

On the fringes of the active welfare state: a socio-biographical study about young people and public welfare assistance

During the last twenty years, the foundations of the welfare state are undermined by economic, social, demographic and cultural changes. As a consequence, the OECD and the European Union have insisted to make social protection systems more employment-friendly by activating people instead of providing benefits. Although activation measures were already taken in Belgium before that, the activation discourse only broke through in 1999 as a consequence of a new federal government consisting of socialists, liberals and ecologists. One of their main aims was the development of an 'active welfare state', which, instead of providing benefits, aims to invest in people, training and jobs. One of the target groups of these activation policies are social assistance beneficiaries. The local Public Centres for Social Welfare (Dutch: OCMWs), which implement the general minimum income scheme and finance it partially, provide the first level of contact with these risk groups who are not entitled to social insurance benefits. These centres and their social workers are increasingly being encouraged to play an active role in preparing people for and guiding people into the (regular) labour market and the social economy.

The first activation measure targeted exclusively to them, is the individualised project for social integration (also called the integration contracts). Since 1993, the OCMW is obliged to offer a social integration contract to every social assistance beneficiary between 18 and 25, in which his rights and responsibilities are made explicit. The aim of this contract is to prevent long-term dependency on social assistance and to bring about the gradual social integration of these young people. The Act on the 'Right to Social Integration' (also called the 'Living Wage' Act), which was introduced in 2002 and which replaces the old Social Assistance Act of 1974, attaches particular importance to the integration of young social assistance claimants under 25 years into the labour market. This law states that, within three months of the application, the OCMW must offer either a contract of employment, or an individualised social integration project leading to a contract of employment.

Our research aim was to evaluate the assistance provided by the OCMW and the specific activation tools targeted to young social assistance claimants (such as the social integration contract and the social employment). The project consists of three stages. In the first stage, we analyse the main trends in the Belgian activation policies and we situate them in an European perspective to understand their specific qualities. The second and third stage make up the project's core and are based on in-depth interviews with young social assistance beneficiaries. Theoretically, these interviews are inspired by the dynamic approach of Leisering and Leibfried (1999). The purpose of the second part is to understand the origins of the welfare dependency

from a biographical point of view: why have these young people become dependent on social assistance benefits. The third part evaluates the centre's assistance by means of the experiences of the youngsters. A differentiated supply of assistance for young people and appropriate (re)activation measures to get them back into work can only be provided on the basis of insights into the causes of dependency and into the way in which benefit dependency and OCMW assistance are perceived. Only through learning about the experiences, perceptions and understandings of these youngsters can researchers learn what they need and how they can be best helped.

The Belgian activation policies in an European perspective

The Belgian federal policymakers have considered social assistance beneficiaries as target group of activation policies rather late in comparison to its neighbouring countries. This doesn't mean that OCMWs didn't activate their clients in the nineties. Since their establishment in 1976, the OCMWs can employ their clients temporarily in their own services to make them eligible for the unemployment insurance. The purpose of these social employment jobs have changed at the end of the nineties: from integration into the unemployment insurance to work experience and preparation for the labour market. OCMWs have only recently become an active partner in labour market policy.

The eligibility rules of the unemployment insurance influence the influx into social assistance: the more stringent the entry into the unemployment insurance, the larger the chance people have to apply for social assistance. Because of the relatively severe period of reference of the Belgian unemployment insurance, youngsters with an insufficient labour history make up an important risk group of social assistance. Only when they have worked at least 312 days during the last 1,5 year, they can apply for the unemployment insurance. At the moment, Belgium is one of the most stringent countries in Europe concerning the access to the unemployment insurance.

On the other hand, Belgium is the only European country, which provides a waiting benefit (financed by the unemployment insurance) to school leavers, who have a school certificate. Though, this benefit has a rather long waiting period before they can apply for them. The amounts of the benefit differ according to the claimant's family situation and age. For youngster under 21 years, the amount of the waiting benefit is less than the social assistance benefit. Thus, we can distinguish four main risk groups of social assistance : youngsters with an insufficient labour history, unemployed school leavers during their qualifying period for a waiting benefit, unemployed youngsters with a waiting benefit under the amount of a social assistance benefit and unemployed school leavers who can't apply for a waiting benefit (because of the lack of a school certificate).

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework is inspired by the dynamic approach of Leisering and Leibfried (1999). This approach is based on three concepts: the temporalisation, democratisation and biographisation of benefit dependency. Our research project analyses especially the third concept which is based on three assumptions: (1) benefit dependency is associated with special events in a person's life (life-events), (2) objective disadvantages are shaped by the biographical significance that individuals ascribe to them and (3) the objective duration of financial dependency is coloured by the subjective way in which the person receiving benefits perceives time (Leisering & Leibfried, 1999). Their analysis of the subjective time perception leads to two types of social assistance beneficiaries: the 'successful bridgers' who see their benefit dependency as a temporary, limited phase in their life, and the 'subjective long-term claimants' who assume that they will remain dependent on benefits for a long time.

Their dynamic approach of benefit dependency is based on the individualisation theories of sociologists such as Beck, Bauman and Giddens. There are, however, two sides to the process of individualisation. It supports individuals' emancipation from traditional categories such as the neighbourhood, social class, family and gender and leads to more freedom and more opportunities for self-development. The risky character of this process arises from the fact that the routes that were marked out for individuals in the past also gave them the security they needed. Individuals are obliged to choose (Giddens, 1991). In order to make these choices, however, the individual must have access to sufficient resources which can be obtained in the educational system and on the labour market. If these individuals don't dispose of sufficient social, cultural and economic resources, it is the more difficult to handle their liberty of choice. When applied to our research project, it can be assumed that the extent to which people have access to such resources will also influence both the objective and subjective time dimension in relation to the period of benefit dependency. The more resources are available to a young person, the greater the likelihood that he or she will be able to become integrated in the regular labour market in a relatively short period and will see himself or herself as a 'successful bridger'.

Methodology and data collection

In this study, we have opted for the biographical research method to analyse the origins of social assistance dependency and the subjective perception of the assistance provided by the OCMW's. This qualitative research method reconstructs by means of in-depth interviews the youngster's

life course. It enables us to penetrate the experiences, the lifeworld and the daily structures of these youngsters

Initially, the project's purpose was to interview 45 social assistance beneficiaries under 25 and 15 former claimants. Finding the respondents, however, was not an easy task. First of all we were not able to use administrative files on OCMW clients, for reasons of privacy. We therefore had to try to reach young people via the OCMW. The non-responses of certain OCMWs made up a first obstacle. Secondly, the youngster's willingness to participate to the research project was very low. Thirdly, some youngsters didn't want to cooperate at the moment of the interview itself. The search for former social assistance beneficiaries was very laborious, however, since the centres stated that - with a very few exceptions - they had completely lost contact with them. Ultimately only five young former claimants were included in the study. Ultimately, 51 youngsters were interviewed. Young social assistance claimants who were in full-time secondary or higher education were not included in the study group. That is because we assumed that in their case the problems were related more to the relationship between collective and family solidarity, than to 'activating' people

Results of the research project

1. What came before ... biographisation of the causes of benefit dependency

The actual stories of the youngsters indicated that their problems involved a wider causal context than is traditionally stated. In other studies (e.g. Dehaes et al., 2000) the causes of benefit dependency are often limited either to transitions between jobs (such as becoming unemployed), family transitions (e.g. the loss of the main breadwinner as a result of divorce) or the loss of an entitlement to a social security benefit. When social assistance dependency is placed in a biographical context, however, it emerges that there is often a complex interaction between several factors, often situated in various areas of the young person's life. Negative developments of the family situation, the school career and the labour market position before the social assistance dependency constantly influence and reinforce each other. In other words, concerning these youngsters, their application for social assistance can't be explained by one life-event, but by various factors of different life areas.

Fortunately not every young person who arrives at the OCMW faces multiple problems along these lines. In our study group, however, they form a small minority, although this must be considered in the light of the way in which the sample was drawn, since young people in full-time study were not included. These young people with less complex backgrounds are usually single mothers for whom caring for their child(ren) is temporarily impeding their integration in

the labour market. This group also includes young people for whom not finding a (suitable) job is the only obstacle to their becoming self-sufficient. These are mainly young people relatively rich in educational capital and with a stable family network. This means that they have a relatively large amount of 'capital' and they also have a good chance of coming off benefits relatively quickly. These young people themselves see their period of benefit dependency as a bridging period ('successful bridgers'), in which the OCMW is providing them with an income while they search for a job or during a period when they have to care for their children. With support from the OCMW, they can be expected to be able to stand on their own two feet in the labour market relatively quickly.

2. An in-depth look at the experiences of young minimum subsistence benefit claimants when receiving assistance from the OCMW

2.1. Crossing the OCMW threshold

In many interviews, there is a strong sense of shame or embarrassment because of the application to social assistance benefits. The young people have a strong feeling that they have failed because of having to turn to the OCMW for help. First of all 'having to ask someone for something' is a threshold in itself. Secondly there is still the stereotyped image that many people have of the OCMW as being for poor people and losers. Consequently there is a clear process of weighing up before contacting the OCMW, in which people often look for other solutions first. Usually the young people first try to alleviate their financial insecurity in various ways, such as looking for temporary accommodation with friends, gaining income through unofficial work or through other illegal practices such as dealing in drugs. People only turn to the OCMW when it becomes clear that these strategies do not offer significant long-term prospects. The young people almost always expressed their initial request for help in financial terms, even though their problems are often more complex and far-reaching. This is due both to the widely held perception in our society that the OCMW is a body that provides financial assistance, and to the fact that young people are not as quick to take action to get help in relation to other issues. This doesn't mean that the centres don't offer other forms of help to them.

2.2. The help provided by OCMWs to young minimum subsistence benefit claimants

We carried out an analysis of the young people's experiences with the methods and tools used in the provision of assistance by the OCMW. In the context of the current stress on activation, attention was mainly devoted to the guidance provided by the OCMW in the area of employment, but the efforts made by the OCMW in the areas of housing and budgeting were also considered, because stability in these areas can be a precondition for integration in the labour market. In that sense such forms of assistance can also be considered as activation policy (in the broad sense).

One first measure which fits perfectly with the philosophy of the 'active welfare state' is the individualised social integration project (the so-called **integration contracts**). It quickly emerged, however, that this measure is not well known. Although an integration contract is a legal obligation for young minimum subsistence benefit claimants, two-thirds of the respondents answered 'no' or 'I don't know' to the question of whether they had ever signed an integration contract. Among those young people who had signed an integration contract, it was noticeable that they barely knew what was in the contract and what the aim of it was. Insofar as the young people are aware of the content of this activation measure, they see drawing up such a contract partly as a useless tool with no added value, and partly as a threat. None of the respondents saw it as a tool that could be used to define mutual responsibilities. What is more, no young people at all indicated that they had any say in the drafting of the contract. This was presupposed, however, when this activation measure was introduced in 1993.

The possibility of being employed via the OCMW on the basis of **Article 60§7 of the OCMW Act** was generally known to the interviewed youngsters. Since the initial purpose of this measure, namely the accumulation of social security rights, was extended in 1999 to offering work experience, we consider it as an activation measure. The analysis revealed both its benefits and risks. All the young people who were employed in the context of Article 60§7 were relatively satisfied with the job and saw it as an important positive step, which had given them the feeling - often after a series of failures in the labour market and/or in other areas of life - that they were getting a grip on their own lives again. Because they are working they feel less like an 'OCMW client'. Integration in social security and, more specifically, the right to an unemployment benefit at the end of the employment was also seen as an important positive factor. It is also important to consider the long-term expectations of those involved in relation to integration in the labour market. Our analysis shows that only one young person referred to the possible improvement in his employment opportunities after the end of the period of employment. Policymakers may talk about a shift in the purpose from guaranteeing an income to gaining work experience, but for the people involved this was not found to be a priority.

The fact that not a single young person referred to the work experience that had been gained during the period of social employment as a positive contribution towards this offer of employment has a lot to do with the nature of the jobs. This is almost exclusively poorly qualified work and many jobs are an extension of the work experience that they had done before this period of employment. In many cases (particularly among women) there were parallels between the work done during social employment and household tasks, so that they were already familiar with the work that they had to carry out without any actual work experience.

Often the young people were not impressed with the content of the jobs and got the feeling that the OCMW was mainly trying to meet its own need for cheap labour. In the young people's eyes

this was therefore a demand-oriented approach to social employment, where the interests not of the young people but of the OCMW were being put first. By this we mean that it is more important to the OCMW to fill the available vacancies than to cooperate with the youngster to find a suitable solution. From the young people's stories it could be deduced that there is rarely a supply-oriented approach, based on the capacities and limitations of the young people themselves. In such a demand-oriented approach, where the OCMW's offer of employment is seen as the only standard, there is also a danger that efforts made by the young people themselves (with support from the OCMW) to look for alternatives outside this offer (training, integration in the regular labour market etc.) will be ignored. From the stories of the youngsters can be derived that a supply-oriented approach, which departs from the possibilities and the limitations of the youngsters themselves is seldom be developed. Often, the OCMW's don't take into account the opinions of the youngsters themselves and offer them a job without without having ascertained beforehand what his or her interests are

Finally, the crucial question is to what extent this social employment will ultimately lead to integration in the regular labour market. Due to the small number of respondents, we are not able to make any general comments on the situation of these young people after their period of employment. We did find that once the young people are employed, they often receive much less guidance from the OCMW focused on their integration in the regular labour market, or even none at all.

If social employment - in accordance with the policy that has been formulated - is to be work experience, then it is also important to give some training to those involved. Within our study group, however, it was found that little attention was paid to this aspect of training. Only a small number of those people in social employment said that they had been given any training during their social employment. This was mainly general educational provision, with language and arithmetic forming as an important part. For some of them the education also related to their social and financial rights and to job applications. The young people's responses were generally positive. On the basis of our data we cannot comment on the effect of this training on subsequent entry into the regular labour market. It can be expected, however, that training of this kind will strengthen their starting position after social employment.

A small number of young people, however, did refer to some work-related guidance on a participative basis. These young people were encouraged to look for other jobs themselves, but they were also given the necessary support and information from the OCMW. What is more, efforts were not immediately made towards one particular form of guidance (e.g. employment in the context of article 60§7), but all the possibilities were taken into account. In that sense this is employment pathway guidance, where an effort is made through discussion with the young person to find the best solution in order to bring about (re)integration in the labour market.

However, the young people involved in this participative approach mostly already had a relatively stable period of employment behind them and/or had accumulated some educational capital (a diploma in secondary education).

How do the young people themselves now perceive the expectations on the part of the OCMW in terms of integration in the labour market, as made explicit in the requirement to be willing to work? Everyone basically considers it self-evident that a person entitled to a social assistance benefit is expected to make efforts to find work. The young people therefore emphasize their own responsibility. Negative comments are made, however, when the young person considers that (in his or her eyes) the underlying problems (such as poor housing or psychological problems) and their capacities and limitations (such as limitations on mobility, in the case of single mothers) have not been taken sufficiently into account. The young people want to have a say and be consulted during the process of being guided into the labour market.

A parallel conclusion can be reached in relation to the guidance provided by the OCMW in other areas, such as in the area of budgeting. Once again, most young people said that they appreciate the efforts made by the OCMW. It offers them a period of respite in which they no longer have to be afraid of registered letters or bailiffs. They also see the guidance in relation to their finances as a form of self-protection, whereby some control is exerted on their spending. Finally the OCMW fulfils an exemplary function; they notice that it is possible to impose a structure on their patterns of income and expenditure. Dissatisfaction is expressed, however, when the young people feel that they are not sufficiently involved, do not have a say or are not consulted.

Keeping the above comment in the back of one's mind, it is self-evident that an emancipatory content consisting of dialogue, consultation and involvement, is raised as a crucial factor by young people when they speak about a positive assistance relationship with the social worker. Active involvement on the part of the young person creates a feeling of having an influence, which is vital in order to reduce feelings of powerlessness. When this happens the dependency aspect of assistance will also be perceived as less of a problem and it is possible to prevent the assistance giving rise to greater dependency. Not every social worker, however, has an assistance style that includes such an emancipatory dimension. More generally, our study clearly revealed that there is considerable diversity between the assistance styles of individual social workers, both within a single OCMW and also between different centres. The young people are quite aware of this and regret that the results of the assistance process depend so heavily on the person of the social worker.

Policy conclusions

This research leads to important policy conclusion concerning the new Act on the Minimum Wage, which aims to prevent youth poverty by offering a concrete pathway into work within a particular time for every young social assistance claimant. This focus on the labour market must, in principle, be welcomed with open arms. Among young people themselves we also noticed that finding a place in the labour market is seen as an internalised life-mission. This is because they assume that the transition from being a young person to being an adult has not really taken place until they get a job and therefore receive an income from work.

When the reasons for their application for social assistance were placed in a biographical perspective, however, it became clear that simply offering a job is not enough for every youngster. This is because a number of young social assistance beneficiaries face a whole series of problems in various different areas of their lives. By only offering these people support in the area of employment, there is a risk of losing sight of the causes underlying their benefit dependency. One might ask here: can employment really bring about integration when other areas are the source of exclusion?

The chances of successful assistance provided by OCMW's do, however, improve when the concept of activation is interpreted broadly and efforts are made first to bring about positive changes in areas of life other than the labour market. It is not until a safe platform has been built that they can be guided into the (regular) labour market. This, however, can take more time. The new Living Wage Act, however, states that the OCMW has to offer a job after three months or a social integration contract which leads to a job within a specific period. Both the young person and the social workers are therefore placed under severe time pressure. On the other hand it can't be denied that the Living Wage Act contains a number of elements that permit a broad interpretation of activation. More exactly, a built-in opportunity is created - if integration in work cannot be achieved within a short time - to grant the young person a living wage, linked to an individualised social integration project. When the individualised project is interpreted broadly by the OCMWs, this therefore creates an opportunity to support the young living wage claimants in other areas of their lives, such as psychological problems, dealing with housing problems etc. before working explicitly on integration in the labour market. The future will reveal whether or not this is actually happening.

This kind of broadly-based guidance is not, of course, necessary for every young person who turns to the OCMW. For some of them - albeit a minority - the only obstacle to integration is finding a job. For these young people support and guidance from the OCMW into the regular labour market is all that is needed. The new Living Wage Act therefore offers clear opportunities.

Thorough screening of young people's capacities is extremely important in order to assess whether direct guidance into the regular labour market or a social employment job is

recommended. By doing this the OCMW can avoid that these people occupy social employment jobs, for whom assistance from the OCMW during their job search in the regular labour market would have been sufficient. If it becomes clear that a more protected form of employment such as Article 60§7 is recommended, it is important not to lose sight of the long-term objective, namely integration within the regular labour market. In order to achieve this, support is needed both during and after the period of employment. Guidance during this period may consist of additional education or training and guidance with the continuing search on the regular labour market. One important aspect of this support is that the OCMW should help the young person to find a way through the services of the VDAB (Flemish Public Employment Agency). Since our study has shown that many young people have had little or no contact with this organisation before their social assistance dependency, this first acquaintance with the VDAB during the guidance process is all the more important.

Concerning after-care, we observe that in the selected OCMWs, they have in most cases lost sight of the former benefit claimants. It is these young people, however, who feel the need for after-care most acutely. The main problem is that the OCMW is no longer able to maintain a bond with the client after a period of social employment, because the entitlement to the social assistance benefit has expired. Another study has shown that a number of OCMWs provide some pathway guidance after Article 60§7 has expired. Their reasoning is that a pathway does not come to an end when a period of social employment ends, but only when a job is found in the regular labour market. The guidance is therefore provided on a voluntary basis. It is therefore more important that the OCMW should seek to help its former clients to find a way through the opportunities offered by the VDAB. The young person must find his way to the VDAB. This requires a structural collaboration between the OCMW and the VDAB as equal partners at the local level. This also means that the VDAB must adapt their assistance in accordance with the needs of the (former) OCMW clients.

If the OCMW provides adequate guidance to the client during their social employment job and the VDAB follows up the client after the employment, albeit together with the OCMW, there is a greater likelihood that this social employment will actually constitute some preparation for the regular labour market. If this condition is not met, there is a real danger that the end of this period of employment will simply mean a transition from being an OCMW client to being an unemployment insurance claimant. The young person may then be released from the stigma of the OCMW, but his active participation in society has not increased as a result. At present there is only limited guidance from the federal government in relation to the way in which social employment jobs are developed at local level by the OCMWs. This study clarifies that social employment jobs, in their current form, sometimes leads to a shift in benefit dependency from social assistance to the unemployment insurance.

Finally the results of the study demonstrate that young people appreciate it when the assistance provided to them is expressed in an emancipatory way. What this means is a perspective on assistance that allows the person asking for help to gain insight, engage in dialogue, to be consulted and to play an active part, whether guidance is involved in the area of employment or in other areas. When this is done, young people feel that their voice is heard and they become involved in outlining the assistance process that will lead to integration in society and in the labour market. In order to do this, time must be made available to listen to the young people's stories in order to find out the underlying reasons why they contacted the OCMW and to draw up an assistance pathway that is tailored to the client. This also means that social workers must be adequately trained within this emancipatory approach.

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The recommendations set out above can be expressed in diagrammatic form as follows:



