions taken at the PCSW can have a long-term influence on the integration of newly arrived immigrants (e.g. in terms of labour market opportunities or housing). A large responsibility in this respect lies on the shoulders of individual social workers at PCSWs, as it is known that public workers in settings such as a PCSW have a high amount of discretionary power in the execution of their job. This discretionary power is valuable and necessary in policy implementation, as not everything can be spelled out in rules. Providing a flexible and individualized treatment, responding to varying individual needs, including to those of immigrants, requires room for manoeuvre by the social workers. However, this implies that actual policies and interventions towards newcomers can only be fully understood when taking into account the process of implementation, and therefore the positions, motives, actions and decisions of the frontline workers (i.e. the social workers).

On the onset of this research, little was known about practices and interventions towards newcomers in PCSWs in terms of assistance provision, nor was it clear which are underlying rationales explaining these practices and interventions and more particularly the decision-making process. The BBOX research project was set up to gain more knowledge in this regard, focusing simultaneously on the perspective of the social workers, their management, and the newcomers. We focused specifically on newcomers from a non-EU origin who have been living up to 5 years in Belgium. This study fulfilled three research aims. A first aim was to map the practices regarding the granting of rights and social activation interventions targeting newly arrived immigrants. Second, we shed light on the factors influencing social workers' choices and decisions regarding social benefits and social activation targeting newcomers. Third, we provided an analysis of the accessibility of social welfare for newcomers and of their experience with a welfare administration. As a general theoretical framework, we relied on the concept of accessibility, as well as on the existing literature on street level bureaucracies. For more details on the theoretical framework, we refer to Perna & Vandermeerschen (2023).

To accomplish the goals of this study, we adopted a mixed-methods design, combining both qualitative and quantitative research tools, as well as accounting for the perspective of a variety of stakeholders and social actors involved. The overall approach of our research included four main phases: a literature review, a qualitative study of welfare practices through interviews with 197 staff members (social workers, management and members of the Committee) in 20 PCSWs across the 3 regions of Belgium, interviews with 87 immigrant beneficiaries and an online survey sent to the chief social workers of PCSWs. The survey was conducted to complement and crosscheck our findings from

the qualitative study, bringing data triangulation into our research design. The survey was sent to 542 PCSWs and was filled out by 99 chief social workers (or someone better positioned to fill out the survey), thus giving us a response rate of 18%. For more details on how the data have been collected, processed and analysed, we refer to Mescoli et al. (2023).

The research was conducted from 2019 until the beginning of 2023 by 3 research teams: HIVA – KULeuven, CEDEM – University of Liege and CESIR – Université de Saint-Louis – Bruxelles.

BBOX research team

HIVA-KU-Leuven	Hanne Vandermeerschen, Marije Reidsma, Michelle Crijns, Peter De Cuyper (promotor)
CEDEM-ULG	Elsa Mescoli, Jeremy Mandin, Angeliki Konstantinidou, Roberta Perna, Jean-Michel Lafleur (promotor)
CESIR-FUSL	Adriana Da Costa Santos, Carla Mascia, Youri Vertongen, Abraham Franssen (promotor)

The results reflect an analysis at three levels, i.e. the organisational/management level, that of social workers, and that of the newly arrived immigrants as beneficiaries. Beyond a documentation of the Belgian assistance provision, this research contributes to a broader in-depth understanding of the interactions between immigrants and the Welfare State from policy to practice. Moreover, by including the study of migrants' own experience with welfare institutions, it brings a multi-stakeholder perspective to the subject matter and contributes to the emerging but still insufficient literature on the functioning of welfare systems from the perspective of recipients.

The main result of the research is a peer reviewed open access book (Vandermeerschen et al., 2023). The table of contents of the book can be found in annex 1. In addition, a management summary containing key findings with a focus on policy makers (in Dutch and French only) (Vandermeerschen et al., 2023) and a report presenting the survey results have been published (Reidsma et al., 2023). The output of the research can be found here: https://hiva.kuleuven.be/nl/onderzoek/thema/armoedeenmi/p/BBOX.

2.RESULTS

In what follows we come back to the three research aims as described above. We summarise the key findings with regard to each of them, bringing together the perspectives of all actors, ranging from the 'system' to the users. In a fourth paragraph we discuss the main findings related to two additional themes that emerged from our study, that is, the question of equity and the high price of support. The summary is based on Vandermeerschen & De Cuyper (2023: 301-313), Vandermeerschen et al. (2023) and Reidsma, Vandermeerschen & De Cuyper (2023), with sections in this report directly quoted from these sources.

The present report has to be considered as a summary of the BBOX research with a focus on the policy perspective. An in-depth discussion of the state of the art, methodologies and scientific results is provided in the Open Access book 'Newcomers navigating the Welfare state: Experiences of Immigrants and Street-Level Bureaucrats with Belgium's Social Assistance System'. For more details, please download the book at: https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/85783

2.1 Practices of granting of rights and social activation interventions

2.1.1. The organisation of service delivery towards newcomers and collaboration with partners

PCSWs organise their services towards newcomers in two main ways. One way is to deal with newcomers' demands and the related files directly at general social services; another way is to manage these records first at specialised social services, before being transferred to general social services at some point. Both approaches were present in the field, with 16% of the PCSWs that filled out the questionnaire indicating they have a specialized service for newcomers. This is mainly the case in PCSWs in large or medium-sized municipalities with a larger share of beneficiaries from outside the EU. PCSWs can also opt for a configuration in between those two approaches by having social workers specialising in newcomers who work within the general social service. This is the case for 55% of PCSWs without a specialised service for newcomers.

In our research, it became clear that PCSWs are not isolated organisations, but also rely on partners to execute service delivery for newcomers. The partnerships that can be found most systematically – sometimes also by means of formal agreements – are with the regional centres for integration, schools for language education (Dutch/French), other municipal services, and regional employment services (VDAB/Forem/Actiris/ADG). In Flanders, the general welfare centres (CAWs) also often featured as partners. We note that there are many other partners, such as schools, health centres, health insurance companies, centres providing support to pupils, interpretation services, NGOs or other organisations providing support around legal aid, employment institutions, housing institutions, Fedasil, Kind en Gezin, and so on. However, the exact 'patchwork' of partners varies from PCSW to PCSW. Besides the more institutionalised and formalised partnerships (for example with employment services), cooperation with organisations often depends on social workers' personal initiatives, preferences or connections.

Referrals to partners can occur when a need arises that requires input from a specialized organization. Examples include referring individuals to legal assistance provided by NGOs or other organizations for newcomers seeking family reunification or in need of information on residency rights, or referring individuals to a psychologist when they are facing mental health issues, or providing homework support for children who require assistance with their schoolwork. However, referrals require social workers to find the time and space to address these needs, but as will be discussed later, problem detection is sometimes compromised in practice. Conversely, time constraints can also be a reason for referrals, namely when it is estimated that someone could be more thoroughly supported by other organizations (for example, referring them to a regional welfare centre or another organisation to assist in finding suitable housing).

Although social workers and managers at the PCSW emphasize the importance of working within a network when assisting newcomers and other beneficiaries, collaboration is not always straightforward in practice. For example, although the public employment services and the regional integration centres frequently come forward as partners, it is remarkable that the intensity of cooperation is often lower than one might expect based on the complementarity in terms of expertise and the common focus on integration in society of both organisations. In practice, the degree of cooperation is variable and often rather limited in scope. Various reasons may underlie this, such as differing views on social work and diverse institutional cultures between the PCSW and partner

organisations, but also frustrations among partners regarding aspects of the PCSW's functioning. Additionally, frequent or systematic referrals due to time constraints — which partners may interpret as passing on tasks and responsibilities, potentially resulting in overload for the partners themselves — can lead to tensions at the level of the collaboration and communication in the follow-up of individuals being assisted.

2.1.2. Social activation strategies and the role of partners

Within this research, a particular aim was also to shed more light on social activation strategies targeted specifically at newcomer beneficiaries. Specifically with regard to labour market activation, our mapping of practices revealed that social workers act as gatekeepers to employment, with newcomer beneficiaries having to be willing to work. This condition, which is linked to receiving an integration income, is often translated into demonstrating willingness to take 'preparatory steps', such as learning the regional language, but also working on certain prerequisites or following training. However, social workers do not only consider the newcomers' willingness to work, since the latter also need to be considered employable by social workers at the PCSW. Some frequently mentioned criteria in the survey to assess the newcomers' employability are, among others, language proficiency, psychosocial stability, and the availability of stable and/or adequate housing. Labour market activation tends to occur later for newcomer beneficiaries, with other (intermediate and "social") goals being prioritised first, and social workers often (felt they have to) temper newcomers' expectations with regard to employment prospects as well. This assessment is often done by their general social worker. This means that, in many cases, there is no immediate focus on job placement; rather, efforts are initially directed towards addressing prerequisites. This process, viewed by social workers as a more general guidance towards activation, is deemed necessary for effective counseling to employment. This approach is also evident in cases where newcomers themselves initially expect to enter the workforce immediately. Thus, in practice, social workers do not usually adhere strictly to the 'work-first' principle — where employment is seen as a crucial stepping stone to integration and is therefore prioritized — but instead often choose to encourage (or somewhat obligate) newcomers to take several other steps first, particularly — but not exclusively — in terms of language acquisition (depending also on the newcomer's profile).

The above trends apply to Brussels, Flanders and Wallonia, but there are also differences in activation policies between the regions, with a stronger emphasis on employment and a more conditional and somewhat stricter approach in Flanders compared to Wallonia. In Flanders, for example, a higher percentage of PCSWs (66%) require a minimum level of language proficiency compared to Wallonia (28%).

A remarkable finding was that most PCSWs consider themselves as the primary actor in charge of beneficiaries' journey towards employment, instead of the public employment services. Around 70% of the PCSWs indicated in the survey that they consider either their socio-professional insertion service or the 'general' social worker the primary actor in terms of labour market activation. In PCSWs' experience, social workers are most familiar with working with their target group – in this case, newcomers – and therefore they like to hold the reins in the activation process. Concerns about the provision of sufficient follow-up to beneficiaries also play a role in this. The survey results show that a slight majority of the PCSWs that do not consider the public employment services as the main actor in activation to work, believe that the public employment services do not always provide sufficient opportunities for newcomers and/or for weaker beneficiaries.

2.1.3. The importance of discretion in the granting of rights

As for granting rights, throughout this research, it became clear that different levels are at play in the decision-making process on the allocation of social benefits, with social workers, managers and/or directors and a deciding committee each having their own specific role. An emphasis on tailor-made support, and decisions taken on a 'case by case' basis was observed as a common thread throughout our findings. Of course, there are rules and policy lines in place, but they do not cover (nor aim to cover) all possible situations encountered in the field. Moreover, negotiating the rules to some extent, is part of the process. While the entitlement to an integration income is rather fixed (by law) and conditions are rather straightforward, complementary aids (in addition to the social integration income) need to be argued.

Our analysis revealed the importance of discretion in the social assistance provision to newcomer beneficiaries at PCSWs. However, the use of discretion requires the engagement and motivation of the social workers and presupposes they acknowledge their discretionary power and take responsibility in performing it. Indeed, the discretionary power of social workers gives them the possibility to engage with the rules in different ways. They can strictly adhere to the rules – which may lead to allocate lower aid – or engage more with the rule – finding spaces of interpretation to increase the social aid. As a result, the extent to which discretion is performed differs largely between social workers and between services at the PCSW, which can affect the outcomes for beneficiaries as well. These findings confirm the value of 'street level bureaucracy' as a theoretical framework for the analysis of service provision to newly arrived immigrants, as (different forms of) discretion indeed turned out to be fundamental in the decision-making process leading (or not) to access to rights.

2.2 Factors influencing choices and decisions of social workers

While some room for interpretation of the legal framework for social assistance is necessary to make a tailor-made support possible, as we have discussed in the previous section, it also comes with its own risks, since discretion and other factors than mere 'facts' influence the judgement of social workers. As described in the literature (Perna & Vandermeerschen, 2023), these factors fall into two main categories: institutional aspects and the personal characteristics of social workers. Two factors strongly influencing the approach from the social worker came forward in this study: the workload and the way social workers evaluate the attitude of the beneficiary.

High workload as an obstacle for accurate need detection

Many PCSWs are characterized by time pressure and high workload. Social workers and managers explain that the vast amount of administration is time consuming, which by consequence leaves less time for discussing other aspects. One of the consequences is a lack of need detection in the case of newcomers. The extent to which needs detection actually occurs in practice varies largely between social workers and is related to workload. Failing to invest in (or have room for) problem detection results in an accrued imbalance between what is considered 'actual social work' – increasingly difficult to achieve – and administration – which corresponds more and more to the work carried out by the social workers of the PCSWs, as they point out. The lack of needs detection raises a problem of availability of service delivery. This also implies that not all relevant help and guidance options can be offered. Interviewees who experienced a high workload also indicated[1] that they could not address all

[1] Especially, but not exclusively, in PCSWs in an urban context and with a larger number of beneficiaries.

problems of beneficiaries due to a lack of time. Yet, needs detection was identified as a precondition to make adequate referrals: one can only refer to a partner to offer support, if the need for support is identified first (think of needs as diverse as legal advice, psychological counselling, help with schoolwork for the children, etc.).

These observations apply generally, and not just to migrant newcomers, but they are more pronounced in several aspects for this particular target group. First, the study shows that working with newcomers is on average more time-consuming than with other beneficiaries. In the initial phase, a great deal of administration needs to be sorted out (such as the integration wage, housing, installation allowances, registration with health insurance, etc.), while also providing more extensive and broader information compared to other beneficiaries. Whereas social workers can rely on a "foundation" of things that are usually already in good order for other beneficiaries (such as registration with health insurance) or existing knowledge, everything needs to be explained from scratch for newcomers. For this reason, referring newcomer beneficiaries to other organisations due to time constraints also often leads to issues, as newcomers are not always sufficiently familiar with the Belgian systems and institutions[2]. Social workers also indicate that it often takes longer to discuss or address underlying problems with newcomers because there is so much administrative work at the outset. In other words, needs detection is even more at risk with newcomers, as administration takes precedence even more at the beginning. Additionally, language barriers often hinder communication, which also impacts the content of assistance and services (cf. infra). Newcomers are also unfamiliar with the PCSW as an institution, which means they are less aware of what to expect or ask for, potentially missing out on help or support if it is not actively offered (cf. infra).

In summary, the general context of a high workload, bureaucratic organization, and procedures that must be adhered to, sometimes make it difficult in practice to provide the support that newcomers need.

Assessing the attitude of the beneficiary

A second factor influencing the approach of social workers which strongly came forward in this study is the way in which they evaluate the attitude of the beneficiary, i.e. how he/she is viewed, perceived, based on personal moral positionings as well as institutional expectations. Such assessment is based on moral and relational aspects and may reflect some (cultural) prejudices of the social workers and reveal unbalanced power dynamics, putting beneficiaries at the mercy of the judgments produced on them. In our research, we observed that beneficiaries' attitudes will be positively assessed when they "collaborate" and demonstrate "willingness", motivation and commitment. Examples of the expected attitude of "deserving beneficiaries" – as perceived by the social workers – are responding to the convocations, bringing the needed documents, being honest, understanding what is being asked and why the aid is or is not granted, accepting and following the advice of the social workers, engaging in socio-professional integration initiatives, showing the willingness to learn the national language, etc. In practice, these types of behaviour function as prerequisite for accessing and maintaining the social rights at the PCSW. This is line with the literature on 'welfare deservingness': accessing rights is also an issue of proving to deserve them.

[2] While this is covered in the social orientation course, it does not eliminate all problems, also because, for example, beneficiaries have not yet completed the course at the time they enter the PCSW.

In this process, the assessment of the attitude of the beneficiaries by social workers (and of other social actors involved in the decision-making process at PCSWs) can have real consequences in terms of the support that the former can (or cannot) receive. In the literature review (Perna & Vandermeerschen, 2023), we learned how the decisions of street-level bureaucrats in a context in which there is a structural tension between "care" and "control" inherently carry a risk of differential treatment, or even discrimination, thus potentially reproducing – rather than reducing – social inequalities (Lotta & Pires, 2019; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012; Raaphorst & Groeneveld, 2019; Thomann & Rap, 2018). However, in our study we observed that an increased engagement of social workers in supporting the demands of "deserving beneficiaries" and "defending a case" can lead to more favourable decisions, thus making discretionary practice, paradoxically, a potential tool of social justice toward more vulnerable populations such as newcomers – therefore challenging the restrictive welfare policy framework. Nevertheless, the possibility of this happening depends on the level of awareness of social workers of their discretionary power, as well as their choice to make this extra commitment to (and take on more responsibility for) the cases they manage, instead of strictly adhering to the rules and minimum standards they have set.

From the point of view of newcomers, deservingness is also experienced as something that needs to be performed in front of social workers in order to "prove" that one is justified to benefit from social services. During the interactions with social workers, newcomer beneficiaries were found to be aware that they had to demonstrate that they deserved the received support by complying with the institution's rules and by showing a proactive attitude. Beneficiaries also develop discourses and attitudes that allow them to distance themselves from actors deemed "non-deserving". However, the "case per case" approach – and the discretion practiced in the concrete realisation of it, as well as the lack of transparency about rules (cf. infra), also comes with a feeling of arbitrariness among immigrant beneficiaries, as will be discussed below.

Our findings demonstrate the importance of attitudes of deservingness – and therefore the crucial role of the relationship operating between social workers and welfare beneficiaries – in understanding the dynamics of local social service provision to immigrants. This is in line with earlier findings from Ratzmann & Sahraoui, who point out that "[m]oral judgements play an important role in street-level bureaucrats' use of discretion." (2021, p. 441), regardless of its outcome.

2.3 Accessible services for newcomers?

The analyses in our research revealed a number of problems in terms of accessibility for newcomers. Without being exhaustive, here we highlight three main challenges that were identified. In the final subparagraph, we also discuss how newcomers experience the welfare administration on the basis of the concept of the administrative burden.

2.3.1. Communication

A large obstacle with regard to accessibility is related to language. The access to, and use of services and benefits is greatly influenced by language, as it depends on the possibility of reciprocal understanding between social workers and beneficiaries. Language-related inequity experiences have been stressed in the literature, and language has been shown to contribute to the social stratification of access (see e.g. Brubaker, 2015; Cederberg, 2014; Holzinger, 2020; Ratzmann, 2021). Our study indicates that language problems affect the quality of service delivery at the PCSW, in line with earlier findings from Van Robaeys & Driessens (2011) in a PCSW in a Belgian city as well. In our study, language

problems were found to affect mutual understanding, making it difficult to touch upon "deeper" issues (involving issues related to psychosocial wellbeing for example), and hence impacting the support given to newcomers. Failing to understand each other in a detailed way affects the content and nuances of communication, and hence the quality of the service delivery, and the appropriateness of the support. However, while many respondents pinpoint the issue of language, generally there is no systematic or structural solution offered to it. Instead of relying on a professional framework offering guidance about when to use certain tools or strategies (ranging from translation apps to professional translation), personal opinions, preferences, practical considerations and ideology seem to guide choices in practice, resulting in a variety of approaches in the field. This diversity and lack of a framework on the organisational level is also reflected in the survey results: while the majority of social workers use online translation tools, trust on informal interpreters (such as colleagues or the beneficiary's family), or ask the beneficiary to bring someone who speaks the language, only a small minority of PCSWs can resort to more structural instruments, such as translations of documents or the availability of (and opportunity to follow) trainings on the use of 'plain' language. What is more, 80% of the respondents indicated that social workers in their PCSW are free to choose themselves in which language they communicate with beneficiaries.

While many social workers stress the importance of beneficiaries learning the regional language as a matter of integration (which is mentioned as an argument for relying on the regional language as much as possible), other social workers go further in organising translation and contacting an interpreter, highlighting the importance of good and nuanced communication. Practical problems with regard to interpreting services also play a role, such as missing or defective structural agreements, time consuming procedures, financial costs, the lack of availability of certain languages or dialects, and the increased duration of conversations with interpreters. Yet, the interviews with beneficiaries have demonstrated the importance of adequately dealing with language problems. Indeed, while language was not necessarily identified by newcomers as the principal factor influencing their relation with the PCSW, interviews have nevertheless illustrated how the difficulty to deal with language affects services (think of missing out on information about the existence or availability of services, miscommunication, shyness to ask for things, etc).

2.3.2. Understanding the PCSW and its services

Another challenge in service delivery at PCSWs for newly arrived immigrants affecting the accessibility of the PCSW, regards the understandability of the system of aid, and of the PCSW as an institution. Based on the accounts of the social workers, it is challenging to make sure the beneficiaries understand what the PCSW stands for, what help they can get, what the goals are, etc. This knowledge cannot be taken for granted, and even less with newcomer beneficiaries. This was confirmed in the testimonials of newly arrived immigrants, explaining they did not know what to expect, and mentioning difficulties to obtain information (and their dependence on their social worker for it, cf. infra). These challenges relate to the accessibility of the service as well, and more particularly to dimensions of approachability (transparency, outreach, information, etc., see Levesque et al., 2013) and availability and accommodation (organising the service in such a way that it suits the context from which the beneficiary comes, see Russell et al., 2013), amongst other things.

2.3.3. Understanding the challenges newly arrived immigrants face

Last, the analyses also revealed that the awareness of challenges faced by newly arrived immigrants differs largely between social workers and between heads of service, impacting service delivery. More generally, we found that – on average – little thought was given to accessibility for newcomers within PCSWs, and there was little questioning of the "system" and prevailing practices. This also affects service usability, which is a dimension of accessibility. In addition to tackling the challenges and problems identified by this study, it is therefore necessary to focus on further strengthening staff and those responsible for working with newcomers, for example through training, exchanging experiences and sharing good practices. A language policy that allows good communication is another important step in this regard, so that the perspective of newcomers can also be heard by social workers and, through them, by managers, heads of department and committee members.

2.3.4. The administrative burden weighs on newcomer beneficiaries

In addition to the challenges described above that newcomers may face in accessing the PCSW, it is also important to consider that the assistance and services provided by the PCSW come at a price for the beneficiaries, not so much financially but in other ways. In the study's literature review, we refer to the concept of 'administrative burden', which amounts to the costs that citizens experience when interacting with the public administration. Administrative burden consists of learning costs, psychological costs and compliance costs and has an impact on access to and use of services. Based on the experiences of newcomers, we can conclude that PCSW support is often associated with high administrative burdens. Learning costs in this context are the efforts it takes for newcomers to get to know the PCSW, its functioning, conditions for support, etc. Examples of psychological costs are also clearly put forward by the newcomers, such as the cost (and accompanying stigma) of being dependent on welfare instead of being able to provide for their own (and better) income. This also implies a status drop for many, a fortiori for highly educated people with a strong social status in the country of origin. What is more, meeting the conditions of the ISIP and demonstrating a willingness to work also carries a burden in practice, both psychologically and practically. Examples include dealing with the controlling nature, the stress involved as mistakes can have consequences for receiving a living wage, being sent from pillar to post for the right documents, etc. Based on the experiences of newcomers, it is clear that compliance costs are sometimes high. Although PCSWs seek more autonomy from beneficiaries, monitoring practices and the burden of procedures often have an opposite effect in practice.

In short, if PCSWs want to improve their accessibility for newcomers, there is a lot to be gained from reducing the administrative burden, because – as it is described in the literature – "*small costs can mean a big deal*" (Moynihan et al, 2014: 147); the costs determine not only beneficiaries' experiences with the organisation (i.e. newcomers in the PCSW), but also the choices made by individuals, e.g., whether or not to apply for support, whether or not to raise something with the social worker, and so on, as was also confirmed in the interviews.

2.4 The question of equity: little transparency on conditions of supplementary aid

Throughout this study, it became clear how access to PCSW services for newcomers is marked by highly asymmetric power relations: beneficiaries, as such, are in a highly dependent position vis-à-vis the social worker and the PCSW in general. This dependency is exacerbated in the case of newcomers as opposed to other beneficiaries, for example by their unfamiliarity with the system (what is a PCSW,

how does it work, what can you expect, and so on), by their lesser knowledge of the language being communicated in, etc). One notable issue arising from this dynamic, which emerged prominently throughout the research, is the occasional lack of transparency on the conditions of supplementary aid.

Interviews with newcomers revealed a lack of clarity regarding the types of support they are entitled to and when they are eligible for them. While the eligibility criteria for the living wage are clear, this is much less the case for other forms of assistance. Newcomer beneficiaries rely on their social worker for information on this matter, and the way it is provided varies among social workers. Sometimes, the social worker proactively informs the beneficiaries about the various forms of support and services, but in most cases, newcomers indicated that they themselves requested assistance based on information they received elsewhere (e.g., from other beneficiaries or from previous experiences with another PCSW). What is more, it is the social worker (and not the beneficiary) who decides whether or not to use an interpreter to facilitate the conversation, the social worker who often decides how/when an appointment is made, etc. Not only does the information vary, but also the effective access to certain support, benefits, or services varies in the perception of newcomers, both between PCSWs and among social workers. This leads to a sense of arbitrariness regarding the support received. Newcomers indicate that they do not see any underlying logic — nor are they aware of rules regarding — when certain forms of support are granted. Therefore, it often comes across as a 'favour' or an expression of the social worker's 'goodwill', rather than the result of a social right.

Many interviewed social workers also acknowledge that the information about forms of support provided to beneficiaries varies among social workers. The vision of the board, the responsible manager, and team discussions contribute to determining the approach of social workers (explaining differences *between* PCSWs, but with the aim of promoting equality *within* a PCSW/team). In addition, however, each social worker has their own style and approach, and their own experiences, beliefs, and personal sensitivities also influence their actions. This influences practices in the field and thus also the development of potential differences in implementation practices among social workers. Differences between social workers are to some extent unavoidable, as they are a logical consequence of the discretionary space that social workers have, which is essential for carrying out their job (and often also used to the benefit of newcomers). Some social workers and managers explicitly acknowledge these differences and indicate that they are confronted with them, for example, when they temporarily take over files from colleagues, while others (especially team leaders) emphasize that differences are being flattened out as much as possible, for example, through team discussions. In other words, virtually all interviewed PCSW staff (social workers and managers) acknowledge differences in the approach of social workers; however, there is less consensus on the extent to which this results in different outcomes for the beneficiaries.

A way in which differences between social workers *could* be diminished, is by the committee. In the fieldwork, there was a recurrent discourse among managers, department heads, and members of the committee that their intervention promotes or ensures equal treatment of beneficiaries by smoothing out potential differences between social workers. They reported taking a more neutral position and having a broader overview. After all, important decisions in a beneficiary's case are ultimately made by the committee. The committee has considerable freedom in making decisions: not everything is cast in fixed rules, but here too the principle of deciding on an individual basis is applied. In a majority

of cases, the committee ratifies the social worker's proposal, but they can also request more information and/or decide differently.

Nonetheless, the findings of our study raise some doubts as to whether the committee unambiguously promotes equal treatment and fairness, in practice. While the committee may indeed mitigate and attempt to smooth out differences between social workers, its own objectivity – or even fairness – was sometimes questioned by our respondents. Indeed, our analyses showed that prejudices and a lack of relevant expertise bring *bias* into their decision-making in some cases. Examples from the field research include committee members asking more questions when it came to migrant newcomers (compared to other beneficiaries), committee members making a distinction between recognised refugees and other migrants (and showed a more critical stance towards the latter), committee members showing little empathy and not understanding, for example, that not everyone 'can just go to work', others asking irrelevant or biased questions, and so forth. In addition, interviews (especially with department heads) also revealed that committee members – a fortiori at the start – often lack basic knowledge about the functioning of PCSWs and the organisation of social protection (e.g. not being familiar with an ISIP contract). Conversely, counterexamples were also mentioned of committee members with relevant expertise contributing significantly to decision-making with their input, and whose substantive contribution was highly valued. Thus, while the existence and usefulness of a committee as an overarching hierarchically decision-making body as such were not called into question by the interviewees, our findings suggest that the functioning of social protection would benefit from a committee composition based on relevant professional background. In other words, since decisions are made for individual situations, expertise and relevant professional experience, rather than political representativeness, would be a better guide for forming the decisive committee. In summary, the prevailing logic in PCSWs to work individually and make case-by-case decisions requires discretionary space. The presence of differences based on this space is thus somewhat expected and is also in line with findings from previous studies. Nonetheless, the extent to which newcomers feel they depend on a 'good' or 'less good' social worker, or on luck in that regard, does stand out, and the perception of inequality is strong. From this point of view, we consider team discussions as an example of good practice to reduce differences in outcomes, provided that these discussions do not lead to an equalisation 'downwards', but instead provide an opportunity to highlight the specific needs of newcomers and share the good practices of the most active and experienced social workers in this area. In addition, it also seems advisable – despite the need for discretionary space – to further focus on automatic granting of rights, as well as on clear and transparent policies and information.

2.5 Final remarks

In this research, we engaged with numerous newcomers who are motivated to navigate and integrate into Belgian society, as well as with social workers and their managers who strive daily to facilitate this process to the best of their abilities. However, as the research revealed, both newcomers and social workers encounter various obstacles, and social workers also need guidance in certain areas to address these challenges. Where support for newcomers falls short, it is generally unintentional and often involuntary. Through this research, we hope to contribute to further optimizing existing policies to facilitate the daily practice of social workers, so that they are best equipped to provide accessible and high-quality guidance and support to newcomers. In addition, we also encourage recognizing

newcomers – like all beneficiaries – as actors who can contribute to the improvement of policies that affect them, rather than solely as passive beneficiaries.

3. PUBLICATIONS AND VALORISATION

The main result of the research is a peer reviewed open access book. In addition, a management summary containing key findings with a focus on policy makers (in Dutch and French only) (Vandermeerschen et al., 2023) and a report presenting the survey results have been published (Reidsma et al., 2023). These outputs can be found on the following website: https://hiva.kuleuven.be/nl/onderzoek/thema/armoedeenmi/p/BBOX.

Vandermeerschen, H., Mescoli, E., Lafleur, J.-M., & De Cuyper, P. (Eds.) (2023). *Newcomers navigating the welfare state. Experiences of immigrants and street-level bureaucrats with Belgium's social assistance system.* Leuven University Press.

Vandermeerschen, H., Costa Santos, A., De Cuyper, P., Franssen, A., Konstantinidou, A., Lafleur, J.-M., Mandin, J., Mascia, C., Mescoli, E., Reidsma, M., & Vertongen, Y. (2023). *De dienstverlening aan anderstalige nieuwkomers in Belgische OCMW's: lessen voor het beleid.* HIVA-KULEUVEN.

Reidsma, M., Vandermeerschen, H., & De Cuyper, P. (2024). *Anderstalige nieuwkomers in het OCMW. Een kwantitatieve analyse van de dienstverlening, praktijken en strategieën.* HIVA-KULEUVEN.

Other publications

Mascia, C. & Costa Santos, A. (2021). « Suivre la règle », ou le (non)-usage du pouvoir discrétionnaire. *Les Politiques Sociales*, 3-4, 93-104. https://doi.org/10.3917/lps.213.0093

Reidsma M., & De Cuyper, P. (2024). Een blik op de dienstverlening voor anderstalige nieuwkomers in OCMW's. In G. Briels , & H. Grymonprez (Eds.), *Bouwen aan een breed sociaal beleid: Cahier 11. Inclusief samenleven: lokale besturen als spil bij integratie en inburgering* (Vol. 11). Politeia.

Mandin, J. & Mescoli, E. (in preparation). Negotiating pathways of incorporation: Migrants interaction with street level bureaucracy in Belgium, in Itır Aladağ Görentaş; Marie Mallet-Garcia; Jérémy Mandin; Elsa Mescoli; Buket Özdemir Dal (Eds.), *Everyday bordering in migrants' access to social services: scope, practices and resistance*, Palgrave Macmillan.

Presentations and conferences

Costa Santos, A., Mandin, J., & Reidsma, M. (2022, June 29-July 1). *The access to welfare entitlements in Belgium: Immigrants' experiences and representations on street level bureaucracy* [paper presentation], IMISCOE Annual conference 2022 "Migration and Time: Temporalities of Mobility, Governance, and Resistance", Oslo, Norway.

Mandin, J., & Mescoli, E. (2023, June 19-20). *Negotiating pathways of incorporation: Migrants interaction with street level bureaucracy in Belgium* [paper presentation], MIGLEG INTERNATIONAL

WORKSHOP, Understanding the determinants of migrants' access to social services across legal statuses: an International Comparison, Paris, France.

Mescoli, E., De Cuyper, P., Lafleur, J.-M., Vandermeerschen, H., Reidsma, M., Mandin, J., Crijns, M., & Costa Santos, A. (2022, June 29-July 1). *Street-level bureaucrats and immigrants' access to welfare* [conference panel], IMISCOE Annual conference 2022 "Migration and Time: Temporalities of Mobility, Governance, and Resistance", Oslo, Norway.

Mescoli, E., & Vandermeerschen, H. (2022, June 29-July 1). *Challenging welfare regimes from below: the role of local implementation practices and street-level bureaucrats' discretion in granting social aid to immigrant beneficiaries* [paper presentation], IMISCOE Annual conference 2022 "Migration and Time: Temporalities of Mobility, Governance, and Resistance", Oslo, Norway.

Vandermeerschen H., Reidsma M., & De Cuyper P. (2023, May 3). *OCMW/CPAS and new migrants: opening the black box of policy in practice*, Presentation and discussion with focus on 'activation' with VDAB (Flemish PES), Brussels, Belgium.

Vandermeerschen H., Reidsma M., & De Cuyper P. (2023, June 22). *OCMW/CPAS and new migrants: opening the black box of policy in practice*, Presentation and discussion with the Federal Public Planning Service for Social Integration , Brussels, Belgium.

4. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the Policy Office (BELSPO, BBOX project) for the financial support to our research and the members of our follow-up committee for their support, and input in the course of the project.

We also would like to thank all those migrant newcomers, social workers and managers at the PCSW who participated in the interviews and the survey, as well as the members of other associations that helped with the access to the interviewees.

5. REFERENCES

Brubaker, R. (2015). Linguistic and religious pluralism: Between difference and inequality. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *41*(1), 3–32.

Cederberg, M. (2014). Public discourses and migrant stories of integration and inequality: Language and power in biographical narratives. *Sociology*, *48*(1), 133–149.

Holzinger, C. (2020). We don't worry that much about language: Street level bureaucracy in the context of linguistic diversity. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *46*(9), 1792–1808.

Levesque, J.-F., Harris, M. F., & Russell, G. (2013). Patient-centred access to health care: Conceptualizing access at the interface of health systems and populations. *International Journal for Equity in Health*, *12*(18), 1–9.

Lotta, G., & Pires, R. (2019). Street-level bureaucracy and social inequality. In P. Hupe (Ed.), *Research handbook on street-level bureaucracy. The ground floor of government in context* (pp. 86–101). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Maynard-Moody, S., & Musheno, M. (2012). Social equities and inequities in practice: Street-level workers as agents and pragmatists. *Public Administration Review, 72*, S16–S23.

Mescoli E., Konstantinidou A., Reidsma M., & Mandin J. (2023), *Applying mixed-method design in the study of immigrant social protection*. In: Vandermeerschen, H., Mescoli, E., Lafleur, J.-M., & De Cuyper, P. (Eds.) (2023). *Newcomers navigating the welfare state. Experiences of immigrants and street-level bureaucrats with Belgium's social assistance system.* Leuven University Press.

Moynihan, D., Herd, P., & Harvey, H. (2014). Administrative burden: Learning, psychological, and compliance costs in citizen-state interactions. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, *25*, 43–69.

Perna, R. & Vandermeerschen, H. (2023). Chapter 1. Conceptualising immigrants' access to social assistance and their interaction with street-level bureaucrats. In: Vandermeerschen, H., Mescoli, E., Lafleur, J.-M., & De Cuyper, P. (Eds.) (2023). *Newcomers navigating the welfare state. Experiences of immigrants and street-level bureaucrats with Belgium's social assistance system.* Leuven University Press.

Raaphorst, N., & Groeneveld, S. (2018). Double standards in frontline decision making: A theoretical and empirical exploration. *Administration & Society, 50*(8), 1175–1201.

Ratzmann, N. (2021). Deserving of social support? Street-level bureaucrats' decisions on EU migrants' benefit claims in Germany. *Social Policy & Society*, *20*(3), 1–12.

Ratzmann, N., & Sahraoui, N. (2021). Conceptualising the role of deservingness in migrants' access to social services. *Social Policy and Society, 20*(3), 440–451.

Russell, D. J., Humphreys, J. S., Ward, B., Chisholm, M., Buykx, P., McGrail, M., & Wakerman, J. (2013). Helping policy-makers address rural health access problems. *Australian Journal of Rural Health, 21*(2), 61–71.

Thomann, E., & Rapp, C. (2018). Who deserves solidarity? Unequal treatment of immigrants in Swiss welfare policy delivery. *Policy Studies Journal, 46*(3), 531–552.

Van Robaeys, B. & Driessens, K. (2011). *Gekleurde armoede en hulpverlening. Sociaal werkers en cliënten aan het woord*. Lannoo.

ANNEX 1: TABLE OF CONTENT OF THE BOOK