

40 years of social assistance in Belgium

by Marjolijn De Wilde, Bea Cantillon, Frank Vandenbroucke en Maria De Bie

This year, Belgium's public centres for social welfare are celebrating their 40th birthday. Marjolijn De Wilde, Bea Cantillon, Frank Vandenbroucke, Maria De Bie and a number of other researchers decided to mark the occasion by writing a book about the trends and evolutions they have observed within these centres. Among other recommendations, the authors call for the partial automation of social assistance practice.

The year 1974 marked a turning point in the development of Belgian social assistance. From then on, citizens with insufficient means who were unable to rely on supplementary welfare allowances, such as sickness benefits or jobseeker's allowance, were entitled to a minimum income (*bestaansminimum*). The public centres for social welfare (*Openbare Centra voor Maatschappelijk Welzijn*, OCMWs) were founded in 1976, with the core aim of guaranteeing the right to human dignity.

These centres were also tasked with paying the minimum income called *bestaansminimum*, which was replaced by the minimum income called *leeftoon* in 2002. The new book, entitled *40 Years of Social Assistance in Belgium* (Dutch: *40 jaar OCMW en bijstand*), published by ACCO, takes a closer look at a number of trends in social assistance's evolution and also highlights concerns and policy recommendations for the future.

Conclusions of the book:

In the early years, around 10 000 people received a minimum income every year. By 2015, almost 140 000 people were entitled to receive social assistance. This increase can be attributed in part to changes in the minimum income itself (personalised approach, increased access for specific groups, e.g. students). At the same time, the surge also reflects the failure of the social security system. A growing number of people are unable to access these benefits, perhaps because they are unable to build up rights (because they work for shorter periods), or because they are not eligible for certain benefits (e.g. immigrants or early school leavers), or because the system's conditionality has been increased (e.g. jobseeker sanctions).

Moreover, this growth also means that an increasing number of social assistance recipients are coming face-to-face with a system going through certain problematic evolutions:

1. The social assistance system is a weak protection system. This is primarily because the benefits are too low. As a result, most families are unable to live a dignified life. Secondly, the transfer from social assistance to employment remains very difficult. Thirdly, social assistance struggles with high non-take-up: many of the people who are entitled to this benefit do not receive it, because of embarrassment, administrative obstacles or problems with the follow-up procedures in the public centres for social welfare. It is problematic that more and more people are becoming dependent on this inadequate system.
2. In principle, the payment of social assistance goes hand-in-hand with intensive, individual follow-up carried out by social workers. These social workers are allowed a certain amount of

discretion in order to offer tailor-made assistance that is in line with the client's needs and capacities. If this level of personal, high-quality assistance is to be offered to an ever-increasing group, it will ultimately be compromised.

3. In Belgium, local governments are granted substantial discretion when it comes to welfare policy. This level of discretion means that assistance can be adapted in line with the local requirements and means. Ultimately, however, the growth of the welfare population results in the decentralisation of welfare policy, despite the fact that this was never a policy objective (as it was in the Netherlands, for example) and despite the lack of additional funds for the municipalities.
4. In recent decades, the number of conditions linked to social assistance have increased. Conditionality can help activate welfare recipients and, in that sense, it is an indispensable instrument. However, it should always be kept in mind that social assistance is the last safety net for people without means, and that these people have nowhere else to turn.

Policy recommendations:

1. In light of the above, the authors caution against the referral of people from other branches of the social security system to social assistance.
2. They call for the partial automation of social assistance practice, for example in granting the living wage. This would allow social workers to focus on important integration and employment counselling. It is also important that people who are not deemed eligible to receive a living wage based on administrative data receive properly personalised follow-up.
3. Public centres for social welfare would benefit from feedback systems, in which anonymous comparisons with similar municipalities could give them insights into the impact of local policy choices. More generally, the authors argue in favour of increasing the policy-making competences of public centres for social welfare using carefully considered networks in Flemish social policy.

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