

POLICY BRIEF 7

**DURABLE EMPLOYMENT**

This policy brief is relevant for:

- Flemish Ministry of Economy, Innovation, Work, Social Economy and Agriculture
- Flemish Ministry of Education and Training
- Municipalities, Cities & OCMWs
- NARIC
- VDAB

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.

**SUMMARY**

Persons with International Protection (IP) and their family members are often expected by their local Social Welfare Office (OCMW) committee to **find employment as soon as**

<sup>1</sup> Interviews with refugee families indicated that discrimination due the hijab as well as the requirement to know more than one language (especially in the Flemish area around Brussels) create big obstacles to access employment (see also: REFUFAM Policy Brief 8 Taal & Werk). See also: Dries, L., Marx, I. and Vujić, S. (2018). 'Is Quick Formal Access to the Labor Market Enough? Refugees' Labor Market Integration in Belgium', IZA Institute of Labor Economics, Discussion Paper Series, IZA DP No. 11905

<sup>2</sup> For a more comprehensive analysis, see Rea, A. & Wets, J. (2014). The Long and Winding Road to Employment: An Analysis of the Labour Market

**possible**, leading them to accept **low-skilled and/or precarious jobs, even in case of over-qualification**.<sup>1</sup> Interviews with both experts as well as members of refugee families indicate that such employment only provides a short-term solution. When refugees try to move on from such low-skilled employment, **little assistance is available to support them towards durable employment** that is in line with their capacities and ambitions. As a result, many refugees end up being stuck in a vicious cycle of precarious, low-skilled employment and unemployment. This represents a loss of human capital both for refugees and for the Belgian labour market. In this policy brief, we make several recommendations to address these barriers to more durable forms of employment for refugees and their family members.

**POLICY**

After a positive decision on their application for international protection, refugees and their family members often rely first on social welfare benefits (*equivalent leefloon*) while they settle down and complete civic integration and language courses.<sup>2</sup> However, access to social welfare benefits is subject to the condition that one is **“willing to seek employment”**<sup>3</sup>.

To that end, since May 2024, all persons receiving social welfare benefits are **obliged to register with the Flemish Employment Agency (VDAB)**.<sup>4</sup> Before May 2024, refugees and their family members were already required to do so as part of their civic integration course. Depending on the

Careers of Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Belgium, Science and Society Series, Academia Press. See also Belspo. (2022). IMMILAB final report - Improving the Labour Market Position of People with a Migration background in Belgium. June 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Art. Art. 3, 5°, Law of 26 May 2002 concerning the right to social integration.

<sup>4</sup> Decree of 19 April 2024 concerning the activation of social welfare recipients (leefloongerechtigden) through mandatory registration with VDAB.

individual's circumstances, either VDAB or OCMW will take the lead in assisting the person to find employment.<sup>5</sup>

Decisions regarding the path towards employment (e.g. enrolment in vocational training, language courses etc.) must be approved **via the local OCMW office, by a committee of local politicians**. Hence, local governments have a large discretionary power, which in turn leads to deviating practices at the local level.

In practice, practitioners as well as refugee families experience pressure from their local politicians to find employment as soon as possible, leading them **to accept any type of employment, regardless of professional qualifications, experiences and ambitions**. At the same time, research has shown that longer dependency on social welfare support, to – for example – find a more suitable job or pursue a training, does not decrease the likelihood of newcomers becoming active on the Belgian labour market.<sup>6</sup> When newcomers accept (often times low-skilled) employment, there are **little to no opportunities for these persons to develop themselves further professionally**, to pursue a professional career of their choice in the long-term. This reality obstructs durable inclusion into the Belgian society and is clearly at odds with the second pillar of the Flemish Coalition Agreement with regards to Work and Social Economy, namely: *“further development of talent to increase our productivity and strengthen one's career path”*.<sup>7</sup>

## FINDINGS

### 1. A Lack of Support to Find Durable Employment

Many OCMWs consider the durability of employment opportunities for refugee families **to be of secondary**

<sup>5</sup> The Flemish Agency for Integration and Civic Integration also employs counselors ('traject begeleiders') to assist newcomers with respect to their future orientation on the Belgian labour market, as part of the (obligatory) civic integration trajectory (see also: REFUFAM Policy Brief 2 Transversal Policies in Flanders).

**importance**. As a consequence, they are likely to find themselves carrying out low-skilled jobs that often do not correspond to their capacities and ambitions. As formulated by a VDAB employee:

*[T]he [committee of local politicians] asks that people work, even if it is someone who is highly educated who then needs to start working as a cleaner. They want to see steps towards employment, and soon.*  
(VDAB employee, 16.10.2023)

Such time pressure was also observed by a refugee family member:

*[the social workers from OCMW asked:] “Do you want to work? Do you want to do a cleaning job?” And I said: “I haven't learned Dutch yet. I don't know the country yet. Why is it like this? I do not want to do a cleaning job, I have a higher diploma, I have work experience, I prefer to work in my sector.” That is what I wanted, but [it was] not what the people proposed.*  
(Family member of a person with IP, 22.11.2022)

Like the previous testimony, the following interviewee also experienced the same push towards low-skilled employment, regardless of their qualifications:

*For women, if they want to work, they can become a cleaning lady. But I don't want to work as a cleaning lady, I have a bachelor, I have a lot of [work] experience. I don't want to say; “Okay, I'll work as a cleaning lady”. I need work, but I don't want to work as a cleaning lady. I want to move up the professional ladder, not go down.*  
(Family member of a persons with IP, 02.10.2023)

<sup>6</sup> Carpentier, S. (2016). Lost in Transition? Essays on the Socio-Economic Trajectories of Social Assistance Beneficiaries in Belgium, PhD thesis, Universiteit Antwerpen.

<sup>7</sup> Flemish Government, [Flemish Coalition Agreement 2024-2029](#), p.23.

Hence, the circumstances under which refugee families are expected to seek their first employment in Belgium thus increase the chances that they are employed in jobs that do **not align with their professional or educational background, nor with their future professional ambitions.**

Valuable opportunities such as IBO<sup>8</sup> trajectories, whereby an employer can make use of subsidized employment of a new employee in order for them to learn on the job, are not sufficiently known and used by employers.<sup>9</sup> This while prior research has shown that trajectories with a direct link to the labour market or to a particular profession, such as IBO trajectories, are the most effective way for newcomers to reach durable employment.<sup>10</sup>

Once refugees and their family members become economically active in Belgium, they then face challenges to change career paths, for example due to a lack of opportunity for further professional development. As a VDAB employee illustrates:

*To give an example, someone who is currently employed: loading and unloading. And that person wants to become a warehouse worker. We cannot offer this person vocational training, so this person will need to save money themselves and get the qualification through a training outside the government funded programs. It costs a lot of money, those kind of trainings. [...] We can only offer them such a public vocational training program if they are unemployed [because these programs are only offered as full-time trajectories].*

(VDAB employee, 20.11.2023)

Even though the VDAB was established to help both jobseekers **as well as employed persons** to work towards a **durable professional career**<sup>11</sup>, in practice their work is focussed on activating jobseekers.<sup>12</sup> This was illustrated by a VDAB employee who explained that he assists former clients in his own free time, to help them transition to a new type of job that is more in line with their professional pursuits.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the limited training opportunities during employment, difficulties also arise with regards to **dropping out**. This is a phenomenon that has been confirmed in various studies<sup>14</sup>, indicating that quick employment is oftentimes not long-term employment for various reasons.<sup>15</sup> As an OCMW employee explains:

*[Quick low-skilled employment] doesn't work in the long term. So we see, after a period of time, that people are employed but then the employment is terminated.*

(OCMW employee, 14.05.2024)

This OCMW employee explains how persons can end up in an even more difficult situation after a period of employment. Namely, persons who **did not work a sufficient number of days**, or persons who **left their job voluntarily**, can often not rely on unemployment benefit.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, depending on the approach of their local government, they may be considered as **unwilling to work**, thereby excluding them from accessing social welfare benefits.

<sup>8</sup> [Individuele Beroepsopleiding/ Individual Vocational Training.](#)

<sup>9</sup> VDAB employee, municipality F, 20.11.23.

<sup>10</sup> Wood et al. (2020). [Wegwijs naar werk; Longitudinale analyse en evaluatie van inburgerings- en activeringstrajecten in Vlaanderen 2005-2016.](#)

<sup>11</sup> Art. 4, Decree of 7 May 2004 establishing the public-law external independent agency Vlaamse Dienst voor Arbeidsbemiddeling en Beroepsopleiding (VDAB).

<sup>12</sup> As instructed by the Flemish Minister of Economy, Innovation, Work, Social Economy and Agriculture.

<sup>13</sup> VDAB employee, municipality F, 25.10.2023.

<sup>14</sup> Lens, D., Marx, I. and Vujić, S. (2019). 'Double Jeopardy: How Refugees Fare in One European Labor Market', IZA Journal of Development and Migration, 8:8, pp. 1-29; OECD, [Skills and Labour Market Integration of Immigrants and Their Children in Flanders](#), OECD: Paris, 2023.

<sup>15</sup> E.g. working conditions may become too heavy (i.e. night shifts or heavy physical work), temporary or interim contracts are not extended or mental health issues occur due to misalignment with the persons' professional interests and ambitions.

<sup>16</sup> See Art. 30 and 44 of the Royal Decree of 25 November 1991 on unemployment regulations (Koninklijk besluit houdende de werkloosheidsreglementering).

The OCMW employee goes on discussing the option of **subsidized employment** under Art. 60, §7 of Law of 8 July 1976:

*We could move these persons and put them in Art. 60 employment, and when they complete the trajectory they open the right to receive unemployment benefits. It may look like the problem is solved, but only in the short-term.*

*Many persons drop out of unemployment benefits and again fall back on social welfare benefits. [...] The numbers of the [National Employment Service] may appear to show positive developments, but the numbers of persons receiving social welfare benefits don't. Like this, we're just shifting a problem around.*

(OCMW employee, 14.05.2024)

Hence, subsidized employment under Art. 60, §7 often **does not increase the chances of finding durable employment** on the Belgian labour market, as prior research has confirmed.<sup>17</sup>

Arguably, employed persons with IP and their family members could benefit from assistance from a **career counsellor**, to plan out a long-term career path in line with their interests. Unfortunately, subsidized career counselling, provided by the VDAB, is only accessible after a minimum of 7 years of work experience<sup>18</sup> and the sessions are offered in Dutch only.<sup>19</sup>

It is well known that employment plays a significant role for newcomers to facilitate their inclusion in the host society. Finding durable employment for members of refugee families, within a reasonable amount of time, should therefore be made a priority. This can be achieved – among others - by facilitating further guidance and assistance to both jobseekers as well as employed refugees (by VDAB,

<sup>17</sup> Franssen, A., pp. 39-54, in: Hanne Vandermeersch and others (eds), [Newcomers Navigating the Welfare State](#) (Leuven University Press 2023)

<sup>18</sup> Work experience outside Belgium may be proven through an attestation provided by the respective employer(s), see Art. 3 § 1 3° of the Decision of the Flemish Government on career counselling of 17 May 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Art. 3, § 1, Decision of the Flemish Government on career counselling of 17 May 2013.

social workers, integration counsellors<sup>20</sup> and career counsellors) and the promotion and further development of learning opportunities on the job, to facilitate upskilling.

## INNOVATIVE PRACTICES

**DUO for a Job** - The DUO for a Job association resulted from the observations that young persons with a migrant background face challenges when attempting to enter the Belgian labour market as well as the fact that persons over 50 years old had a relatively high unemployment rate in Belgium. The DUO for a Job initiative therefore started to match individuals from these two groups of persons, so that experienced employees over 50 years of age (the mentor) could coach young persons with a migrant background (the mentee), to facilitate intergenerational as well as intercultural exchange, and their access to specific segments of the labour market.

This mentoring program enables an exchange of knowledge and experiences and allows the young persons to identify and work towards professional objectives with assistance from their mentor. Mentors receive a training by the association to provide them with a useful toolkit that they can apply in their coaching sessions. Matches between mentor and mentee are made on a basis of various criteria (e.g. sector, language, personality, availability). The mentor and mentee meet weekly for two hours, for a period of six months with the specific purpose of increasing their chances for durable employment.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> A recent project “Vervolgtrajecten na inburgering” focusses on this element, whereby persons with IP as well as their family members can receive continued support to pursue their educational and professional pursuits, following the completion of the (obligatory) integration trajectory. This project is the result of a cooperation between Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering, Amal and Atlas, more information can be found [here](#).

<sup>21</sup> More information can be found [here](#).

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

For VDAB:

- **Further promote the use of IBO (*Individuele Beroepsopleidingen*)** – as well as other initiative that enable further training and learning on the job - **among employers**.
- **Further promote the use of NodO+ (*Nederlands op de Opleidingsvloer*) among trainingscentres** so that more newcomers can benefit from Dutch language learning as part of their vocational training.
- **Explain and promote the option of subsidized career counselling among employed clients** when relevant and applicable.<sup>22</sup>
- Set up **collaborations with partners that provide vocational training opportunities in both full-time as well as part-time and/or evening classes**.

For NARIC:

- **In order to ensure a swift recognition of qualifications**, we refer to the 10 recommendations put forward by the Advisory Committee on Economic Migration and the Committee on Diversity.<sup>23</sup>

For Municipalities:

- **Give equal priority to finding both quick as well as durable employment for persons with IP and their family**, through labour market activity that leaves room for further training and learning (for both language as well as professional skills).

For OCMWs:

- **Explain and promote the option of subsidized career counselling** when relevant and applicable.
- **Advocate for steps towards durable employment (rather than quick employment)**, when presenting clients' proposed trajectories towards employment in front of the local committee of politicians.

**Flemish Ministry of Economy, Innovation, Work, Social Economy and Agriculture:**

- Considering that the number of persons with a migration background seeking career counselling services is limited<sup>24</sup> and the observation that this group of persons is not always familiar with the concept of career counselling<sup>25</sup>, **enable a first career counselling session free of charge** in order for this group of persons to gain an understanding of the service and its potential value for their personal career.
- **Accept alternative documentation from persons with a migration background (including refugee families) to prove work experience prior to their arrival to Belgium**,<sup>26</sup> to ensure that they meet the requirement of 7 years of work experience to access subsidized career counselling services more quickly. Alternatively, consider making these requirements more flexible for refugee families and other newcomers.
- **Consider reducing the required number of years of work experience**<sup>27</sup> **for persons with a migration background**, so they can sooner benefit from assistance of a career counsellor, to avoid that these persons exit

<sup>22</sup> The most [recent report](#) (2022) on yearly survey results of career counselling clients shows that more than half of the clients decide to use career counselling services due to their own efforts; after referral within their own network or after finding information on the internet.

<sup>23</sup> Adviescommissie Economische Migratie & Commissie Diversiteit. (2024). [Advies: 10 maatregelen voor een efficiënte en toegankelijke erkenning van buitenlandse studiebewijzen](#).

<sup>24</sup> In 2023, just over 2% of persons seeking career counselling services had a migration background (see [Cijfergegevens Volledig 2023](#)).

<sup>25</sup> Verbruggen, M. et al. (2009). 'De vraag naar loopbaanbegeleiding bij allochtone werkenden', *Over Werk – Tijdschrift voor steunpunt WSE*, pp. 127-132.

<sup>26</sup> Art. 3, § 1, 3° of the Decision of the Flemish Government on career counselling of 17 May 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.





the labour market after a temporary period of employment.

- **Enable career counselling with an interpreter**, if needed, to ensure effective career counselling sessions (see also PB on Temporary Protection).<sup>28</sup>
- **Give equal priority to assistance and support for employed persons as well as jobseekers** and instruct the VDAB accordingly, providing them the resources to carry out this task, as they are by law prescribed to fulfil.<sup>29</sup>
- **Diversify subsidized training opportunities** to include part-time and evening classes that can be followed in conjunction with employment, and **do not limit such training opportunities to sectors and/or jobs with high demand only**.<sup>30</sup> It is important that such trainings are **possible to complete in conjunction with (full-time) employment** in order to create a realistic professional career path.
- **Promote the use of Vlaams Opleidingsverlof<sup>31</sup> among employers**, as one way to facilitate the continuation of (language and/or professional) learning for persons with IP and their family members on the job. **This measure should be accompanied by sufficient subsidies**, to create an incentive for employers to hire refugees and their family members.

#### Flemish Ministry of Education and Training:

- **Provide the resources for the development and implementation of a course on “Applying for a Job in Dutch”** in cooperation with CVO, Ligo, ILT, CLT etc.

#### FURTHER READINGS

- Belspo. (2022). *IMMILAB final report - Improving the Labour Market Position of People with a Migration background in Belgium*.
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<sup>28</sup> In May 2022, the Standing Committee on Language Supervision (VCT - Vaste Commissie van Taaltoezicht) stated that “The Dutch section of the VCT has already advised on several occasions that it can exceptionally, limitedly and temporarily accept the use of other useful languages in the provision of services vis-à-vis the specific residents who are in an initial integration phase and who have not had the opportunity to learn and become familiar with sufficient Dutch...”. See letter 54.087/I/N of 13 May

2022 in which the VCT responds to a request for advice submitted by the VDAB on 17 December 2021.

<sup>29</sup> Art. 4, 1°, Decree of 7 May 2004.

<sup>30</sup> As currently foreseen in the Flemish Coalition Agreement 2024-2029, p.24.

<sup>31</sup> Decree of 12 October 2018 on Flemish training leave and on various provisions relating to the Work and Social Economy policy area.

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*With many thanks to all our interlocutors and other experts for sharing their insights with us.*

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