

## Social and sociocultural actors speak with a single voice: a strategy to lift the lockdown that take all populations seriously requires two essential actions

Since March 13, Belgium has been living at the pace of COVID. The lockdown, necessary to slow down the spread of the virus, lands brutally on breeding grounds for inequalities. The lockdown implacably reveals that poverty, the lack of access to basic vital rights for an important part of the population, the oblivion of diverse vulnerabilities. The last figures before the health crisis showed that 16.4% of the Belgian population, i.e. more than 1.8 million people in total (!) lived on an income below the poverty line, the highest number since the start of systematic measures in our country<sup>1</sup>. That pre-existing social crisis will only be intensified by the Covid crisis<sup>2</sup>. Even more people will be pushed towards poverty and their survival will be even more difficult: the ERMG estimates that nearly 30% of the population has suffered a net loss of income since the beginning of the crisis<sup>3</sup>. **The loss of financial resources is combined with the anxiety of this reality and the stress that this health crisis generates on individual and collective mental health.**

The "social" in the field of labour economics first, in the field of families then

So far, the federal government has taken steps to prevent a sanitary fire from being followed by an economic desert. Companies, workers and freelance workers are variably supported by vigorous measures organised on the basis of a principle of trust. Temporary unemployment has been reinforced and has led to flexibilities for unemployed people<sup>4</sup>, especially to avoid a series of layoffs that would precipitate the crisis. Nevertheless, on the one hand, many forms of precarious work have been forgotten by the temporary unemployment protection – ALE, outreach work, childcare, student jobs, temporary work, expired and non-renewed fixed-term contracts, various forms of artists' work... On the other hand, for people who were already out of recognized work prior to the crisis and who receive little or no support – dismissed people and job seekers, social welfare recipients, undocumented, homeless, sex work... For 25.3% (!) of the population estimated before the crisis as having no capacity to cope with unforeseen expenses<sup>5</sup>, the crisis is plunging them into greater precariousness every week<sup>6</sup>.

The mobilization of civil society has made it possible to convince people of the need for parental leave for families faced with the difficulty of reconciling work at home and the care of children with compulsory schooling. However, its amounts and conditions (in particular, the need for the employer's

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<sup>1</sup> The EU SILC statistics calculate the risk of poverty as having an income below 60% of the Belgian median income. They are very useful to provide a basic minimum standard, but they underestimate poverty: on the one hand, they do not take into account the specific situations of each household; on the other hand, they are based on surveys that underestimate certain incomes, particularly those from property. <https://plus.lesoir.be/8911/article/2015-10-12/la-pauvrete-est-sous-estimee-en-belgique>

<https://statbel.fgov.be/fr/themes/menages/pauvrete-et-conditions-de-vie/risque-de-pauvrete-ou-dexclusion-sociale#figures>

<sup>2</sup> COVIVAT - Corona Onderzoeksconsortium Voor Inkomensverdeling en sociale effecten, Huishoudbudgetten en Sociale Minima in Lockdown, [https://8d4783fa-1302-40da-8105-74e82c22674f.filesusr.com/ugd/4ab716\\_43e34cee5e024916a5d8dda8029c5cc3.pdf](https://8d4783fa-1302-40da-8105-74e82c22674f.filesusr.com/ugd/4ab716_43e34cee5e024916a5d8dda8029c5cc3.pdf); see also : [https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20200517\\_04963100](https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20200517_04963100)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.lalibre.be/economie/conjoncture/perde-de-revenus-un-belge-sur-7-lourdement-affecte-a-causedu-coronavirus-5ea6d179d8ad58632c7cc9e9>

<sup>4</sup> Until the end of May, with a possibility of extension until the end of August :

[https://plus.lesoir.be/299792/article/2020-05-09/la-ministre-de-lemploi-nathalie-muyllveut-permettre-le-chomage-temporaire?from\\_direct=true](https://plus.lesoir.be/299792/article/2020-05-09/la-ministre-de-lemploi-nathalie-muyllveut-permettre-le-chomage-temporaire?from_direct=true)

<sup>5</sup> <https://statbel.fgov.be/fr/themes/menages/pauvrete-et-conditions-de-vie/privation-materielle-et-sociale>

<sup>6</sup> See also:

<https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2020/05/19/reactie-netwerk-tegen-armoede-op-getuigenis-dylan/?fbclid=IwAR1M40BQLe8CNVr5EVG-isbj5KumgBFSdS4MJOVDP7xdgSbMWP8NxId3H4>

agreement) make it inaccessible to the most precarious workers. Given the arduous efforts required of the population and the dissatisfaction it has shown with the imbalance in relation to the economic field, the Government has also authorized, under certain conditions, physical meetings with families and friends. There is also the limited opening of schools and the limited resumption of sports activities in organised clubs, in addition to the crèches and nurseries in schools that have been set up since the first days of the crisis. **Nevertheless, these "social" packages of measures are applied with a relative level of practicability, but above all they variably meet the needs of the population, depending on pre-existing and unequal living conditions of individuals and families (housing, location and outdoor space, population density, mobility, age and health of grandparents, club membership or supervision by a sports coach or not, loss of income, etc.).**

### The "social" ... outright forgetfulness for many sectors

Many Essentials (professionals and citizens) have continued to take care of populations with multiple significant vulnerabilities in need of accommodation among others. If the elderly people in nursing homes and the staff who care for them have ended up receiving the maximum attention they need, it is through a struggle that disability stakeholders managed to make their voices heard. But what can be said for the populations and professionals of the other many institutions of accommodation and supporting homeless people and people without a status<sup>7</sup>? What can be said about all the associations and professionals of socio-cultural action, lifelong education, neighbourhood work, social integration, etc.<sup>8</sup>? The federated entities act as they can, but federal attention has not been given to these populations and actors during the lockdown, nor is it given to them in the organization of the lift of the lockdown. **Those who were already at the limit/below the limit, in poverty, isolation, social disaffiliation, resourcefulness, in situation of lawlessness, before the epidemic crisis, cannot be left at the edge of the cliff.**

For a real social lift of the lockdown that is based on the possibilities of the poorest and the most vulnerable, and on the actors who are with them in the field

**A social lift of the lockdown with positive individual, collective and societal impacts is one that is based on the rhythms and possibilities of people** who live in the street, migrants in transit, undocumented immigrants. It is a lift of the lockdown which counters the risks for the 10% of the Belgian population who cannot read or write, which counteracts the difficulties of the digital divide, which relieves single-parent families, which avoids language barriers for immigrant populations, which understands the particular difficulties of people with disabilities, which receives the consent of working-class neighbourhoods, disenfranchised youth, the marginalised affected by living with too little of everything and the feeling of social rejection. It should bring air and perspective to people who are afflicted by life during lockdown, which affects people even harder when material conditions of existence are insufficient. **It is essential that federal management of the crisis and of the lift of the lockdown is thought out with the actors who accompany these most vulnerable populations:** continuing education, socio-cultural, AMO (assistance in open environment), culture in action, informal cultural and sports workshops in the neighbourhoods, street educators, migrant associations, neighbourhood associations and welfare centres, medical centres, family planning, outpatient health actors including street nurses

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<sup>7</sup> Adults and families in foster care, children and adults with physical and/or mental and/or behavioural deficiencies (disability), children and young people in youth care, people hospitalized for mental health problems or addictions, abused women, asylum seekers in reception centres including in closed centres, persons in detention, undocumented people, transitional accommodation areas ranging from the most to the least precarious for homeless people/migrants in transit often in the hands of NGOs and supported citizens.

<sup>8</sup> Youth centres, youth organisations, open-air activities, neighbourhood centres, street entertainment, neighbourhood sports, social welfare centres, community projects, etc.

and associations organizing street guidance and social vigilance, collectives of people who offer shelters, actors working for the homeless, associative and social services in prisons, etc. The limits and/or interruptions to the actions carried out by these actors during lockdown demonstrate the urgency of hearing their needs and equipping them accordingly. **It would be tragic if only the health criterion in the epidemic sense remained central and sounded the end of the crisis at some point, when its social consequences and its consequences in terms of collective mental health would be added to pre-existing inequalities and social injustices.**

Together, the social and socio-cultural sector in the broadest sense requires responsible federal and federated governments and Interfederal National Security Council to integrate into their strategy of economic support and relief for families, the urgent need for a social lockdown lifting plan. This must be based on two aspects:

- Direct and urgent monthly financial assistance from the federal government to impoverished households on a principle of trust – a Covid19 monthly allowance. Direct financial assistance to exposed households is crucial today, as will be the increase in social benefits and minimum income above the poverty line tomorrow, and the strengthening of social security system.
- The planning of a lift of the lockdown organized with and by the actors concerned who represent these vulnerable populations, and their equipment, and this in synchronization with the federated entities, as is the case for education, crèches and nurseries and sport.