

## POLICY BRIEF: INTRODUCTION

## REFUGEE FAMILIES AFTER RECOGNITION:

## GAPS AND INNOVATIONS

## IN POLICY AND SUPPORT

REFUFAM examines the effects of government policies on the integration trajectories of refugee families. These *Policy Briefs* are based on interviews and focus groups with 98 members of refugee families, and with 99 street-level practitioners and local experts. By *refugee families* we understand families in which at least one person has acquired international protection, either through refugee status or subsidiary protection.

In theory, Belgium's reception and integration policies towards refugee families are neatly streamlined with a clear division of tasks between different government services. As a Federal agency, Fedasil is responsible for organising the reception and guidance of applicants for international protection during their procedure, in close cooperation with partners in their reception network and municipalities. Once refugees and their family members are granted protected status, regional governments become responsible for their civic integration trajectory which emphasises refugees' plight to learn the local language, find work and build social networks. Everything else that relates to their broader 'integration' process principally falls under

the competence of municipalities and cities. It could not be much clearer.

**Unfortunately, things are not that simple.** In practice, refugee families end up in a maze of poorly aligned policy domains that are implemented by a wide range of formal and informal support actors. In Flanders, for example, the Agencies for Integration and Civic Integration are tasked with connecting certain policy domains such as language and employment. Yet other policy domains, such as housing, education and well-being, remain largely isolated from the civic integration policies that are implemented by these very agencies.

In **refugee families' life-worlds**, these domains are nonetheless intrinsically linked; when they need to move several times to find a stable place to live, this has far-reaching consequences on their ability to find work, pursue education, and build a social network.<sup>1</sup> For families with young children, these interrupted housing pathways force children to start all over again repeatedly in a new school and a new place. Even relatively simple things like registering in the municipality so that the civic integration trajectory can start and families can access other public services are thus needlessly delayed. In other words, the compartmentalisation of all these policy domains **creates numerous barriers and detours in the integration trajectories of refugee families.**<sup>2</sup>

What seems simple on paper turns out to be extraordinarily complex in practice. In Belgium, policies are divided between federal, regional and local governments, which is complemented by a strong autonomy for municipalities and cities – although this autonomy is not necessarily supported by adequate structural funding. This leads to substantial local differences in the extent to which refugee families receive support, who provides it, and what expertise public

<sup>1</sup> Beeckmans, L., & Geldof, D. (2024). Reconsidering the interrupted housing pathways of refugees in Flanders (Belgium) from a home-making perspective: a policy critique. *Housing Studies*, 39(5), 1129-1151. Zie ook Wyckaert, E., Leinfelder, H., & De Decker, P. (2020). Stuck in the middle: The transition from shelter to housing for refugees. *Transactions of the Association of European Schools of Planning*, 4, 80-94.

<sup>2</sup> Zie van den Bogaard, R. (2022). "Obstakels voor vluchtelinggezinnen in hun toegang tot huisvesting, onderwijs en arbeid", pp.241-254, in: Geldof, D. et al. (2022). *Gezinnen in Migratie: hulpverlening en gezinsbeleid in een superdiverse samenleving*. Garant: Antwerpen, België.

service providers have to work with different groups of newcomers.

This institutional complexity generates **gaps in policy and support for refugee families**. First, these gaps are situated between the objectives of formal integration policies and the reality in which refugee families try to find their way to work, housing, education and society at large. While policies, for instance, may prioritise the economic self-reliance of newcomers, the combination of, amongst other things, a narrow focus on quickly finding any work at all with strict language requirements in the labour market leading to precarious rather than durable employment. Perhaps it is then no coincidence that Belgium still scores relatively low compared to other OECD countries in terms of the sustainable employment of newcomers.<sup>3</sup>

Second, there seems to be a **lack of integral and transversal forms of guidance at crucial steps in refugee families' integration trajectories**. In some situations, this is due to the poor alignment of certain policy domains, yet in others it is the effect of policy choices to raise the barriers for newcomers. Although it is widely known, for instance, that a lack of stable housing undermines people's ability to learn a new language, find work and ensure that children do and feel well at school, there are hardly any policies that aim to provide even temporary housing to refugee families after their recognition. Together, both types of policy gaps produce policies that contradict their central aims: to organise an efficient reception and integration policy that effectively strengthens refugee families' self-reliance and social participation.

These complex, contradictory policies force refugee families and their supports to come up with **creative modes of organisation, cooperation and assistance**. Immigrants who have already been settled in Belgium for a longer period, volunteer groups,<sup>4</sup> civil society organisations<sup>5</sup> and local authorities continue to improvise support for refugee families when they need it. They guide them through the maze of government services, translate the meaning of difficult-to-read documents, support them in their search for housing,<sup>6</sup> register the children in school, foster social bonds<sup>7</sup> and so on. Much of this front-line support is unpaid or, at most, benefits from temporary, project-based funding. In spite of all the reforms of the 'integration sector' in Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels alike, this improvised 'bricolage'<sup>8</sup> of formal and informal assistance still plays a crucial role in the actual reception and integration of refugee families and other newcomers alike. As a result, **the pace and direction of refugee families' integration trajectories depends heavily on where they happen to end up, and whom they meet**.

The **reception of temporarily displaced persons from the Ukraine** shows that it can be done differently.<sup>9</sup> In response to the EU's activation of the Temporary Protection Directive, for instance, ensuring people's access to accommodation and education was prioritised before gradually turning towards socio-economic activation and civic integration. In addition, numerous collaborations emerged between local, regional and federal government actors, as well as NGOs and individual citizens. While we should not blindly romanticise this exceptional set of policies, they clearly offer a vantage point from which we can rethink regular reception and integration policies.

<sup>3</sup> OECD (2023). *Skills and Labour Market Integration of Immigrants and their Children in Flanders*.

<sup>4</sup> Carlier, L. (2024) Working Paper refufam.

<sup>5</sup> Vandevooort, R. (2019). Eroding rights, crafting solidarity? Shifting dynamics in the state-civil society nexus in Flanders and Brussels. *Social Inclusion*, 7(2), 106-117

<sup>6</sup> D'Eer, L., Robeyns, L., & Geldof, D. (2019). Capteren en ontsluiten van inspirerende praktijken inzake werken met vrijwilligers bij woonondersteuning van vluchtelingen: Onderzoeksrapport. Kenniscentrum Gezinswetenschappen, hogeschool Odisee

<sup>7</sup> Derluyn, I. (2023). Hier en Ginder. Hoe jonge vluchtelingen ondersteunen. Borgerhoff Lambrechts..

<sup>8</sup> Phillimore, J., Bradby, H., Brand, T., Padilla, B., & Pemberton, S. (2021). *Exploring welfare bricolage in Europe's Superdiverse Neighbourhoods*. Routledge. Zie ook: Debruyne, P. (2024). Reassembling the right to family reunification for refugees in Belgium through social work practices of welfare bricolage. In *Family Reunification in Europe* (pp. 296-314). Routledge.

<sup>9</sup> Zie onder meer [Vlaanderen Helpt Oekraïne](#) en onze Policy Brief over [Lessen uit het onthaal van tijdelijk ontheemden uit Oekraïne](#).

In these policy briefs we sketch how and why government policies sometimes complicate rather than facilitate the integration trajectories of refugee families and other newcomers and which innovative practices are already addressing these gaps in policy and support. Drawing on both original and existing scholarly research, we offer **more than 90 recommendations**. The conclusion is simple: a different way of ‘doing integration’ is possible.

Prof. Robin Vandevordt, Principal Investigator

[Robin.vandevordt@ugent.be](mailto:Robin.vandevordt@ugent.be)

## OVERVIEW

Each Policy Brief will be made available in English and in either French or Dutch.

1. From international protection to integration (FR)
2. Towards an integrated reception of refugee families in Flanders (NL)
3. Towards an integrated reception of refugee families in Brussels and Wallonia (FR)
4. Lessons learned from the reception of temporarily displaced persons from the Ukraine (NL)
5. Housing: the first step in refugee families’ integration trajectory? (FR)
6. Education: entering and leaving OKAN (NL)
7. Durable employment (NL)
8. Language and the road to work (NL)
9. Language and public services (NL)
10. Family Reunification (NL) (forthcoming)

## FURTHER READINGS

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- Westerveen, L., & Adam, I. (2019). Monitoring the impact of doing nothing: New trends in immigrant integration policy. *Ethnicities*, 19(1), 20-43.