

Activités des CPAS belges en faveur de l'intégration sociale des migrants: une étude exploratoire

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Executive summary

This research project is an exploratory study, which aims to give an overview of the various types of activity carried out by the Belgian Public Social Welfare Centres (PSWCs) to promote the “social integration” of foreign national users. The main areas for research were, firstly, to identify the main foreign-user groups, and see how they had evolved and were evolving, and then to highlight the form(s) of integration targeted by the PSWCs in their initiatives geared to foreign national users. Another goal was to examine the working practices of the PSWCs in their dealings with foreign national users, both internally (specific problems, use of special schemes) and externally (specific partnerships, interaction and influence of supra-local decisions and policies). The methodology used was a combination of a quantitative approach, by means of an on-line survey sent to all PSWCs, and a qualitative approach, using case studies of 25 centres (10 in Flanders, 10 in Wallonia and 5 in Brussels).

The PSWCs identified three distinct groups of foreign national users, included in the study: foreign citizens registered with the Belgian administration, Belgian nationals of foreign origin, and asylum-seekers. Other more specific user-groups were also identified (the Roma, people without a residence permit, etc.). The number of foreign-national users has increased significantly in more than half the PSWCs, especially over the last five years. This is particularly true for asylum seekers. The study confirms, then, the trend already observed towards a “change in the colour” of poverty, to use the expression now popular in Flanders to reflect the fact that people of foreign origin are increasingly suffering from poverty and social exclusion. This is clearly an urban phenomenon. Together with the rise in numbers of foreign nationals using the PSWCs, there has been an increase in their diversity, so much so that we can now speak of the “extreme diversity” of foreign national users. These, then, vary widely in terms of life-experience, origin, languages, reasons for coming to Belgium, migration routes, social skills, etc.

In order to respond to this change in the types of users, the PSWCs use all the social integration tools at their disposal, adjusting them to the particular characteristics of each individual and his or her administrative status. The aim is to support individuals in a way which encourages their personal development through fuller integration into society, helping them to develop their social, socio-professional and civic potential. In this context, origin as such is unimportant, as long as an individual is not being denied his rights. This view is somewhat different, therefore, from the narrower concept of civic integration, which is geared specifically to new arrivals, and which sets out certain steps to follow towards integration. The PSWCs, therefore, can be said to be concentrating on social integration.

The growth in numbers and diversity of foreign national users has led to a considerable increase in the workload of some PSWCs, essentially those in urban areas. These centres have changed the way they

organise their work, taking on more staff and using intercultural mediators and/or community interpreters. Many of them have also established partnerships and forms of cooperation with other institutions and associations working in the various areas relevant to the integration of foreign nationals.

Despite these changes, most PSWCs feel that the mechanisms currently available to help with the integration into society of foreign nationals are sufficient, particularly for foreigners already registered and for Belgians of foreign origin. This is less true, however, for asylum seekers or specific groups, such as those not holding a legal residence permit, who do not benefit from the same rights. For many urban PSWCs, asylum seekers account for a significant amount of the help they provide. Strictly-speaking, support to asylum seekers from the PSWCs is now provided solely through so-called “Local reception initiatives” (ILAs). Our research shows, however, that PSWCs which do not have such an initiative are also being confronted with requests for help from asylum seekers. The centres therefore use various social and cultural participation measures, helping with language-learning but also organising intercultural and other get-togethers, to encourage the integration of foreign nationals.

Whilst, in general, the PSWCs seem to have a sufficient range of tools as such available, they refer to communication problems, resulting from poor language knowledge and cultural differences, as being the main obstacles to their integration work. Other significant hindrances mentioned, particularly in the Brussels Region, are the shortage of human and financial resources, as well as a lack of cooperation and exchange.

Non-nationals often face particular problems in areas such as education and training, or access to and quality of housing. Nevertheless, a lack of language-knowledge is highlighted by a large number of PSWCs as a particular difficulty. Obviously, poor language skills are a serious obstacle to the social integration of the foreign nationals themselves, and the PSWCs do organise activities to try and remedy this. Poor language-knowledge, however, also makes the integration work of the PSWCs more difficult. For social workers, language is the main means of communication, and therefore the means to evaluating an individual’s needs. Where such communication is limited, it can be difficult to detect underlying problems. A good knowledge of the languages of the groups with which they are working is becoming increasingly important for social workers, particularly in urban areas, and they receive relatively little training in this area. Some of the PSWCs surveyed also suggested that specific integration tools could be developed, as well as ways to make language learning more systematic.

Finding a job is also deemed an important way for non-nationals to integrate into Belgian society. However, they face particular problems in this area (language, discrimination, poor qualifications, etc.). The PSWCs often use Article 60 and 61 measures to promote such social and professional integration for non-nationals, at least for those who are eligible, but some centres doubt the long-term efficacy of such measures. Although certain PSWCs have established specific ways of monitoring the situation of particular groups of foreign nationals, they still feel the need for specific, quantitative and qualitative tools for monitoring and evaluation, at regional and/or federal level, to help them to better identify problems at a local level, and to keep a closer eye on the whole progress of foreign nationals towards successful long-term integration.

Some of the PSWCs surveyed also called for a general discussion to establish clear objectives and a consistent general plan of action concerning support to foreign national users, particularly to asylum seekers. A large number of the PSWCs questioned also expressed the wish for a way of systematically exchanging practices and experience of how to integrate foreign nationals into society.