



Belgium

Tackling child poverty and promoting the social inclusion of children

A Study of National Policies

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Executive summary

In comparative perspective, Belgium is not a European country where poverty among children is extremely alarming. Nevertheless, this report points to some issues that call for attention in order to prevent a deterioration in the situation of children at risk of poverty.

The most striking figure concerns children living in households where none of the parents work. Belgium scores worse than most other EU countries in this regard: with 13.5 % of children in jobless households, Belgium exceeds the average of 9.5 % in the first 25 EU Member States. Administrative data suggest their number may even be larger. The share of these children and the degree of poverty experienced by jobless households are both a threat to the well-being of children. The poverty rate among jobless households with children exceeds 77.5 % compared to 2.9 % for two-earner households with children. These figures indicate that parents' employment plays a decisive role in the financial security of families. Access to the labour market is facilitated by expanding daycare provision and more flexible types of daycare for specific groups. Other measures to support the combination of work and family life include parental leave policies. The conditions and benefit levels for parental leave have been improved in recent years. The principal aim of these measures was to lower the employment gap between men and women.

Secondly, as a consequence of higher divorce rates and dissolution of relationships, Belgium is witnessing an increase in the number of single parents. This trend is observed among migrant families as well. As a group, single parents face a much higher poverty risk than compared with their married or cohabiting counterparts. Employment combined with generous family policies is considered a necessary condition to keep poverty down for this group. Yet Belgium appears to be underperforming in this respect. The labour market participation rate for single parents remains below the average female employment rate. Both the number and the age of children have an impact on single parent employment rates. Easier access to daycare is seen as the principal instrument to achieve better employment rates among this group. This measure is part of a broader set of family policies having a universal character. Recently, the government decided to allocate single parents a supplement to the general child allowance. This can be considered as a minor shift toward more targeted measures in Belgian family policies.

The overall measures to increase employment and stimulate job-creation — especially jobs for those furthest away from the labour market — are expected to contribute to the employment of both jobless households and single parents. However, an increase in employment does not automatically result in less jobless households. There may be other barriers than insufficient work-incentives or lack of affordable daycare. Therefore, it is important to investigate this group further, including its problems and experiences. The low level of guaranteed minimum income contributes to the weak financial position of jobless households as well.

Several measures aim to support parents in their role as educators. However, the actual record of recent policies appears to be mixed. Public agencies responsible for preventive care in early childhood, such as the Office de la Naissance et de l'Enfance (ONE) and Kind & Gezin (K & G) have a strong reputation in reaching out to the poorest families. Access to childcare services is improving, but remains strongly biased in favour of middle-class families and two-earner families in particular, leaving little room for the poorest. In the area of youth care, grass-roots organisations keep demanding more radical reforms in order to restore confidence between social workers and families.

More ambitious measures have been taken in the field of education, primarily targeted at tackling educational disadvantage. Achieving universal participation in kindergartens, pulling down financial barriers, and combating segregation emerge as key objectives in this field. If these measures are

successful, they should result in less educational disadvantage for the most vulnerable children and less unqualified school drop out which in the long run should contribute to better employment chances.

Overall, it appears that choosing child poverty as a policy priority at EU level has triggered public attention and placed the topic on the policy agenda in Belgium.

1. Child poverty and well-being in Belgium, an overview

1.1. Introduction

Choosing child poverty as one of the policy priorities in the Belgian 'National action plan on social inclusion' (NAP/Inclusion) illustrates the growing influence of Europe and the 'Open method of coordination' on the Belgian social inclusion agenda. Prior to the appearance of child poverty as a priority in the Belgian NAP/Inclusion 2006-08, child poverty was not explicitly on the political agenda and received little attention. Unlike in Anglo-Saxon countries, where child poverty is often alarmingly high and consequently receives a great deal of attention, children living in poverty were almost invisible in the Belgian social inclusion discourse. Even if child poverty has become a policy priority, the focus still remains broader. Measures targeted at parents, rather than children themselves, characterise most of the Belgian social inclusion measures. This is not entirely surprising since the income situation of parents determines to a large extent the situation of the children. Children themselves have limited resources to alter the circumstances in which they live and cannot be held responsible for their poverty.

Breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty and offering better opportunities to children who grow up in poverty are the principal objectives in this context. It therefore makes sense to include child poverty as a priority in the NAP/Inclusion since it requires measures in many different areas. The Belgian strategic report also includes two quantifiable targets with regard to child poverty: a reduction of child poverty to 12 % by 2010 and a reduction in the proportion of children living in workless households to 7 %. These targets make the commitment more tangible. Results will be assessed against these targets. In the next section, the extent and nature of child poverty in Belgium and its regions will be described and discussed.

1.2. Children at risk of poverty

In 2004, 18.6 %¹ of all Belgian children lived in families with a disposable income below the 60 % poverty threshold. Thus, children had an above-average risk of poverty (14.8 %). Moreover, table 1 shows that the risk is almost twice as high in the Wallon region compared to Flanders.

Whereas the poverty rate for children remains below the EU average (19 %), Belgium scores badly when it comes to the share of children living in jobless households.

Table 1: At risk of poverty rate for children aged 0-15

Belgium	Flanders	Walloon region
18.6 %	11.7 %	21.8 %

Source: European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions in 2005 (EU-SILC 2005);

¹ Children aged 0-15 (Source: Belgian Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2005).

1.3. Children in jobless households

The proportion of children in jobless households is alarmingly high. In 2006, 13.5 % children lived in a jobless household, with only Bulgaria and the United Kingdom having higher shares. The average is 9.5 % in the first 25 EU Member States. Brussels has the highest share of children living in jobless households. Results of the labour force survey in 2004 report that 24 % of children aged 0-17 are living in a jobless household. Administrative data suggest that this number is even higher: 31 % (Welzijnsbarometer 2006). The number of children born in households with no income from work in Brussels is increasing steadily and was estimated at 29 % in 2005. Flanders scores better with 11.7 % of children living in jobless households, but remains nevertheless above the average of the first 25 EU Member States.

Returning to the Belgian situation, we find that 55.5 % of these children are living in a single parent household and 32.6 % in a two-parent family.

Living in a household where no one works has also serious consequences for the risk of poverty. Households with children where no one works display a very high poverty risk — 77.5 % (EU-SILC 2005). For jobless households without children, the poverty rate is considerably lower at 24.2 %. Having children clearly increases the risk of poverty, and all the more for this otherwise vulnerable group. At the same time, it is an indication that the disposable package of family and child benefits alone is not sufficient to reduce poverty risk and that paid work is an important buffer against poverty.

The poverty situation among jobless households is worst in the Walloon region, where 78.8 % of jobless households are at risk of poverty. In Flanders, their poverty risk rate is somewhat lower, 69.7 %.

Table 2: At risk of poverty rate by work intensity

	Belgium	Flanders	Walloon region
Jobless households without dependent children	24.2 %	18.9 %	26.8 %
Jobless households with dependent children	77.5 %	69.7 %	78.8 %
Households with dependent children and full-time working parents	2.9 %	2.8 %	2.8 %

Source: EU-SILC 2005, DG Statistics and Economic Information.

By contrast, for children living in households where (both) parents work full-time, year-round, the situation is much better. A mere 2.9 % of these households are facing a risk of poverty. This finding confirms that work is (often) a good protection against poverty and that measures to facilitate entry into the labour market for parents are a necessary step to reduce poverty among children.

The *Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion (2007)* has also indicated children living in jobless households as a priority group and Belgian figures show that this concern is justified. It also explains why measures to lower barriers to employment are among those being promoted the most to combat child poverty. These measures can be criticised for being too focused on the economic situation of parents and not directly targeted at children themselves. Questions about the effect of maternal employment on young children or what type of daycare is best, receive only little attention.

In order to break intergenerational poverty, it is also important to empower children living in low-income families. Empowering children makes them less vulnerable, and able to cope better with the challenges they face. Measures to promote the empowerment of children are (so far) not present in the Belgian approach. Most of the attention is focused on measures to support parents in their educational role.

The strategic report acknowledges the need for more research on intergenerational poverty and specific topics (i.e. teenage pregnancies). More knowledge about children's experience of poverty and the situation of migrant children could have been added to this list as well. More detailed studies, including poverty among specific groups of children (disabled children) are not available. This is also a consequence of the lack of child poverty indicators. Most of the indicators available take the family as unit of analysis, hence, it is difficult to draw conclusions on children's characteristics and how they affect poverty. Nor are there any longitudinal studies that follow children in poverty over a longer period of time.

1.4. Children living in single parent households

Single parents display a higher risk of poverty (35.1 %) compared to the overall Belgian at risk of poverty rate (14.7 %). The number of single parents, both mothers and fathers, has been steadily increasing in recent years. In 1991, there were 288 774 single mothers and 73 076 single fathers (census data, 1991). In 2005, their numbers were respectively 421 781 and 159 896². Together, they account for 13.1 % of all Belgian households.

It is also worth noting that single-motherhood is on the increase among the migrant population. The consequences of a marital break-up may aggravate the vulnerable economic situation of many migrant households even more. Cultural practices can also result in isolation of single parents in their communities.

The increasing number of single parents and the higher risk of poverty these households face are reasons for keeping a close eye on this group. In this regard, investing in more preventive measures could be worthwhile pursuing.

Table 3: At risk of poverty rate by household type and by region

	Belgium	Flanders	Walloon region
Overall poverty rate ³	14.7 %	10.7 %	17.5 %
Single parents with at least 1 dependent child	35.1 %	22.1 %	42.7 %
2 adults with 1 dependent child	9.3 %	5 %	15.4 %
2 adults with 2 dependent children	9.8 %	5.7 %	15.6 %
2 adults with 3 + children	20.1 % ⁴	17.8 %	15.5 %

Source: EU-SILC 2005

⁴ The indicator for subjective poverty (share of persons living in households that report difficulties to make ends meet) is higher: Belgium, 17.1 %; Flanders, 12.5 %; Walloon region, 21.5 %.

⁵ This figure includes the results for Brussels. This explains why the Belgian average is higher than those for Flanders and the Walloon region.

There are important regional differences, not the least for single parents. Single parents in the Walloon region have worse outcomes than their Flemish counterparts. In Flanders, 22.1 % of the single parents with at least one dependent child fall below the 60 % of the median poverty threshold, whereas in the Walloon region this number amounts to 42.7 %. If we compare single parents with couples, we find a

² Population register data on 1.January.2005, calculations by the national statistical office (DG Statistics and Economic Information).

high discrepancy between the two groups. The poverty risk for couples is much lower than for single parents, and this is true in both Flanders and the Walloon region. Nevertheless, differences remain between the regions and Flanders displays better outcomes compared to the Walloon region and Brussels.

Impact of children on single mothers' employment

Research on single mothers (Solera, 2003, Morissens, 1999) has indicated that the combination of employment and generous family benefits offers the best protection against poverty for this group. Whereas the supplemental child allowance for single parents is a step in the right direction to improve single parents' income situation, employment rates for single mothers remain below average and show there is need for improvement.

The employment rate for single mothers is correlated with the number of children and the age of the youngest child. Single mothers' employment rates decrease when the age of the youngest child is low and the number of children is high. For single mother households with a child and the youngest child aged three or younger, the employment rate is 48.5 %. For mothers living in a couple, the employment rate is considerably higher (75.1 %). Their employment rate is similar to the employment rate for women with no children (75.7 %).

If there are two or more children in a single mother household, the employment rate falls to a mere 30.1 %. The employment rate slightly increases with the age of the child but remains below the average Belgian female employment rate. The possibility to attend preschool at the age of two and a half is likely to have a positive impact on single mothers' employment rate.

Once more, we observe important differences between the regions. In Flanders, the employment rate for single mothers with one child and the child aged 0-3 is 60.8 %. Their counterparts who live in a couple reach an employment rate of 79.6 %. As the higher poverty rates among single mothers in the Walloon region suggested, we find lower employment rates there. For single mothers with one young child, the employment rate is 39.6 %. Brussels also displays low employment rates for this category (43.6 %). Mothers living in couples have lower labour market participation rates than their Flemish counterparts as well ⁵.

1.5. Large families

Finally, we take into account the number of children in the household to determine whether larger families are more at risk of poverty than others. Families with three or more children face a higher risk of poverty than families with two dependent children. The need to spend more time on domestic tasks may have a negative impact on the family's budget and contribute to the higher poverty rates that we observe among these families. Once again, the Belgian poverty rate includes the problematic outcomes for Brussels for which we cannot report the results separately. Brussels has a younger population and hosts many immigrant families. A recent study (Van Robbaeys and Perrin, 2006) reported very high poverty rates among immigrant households. These families often have more children than Belgians so it is likely that child poverty among migrant children is higher as well. Unfortunately, the Belgian NAP/Inclusion does not refer to this group for which additional measures may well be needed. Research projects about this group should be encouraged as well. In other countries, there are research projects

⁵ Datawarehouse Arbeid en Sociale Bescherming (ASB), Kruispuntbank Sociale Zekerheid (KSZ), basic application 11 (calculated by Steunpunt WAV).

that follow children until adulthood and have added a special focus on migrant children. This type of research could increase knowledge about the consequences of childhood poverty for both native and migrant children ⁶.

Table 4: At risk of poverty rates for families with children by region

	Belgium	Flanders	Walloon region
Couples with 3 + children	20.1 %	17.8 %	15.5 %
Couples with 2 children	9.8 %	5.7 %	15.6 %

Source: EU-SILC 2005.

So far, this section has described child poverty in Belgium and identified households most at risk: jobless households with children, single parents and families with three or more children. Child poverty is therefore a consequence of multiple factors (employment, family type, household composition etc.) which call for action in different areas.

1.6. Poverty duration

Unfortunately, recent data on the duration and severity of poverty experienced by families with children are unavailable. A longitudinal study (1993-97) based on 'Panel Study of Belgian Households' (PSBH) data found that between 12.5 % and 15 % of the persons with an income below the 60 % poverty threshold experienced poverty spells of two years or more (Dewilde and Levecque, 2002). Generally speaking, the study showed that for households that were confronted with poverty at one point in time (five years), the poverty experience generally lasted a short period. However, longer poverty spells were noted among jobless households.

Taking into account family characteristics, authors found that poverty occurred equally in shorter and longer spells in families with children, while single parents faced a higher risk of persistent poverty.

1.7. Child poverty, more than financial poverty?

In addition to financial hardship, child well-being also refers to children's health, infant mortality, school performance, contact with peers, drugs abuse, mental well-being, etc. The next paragraph will tackle alternative indicators that can inform us about the well- or ill-being of children.

Ritakallio and Bradshaw (2005) have added subjective poverty and deprivation to the low income indicator. For Belgium, there was almost no difference between the subjective poverty indicator and the income indicator. Single parents having difficulties to make ends meet represented 36.8 % of the share for single parents — a slightly higher score than the low-income indicator (35.1 %). It indicates that for Belgium, the subjective poverty indicator confirms the income-based measure. These are still results based on the family rather than the child as unit of analysis.

Bradshaw (2006) developed an index of child well-being, which is much more comprehensive and based on information about/from children, rather than about/from their parents. The index includes: material situation, housing, health, subjective well-being, education, children's relationships and civic participation. This approach is useful and can serve as a source of inspiration for the working group on

⁷ In Denmark, a longitudinal study of children born in 1995 - , 'The social responsibility of the family' Danish National Social Research Institute (European Observatory, Austrian Institute for Family Studies, Puzzleweise 13/2002, August 1, 2002,) and in the United Kingdom, the 'Millennium' study are examples of studies that devote attention to children with a migrant background.

indicators in its search for new indicators on children's poverty and well-being. To date, there is very little reference to alternative indicators. The annex of the NAP/Inclusion mentions a couple of additional indicators, but limited data availability makes child well-being analysis a difficult exercise.

Two groups of very vulnerable children whose rights are seriously threatened are unaccompanied minors and children of asylum-seekers who have to live in closed centres during the asylum procedure. In 2004, 679 unaccompanied minors applied for asylum (WASO, 2006). Until 2002, these minors have been treated as adults for the asylum procedure. Meanwhile, efforts have been made to improve their conditions. Since 2002, minors receive a temporary residence permit for as long as the services are looking for their parents. Since 2004, a law regulates the assignment of a guardian to these minors. However the shortage of guardians hampers appropriate implementation of this decision. Unaccompanied minors are now hosted in observation and reception centres. Two of these special centres were opened in 2004 and 2005.

The detention of children accompanied by their parents in closed centres is still contested by both children's rights advocacy groups and the Flemish children's ombudsman. The United Nations (UN) have also criticised this practice since it violates several articles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

2. Policy framework

The NAP/Inclusion 2006-08 sets clear targets for the reduction of poverty among children by 2010. The goal is to achieve an at-risk-of-poverty rate of 12 %. Given the fact that poverty among children in jobless households is skyrocketing, a specific target relating to the share of children living in these households has also been set: to bring down the share of children living in jobless households to 7 % by 2010 in Belgium. This is ambitious, and will require serious efforts, especially in Brussels and the Walloon region, where the share of children living in households with no one in paid work is highest.

Belgium has a well-developed social security system that operates as the primary safety net against poverty and social exclusion. For those who are not eligible for these benefits a right to social assistance or material help from the public social welfare centres. In addition to these two pillars, there is a range of universal benefits specifically targeted at families with children: maternity allowances, parental leave allowances and regular child allowances. There is also a well-developed system of subsidised day care. Preschooling is available from the age of two and a half years onwards. This range of benefits and services has its merits but does not prevent poverty for a considerable proportion of children. The objectives of family policies are multiple and have evolved over time. Belgian family policies were initially introduced to sustain the single breadwinner model, and to allow mothers to stay at home with their children. Nowadays, family policies have become an instrument for achieving further gender equality, especially decreasing the gap between male and female employment rates. Extended parental leave opportunities are a clear example of this shift in orientation.

In this chapter, we take a closer look at some policy areas that can be considered of greatest priority. Other areas such as health, sports, recreation and culture will be disregarded due to constraints in time and space. To start with, we will briefly discuss the link between social inclusion policies, children's rights and participation.

2.1. Children's rights and participation, a blind spot

The measures described above are strongly geared toward families, and the same is true for the measures announced in the Belgian NAP/Inclusion. These measures are an important support for families with children, not only financially but also in providing services that facilitate the combination of work and family life. These measures obviously benefit the well-being of children. However, it must be admitted that they are not explicitly inspired by children's rights. No explicit reference is made to either children's rights nor to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was ratified by Belgium. As regards children's participation, those experiencing poverty were not consulted for the draft of the NAP/Inclusion. Poor people's organisations have been consulted during the NAP/Inclusion process but within these organisations, the possibilities for children to participate are also limited. This remains a point of attention for the future.

Some tools are available to promote children's rights and participation. For example, Flanders has introduced the possibility of assessing the effects of new legislation on children. It allows the Flemish decrees to be tested against the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and to check whether children's rights are respected by the legislative powers. Unfortunately, this possibility has remained underutilised until now.

In 2006, the regions agreed to step up cooperation and coordinate their policies in implementing the requirements of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This agreement should result in a national commission for children's rights that will be entrusted with the coordination between the different actors and reporting to the UN.

Children may experience poverty differently than their parents. Financial poverty is generally seen as a key indicator but this is unlikely to be adequate to capture children's experience of poverty. Poor children are likely to have their own indicators. They may experience exclusion at school, when they cannot participate in extra-curricular activities or when they do not have access to the same toys or clothes as their non-poor counterparts. And yet it is rare to discuss poverty and social exclusion from a children's perspective in Belgium and knowledge about their experiences of poverty is still very limited. Better insight into children's own experiences would be useful for detecting poor children's primary needs and examine how they can be fulfilled. If child poverty is a policy priority, children's voices need to be heard as well.

2.2. Social protection

Immervoll, Sutherland and de Vos (2003) calculated that family-related benefits accounted for 6.6 % of a household's income in Belgium in 1994. This was the highest score among the European countries in their study. If these family benefits were to be removed, the child poverty rate would increase by 10 percentage points. Bradshaw (2006) also compared the child poverty rate before and after transfers, based on 'European co-ordinated household panels' (ECHP) data for 2003. The poverty reduction effectiveness of transfers on the child poverty rate is 52.9 % (own calculations).

Even though these figures are not recent, they illustrate the importance of family-related benefits in alleviating child poverty. Another finding of their study is that age supplements and a system of incremental child allowances have a positive impact on families' budgets.

A study by the Centre for Social Policy (CSB, Cattoir and Jacobs, 1998) attributed a positive impact from child benefits on the income of families with three or more children, and of single parent households. Looking at the current poverty rates of those family types, it seems that a deterioration has

taken place. The breaks in data sources make it difficult to judge whether it is a data issue or a genuine increase but the last two editions of the EU-SILC data point to a worsening situation among single parents compared to the mid-1990s.

Among the financial tools to combat child poverty, the guaranteed family allowance is worth mentioning. This allowance is dedicated to families with children who are not eligible for regular child allowances: employment is a requirement to receive regular child allowances. Even if the family does not fulfill this requirement, the family is still entitled to guaranteed family allowances. In most cases, beneficiaries are families receiving the minimum income or having social transfers as their main source of income. As to the number of children entitled to this benefit, there has been a dramatic increase over the years. In 2005, 14 600 children were entitled to this benefit compared to 5 735 in 1985 (Vranken, De Boyser and Dierckx, 2006).

In 2003, Belgium spent 2.7 % of its GDP on family benefits and thus occupied a middle position in an Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) ranking (OECD family database, 2007). Besides cash benefits, which make up the largest share of the family policies expenditure, tax deductions provide indirect support to families with children. However, the latter are more likely to benefit the middle and higher income groups. The deductibility of childcare costs is definitely a measure that can help overcome barriers to work, but for persons in low-paid jobs or poor families, access to affordable childcare may remain problematic — and the benefits from the fiscal measures modest.

With the inclusion of child poverty in the NAP/Inclusion, existing policies are being extended or targeted to specific groups in order to play a preventive or alleviating role for child poverty. Nevertheless, targeting is still more the exception than the rule. The back-to-school bonus, which was introduced in September 2006 to help cover extra costs at the start of the school year, is a universal measure. A higher, means-tested benefit targeted at low-income families would have a stronger impact for this group. The EUR 20 child allowance supplement for single parents, announced by the council of ministers in March 2007, is one of the rare exceptions to the universal approach. Continuity of the school bonus depends on the efforts of the regions to keep this measure in place. Federal commitment was limited to one year and the regions need to find the necessary funding for the continuation of this measure.

Many children live in households who receive the guaranteed minimum income. The commitment of the government to level up this benefit by 10 % has not been fulfilled so far. On 1 April 2007, the guaranteed minimum income increased by 8.2 %; on the other hand, we estimate that minimum income recipients have lost an extra 2 % of their purchasing power compared to average citizens, due to the recent energy crisis and the disproportionate increase in housing rents. The current value of the minimum income remains significantly lower than the EU at risk of poverty threshold.

Administrative data show that among the male recipients of social assistance, single fathers are overrepresented. They account for 57 % of all male recipients (Belgian strategic report indicators annex). It would be useful to examine the role of child alimony and the impact it has on the poverty rate, on the side of the receiver and the side of the payer.

In 2004, the alimony fund became operational; this fund was created to pay a cash advance in case the other parent failed to pay the alimony. Prior to the creation of this fund, parents could ask public social welfare centres for an advance payment. The functioning of this fund has not been very successful so far. It was estimated that in 2006, 120 000 persons could have applied for an advance payment; whereas the fund received only 25 000 applications. This points to a problem of information: many entitled persons do not know that the fund exists. Another reported problem is the difficulty experienced

by the fund to re-claim the advance payments from the parents who did not fulfill their alimony obligations.

2.3. Maternity and early childhood services

In Belgium, two governmental agencies are responsible for supporting young children and their families: K & G in Flanders and the ONE in the Walloon region. They actively provide advice and help to mothers and their young children (up to the age of three). Both organizations are important actors in the implementation of policies related to child well-being. They cover a wide range of activities, among which prevention and advice occupy an important place. This includes informative sessions for future parents, pamphlets on childrearing and nutrition, visits after childbirth, both in the hospital and at home, and free medical consultations with the possibility to inoculate babies. K & G also screens all newborns for any hearing problems, in order to detect them at an early stage. Both agencies also play a coordinating and controlling role for childcare provision in Belgium.

With regard to child poverty, the visits made by nurses just after childbirth and the free consultations are activities that reach all families, including the most disadvantaged. These visits are also helpful for nurses to detect family or financial problems and provide help at an early stage or referral to specialised authorities.

K & G has explicitly integrated 'attention for poor families' in its approach and provides extra help for this group. The organisation has also developed its own poverty registration system in order to gather the necessary information to offer appropriate help to low-income families with young children. The following indicators are used: disposable monthly income below the social assistance threshold, low educational level of the parents, precarious employment situation of the parents, low level of stimulation, poor housing and poor health. If a family scores three or more on this set of indicators, the family is registered as a poor household. These families are entitled to a longer consultation period. In 2004, K & G registered 3 676 births in poor households. This is 5.89 % of the total number of births in Flanders (62 374). ONE also collects information about the socio-economic situation of the mother.

K & G also works with *ervaringsdeskundigen*, i.e. mediators with a personal experience of poverty, who have an advantage in building trust. Poor families have often had negative experiences with public services and are therefore often suspicious as regards social workers.

In 2005, the triple P (Positive Parenting Programme) was introduced with support from the Flemish Government. This programme supports parents in difficult educational circumstances. If pilot projects prove to be successful, the programme will be mainstreamed in Flanders. Furthermore, in 2006, K & G has launched a new antenatal programme for vulnerable pregnant women. This can be seen as a step forward from a preventive point of view.

2.4. Childcare and the reconciliation of work and family responsibilities

In the welfare state literature (Esping-Andersen 1990, 1999), Belgium is classified as an example of a conservative-corporatist welfare state. One of the characteristics of this welfare state is that it leaves caring tasks to families. Caring tasks are often considered a responsibility of the family (or mothers) and the State offers little support in terms of daycare. However, Belgium deviates in this regard since subsidised daycare provisions are well developed. The main objective of daycare provision is to lower barriers to female employment. The above-average female employment rates among women in the

childbearing age cohorts⁷ indicate that policies to combine work and family life are quite successful. The bottleneck for female employment is situated mainly among the older age cohorts. In recent years, Belgium has also improved conditions for parental leave for both mothers and fathers and has increased the tax rebates for childcare costs. How do these policies affect low-income families?

Better and more generous parental leave conditions are a commendable initiative but it is unlikely that low-income families are the main beneficiaries of these measures. They cannot always afford to reduce their working hours and are often employed in precarious jobs that do not allow taking up parental leave. Tax deductions for childcare costs are meant to encourage (female) employment in general, but middle- and high-income families gain more from this measure than families whose income is below the tax-free minimum threshold. Parents with limited budgets may benefit more from direct financial support instead of a future tax rebate from which they only have limited gains.

When childcare costs are high, low-income families will have modest financial gains from being in employment. But provision of affordable daycare alone is not necessarily sufficient to allow low-income families to increase their income through employment. Measures to make work financially attractive are a necessary complement. Immervol and Barber (2005) have examined the impact of childcare provision and tax benefits on work incentives. The main findings for Belgium can be summarized as follows:

- The average monthly fee for childcare in Belgium was estimated at 16 % of the gross earnings of the average production worker (APW). Belgium occupies a middle position compared with other OECD countries. The average typical fee is also 16 % of APW.
- Single parents in Belgium gain little from low-wage employment as a consequence of the relatively high tax burden. The introduction of the work bonus should have a positive impact on their work earnings.

Raising the number of childcare places is seen as a key measure to lower barriers for women's employment, but in the NAP/Inclusion 2006-08, it is also promoted as a measure to combat child poverty. It is probably fair to say that increasing the female employment rate is informed by economic motives rather than by the well-being of children. The Flemish Minister of Well-being and the Family launched the idea of employing long-term or elderly unemployed in daycare facilities, which would solve part of the unemployment problem while at the same time create more daycare places. This idea was received with scepticism from the field, due to concerns about the quality and guarantee of professionalism of the daycare that these workers would provide.

All regions announced an increase in the number of daycare places in the years to come, though with slightly different emphases. In Flanders, in the period 2006-07, 6.6 million euros were invested in additional daycare places, with an emphasis on the creation of alternative forms of daycare for unemployed persons or persons working irregular hours: the system of service vouchers can now be used for daycare facilities under certain conditions. In the Walloon region, the 'Cicogne II' plan was launched. This plan provides for 4 000 additional childcare places by 2009. The types of childcare provision will be extended with *co-accueillantes*, a familial type of daycare with 8-10 children supervised by two carers.

These measures must be seen against the backdrop of a well-developed system with a good quality of services, but highly unequal access. Vanpée et al. (2000) show that, despite means-tested fees, low-socioeconomic status (SES) groups in general make far lesser use of formal childcare services than the rest of the population. This is due, in the first place, to the fact that priority is given to two-earner families

⁷ In 2005, the employment rate for women in the age cohorts 25-29 was 71.2 %, in the age cohort 30-34 it was 71.7 % and in the age cohort 35-39 70.9 %. The overall employment rate for women aged 15-64 is 53.1 % (Source: Steunpunt WSE in collaboration with IWEPS).

as the available number of places is limited. Fee levels, and a distrust of formal care providers appear to be the main barriers for poor families. It is therefore important to widen access to existing provision, in addition to the specific measures included in the NAP/Inclusion.

Table 5: Use of childcare services among native Flemish households with children aged 3 months to 2.5 years, by SES

Use of childcare services	Non-poor households	Native poor households	Immigrant households
Regularly	61.6	31.4	12.9
Seldom or never	38.4	68.6	87.1

Source: Vanpée et al. (2000: chapters 10-11).

Note: Poverty is defined here using the multi-dimensional definition of K & G.

2.5. Education

Education can be a decisive step on the road to better living conditions for children who grow up in poverty or face the risk of poverty. At the same time, education leads to the reproduction of social deprivation. The conclusions of the recent PISA survey pinpointed the problem (OECD 2004). Education in Belgium — in all three communities — treats pupils from various socioeconomic backgrounds unequally, although average performance is good. Nowhere in the OECD is the performance gap between native and immigrant young people as wide as in Belgium (OECD 2006).

According to the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef), Belgium comes last (out of 24 countries) in terms of inequality at the bottom of the education ladder (the gap between the 5th and 50th percentiles in PISA), and 14th out of 24 in terms of a composite indicator of 'educational disadvantage' (Unicef 2002).

Academics who closely monitor the education system observe that OECD publications — and to a lesser extent those of Unicef — have had a significant influence on the policy priorities of the three current education ministers in Belgium (Mahieu and Desmedt, 2006)

The education system in Belgium is the responsibility of the three language communities. After more than 15 years of autonomy, the differences between the three education systems are visible at various levels. In this paper, however, it is clear that the challenges for an equal opportunities policy are strikingly parallel.

'Equal educational opportunities' form the central objective of Flemish education policy from 2004 to 2009 (Vandenbroucke, 2004). The performance of Flemish education is of high level in European terms but not for those young people who get off to a poor start. By simultaneously strengthening the link between education and work, education financing, the management capacity of the schools and the professional development of teaching staff, the aim is to ensure that those pupils who do less well are not left behind.

The ambitious policy statements for dealing with inequality in French-language education were bundled together in the 'Contrat pour l'école', which establishes the priorities for French-language education until 2013. The objectives are transverse: raising the level of education, combating segregation and educational deprivation, making sure that more pupils obtain a qualification and devoting additional attention to those who find it difficult to acquire basic skills.

In the German-speaking community, the performances of pupils are around European average. The positive aspects — the system of *Ganztagschulen* (all-day schools) and free access to nursery

education — are being consolidated. PISA ranks the transfer from elementary to secondary schools, which is a comparative problem for many pupils in the German-speaking community, at the other end of the evaluation. During this legislative session, the main effort is on a substantial investment in improved school infrastructure (Paasch, 2007).

If we take a look at the common threads in these policy priorities, two trends become evident. One raft of measures relates to the financial thresholds for pupils and the financing of schools. At macro level, a new financing structure is outlined for education and, at the same time, at household level, the aim is to curb increasing school costs. A second raft of measures corrects the social segregation in education. In particular, this means increasing participation in nursery education, registration rules, referrals and combating school drop-out rates.

The observation that education ministers are looking for integrated formulas to improve the position of vulnerable children in schools is itself a highly positive development. Halfway through the government's term of office, policymakers are at the point where their ambitious plans are being transposed into legislation.

2.5.1. School funding

New financing system in the Flemish community

One structural step forward in the equal opportunities policy is the objective of the Flemish Government to thoroughly reform the financing system in elementary and secondary education (Vandenbroucke, 2007a). The support policy for equal opportunities currently only ensures additional staff and has no effect on operating resources and the basic staffing of the school. From September 2008 onwards, the size of regular staff and operating resources per school will be calculated based on 'pupil and school characteristics'. The initial phase covers elementary education and the first level of secondary education.

Using the new financing, schools that have to help relatively high numbers of children cross socio-cultural barriers will receive a relatively higher operating budget and more staff. For some schools, this means an appreciation and strengthening of the present policy; for others, it means a financial incentive which can encourage them to attract pupils with lesser educational opportunities. The additional resources schools receive because of the socioeconomic and sociocultural characteristics of their pupils are above all an incentive to develop a strong equal opportunities policy in the school. The intention is to make schools accountable for this.

Although the reform is fully underway, the rough outlines are fixed. Differentiated financing will take place based on a set of four pupil characteristics: the mother's qualifications, the parents' income (especially the question of whether the family is entitled to a study grant), whether or not a language barrier exists and the social environment from which schools in the cities draw pupils. In addition, the school size, the pupils and their place in the education system — nursery education, elementary education, study programmes and other forms of education — remain the main 'drivers' for calculating financing.

Reducing school costs

The government of the French community has in recent years been able to rely on extra credits for education and envisages an increase in operating costs for schools until 2010. In anticipation of further structural measures, a number of smaller, concrete measures are in force, in particular the

reimbursement of manuals in parts of elementary education, free school agendas and limiting the costs of photocopies.

The francophone part of Belgium is more reticent about placing an upper limit on school costs by decree. Lejeune (2007) outlines a differentiated policy of the cost problem and the way in which schools can counteract this. Research by the Family Association makes the connection with the competition between schools and advocates that the government take targeted measures to promote initiatives for cheap education, rather than linear measures that cannot exert any effect without additional resources.

The education budget in Flanders has more financial room. Steps have been taken tangibly to reduce school costs in compulsory education (Vandenbroucke, 2006a). This involves a combination of free elementary education, cost control in secondary education and a selective expansion of the system of study grants. It is important to mention that these measures are accompanied by an increase in the operating budgets of the schools.

Free elementary school education is gradually being implemented starting in the 2007/08 academic year, with the fifth and sixth school years. This means that everything needed to achieve the attainment targets or development aims has to be offered free of charge. An upper limit is gradually being implemented for those costs that can still be passed on, in the form of a 'double maximum invoice': a high maximum invoice for expenses related to the purchase of files, journals and the costs of extracurricular activities up to a maximum of one school day, plus a lower maximum invoice for multi-day trips.

Researchers point to the importance of the obligation, at the beginning of the school year, to inform parents of the cost price of school activities: the unpredictability of some expenses is omitted and schools can make temporary arrangements concerning repayment plans with parents in financial difficulties (Bollens et al., 2000). Non-governmental organisations which specialise in the subject of school costs were a valued government partner; they develop and promote good practices at local level and give policy advice in this respect.

Finally, student grants are to be reformed. As the income thresholds rise, more children in Flanders will be entitled to a grant: the number of beneficiaries will almost quadruple. A student grant will be awarded to infants and pupils in elementary education, with the remaining costs covered for those parents in the greatest need. Additional study grants will also be awarded to pupils following an expensive programme with good job opportunities. It is notable that from 2008 onwards, pupils from part-time education centres, centres for part-time training and those in apprenticeships will also be able to obtain a grant.

In contrast to means-tested grants, the federal government decided to allocate a lump-sum school subsidy to everyone in the short run.

2.5.2. Preventing social segregation

A meritocratic education system, such as in Belgium, to a certain extent implies equal opportunities but in practice also accepts unequal treatment and unequal outcomes (Nicaise, 2001). In the infamous 'waterfall', the 'less-talented' and under-achieving pupils are allowed to drop out of general education into technical and vocational education and, within the latter, into weaker education programmes resulting in early school-leaving. The selectivity and performance focus of education can, to a large extent, explain how children from poor families are excluded within education. From the very start of a school career, the education system works as a filter and facilitates social division (Groenez et al., 2003).

In Belgium, the waterfall effect goes hand in hand with quasi market forces in education. The combination of free school choice (by parents) with the free organisation of schools and a large measure of pedagogic freedom, e.g. the absence of a national curriculum, has produced a very competitive system that performs well on average but has also clearly facilitated selective admission rules and social segregation. After Hungary, Belgium is the OECD country with the widest between-school variance in performance (OECD, 2004). This between-school variance is for the most part explained by social segregation.

In francophone Belgium, the aim is to achieve a general increase in the competence level of the overall pupil population, combined with a clear focus on improving the results of the weaker pupils. In order to achieve this, one ideal means is envisaged: ensuring greater social diversity in schools. Within this context, we refer to the publication of a survey commissioned by the minister regarding the so-called *bassins scolaires* or school districts (Delvaux et al., 2005). The intention is to achieve a better social mix in schools within a *bassin scolaire* by a collective registration policy for all the schools. Although at policy level no action was taken concerning this potential instrument, failing to mention this long-awaited study would detract from the dynamism it has since induced in francophone education.

Reform of enrolment procedures

In order to avoid schools being able to reject pupils unlawfully, enrolment procedures have been adjusted in both Flanders and the French community.

From 2008 onwards, a fixed registration date is being introduced in the French community for all schools. In addition, changing schools during a two-year grade cycle will be forbidden. Schools that register excluded pupils will also no longer be financially penalised. With these measures, the government is aiming for transparency, a more stable school career and freedom of choice for all parents. Opponents doubt whether the new arrangement will actually help in the struggle against 'concentration schools' (schools with a high concentration of disadvantaged or ethnic minority children).

In Dutch-speaking Belgium, the right to register is no longer part of the decree regarding equal educational opportunities. Pupils can only be rejected or referred based on precisely defined grounds and procedures. In order to close some loopholes, the scheme was fairly quickly — too quickly for some — changed in 2005. However, complex mechanisms lurk behind the segregation of the education landscape, which means that the right to enrol will not necessarily prevent pupils being refused access to certain schools. Direct discrimination will perhaps largely disappear but will be partially replaced by indirect discrimination (such as the ban on wearing headscarves).

Restriction of referrals to special education

As far as referrals to special education are concerned, the number of pupils making the switch to special education is still rising. With 6.4 % of pupils in special elementary education, Flanders is among the leaders at world level in terms of the segregation of pupils with special educational needs. This segregation is strongly socially determined: the chance of a pupil being referred to special education is higher if the father is unemployed or the mother is poorly educated, as well as within ethnic minority families (Ruelens and Nicaise, 2004). The Centres for Pupil Guidance (Centrum voor leerlingenbegeleiding CLBs) can turn this tide by involving parents at an early stage and in an appropriate manner in the guidance, by offering their staff plenty of opportunities for training about

poverty, and by collaborating with mediators with a personal experience of poverty (Vlaamse Onderwijsraad VLOR, 2006a⁸).

High expectations are placed on the draft decree regarding *leerzorg*, i.e. learncare, where the aim is to achieve one coherent care framework, for all adjustments in ordinary education and the specialist settings in special education. This involves a comprehensive reorganisation with an extended timeline until 2016. By imposing stricter rules on referrals to special education, social selection upon referral should be counteracted or even neutralised. It is noticeable here that the accent is on better cooperation between support services and parents.

2.5.3. Other measures

Increasing preschool participation

In anticipation of a possible reduction in the compulsory school age at federal level, the Flemish government gave its approval to an action plan to increase the participation of underprivileged children in preschool education. The plan includes increased support for preschools, measures to improve the transition from childcare to education and an awareness campaign.

The French community decided right from the start of the legislative session to strengthen preschool education. Besides a substantial increase in funding for elementary education, the strategic plan also provided in the recruitment of an additional 320 preschool teachers over two years.

Combating learning deprivation

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), under-achieving pupils in Belgium are approximately five trimesters behind (relative to the average pupil) by the end of the first level of secondary education, compared to three and a half trimesters in Finland or Spain (Unicef, 2002). The risks of school fatigue or leaving school without qualification for children from vulnerable families are genuine. Children of poorly educated mothers are five and a half times more likely to leave higher secondary education without qualifications than children of well-educated mothers.

In a recommendation concerning poverty in education, the Flemish education council stipulates that, when tackling poverty, attention must be devoted above all to social integration and the prevention of school fatigue and unqualified school-leaving (VLOR, 2006a⁹). We mention three policy priorities in this respect: reform of the first grade of francophone education, boosting on-the-job training and language policy in the Flemish community.

1. In francophone education in recent years, the reform of the first grade of secondary education has been the central focus. At the same time as expanding the joint timetable to 27 or 28 hours, the minister is aiming primarily at teaching the basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic. Remedial methods should be strengthened as soon as difficulties become tangible. In order to facilitate the transition from elementary to secondary education, pupils will be given the opportunity of spreading the first cycle over three years, rather than the current two years. In addition, it appears that a considerable proportion of underprivileged children have inadequate skills for dealing with new

⁸ <http://www.vlor.be/bestanden/documenten/ar-adv001-0607.pdf>

⁹ <http://www.vlor.be/bestanden/documenten/ar-adv001-0607.pdf>

information and communication technology (ICT). In the French community, a step forward has been taken with the strategic plan regarding the integration of ICT into educational establishments — also described as good practice in the latest NAP/Inclusion (Federal Government, 2006).

2. Improved links between education and work are sought in an effort to improve the systems of on-the-job training. The key aspect is the choice to transfer from part-time compulsory education to a full-time commitment, if possible with work, where this is not possible with other activities such as preparatory pathways (*voortrajecten*) and bridge projects. In response to the plans from the minister for the work domain, concerns exist about whether education is being approached in a manner that is too utilitarian or economic/budgetary. Under the heading 'Learning and working', initiatives to promote integration in society also have a place, including concerning participation in the labour market (VLOR, 2006b). Part-time training – which is given a 'serving and service-providing role' in the future landscape of on-the-job training – believes that a fully-fledged and consistent supply for vulnerable young people is likely to disintegrate into short-term initiatives and programmes.
3. Last but not least, we focus on one aspect of the problematic school careers of many ethnic minority children. In line with the assimilation policy pursued by the Flemish government, the present minister is investing in a language policy for education, among other things. Since language difficulties are associated with school difficulties, the emphasis is on acquiring a command of Dutch, for both pupils and parents — and the minister also wishes to impose minimum obligations in terms of parental involvement. Pupils will be tested on their knowledge of Dutch and the language policy of the school must be upheld by all teachers. The reception classes for foreign language-speaking newcomers will also be expanded.

2.6. Specialised youth care

Among the essential services for poor children, specialised youth care is undoubtedly the most controversial type of provision. For many generations, in Belgium as well as in other countries around the world, in-care placement of children from poor families has been common practice, and still is a major source of distress for both children and parents.

The Belgian NAP/Inclusion emphasises that forced placement is the last resort and that measures to support families with difficulties are preferred over placement. Measures to support parents in their educational role are important in this regard, as well as initiatives organized for or by poor families themselves. The next section will discuss the situation and trends in specialised youth care.

According to Nicaise and De Wilde (1995), 80 % of all persistently poor families¹⁰ have benefited from some provision from the sector of specialised youth care or youth protection. Roughly half of the parents and half of the children had a personal experience of 'placement', which points to the vicious circle of deprivation from normal affective family ties. Across the board, the relationship between poor families and the services is characterised by tensions. A closer analysis revealed the following reasons:

1. A systematic confusion between social and judicial approaches. Specialised youth care is the common denominator for specialised social services for children, while youth protection refers to the judicial approach. The former supposedly operate on a voluntary basis and aim to support families and children in 'problematic educational circumstances' (including, of course, poverty). Judicial

¹⁰ The research by Nicaise and De Wilde (1995) was based on a study of the literature and a survey of 100 Belgian families (including 350 individuals) characterised by multiple deprivation (at least three indicators of severe deprivation in distinct dimensions of life).

interventions are in principle confined to cases of delinquency, neglect or abuse of children, or 'acute risk' in problematic educational circumstances. In practice, workers from social services tend to recur to this notion of 'acute risk' in order to impose measures on their clients whenever they feel that the latter resist the 'support' on offer. This means that the voluntary character of the 'support' from the social services (mainly in-care placement) is often violated: at the time of the research, the majority of parents and young people completely disagreed with the intervention.

2. The support was traditionally confined to residential placements, which are mostly experienced as extremely traumatic by parents as well as children. Over the last decades, semi-residential and ambulant care has gradually been developed (day centres, counseling, home support, parenting courses, etc.). Paradoxically, the first effect of this widened scope of services has been an extension of social control over poor families, resulting in a further increase of in-care placements, in parallel with the rise of alternative types of support.
3. There has been ample controversy about the relationship between poverty and (interventions in) problematic educational circumstances. Statistics undeniably demonstrate a strong social bias in interventions (with disproportionately high risks of placement among children from the lowest socioeconomic strata). Whereas parents tend to attribute the problems to their material deprivation (poor housing, financial hardship, health problems, etc.), social services tend to deny these elements and to emphasise the (individual) educational disfunctioning of parents as the key problem. This perception is in turn rejected by parents as 'a condemnation for their poverty'.
4. Although most reforms since the mid 1960s were meant to be more 'family-focused', parents often felt that their views were ignored as measures were taken for their children (such as the choice of school, health care, religious education, etc.). The remote location of institutions, the long duration of placements, the lack of communication, tensions surrounding visits, etc. tended to foster alienation rather than restoration of family ties.

This diagnosis, documented by Nicaise and De Wilde (1995), was also made in the *General Report on Poverty* (ATD-Quart Monde et al., 1995) and has been endorsed in subsequent memoranda issued by associations for poor people (Associations-Partenaires du RGP 1998; Service de Lutte contre la Pauvreté, la Précarité et l'Exclusion sociale, SLPPES, 2005a-b).

Recent tendencies

Although policy makers seem to have recognised the problems, recent policy options do not seem to reflect a will to radically reform the system. On the contrary, some elements have contributed to a tightening of social control of educational relationships and increased interventionism:

- the Dutroux affair and subsequent paedophilia scandals;
- increased public attention for problems of domestic violence;
- the continued weakening of family ties in general;
- the rise of juvenile violence, dramatically symbolised by murders in Brussels central station and in the streets of Antwerp in 2006.

All these elements have led to increased interventionism and stricter rules, for example, regarding the obligation to report any truancy, risk of violence, neglect or child abuse. The systematic confusion between judicial issues and problematic educational circumstances has thus reinforced the climate of suspicion as well as the stigma resting on poor families.

It must be admitted that efforts have been made to differentiate services, to make them more 'family-focused' and to restrain in particular the number of residential placements of children. New types of services have been developed — apparently with greater success in the French than in the Flemish community. In the French community, the number of children placed in custody decreased by 10 % in the period 1997-2002. However, as regards the Flemish community, it increased by 24 % between 1995 and 2004 (SLPPES 2005a; Vervotte 2006). The main 'push factor' in this trend appears to be the explosive growth of judicial interventions in the sphere of 'acute risk' (+ 50 % in four years).

The Flemish Minister of Well-being and the Family has now launched a master plan for youth care in which a number of measures reflect priorities of the associations for poor people. Services will be further diversified. For example, 'education shops' providing individual counselling as well as group-wise training sessions will be accessible in all main cities; 'support families' liaising with poor families and providing informal educational support will be encouraged; parenting support at home will be fostered, etc. More flexible combinations of services will also be facilitated. Further, the role of the 'Committees for specialised youth care' — the main gatekeepers, often feared by families — will be reduced as some services will become directly accessible (Vervotte 2006).

On the other hand, the master plan goes diametrically against the two key demands of the associations for poor people (reducing the number of residential placements, and suppressing judicial interventions in problematic education circumstances). Indeed, the plan involves a new increase in residential provision, 'dictated' by the sharp increase in placements initiated by juvenile courts. Admittedly, the link between the rising number of placements and poverty remains to be examined.

The quest for further reform

All in all, it seems that the policy agenda of grass-roots associations, as summarised in SLPPES (2005a) remains up-to-date:

- a radical separation between judicial and social 'support' is necessary to restore the confidence of poor families in specialised youth care services. This is seen as a prerequisite for families to address the services without fear of 'sanctions';
- the fundamental right of children to be educated within their family must be seen as the cornerstone of youth care policies. This means a shift from a 'youth care' approach to a 'family care' approach. Parents must be enabled and empowered to assume their role as educators;
- as poverty appears to remain a major cause of problematic educational circumstances, a preventive strategy should include measures to support the material, social and cultural security of families. Some well-intended recent measures that aim to protect atypical families may indirectly undermine traditional families: for example, specific support to single parents may discourage them from re-uniting or engaging in a new relationship. Similarly, the reduction or suppression of family allowances when children are placed in care prevents families from investing in regular contacts with their children. As regards measures to promote access to regular childcare services, tax deductions benefit high-income parents and have no effect on poor families;
- apart from more diversified and flexible services, the associations also demand more and better trained staff in those services in order to ensure high-quality support;
- in the event of in-care placement, pathways and action plans should be designed that lead to the restoration of family ties at some point in the future. Appropriate guidance is required, also after children return into their families, in order to support their re-integration;
- specific attention is required for homeless families, as the crisis in the housing sector appears to boost their number, while shelters for complete families are nearly non-existent in Belgium;

- representative associations of parents in the sphere of youth care should be recognised as partners in the preparation of policies, and subsidised for this purpose. Although one organisation has gained some recognition in Flanders (*Raad van Ouders in de Jeugdzorg* — Council of Parents in Youth Care), the legal framework for its participation in negotiations and its subsidisation is still lacking.

The French community has set up the multidisciplinary AGORA group in which youth care representatives and the responsible administrations consult monthly with grass-roots organisations active in the field (ATD-Quart Monde) about the fears of poor families and the notion of 'risk'.

2.7. Housing

Housing is another priority area in the Belgian NAP/Inclusion, and the problems in this area also have an impact on families with children, especially those at the lower income end. Housing prices in Belgium have been rocketing in recent years, to the extent that low-income households often spend a disproportionate part of their monthly income on rent¹¹. Bad housing conditions and the threat of expulsion when a family cannot pay the rent can result in the placement of children. Social housing should be the solution, but this section of the housing market suffers from a shortage and long waiting lists, particularly for families with children. Unlike in many other countries, Belgium has no system of rent subsidies that could help cover the costs of housing in the private market.

Most of the existing measures encourage home ownership by means of tax deductions, but this does not benefit poor families. Most of them cannot afford to buy a house and even if they possess propriety, their incomes are often too low to benefit from the fiscal deductibility.

Divorce and dissolution of relationships also have consequences for the housing situation, and there are some legal caveats that make it difficult for co-parenting parents. Children can only have their official residence at one address; this makes it impossible for the other parent to apply for social housing since he/she is treated as a single person with no children. Consequently, the parent has to turn to the private rental market.

Both the Flemish children's ombudsman and the League of Families suggest that more efforts should be made to inform parents about the possibilities for mediation in the event of a divorce or break-up and that children should be heard as well.

¹¹ In 2003, 33 % of families with an equivalent disposable income below the poverty threshold had to spend more than 1/3 of their income on rent.

3. Monitoring

3.1. The NAP/Inclusion monitoring

As mentioned in previous assessment reports (Morissens and Nicaise, 2006), the monitoring system remains a weakness in the Belgian NAP/Inclusion process. The fact that child poverty is a new policy priority makes its monitoring difficult; work on a set of new, feasible and available indicators is still ongoing.

At present, the targets are being monitored by means of indicators derived from the EU-SILC survey and the Belgian labour force survey, but it is desirable to further develop the set of indicators. The task force on indicators is responsible for the identification of new or complementary indicators. Since child poverty has not received much attention in the past, it would be useful to start with an analysis of the present situation. The search for indicators has only started after it was decided to select child poverty as a priority in the NAP/Inclusion, and it is acknowledged that there are several blind spots in the knowledge about this issue.

The monitoring of the progress in relation to achieving the targets has been assigned to the task force on indicators. As regards the implementation of detailed measures and their funding, information from the online monitoring system should be available at the homepage of the Administration for social integration. At the time of writing, the monitoring system contained no more than a series of empty fiches (apart from a reference to the text of the NAP/Inclusion for each measure).

Besides a more accessible and updated tool that lists the measures and follow-up on their implementation, a better linkage between policy objectives and outcomes is desirable. For example, reducing the number of children living in jobless households is an ambitious target that cannot be achieved just by policy measures for families with children; it also requires interventions in the labour market. Several measures need to be monitored jointly, through a combined, multi-dimensional information system. The existing monitoring system does not provide this possibility. The task force on indicators is therefore discussing the possibilities for a future and more extensive monitoring system.

3.2. Monitoring of child well-being

Several monitoring instruments are available outside the framework of the NAP/Inclusion process. Most of these instruments focus on child well-being in a more general way. As mentioned above, the government agencies K & G and ONE register socioeconomic characteristics of mothers and their children. ONE presents an annual report based on the *banque des données médico-sociales* (BDMS). K & G collects similar data in their IKAROS database. The dataset contains information about nationality of child and mother, mothers' educational level, poverty status of the household, birth weight, vaccinations, etc. Data on childcare is collected in the OSIRIS database. These are important sources of information for data on infants and toddlers in Belgium. They are also used by the agencies themselves to detect flaws in their services or to (re)define priority areas.

Based on its own data, K & G puts a 'children' report at the disposal of municipalities and other organisations with an interest in the topic. This type of information is a useful complement to the available official information. The registration of births indicates that they also reach families that do not appear officially in the population register. Based on the statistics in these reports, we see that K & G has a good record in reaching poor households and non-Belgian households in both Flanders and

Brussels. The coverage for vaccination among these families is similar or sometimes even better compared to the coverage among non-poor and Belgian families. These results illustrate that these agencies are successful in reaching disadvantaged families and contribute to the well-being of the children in these families.

4. Concluding remarks

Even if Belgium is among the European countries where overall children poverty is not at an alarmingly high level, there are nonetheless indications that call for policy attention and action to prevent a deterioration in the situation of specific groups.

Firstly, there is a growing number of single parents who — together with their children — face a much higher poverty risk than their married or cohabiting counterparts. Employment, in combination with family benefits, is regarded as the most effective manner to keep poverty low among this group.

Employment rates among single mothers are far below the average female employment rate. Improving daycare possibilities has been the main remedy so far: a measure that is also targeted at mothers in general. However, there are indications that specific measures for single mothers are being implemented. This is a new shift in Belgian family policies that had a universal character until now. Better insights in what exactly makes employment more difficult for single parents can help adjust policies and improve their employment situation.

A second group of children at risk of poverty is those living in jobless households. Belgium has one of the worst records in a European perspective, both as regards the share of children living in such households and the poverty level among these households. Here again, employment is promoted as main remedy. In the last couple of years, Belgium has made considerable efforts to make work pay and it is too early to evaluate the impact of these measures on the outcomes for children in jobless households. However, an increase in employment does not automatically result in less poverty if the new jobs do not reach this group. As for the single parents, more knowledge about the characteristics of this group and their problems is desirable.

Looking at the measures to combat child poverty, we find several supporting parents in their role as educators. However, the actual impact of recent policies appears to be mixed. The access to childcare services is improving, but remains strongly biased in favour of middle-class families, and two-earner families in particular, leaving little room for the poorest. In the area of youth care, grass-roots organisations keep demanding more radical reforms in order to restore confidence between social workers and families. More ambitious measures have been taken in the education sector, to tackle educational disadvantage. Achieving universal participation in kindergarten, pulling down financial barriers, and combating segregation emerge as key objectives in this field.

Children's rights and perspectives are rather weakly reflected in the proposed package of measures in the NAP/Inclusion.

Summing up, we can say that the social security system, in combination with the (mostly) universal family benefits and child allowances, protects most families and children against extreme poverty. Nevertheless, there are also clear shortcomings. Families where no one works are not sufficiently protected, partly due to the low benefit level of the guaranteed minimum income.

How the proposed measures to tackle child poverty will be implemented, and what their impact on children's poverty in Belgium will be, remains to be seen. The current monitoring system can be

improved and a stronger linkage between the measures and their outcomes is recommendable as well. As regards indicators for child poverty, an extension of the current set is desirable. The intention to increase knowledge in certain areas is likely to stimulate this discussion.

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