

Poverty Watch Belgium

September 2021

Who we are

The Belgian Anti-Poverty Network (BAPN) is a national network of four regional networks all established with the aim to fight poverty in a structural way. The participation of people experiencing poverty is the core stone of our work. Together with them and starting from their stories, experiences and recommendations, we advocate for the development and implementation of national and European policies which lead to the eradication of poverty.

For our European policy work, we work closely together with the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN). This network consist of national, regional and local networks, involving anti-poverty NGOs and grassroot organisations as well as European organisations, active in the fight against poverty and social exclusion.

What do we mean by poverty?

Poverty is much more complex than just a financial deficit. It is a process of exclusion in many areas of life. It is an accumulation of problems that are all interconnected. It is a web of exclusion that creates a gap between the general society and the person living in poverty. After a certain amount of time it becomes extremely difficult for the person living in poverty to bridge this gap on its own.¹

" I know that not everyone thinks about this and should not think about this. it is not normal to have to think about costs and money all the time". (testimony from a 13 year old girl)

Poverty does not only manifest itself on the 'outside', for instance through low income, poor housing or unequal opportunities in the education system or on the labour market. It also has a major impact on a person's well-being. For example, many people living in poverty lack self-confidence, they face feelings of depression and loneliness. Many are ashamed of their situation and some turn against society that seemed to have abandoned and rejected them.

The causes of poverty are to be found in social and institutional exclusion mechanisms. Policy makers bear a major responsibility and need to take structural measures to eradicate poverty and social exclusion.

¹ Vranken, J. (2008) Is armoede van alle (leef)tijden? In: CAMPAERT, G., DE BOYSER, K., DEWILDE, C., DIERCKX, D. en VRANKEN, J. (red), *Armoede en sociale uitsluiting Jaarboek 2008* p. 32. Leuven, Uitgeverij Acco

How is poverty measured?

Three indicators, which are validated at EU level, are generally used to measure poverty: at-risk-of-poverty on the basis of income (AROP), severe material deprivation (SMD) and very low work intensity households (LWI).

The AROP (At Risk Of Poverty) indicator considers people (monetary) poor when they have an income less than 60% of the median income. In 2020, 14.1% of the Belgian population was considered to be at risk of income poverty (AROP) and using the risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE), it affected 18.9% of the population. This means that people face at least one of the three situations above. However, these calculations are made without the influence of the Covid-19 crisis.

The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted the SILC (European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions) research for the year 2020 and therefore the methodology has been modified (e.g. shortened questionnaire). The figures for 2019 and 2020 are therefore **not comparable**. The SILC survey was also thoroughly reformed in 2019. As a consequence, the data of 2019 can't be compared neither with the data before 2019.

The numbers seem to suggest that poverty has decreased but this does not reflect reality. In fact, through our regional members and their affiliated local associations, we see on the field that poverty is rising. This is also confirmed by some statistics: there has been an explosion in requests for food packages² an increase in demands of minimum income schemes (living wage or social integration income) and social support at the social welfare centres and an increase of people in debt mediation.³

Tableau 1n : Pourcentage à risque de pauvreté ou exclusion sociale, Belgique, SILC 2011-2020

	SILC 2011	SILC 2012	SILC 2013	SILC 2014	SILC 2015	SILC 2016	SILC 2017	SILC 2018	SILC 2019	SILC 2020
Belgique	21,0	21,6	20,8	21,2	21,1	20,9	20,6	20,0	19,5 (b)	18,9 (b)

(b) : rupture de série

Source : Statbel (Direction générale Statistique - Statistics Belgium) : EU-SILC 2020

Complementary to the 3 European indicators, the reference budgets are a good tool to determine what a household in general needs to live a life in dignity and to evaluate the adequacy of the AROP-indicators. Reference budgets are priced baskets of goods and services that reflect the minimum that is necessary for a person or household to participate adequately in the society they live in. The reference budgets represent an absolute minimum, taking into account that even the reference budgets will in some cases underestimate what is really needed to participate in society in a decent way. When we apply the reference budgets to the Belgian situation, we see that it confirms the outcome of the AROP-indicator which determines the number of people that have to live with an income below the European poverty threshold.

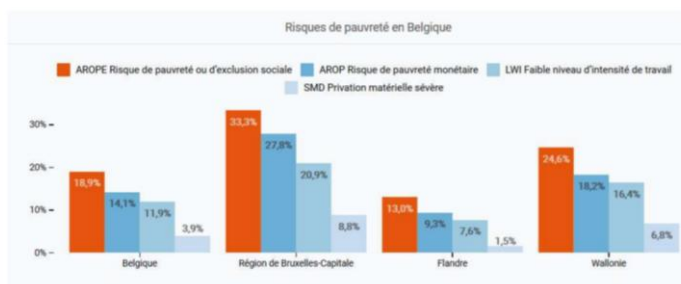
² https://www.foodbanks.be/images/cont/2021-02-17_voedselbanken_pr_jaarcijfers_2020_nl_file.pdf

³ https://socialsecurity.belgium.be/sites/default/files/content/docs/nl/sociaal-beleid-vorm-geven/monitoring_covid_20210825_n-f.pdf

Poverty and inequalities in Belgium

Poverty and inequalities have generally worsened with the covid crisis and then the floods in Wallonia. There are strong regional disparities. For instance, poverty levels are the highest in Brussels as can be seen in the graph below.

Geography is not the only factor, some groups are disproportionately more affected by poverty than others: people living in densely populated areas (21.3%), low-skilled people (26.8%), unemployed people (50%), tenants (31%) and single parent households (29.3%). Also women and children are more likely to be hit by poverty. For young people (under 25 year old), the number of holders of a minimum income scheme has increased by 10% (Statbel, 2020).



Source : Statbel (Direction générale Statistique - Statistics Belgium) : EU-SILC 2020

This income, which is already insufficient under normal circumstances, came under heavy pressure due to the covid-crisis. The consequences are major and will be felt in the long run: people cannot pay their rent and bills, end up in a spiral of debt and are at risk of being evicted from their homes. Health care is postponed as people cannot afford to go to the doctor with negative long-term consequences for the health of the people concerned and the health system in general. People in poverty also suffer from mental health issues because of their problems to make ends meet and the lack of a long-term perspective out of the health and the socio-economic crisis.

The floods have aggravated the situation for people in poverty, especially in Wallonia. As a result of the floods, 41 people lost their lives, more than 10 000 people no longer have a home, essential infrastructure was destroyed and reconstruction will take months, if not years.

In both crises, it was the poorest who were most affected. With covid, there was a for instance higher mortality rate among people experiencing poverty. The floods mainly affected the regions which are socio-economically the most vulnerable.

4 priorities to fight poverty

Below we will discuss 4 policy areas, which demand urgent action in order to tackle poverty and social exclusion in Belgium. These 4 policy areas have also been determined as a priority by the action plan of the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Green Deal..

1. Income

According to the survey EU-SILC 2020, 14.1% of the Belgian population are at risk of poverty based on income. It means that that a single person lives on less than 1284 € per month or less than 2686 € per month for a household of two adults and two children. Also, women face a higher risk of poverty than men: 14.4% as opposed to 13.8%.

Impact of the covid-crisis

"I pray every day that it won't rain too much because I don't know how long my gutter will last. I can't afford to call anyone and I've patched it up as best I can." (testimony of a person experiencing poverty who has lost income because of the covid-crisis)

These numbers date from before the covid-crisis. Because of the pandemic the income of people in poverty, which is already insufficient under normal circumstances, came under heavy pressure.⁴ The increase in the cost of basic goods (food, health, water, energy, etc.) put even more pressure on their budgets, which in normal circumstances are already insufficient to live in dignity. Also people who could just about make ends meet risk ending up in a spiral of poverty because of the loss of income due to the Covid crisis. This mainly concerns people with a vulnerable position in the labour market: low wages, atypical work, temporary work, job students, (involuntary) part-time work,.... They were not or insufficiently protected by the Belgian social security system (such as the temporary unemployment). Before the pandemic crisis, 25,3% of the people said that they could not cope with unexpected expenses.

Impact of the floods in July

"We already had nothing. Now we have less than nothing." (testimony of a person in poverty who has been hit by the floods)

A significant proportion of those most affected by the floods in July are people with a low income. This should not come as a surprise. People on low incomes mainly live in neighbourhoods where the rent is the lowest. It is precisely these neighbourhoods, which are not well located and where the houses are often old and in poor condition, that were badly affected by the floods. In Verviers, for example, the river "Vesdre" has struck hardest in Hodimont, Ensival and Pré-Javais. These are the neighbourhoods where the people with the lowest incomes live. In Trooz, three social housing districts

⁴ <https://www.bapn.be/fr/message/signataires-carte-blanche>

were destroyed. Residents there testify that they have never experienced such heavy weather conditions before.

For people in poverty, the chance of recovery from this setback is very limited. Many people are not or not sufficiently insured (because their income does not allow it). For their transport - especially in rural areas - they rely on an old second-hand car for which they don't have an "omnium" insurance. Therefore, they will not be able to replace it. There is a disaster fund, but currently the conditions for accessing it are very limited, especially for vulnerable groups. Despite the efforts of the local authorities, which have themselves been severely affected, residents of the poorest neighbourhoods report that aid came very slowly, was not adequate or was mainly organised by initiatives of citizens themselves. Many of the people from the neighbourhoods who were hit the hardest are traumatised and in need of psychological support⁵.

Cohabitation status

I think they should seriously reconsider the cohabitation status, because there are many different situations. The status is outdated. When you receive a social benefit, you lose a large part of your income if you live together. This is not dignified. It makes you feel like you don't count anymore. (testimony of a person in poverty)

The impact of the 'cohabitation status' on the lives of people living in poverty is significant. For people with a social benefit who live together, it leads to a decrease in their allowance and leads to situations of dependency (for instance in case of a divorce). This status increases intra-family and intergenerational tensions and the isolation of people. It doesn't allow people with a social benefit to organise freely their family life. It also contributes to poor housing and housing shortages. It can prevent solidarity (for instance to share your home with a homeless or an older person). This status also impacts young people, who are already hit hard by the covid-crisis, to start their independent life. Furthermore, the control procedure regarding this status is very invasive and doesn't respect the private life of people.

Single-parent families

"I know I have cholesterol, but when I pay my rent and bills, I have nothing left. So I eat dirt. There is no other way to deal with this situation. We save the little money in case the children get sick." (testimony of a single mum experiencing poverty)

85.5% of single-parent families are composed of single mothers with children. They depend from one income (often already low as women earn less in general)⁶. Low wages are composed of 2/3 women

⁵ <https://www.bapn.be/nl/bericht/carte-blanche-catastrophes-climatiques-crisis-sanitaires-numerisation-les-personnes-vivant-dans-la-pauvrete-sont-les-moins-protégées-contre-ces-chocs-externes>

⁶ « Au féminin précaire » : une analyse toujours actuelle de la précarité des femmes, juillet 2010, Vie féminine absl, Bruxelles.

and 80% of part-time jobs are held by women⁷. These inequalities have repercussions on pensions, which on average are 800 € for a woman whereas for a man it is about 1250 €. It can be observed very clearly in the numbers of the beneficiaries of the GRAPA, a social assistance allowance for elderly people who don't have sufficient pension rights. It concerns approximately 110,000 people of which 65.5% are women.. Moreover, the least paid and least recognized jobs are mostly held by women (nurses, care assistants, child care workers, cleaning workers, etc). Many women are faced with various forms of discrimination, which makes their situation even more precarious.

“In our work we are abused and exploited, especially because we are undocumented. We blindly ignore the abuses of our employers in order to protect our jobs. Some work longer hours, but are still underpaid. We have no health insurance. We are not allowed to take holidays because we follow a 'no work, no pay' policy. Who exactly benefits most from this system? It is the state and the employers! Cheap labour and social dumping!”(testimony from an undocumented worker in Belgium from the Philippine)

It is estimated that more than 150,000 persons are residing in Belgium without legal residence. They have school-aged children or family members with legal residence. They speak our language and have built up their network here. They pay rent and do their shopping, on which they pay VAT. Many of them work, often in sectors where there are great labour shortages. Despite their large contributions and physical presence, this target group is often ignored and their voices rarely heard. This summer, there was a hunger strike by 450 people without document for 60 days to claim a dignified life and regularisation⁸.

2. Reducing child poverty

According to UNICEF, one child in five (between 0 and 15 years old) grows up in precariousness in Belgium and this is a proportion that predates the COVID-19 crisis⁹. Currently, in Wallonia, 25% of the children live below the poverty line and this proportion reaches 40% in Brussels¹⁰.

The poverty risk is extremely high among children from single parent families (50%), quasi-unemployed families (83%) and children of non-EU origin (54.3%) (Statbel, EU-SILC 2018). In the latter group, administrative, language and cultural barriers, but also discrimination, play a role that should not be underestimated.

Household income and health:

Children living in precarious family situation should draw our attention. Child poverty can be directly related to family income, which is why it is essential to raise all incomes above the poverty line. Access

⁷ « Au féminin précaire » : une analyse toujours actuelle de la précarité des femmes, juillet 2010, Vie féminine absl, Bruxelles.

⁸ <https://www.bapn.be/nl/bericht/les-reseaux-de-lutte-contre-la-pauvrete-appellent-urgemment-trouver-une-solution-humaine-et-rapide-pour-les-grevistes-de-la-faim-et-les-militants-de-leglise-du-beguinage-et-des-universites-vu>

⁹ <https://www.unicef.be/sites/default/files/2021-06/Rapport%20annuel%202020.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://plus.lesoir.be/357138/article/2021-02-24/precarite-menstruelle-la-gratuite-des-protections-dans-les-ecoles-est-sur-la>

to services for children is of course essential, but this must be accompanied by an increase of benefits and household income. With the constant stress and financial pressures, parents aren't mentally available for their children and this fatigue is also felt by them. In the case of single-parent families, 85.5% of whom are single mothers, incomes are even lower and the pressure is greater. These isolated mothers have no time for themselves and often have to make choices, such as not taking care of themselves to pay for their children's schooling.

*"We no longer dare to go to the doctor because we know that we will not be able to pay all the costs."
(testimony of a person experiencing poverty)*

The accessibility of health care depends on the household income and the residential status of children and their families (national resident, EU citizen, 'legal' migrant, asylum seeker or undocumented migrant).

Poverty among non-UE children:

A specific vulnerable group are Roma children, with severe issues relating to accommodation, inadequate nutrition and health problems, begging and early school leaving.

As mentioned above, there are currently 150 000 illegally staying foreigners in Belgium¹¹. They are living without any right and this has consequences for young people: poverty, stigmatisation, change place of residence or school, uncertainty about the future, permanent anxiety about being arrested, health and mental problems, etc. In the case of asylum-seeking minors, they represent 30% of all asylum seekers. One in six of these children is an unaccompanied minor. In addition to problems related to migration, it should be taken into account that these children often suffer psychological trauma's.

Children in care

Another vulnerable group are children without parental care, and in particular, children living in residential institutions. In 2020, 6535 children were placed in a residential care facility. Main issues include the lack of quality care provided by these institutions and a lack of suitable care facilities (e.g. excessively long residential placement and accommodation in unsuitable facilities such as boarding schools). It is also worrying that not enough efforts are made to prevent family separation, leading to unnecessary placements outside of the family. Poverty is one of the causes (indirectly or directly) of the majority of child placements. Some children end up in institutions because there was no water, electricity or enough money to finance their schooling. In cases where material conditions are a risk-factor, immediate assistance to the household can prevent or reduce the duration of separation¹². For children with a handicap, the biggest bottlenecks are long delays in the allocation of a personal assistance budget and the lack of inclusive childcare and education. Many mothers report that child and youth care services do not listen to them and don't understand the family situation. When the family and/or the mother is subjected to domestic violence, the social services will sometimes consider

¹¹ <https://plus.lesoir.be/383107/article/2021-07-09/carte-blanche-et-les-enfants-sans-papiers-en-parle>

¹² Enfants placés: une injustice sociale en plus? Analyse 2010, Vivre Ensemble Education, Bruxelles.

this to be a general climate of violence and therefore separate the child from the whole family. This does not protect the victims and also penalises them for the violence¹³.

Education:

Despite recent reforms, the Belgian educational systems remains relatively expensive and highly unequal. Education in Belgium does not create sufficient opportunities for all children and young people and thus reinforces inequalities. Educational inequality linked to the socio-economic background in the Flemish and French communities is among the highest in the EU. Also much more than in other European countries, educational results in Belgium are very much determined by the school where a student is taught (OESO, PISA results 2018). According to the Sonocom and BDO study on the living conditions of higher education students in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, objective precariousness concerns more than one in three students.

“Financial limitations also have an impact on school and education. In this respect, my son has faced discrimination because of non-payment of bills. One day he had to do his homework outside because I had not paid for the day-care. As a mother, I was hurt and this created a rift with the management” (testimony from a single mother with 4 children).

With the health crisis, educational inequalities have worsened. Students with a precarious background had to study in cramped spaces, with problems of connections and materials, with intrafamilial tensions,... This anxiety-climate has led to the development of eating and sleeping disorders, school drop-out and increased stigmatisation. There are also many concerns following the floods, where schools have been badly damaged and households have been left homeless¹⁴.

Materiel deprivation :

“I live with my parents, my grandparents and my great grandmother in a house. My parents would like to find a place for the three of us to live, but financially it's hard. A small studio is already 500 euros in rent. In addition, the accommodation must not be too far from my school, because we don't have a car and travelling by bus is not always easy. It's expensive too” (testimony from a 13 year old girl).

In 2020, 11% of the Belgian population was facing material and social deprivation and single parents and their children are more affected (28,6%)¹⁵. For children, the deprivation rate is calculated according to 17 items. If the child is in a situation of deprivation if he/she lacks at least 3 of them. This deprivation rate is 15% in Belgium, but with strong disparities between the regions. In Brussels, it reaches 29%, in Wallonia it is 22% and in Flanders 8%¹⁶. This deprivation rate is very much related to low household income and/or living in a jobless household.

¹³ https://www.rtbef.be/info/societe/detail_placements-d-enfants-sont-ils-trop-nombreux-en-belgique?id=10744554

¹⁴ https://www.rtbef.be/info/regions/detail_inondations-toutes-les-ecoles-sinistrees-seront-elles-prettes-pour-la-rentree-peut-etre-pas-pour-le-1er-septembre?id=10812205

¹⁵ <https://statbel.fgov.be/fr/nouvelles/la-privation-materielle-et-sociale-en-2020>

¹⁶ Etude Fondation Roi Baudouin, « pauvreté et déprivation des enfants en Belgique », 2018.

“My son plays football but it's a real financial sacrifice to pay for membership fees and travel. The girls are never interested in an activity because they know it would be out of their budget. (testimony from a single mother with 4 children).

3. Climate and global warming

Following the pandemic, the world is facing global warming issues, from floods to fires (Greece, Algeria, Turkey, Koweit, ...). Concurrently, the GIEC posted a new report in which they foresee an acceleration and escalation of heat waves, drought and heavy rainfall. Each country and each person experiences these health, social et climate crises in a unequal way. The richest 10% of EU citizens were responsible for more than a quarter (27%) of these emissions, the same amount as the poorest half of the entire EU population¹⁷.

“The state puts the responsibility of pollution on individuals but eating organic and driving ecologically, it's expensive and I can't afford to do otherwise. The law says that we have to change our cars when they are too polluting, but how do the poor do it? Support is given to the owners for their renovations so that the houses are up to standards. But what can we do? ” (testimony of a person living in poverty)

Belgium is committed to reduce their carbon emissions by 35% for 2030 and the Green Deal has a carbon neutrality objective, *to leave no one behind* and maintain economic growth¹⁸. In Europe, a Social Climate Fund has been created to fight against energy poverty, to support the conversion of workers to sustainable jobs and create an inclusive and sustainable societal dialogue on these issues¹⁹.

The plans to reduce carbon emissions seem to be more exclusive than inclusive for multiple reasons. The cost of the transition weighs the hardest on the poorest households (access to green energy, insulation, organic food, mobility,...). The polluter-pays principle generates inequality, used as a means of making individuals responsible for their behaviour. People in precarity are not sufficiently consulted to create a sustainable society. In order for the green transition to be just, the eradication of poverty and gender equality should be at the heart of green policies, which is not the case at the moment. The creation of carbon emission is still treated as an individual problem.

Focus on access to energy resources :

In 2015, energetic poverty was affecting more than one household on five and 70% of them are in a risk of poverty²⁰. This inequality is caused by the energy markets which are complicated, untransparent and expensive. As a result, people in poverty usually don't have adapted contracts. Furthermore, the housing conditions are often bad leading to an overconsumption of energy . There is not enough support for poor house owners to insulate their house. There are not enough incentives for landlords to renovate the accommodation that they are renting. Furthermore, there is a high risk that when an accommodation is being renovated, that the rent will increase and that poor people will be evicted.

¹⁷ https://www.oxfamfrance.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Briefing-Oxfam_Combattre-inegalites-des-emissions-dans-lUE_FR-1.pdf

¹⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_fr

¹⁹ <https://www.cncd.be/Green-Deal-europeen-l-heure-est-aux-reformes>

²⁰ Delbeke B and Meyer S., 2017, Baromètre de la précarité énergétique (2009-2015), Fondation Roi Baudouin.

Recently, it has been announced that prices for gas and electricity will rise very sharply in the second half of 2021.²¹

Energy precarity can cause insecurity (inadequate material, lack of maintenance, ...), health problems (physically and mentally), conflicts, etc. The consequences on well-being are devastating and this situation is added to a number of other anxieties:

“We don't want to get up in the morning... it's too cold. My son complains all the time. We get depressed because we have to keep the curtains closed all the time because it's too cold.” (testimony of a person living in poverty)

The floods in Wallonia have affected the poorest people in poorly located and substandard housing. Their income is low and now they find themselves in very unhealthy situations. For the renovation of their home, people need to use a lot of electricity and energy. They are afraid for the bills that will come afterwards, especially with the energy prices on the rise.

4. Inadequate housing and homelessness

The problems with accessibility, affordability, quality, and security of housing are major. More than one household in five does not have decent housing (humidity problems; no bath, shower or toilet in the house; the house is too dark) (STATBEL, EU SILC 2018). On average, in Belgium, a household spends 30.1% of its budget on housing (excluding charges) and this can rise to 60% when incomes are extremely low and/or high rent prices²².

The housing cost burden rate is higher for those renting on the private market (33.8% as compared to 27.4% for the EU average) and those living in Brussels²³. In particular for low income households, renting on the private market represents a large amount of their monthly budget. The risk of poverty for tenants (32.3%) was almost 4 times higher than for owners (8.2%) in 2019. Housing legislation is favourable to owners and the poorer people are usually negatively affected (in particular via the anti-squat law, lack of laws on light housing²⁴, cohabitation,...).

Housing is one of the most important steps to get people out of precariousness, but there are not enough resources in place. There is an enormous shortage of social housing, with long waiting lists as a result. In 2016 as many as 215.000 households were on a waiting list for social housing.²⁵ In all countries where “housing first” is carried out, it allows at least 80% of the tenants to remain in housing after 2 years. In Belgium the success rate is up to 93% (Le Forum). This stands in contrast to the

²¹ https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20210913_97726068

²² <https://statbel.fgov.be/fr/nouvelles/le-logement-occupe-une-place-toujours-plus-importante-dans-le-budget-des-menages>

²³ European Commission 2020, Country Report Belgium (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0500&from=EN>)

²⁴ https://www.rtf.be/lapremiere/emissions/detail_tendances-premiere/accueil/article_habitat-leger-quel-cadre-juridique?id=10765034&programId=11090

²⁵ Steunpunt tot bestrijden van armoede, bestaansonzekerheid en sociale uitsluiting, Feiten en cijfers: Hoeveel sociale woningen zijn er in België en hoeveel mensen staan op een wachtlijst? (https://www.armoedebestrijding.be/cms/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/cijfers_sociale_huisvesting.pdf)

mainstream homelessness system which mostly relies on accessing private housing which is more expensive and therefore leads to more failure. Compared to the total housing market, there is only a small social housing stock in Belgium, i.e. 6.5%. With the floods, the demand for social housing has exploded and no concrete and sustainable solutions have been proposed yet.

Housing problems and poverty are intrinsically linked to homelessness. People who are homeless face very difficult living conditions and are often a difficult group to reach. Homelessness manifests itself also in many different ways, from precarious housing to outdoor sleeping, making it hard to track all these different forms of homelessness.

“We could no longer pay our rent and were evicted. This was in January 2020. We started begging but with Covid-19, people didn't go out and give anything. We couldn't sit on a bench anymore. We had to walk all day with a backpack. I got blisters that turned into septic shock and I ended up in hospital.”

The ineffectiveness of the many services set up to provide basic needs (mobile showers, soup kitchens, clothing donations, etc.) is combined with a very strong stigma that can push people into further exclusion and that can hinder reintegration. Homelessness policies go more and more in the direction of criminalisation, dissimulation and “chasing” people living on the streets (anti-homelessness installations in public places, arrests by the police,..). For instance, during the lockdown, several people living on the street accumulated fines for not respecting the covid rules. Whereas housing offers security, nutrition, sleep, hygiene and also intimacy, privacy which are essential, especially for woman.

“I was born in Kinshasa and was told to go and live in Belgium, saying that I could be cared there. I arrived here but nobody helped me. I slept in parks. I was raped three times. Men offered to help me, to take me in, but I became their maid and had to sleep with them.”

In Ghent, 1,472 adults and 401 children are concerned by homelessness, compared to 422 adults and 78 children in Liège, 932 adults and 285 children in Limburg, as well as 149 adults and 69 children in Arlon²⁶. In the Brussels region, 4,380 adults and 933 children are homeless (compared to 4187 in 2018). According to Bruss'help, women accounted for 20.9% of the homeless population and children, who are mainly cared for by women, accounted for 17.6%. One in three people in reception centres and emergency accommodation are women in 2020²⁷.

Key Recommendations

First of all, it is imperative that policy makers at all political levels recognise the problem of poverty and inequality and make it an absolute top priority. In Belgium even before COVID-19, a social crisis was going on. The pandemic and the floods has made the erosion of basic rights more visible. It is therefore crucial that Belgium strengthens its social security system. Policy makers must stop considering the social security as a cost, but see it as a necessary investment that pays off in the long

²⁶ https://www.rtbef.be/info/societe/detail_le-sans-abrisme-continue-a-augmenter-a-bruxelles?id=10721749

²⁷ <http://ilot.be/denombrement-2020-le-nombre-de-femmes-en-situation-de-sans-abrisme-et-mal-logement-en-augmentation/>

term. In order to make these investments possible, we call for fairer taxation, where the strongest shoulders bear the heaviest burden.

One of the most necessary and urgent investments to make is to raise minimum incomes above the European poverty threshold. The government De Croo has foreseen an increase of minimum income schemes *in the direction of* the poverty threshold. However, most minimum incomes will still remain far under this threshold, making it impossible for people to live a life in dignity. The foreseen rise is also implemented too slowly, certainly in the light of the current crises that hit Belgium. The connection between an entitled person's replacement income and their family situation must be reviewed as well. In doing so, the annulation of the status “cohabitant” must be assessed as quickly as possible.. As the status cohabitation was already removed for people who have been hit by the floods and those who receive the covid-premium of 50 €, this can be seen as an opportunity to cancel it completely. We also ask that conditions and barriers that limit or even prevent people from accessing their social rights must be cancelled.

The employment market must become more inclusive and more investment is needed in people far from the labour market. The social security system should be strengthened so that it also provides adequate protection to people with a vulnerable position on the labour market. The basic rights of all migrants, including their employment rights, should be at all times protected.

Access to adequate income and social services must be foreseen for children and their families that live in poverty. Only by investing in the healthcare system, this accessibility for all can be guaranteed. Education must become the engine to eliminate inequalities. This requires the removal of the financial barriers that currently exist. Teachers' social and intercultural skills must be continuously reinforced with basic and refreshed training. Additional efforts are still necessary to prevent and deal with early school leaving. Specific attention must be given to certain vulnerable groups, such as families at risk of family separation, children in care and children and families with a migrant background.

There is an urgent need to increase the share of social housing so that the right to decent housing can be guaranteed. Tackling homelessness should be put high on the political agenda. In order to develop an effective strategy, there is a need for more cooperation between the different policy levels. Good practices, such as “housing first projects”, need to be further rolled out. The floods have caused that many people have lost their homes. Priority should be given to find decent and healthy housing solutions for these people on the short and the long term.

Within the frame of the Green Deal, Belgium needs to reduce its carbon emissions massively by 2030. It will only achieve this by prioritising as well social and climate justice. Structural and collective solutions are therefore needed. The responsibility shouldn't be put at the individual level. In order to ensure that green policies do not punish the poor and give benefits to richer people, it is essential that a poverty and inequality test is made for a each measure. Belgium should also fight energy poverty by keeping the bill as low as possible for people experiencing poverty. Taxes on energy consumption in



BELGISCH NETWERK ARMOEDEBESTRIJDING
RÉSEAU BELGE DE LUTTE CONTRE LA PAUVRETÉ
BELGISCHES NETZWERK ARMUTSBEKÄMPFUNG
BELGIAN ANTI-POVERTY NETWORK

the frame of climate change policies should not affect people experiencing poverty. Policies to maximise energy efficiency, such as renovations, should not negatively impact the income and access to housing of people in poverty.

In order to get this country back on track after the current crises, we will need all our forces. No one should be considered useless or redundant, as is the aim of the Sustainable Development Goals to “*leave no one behind*”. In drawing up and implementing the socio-economic relance and structural policies to combat poverty and social exclusion, it is important to involve the populations concerned and ensure that their voice is heard in the debates and decision-making processes that concern them, by allowing them, or those who represent them, to participate actively in it.